

CHRIS MATTINGLY

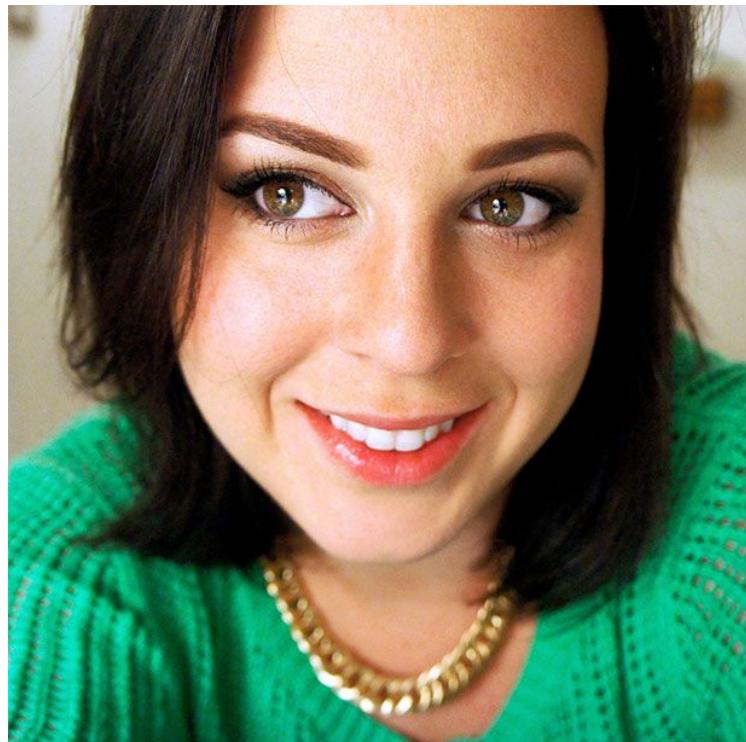


THE 5 PEARLS

LESSONS IN LETTING GO
AND LIVING WITHOUT FEAR

FOR AMY

*You have woken me up to what is truly important
in life and for that I will forever be grateful.*



cats love peanut butter

*Amy documented her story on her personal
blog at catslovepeanutbutter.com*

IN DEDICATION TO



My story is also dedicated to the most inspirational charity I know. One day I know they'll reach their goal of ending people dying from bowel cancer; but until then, I will encourage as much support as I can. I hope my story may also help others affected by this disease.

Amy
Mattingly
1985-
2018
♡



A portrait painting of Amy Mattingly. She has dark hair with blue highlights and is wearing a red jacket over a blue top. She is smiling and giving a thumbs-up. Her left hand is visible, showing a tattoo of a Star of David. The background is black.

"I believe the nicest and sweetest days are not those on which anything very splendid or wonderful or exciting happens but just those that bring simple little pleasures, following one another softly, like pearls slipping off a string."

L.M. Montgomery Anne of Avonlea

Portrait by Dave Stannard; a dear friend of Amy and myself

The start of my story

On the morning of April 5th 2018, my wife Amy Mattingly passed away. Amy was diagnosed with advanced bowel cancer in early 2017 at the age of just 31, and became well known within the cancer community for her wacky dress sense, beautiful smile, and comedic outlook on what was an incurable diagnosis. Amy was a truly magnetic personality, drawing in almost everyone lucky enough to meet her.

For some, she brought the grim truth of what living with the disease was really like. For many, she showed how you can still live with hope and joy even when dealt one of the worst of all cards.

The experience of witnessing Amy take her final breath was one I cannot forget. It will forever be forged within my memory with a strange mix of great overwhelm and sadness, yet one also of deep profundity. Someone who existed merely days before with energy and eagerness for life, now silent, still and gone. I had observed, with privileged access, something that most people never will; a simple fact of all life that is so soberingly obvious, yet one we collectively try to escape from and rarely give space to within our thoughts.

For the months after, I was lucky enough to have loving support from family and friends who helped me once again slowly find joy and peace as Amy had hoped for. I was often asked how I was able to do it and that it was ‘ok to not feel ok’. Of course I knew this, and I often had periods where I was shuttled back to reliving the enormity of what had happened and what I had lost. I immersed myself into reading, talking with people about things I had never talked about before, and slowly I became more and more accepting of what had happened. There will never be a way to resolve the fact that Amy died too early; clearly she did, most of us will probably live into our seventies or eighties, maybe longer. She lived to just 32. But I began to realise that

perhaps it isn't the *quantity* of life that we should mark a life well lived by, rather the *quality* of life. And Amy had this in abundance.

