

# No Regrets: Living with Dying

by Kitty Edwards

In May 2013, Patti Pansa, a professional engineer and life coach, contacted me for assistance in her journey towards death. She had taken care of all the literal preparations for death: she had spoken with family members about her wishes for end-of-life care; her last will and testament, advanced health care directives, and medical durable power of attorney were all signed and delivered to the appropriate people; a list of her important accounts with passwords sat in a folder next to her computer. But Patti wanted more. She wanted to leave a legacy for her family and friends. Perhaps most of all, she wanted to discover ways to celebrate life while she still had time.

I shared with Patti several articles on the regrets of the dying, chronicling how many regretted working too much, spending too little time with family, or living a life that was not their own. These articles made quite an impression on Patti; all she could hear was “I wish... I wish.” But with Stage 4 metastasized breast cancer, Patti didn't want to wish.

She wanted to know how to live life with no regrets. Out of Patti's vision and sense of urgency, the No Regrets Project was born.

Between radiation treatments, spinal surgery, and a bucket list trip to Alaska, Patti wrote essays, talked with anyone who would listen, dreamed, and created. In the end, she developed five simple, personal practices to help herself live life more fully: be grateful every day, trust—take the risk, courage to be me, choose joy, and love myself and share it. While the phrases may be simple, accomplishing them is not. The development of the No Regrets Project is Patti Pansa's legacy to us all.

## Be Grateful Every Day

*I have a choice to focus on gratitude. Some days the pain is almost unbearable. If I focus on the pain, it will intensify like a tsunami. When I concentrate on what I am grateful for, I am more peaceful.*

-- Patti Pansa, May 2013

Each day, Patti wrote in her gratitude journal. The simplest things caught her attention. “I am grateful for a little bird sitting on a branch outside of my bedroom window,” “I love to feel the warmth in the sunlight crossing my bed,” and more. This practice of gratitude helped her to focus on the things she appreciated most, rather than on her declining health and the difficult medical procedures that she endured.

Patti wanted to live. She didn't want to leave her family and friends. She would always thank her friends for the favors they performed. But, perhaps more importantly, she also told each one of them the unique gift they brought to her. I do not know what she said to others, but she often thanked me for not being afraid of her illness.

## Trust - Take the Risk

*When I trust and move forward into a new adventure, I am amazed at the support that the universe provides for me.*

*The No Regrets Project is a good example of this. The idea came to me as an inspiration during a morning meditation. I shared the idea with friends and they wanted to help.*

-- Patti Pansa, June 2013

A week after writing this, Patti was visiting friends in Santa Fe, NM. In casual conversation, one friend mentioned a jewelry designer who produced marvelous pieces. An hour later Patti was in the studio of Douglas Magnus, a designer of embossed metal bracelets. She wanted to interest him in designing bracelets with the No Regrets phrases on them.



Author Kitty Edwards (left) and Patti Pansa enjoy a moment during a celebration of Patti's life in September 2013.

Instead, he encouraged her to design the bracelets herself.

In the last months of Patti's life, she designed the bracelets, hired a mold maker, and found a manufacturer. Patti trusted that the help she needed would appear. And it did.

That summer, Patti learned that trust requires an element of surrender. Not the surrender of defeat, but rather a sweet surrender. With diminishing energy, she simply followed the flow of suggestions and referrals to find the resources that were needed in a short period of time. Patti trusted, took the risk, and a legacy was created.

## Courage to Be Me

*I am dying. This makes some people uncomfortable and sad. It makes me sad sometimes too. When I show up as the person I truly am, it creates a space for others to step into the fullness of their being. Our conversations are more authentic. The masks fall away.*  
-- Patti Pansa, July 2013

Patti was courageous in her life and in her death. Often, she saw people choose to be invisible or masterfully reflect what others wished to see. For Patti, who stood six feet tall, being invisible was never an option.