The more I thought about it, the more I also noticed that I was being guided by a range of lessons and behaviours that Amy herself had come to realise during her terminal diagnosis. She had developed a profound wisdom and clarity that I neither appreciated nor understood at the time. Now, as I look back, I see myself as having walked through a thick fog, trying to preoccupy myself with anything other than thinking about losing her.

My story isn't really a story of grief. Grief is a very personal journey; circumstantial, ebbing-and-flowing, and an emotion that won't just subside over a specific period of time. Some people have very little response at all, some people suffer from acute-grief for years. There's plenty of literature already on this, and if I'm honest, most is very hard to connect with. At a minimum, if you are experiencing grief, it will at least reassure you that you aren't alone in feeling the way you do.

Instead, I want my story to be one of hope for those that maybe find themselves in a similar situation. I want it to be a story of the important lessons our lost loved ones can teach us and how, once we understand them, they can have a transformative effect on the way we lead our own lives. I call them '*Amy's Five Pearls*' (after her favourite quote above) and I'll begin to briefly open up about each one in this story. I'll also mention how I apply them practically to my day-to-day life. One day I want to write a longer book about Amy's lessons, but I'll start with this short version!

So here they are:

1. *It's people, not things.*
2. *Liberate yourself from fear.*
3. *Accept change and let go.*
4. *Make of it the best you can.*
5. *Be present.*

Living after losing a loved one doesn't need to be a spiral into despair, into anger or bitter resentment, or even into depression. Over time, you can begin to develop a new

sense of gratitude and a different *type* of love for them, and even the notion of loss can change. Even if you can't see it right now, you can learn to love more deeply and more selflessly going forward with other people and it can feel wonderful.

Do I live each and every moment by these lessons? Of course not. It's just as easy for me to slip back into my default mode, reactive and small-minded with worries and concerns like everyone else. But I do know that I'm at least *capable* of living by Amy's lessons because I've been able to repeatedly access them. Sometimes when I'm feeling sad, sometimes when I'm feeling really positive. And that for me gives me great strength and hope.

Thank you for reading my story.



It's people, not things.

All that we accumulate is subject to dissipation.

— Famous Zen proverb

Amy and I worked together on a new kitchen renovation before she passed away and we had reached the stage of the new marble worktop going in. On the second day, a scratch had developed on the surface and I was really annoyed that - after all this money and effort - such a thing could happen. She turned to me and just said 'Chris, remember, it's *people*, not things'. At the time, I'll be honest and say that it didn't really help! But she would repeat this almost any time I would get frustrated by something unexpected happening to our possessions; to Amy, it just didn't matter. Possessions and 'things' had no relevance to her other than to serve a basic and practical purpose; only our sense of self-importance and the fact they belonged to us and no-one else made them take on an importance bigger than they needed to.

In our culture where our sense of identity and self-worth is often constructed by our accumulation of external possessions and rewards, it's very difficult to reconcile the fact that 'things' do not matter. After all, what would keep us going if we didn't have our dreams of a nice car and house, or being able to afford the fancy holiday that others can't. We feel a constant dull buzz of inadequacy that drives our need to have something to prove. I cannot preach and say I was any different; for a very long time, I lived in a haze of wanting more, filled with a sense of dissatisfaction that I didn't have enough, all the time urged on by our materialistic world.

But I just kept returning to these words; '*it's people, not things*'. Amy's awareness of this simple but important observation was repeated multiple times in her self-written eulogy and she noted we all need to take more notice of the small things around us. To me personally, she made reference that opening up to people will be the route I needed to take if I'm to find happiness again. "*Chris, please, let people in*" she said. She had realised that all that's left when we are gone are the people we touch, the people we connect with, and the people we get to make an impact upon; not what we gain or have in the most physical sense.

This became such a profound insight that I began to take a step back and focus on what I already had to be grateful for, not what I needed. Of course I needed my basic needs to be met, but Amy had given me so much; everything I needed was right here, right now and all I had to do was to recognise this. I had wonderful friends and family around me, I lived in a town I loved, and I had a chance daily to help people in the job I loved doing. I realised that leading a fulfilling life was about helping and serving people and showing compassion and love along the way, just as Amy had been telling me. And by letting people in - which meant opening up - my existing friendships became even stronger. When I let people in, they let me in too.

How do I apply this to my life now? Beyond just trying to be a more open person, every morning I write down three things I'm grateful for. It could be something simple like a good night's sleep, a nice cup of coffee at breakfast, or knowing that I can get to see my beautiful nieces any time I want. Somedays, I even write down being grateful for the privilege of being alive. I've noticed over time that my list of things being grateful for is more and more about people, not things.



Accept change and let go.

Impermanence is humbling. It is absolutely certain, yet the way it will manifest is completely unpredictable. We have little control. We can either shrink in fear from this predicament or choose a different response.

— Frank Ostaseski

Before Amy was admitted to Dorothy House Hospice, she spent one night in hospital where, earlier that afternoon, she had been told she had a matter of days to live. I remember saying to her ‘Amy, are you not going to try and take some medicine to see if it helps?’. She replied ‘Chris, I’m done. I’m not scared anymore’. Just recalling those words is still very emotional for me.

Amy had reached a state of absolute acceptance of what had happened and was about to happen to her, and she knew there was nothing she could do. She had no control, all she could do was - with great dignity - to let go in its most extreme form; to let go of the fight, to let go of life itself.

Some people don’t know, but earlier in 2017 Amy had suffered a stillbirth. Despite even being diagnosed with terminal cancer, she would tell us that this was the worst part of the ordeal. Three months after this event, she had life-changing surgery, and six months after, she was told she had weeks to live. Time and time again, she had to let go of any future dreams and hopes she had, and had to recalibrate her being.

Instead of clinging to the past of what had happened, or being sad about the future, she accepted the truth of her present circumstances. By letting go, she was able to unlock a sense of freedom that gave her a feeling of ease and an ability to keep positive despite her dreadful situation. Only early on in her diagnosis did she ever exclaim ‘why me?’, she realised that acceptance was the only path she could take from that point on.

We all by nature cling to much of what surrounds us; from possessions as I noted above, to people, to status, even to emotions. “I feel so angry, I can’t let it go”, “I can’t stop thinking about this”. It’s only us that’s doing this; we constantly feed our need to be in control when all it may do is cause undue suffering. Much of it roots to fear of loss or change and this scares us, so we hold on as tightly as we can to protect ourselves. I will touch upon this in a few of Amy’s other lessons, but sometimes just letting go is the best thing we can do to relieve our suffering.

Letting go is difficult to practice as what we hold onto arrives in such varying degrees; from our spouses, to our financial security, to our profession. But we can start by doing it with the most simplest of things and building from there. Let go of needing to win an argument, being frustrated that someone is taking too long ordering their coffee, or holding onto anger because someone cut you off in traffic. I personally have become more tolerant and accepting of many things in life. At work, I’ve accepted that I cannot control everything, and lessening my grip has actually allowed the team and business to flourish and grow beyond anything I could have done on my own.



Liberate yourself from fear.

If you can just open up each door and face it, you may find out there is actually no monster in there. Bit by bit, you start to get more and more free in your life, so you can live bigger and bigger and more and more fearlessly and with more and more freedom.

— Dan Harris

Amy would use Instagram to show off the outlandish dress-sense she had developed. Have a look now and you'll see her catalogue of hilarious cat leggings, (un)tasteful t-shirts, and brightly coloured hair and makeup styles!

“*Just so you know, I've lost my filter*” she would tell her friends. And she really had. I don't think I've ever seen someone walk around the city of Bath dressed in Emoji leggings and a gold-cape!

Amy's body had changed during her diagnosis; a combination of an ileostomy surgery and a lot of weight loss, but she was immensely proud of who she had become. She wasn't a different person; she just wasn't scared any more. This was her and, in her eyes, this was the best version of her. Confident and strong, she had developed a compassion and self-love for herself and she knew her self-worth.

Many of these lessons route back to Amy just not being fearful any more. When you go through traumatic or life-changing events, I believe it's possible to develop a new

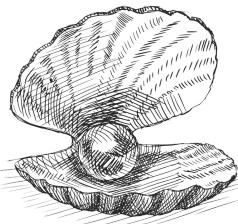
perspective on things that used to be cause for concern. Certainly Amy evidenced this, but there's so much we can all learn from being able to do the same. Much of our fear is fabricated in the space between our two ears, and much is unnecessary and unfounded. Some of our fear results as a behavioural defense mechanism of not wanting to get hurt and to not have our sense-of-self attacked. The result of this is that many of us have 40-foot metaphorical walls surrounding and protecting us, stopping us from really opening up and living more freely.

Evolutionary roots and the need to fit in has us worrying about what people may think of us and how we may be judged, but the hard truth is that they probably don't care that much. Yet why are we so surprised when we find this fact out? Why were we worried in the first place? We all have the same worries and anxieties and we are all just trying to navigate life the best we can. *We are all the same*. If we can learn to step outside of our egocentric behaviour, we can start to become who we really want to be. We can feel a new sense of freedom and these protective walls start to crumble.