In June 2013, Patti underwent radiation treatment to alleviate some of the symptoms of bone pain, treat a fractured vertebra, and shrink a tumor in her neck. To precisely target the areas for the radiation, a radiation mask was built for Patti's torso. The process of creating the mask was excruciating and frightening. At the end of the radiation treatments, although her sister wanted



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*Radiation mask enjoying a strawberry margarita*

to run it over with a car, Patti wanted to take her mask home. She then stepped into ceremony with her friends to create transformation.

With some imagination...some glue... and a sense of fashion... the radiation mask was transformed into a symbol of strength and beauty; a beautiful bust of Patti was created. Patti's friends then

## *Patti learned that trust requires an element of surrender.*

took the mask on adventures that Patti herself could no longer manage. It was photographed at sunrise in the high mountains. It was spotted in a sporty, red convertible. It was seen sipping a strawberry margarita. The mask even posed for an advertisement in a national magazine.

Patti's radiation mask now resides at the University of Colorado Cancer Center in Denver, where workshops are held to assist children with cancer to decorate their own radiation masks.

## Choose Joy

*Happiness is a choice that I can make no matter how grim circumstances might seem. The joy of being alive is always attainable at some level.*  
-- Patti Pansa, August 2013

Over the summer, Patti talked about grief and how it connects us to those we have lost. She knew that the greater the joy, the greater the grief. She often talked about grief and joy as if they were threads from the same fabric, the warp of joy inexorably interwoven with the weft of grief. Patti's fabric was a coat of many colors, rich in texture, and deeply alive.

As Patti's disease progressed to its final stage, she asked her friends to throw a goodbye party for her. She looked for opportunities to express joy and share it with others. At this party each friend brought a flower that represented an aspect of Patti that they loved or admired. There were tears and there was laughter. In the end the vase of flowers overflowed with the vibrant colors of Patti.

## Love Myself and Share It

*For me it's about choosing how you want to live your life, really choosing...loving myself enough to free myself to be fully me ... in all of my expanded potential.*  
-- Patti Pansa, September 2013

Patti spent the last five months of her life celebrating, sharing, creating, loving, and living. She knew her energy was limited. As a caretaker of family and friends, she could easily give herself away. Instead, she developed a practice of nourishing



Patti defined regret as an action taken or not taken, and now regretted. Or it might also be an action someone else took, or one they failed to take, that she regretted. Each day Patti released a regret, only to discover that there was a lesson embedded in each one. She

On October 23, 2013, under hospice care, Patti died at home with her family. She died with no regrets. 🌱



*Kitty Edwards is the executive director of the No Regrets Project, a program of The Living & Dying Consciously*

*Project. For more information about these organizations, visit [noregretsproject.org](http://noregretsproject.org) or [livinganddyingconsciouslyproject.org](http://livinganddyingconsciouslyproject.org).*

herself first before caring for others. But Patti discovered that loving herself first was not easy; her friends wanted so much more from her than she could give. As she continued her meditation practice and writing in her gratitude journal, she also added a new practice: releasing regrets.

recognized that each regretted action or inaction actually held a gift, an insight, a strength. She came to understand that these pearls were ways she had loved herself throughout her life. Spending time reflecting on her strengths, compassion, and wisdom gave her the space to nurture herself.

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to the largest definition of "Sustainable Living" we must identify the "death phobia" in our culture, where aversion, denial and avoidance are the norm.

That relationship to our approaching death can only lead to "life-phobia" the inability and unwillingness to be fully alive, because to be fully alive requires an honest and living relationship with our approaching death.

We say we know we're going to die but is that true? Does the way we live, and the way we interact with the world include an awareness of our approaching death?

We will die and we don't know when. Everyone we know will die and we don't know when. Is there a connection between the condition of the world and our aversion, denial and avoidance of death? By having given away the caring of our dying and dead to institutions and industries, community work has become big business.

We have robbed ourselves of important soul work and community work, hindered our ability to grieve, and further separated ourselves from the natural world. We have diminished death to something to be dealt with, a medical event, a psychological event about loss, rather than a sacred and powerful time.

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