If we can lose fear in these simple behaviours, we can even learn to lose the fear of death itself, just as Amy did. With an awareness of death, we can be more daring, go much further in our daily conquests, all because we have nothing to lose; for death is inevitable. When you can appreciate this, a certain grace enters the way you live and you begin to take things less seriously.

As someone who experiences mild anxiety (a fear of the future), I've tried to integrate Amy's lessons on a daily basis; although not by wearing cat or emoji leggings! I have a few practices I try and use depending on the situation. When I feel mildly socially anxious, I remind myself how strong I am to be going through one of the worst things to go through - how can I possibly be scared of anything now? It makes me approach people with a more neutral, non-judgemental perspective and I feel myself being more open, confident and outgoing.

To gain perspective in other difficult situations, I try and picture myself from 100 miles up, looking down and asking myself "Chris, in the vastness and mystical nature of the earth, the galaxy, even the universe, do you really think this concern is worth it?" Maybe that last one is a tad extreme, but it helps.



Make of it the best you can.

On Facing Hardship:

"I often wonder. I have decided it's random. Some people have to take an extra lump. Hardship doesn't discriminate. It affects good and bad, old and young, moms and dads and daughters and sons. It's not fair. We just get the hand we're dealt with and make of it what we can.

— Amy Mattingly: her last Facebook message to a supporter

We all vary in how we respond to adversity. Some of us have a natural resilience and can keep going, some of us get knocked off our feet and don't know what to do and we blame everyone but ourselves for our misfortune. I am constantly struck by how Amy was able to respond to her multiple blows of life-changing news; how she was able to make the best of it and come back smiling and positive.

When Amy was told by her oncologist on a September afternoon that she had weeks to live, my response was to literally faint in my chair. Amy's was to listen calmly, get up, tell the news to her family, wipe her tears, and figure out what she could do to have the greatest impact in the remaining time she had. She ended up organising a big walk from our home to Bath along the canal to raise money for Bowel Cancer UK, and in the process began to connect with fellow sufferers of the disease. She did 8 walks in total and raised almost £15,000 in the process.

Amy realised that you have a choice when you encounter terrible life events. You have a choice to either accept it and move on into happiness or remain where you are and live with bitterness and anger. Anger is usually easier to hold on to but anger never helps anyone. She used her time to document her experience on [her blog, Cats Love Peanut Butter](#), to help educate others going through the same disease; she spoke to the media on multiple occasions to help raise awareness of bowel cancer; most of all, she made sure to spend time with her many friends and family and to show that you can still lead a full life even if you can't control when it will end.

This is the lesson so many of us have taken from knowing Amy. Life is deeply unfair, nothing is guaranteed, and the goalposts move, but you can for sure use the time you do have to find happiness. The issue so many of us have is we are conditioned to think the opposite; life shouldn't be random and life should be fair. "How dare this happen to me?" I'm afraid that will never be the case, and if we lead our lives that way, we are set up for disappointment and suffering at every turn. We start becoming angry when things don't go our way, if someone doesn't show us respect or acknowledge our status, or if we don't get the things we asked for.

Amy taught me to gain a new perspective on what is and isn't fair and it starts by realising that really not that much is within your control. Obviously there are some things, more so at the micro level (e.g what you will have for dinner). But at a macro level, how can you possibly guarantee what your life will look like in 5 years time. It's difficult to control what it will look like in 5 days time! All you can do is do your best at that moment in time; and if your best doesn't work, well, then you just try again.

My own problems pale into insignificance versus what Amy went through. That in itself is cause for a complete perspective change. When things are getting to me and I can't position my thinking quite at this level, I step back and try to be more forgiving and appreciative of the circumstance. If it relates to a person, maybe I don't know what they are going through. As Amy showed, you can just let go of the problem and move on and make of it the best you can.



Be present.

“What day is it?” asked Pooh.

“It’s today,” squeaked Piglet.

“My favourite day,” said Pooh.

— AA Milne

Ever since I first met Amy, she had a knack of not really worrying about things. Sure, she would have some concerns, but overall she led a very happy-go-lucky life. She rarely held a grudge and I suppose she was able to ‘live in the moment’ to use the common idiom. She was an exceptionally gifted creative person and would regularly lose herself in the flow of doing what she loved most; designing something digitally, planning a room interior, crafting, and many other skillful activities.

When you are given a terminal diagnosis, it’s obviously very difficult to plan anything; scans and waiting for results are hard to avoid planning for, but beyond that, Amy just tried to live as carefree as possible. I believe she really did live in the present.

Explaining the notion to people of ‘being present’ is actually very difficult. Our default behaviours are wired to ruminate about the past (what should have been) or concern ourselves about the future (what’s going to go wrong). This is actually the root of all depression and anxiety. We are either stuck in the past (depression) or worried about the future (anxiety). There’s a gap right in the middle that we can all access and it’s around us right now in this *exact* moment. This is the present. When

you can focus attention on the present moment, nothing is wrong. It is *impossible* for anything to be wrong!

The bad thing you are worrying about has either already happened (in the past) or hasn't happened at all (in the future). If you focus on the present, that worry will just dissolve. When you can realise this, there's a feeling of peace that wraps around you and you better savour the experience of life. *Everything is OK.*

Perhaps Amy reached this level of mindfulness simply as a consequence of knowing how she wanted to live her life. She lived for the moment, making new friends and connections, using her creativity to express herself, and importantly to try and help others. She never planned past a day, she never worried about what had happened or would happen. This is perhaps the most important of all the lessons for me. By better observing the present moment, I can slowly learn to not let the voice in my head run wild, to chase things blindly, to grasp at things that won't last. I can learn to give one of the greatest gifts I can to people: *paying attention.*

Each day, I spend at least 15 minutes silently trying to be present and focusing my attention. I close my eyes, focus on my breath, and let my thoughts arrive and disperse naturally. Thoughts are like a drop of water hitting a puddle, or clouds passing through the sky. The water radiates for a little while, or clouds congregate together, but then the still and serene state is always returned to. This is the present state. Your thoughts and emotions, however negative or positive, are only temporary and will always disperse. There is great comfort in knowing this.

A way forward

When we awaken love in ourselves and express it, our love changes the world around us. The hearts of those we touch are opened, and they in turn touch the hearts of others. Love is the basic nature, the goodness of all beings, waiting to manifest.

— Tara Brach

Writing this has been therapeutic and helpful for my own grieving. I now have something to refer to each time I feel sad or miss her. I know Amy's never coming back, but my love for her is still nestled deeply within my heart and forever will be. It's a different type of love; one where she wants me to be happy, but also one where I'm deeply grateful for the life she gave me, and I her. There are many other stories and memories of Amy I could speak about, but I wanted to start by trying to put into words how her own way of life now guides mine and perhaps how it could help others.

A lot of what I have learned to do is about re-appraising. Reappraising people, things, and situations. We don't have to be the victims of our circumstances, what if we could take tragic events and work out how to grow stronger as a result of them? What if we could practice forgiveness instead of sadness or anger? There's no magic prize if you reach the end of your life with nothing going wrong and everything going perfectly. For a start, that would be impossible! Maybe we can start by realising things *will* go wrong. I never expected to be a widow in my 30s, to have to change the 'plans' for my life, to have to think about how I can love again. All I can do is accept what has happened and build a new life that is even more meaningful and less fearful. I'm not going to start skydiving every weekend or suddenly change personality to become

super-outgoing, but I can slowly begin to integrate Amy's wisdom into my life in small ways.

For a long time, I've weight trained and there's a physiological response in our body as a result of doing this: *the hormetic response*. When you are exposed to stress (i.e. heavy weights), it triggers your body to repair itself and adapt so it can handle the same stress again or even greater stress. It quite literally repairs and adapts itself to be better the next time. I don't even know if this is a scientific term, but I'll term it *emotional hormetic response*. Through Amy, I can adapt to be an even better and stronger person, capable of loving myself more and those around me more.

I've begun to learn many other lessons from Amy that perhaps I'll save for another time. However one I will briefly touch upon is this; *everything is about love*. I never thought I'd say that, but I now believe it really is. When you strip away our desires - be it chasing material wealth, power, status, beauty - or our defenses that protect us from being hurt - fear, shame, anger - all that is left in any of us is *love*. Sometimes I imagine our species being observed and I ask myself what would be made of us; what actually makes us human. We will say a lot of things, but I'm certain it will simply boil down to love. This to me is the human condition. These days, I just try to be as nice and as loving as I can and, in turn, the world seems to do this back.

I will end this story with the words of Sheryl Sandberg who lost her husband in 2015.

When life sucks you under, you can kick against the bottom, break the surface, and breathe again. I learned that in the face of the void—or in the face of any challenge—you can choose joy and meaning.

Thank you for reading.

Chris Mattingly

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