



Force of Nature, Ray of Light

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

Philanthropist, ethical scientist, 2010 New Zealander of the Year, 2011 Most Trusted Kiwi, award-winning inventor and best-selling author. The list goes on. An estimated 16 million African and Asian souls owe him their sight and countless others, their lives. A knight of the realm he may also be, but Sir Ray Avery doesn't mind getting his hands dirty.

The door opens and Avery welcomes me wearing shorts and a T-shirt splattered with what appears to be cement. He's having renovation work done at his home and earlier that morning the builder cut himself deeply enough to require hospital attention, leaving Avery to take over the construction duties. Shaking hands, he asks if we'll be needing photos and I reply that we will. "I'll just nip and freshen up," he beams, imploring me to help myself to coffee.

A philosophy of Sir Ray Avery's concerning a cost-effective way to live our lives recently went viral. It centres around the theory that, accident or illness aside, each of us is gifted an average of 30,000 days to live and that we shouldn't waste a beat.

"Knowledge and observation are the key to innovation," he says, the workwear now replaced by a crisply pressed shirt and smart black slacks. "We plan our work lives in a way that we don't our personal ones. If you know you have 30,000 days, you can reverse-engineer your life and pick the points in time by which you wish to achieve certain things."

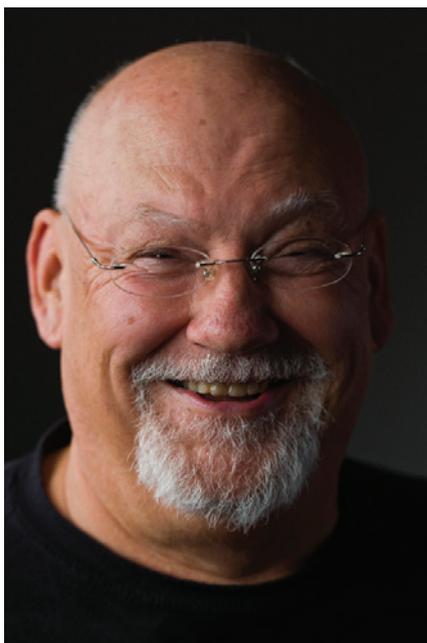
Though not without a certain element of morbidity, this inspiring concept has spawned a website which allows the user to watch the seconds of those 30,000 days evaporate. The months passed are ticked off in bold red blocks like an automated online advent calendar, only less festive and without the chocolate. Sir Ray asks for my birthday, joyfully keys it in and I reluctantly watch the countdown to my death. It's a sobering sight. Sir Ray takes it all in his stride, the Grim Reaper clearly doesn't scare him one bit. Sir Ray loves a challenge:

"I have around 5,000 days left, but I reckon that I could turn those into 10,000 if I multi-task. That's my game plan, don't waste time, don't waste a day."

His latest endeavour, the Health Innovation Hub for which he is deputy chairman, aims to 'change the global healthcare one step at a time'. Avery wants to make New Zealand the world's foremost health care provider.

"We've got our foot on the bottom rung of the ladder," he says. "We already have a world first whereby most of the country's District Health Boards are signed up to the same organisation – our Hub. They've invested time and money to make it work, no other nation has that connectivity. It means that we can look at the whole of New Zealand as one society in terms of its health-care opportunities."

They aim to improve the efficiency of hospitals, which Avery compares to badly run restaurants, by reducing admissions and using technology to provide better



home care and monitoring. "Hospitals don't know how many customers they will have on any given day," he says. "So how can they marry-up their service demand with their service resources?"

One solution lies in the simple form of a wristband, which can be used to check patients' vital signs so that their health can be monitored remotely without the need for them to even set foot into a hospital. Other offerings include a cutting-edge Smartphone-like device that may help lessen the risk of sudden infant death via an app and Cloud technology. What makes Avery's zest for life all the more inspiring is that his vision of the very of brightest of futures was born of the very darkest of pasts.

A child of drunk and violent parents in post-war Britain, he was to spend his formative years in and out of foster care. By his early teens, Avery had made numerous attempts to escape the "abusive system" until he finally came to reside under a railway bridge in London's Finsbury Park. He taught himself to read in local libraries where he would go to escape the merciless English chills, later to be found by Jack Wise, a teacher and social worker who then enrolled Avery in a local college.

"Jack Wise changed my life," says Sir Ray. "He put me into the education system and found me somewhere to live. He was the real deal. One of his sons had committed suicide and he felt that he had failed in some way and wanted to make amends. His heart was huge and he inspired me for the first time to believe in the goodness of human beings. Up until then I didn't give a toss, I was just trying to survive."

He clearly saw something in you?

"I managed to get back to see him twenty-odd years ago before he died. He told me that for all of his life, I had been his star pupil. He couldn't possibly know that, he helped so many. I spend time mentoring young New Zealanders to pay back that cycle. The best way you can become immortal is to live on in somebody else, to inspire them to take over where you left off."

Taking over from Avery will be no easy task, especially given that he feels he "hasn't changed the world enough yet." He tells me that in the time that we have spoken, babies have died because they haven't had access to the likes of his revolutionary low-cost, zero-maintenance incubators, which are currently in the last stages of development through his other organisation, Medicine Mondiale. It is predicted that each one will save 50 children a year in the developing world. Affordable cataract-curing lenses, which he pioneered along with intravenous-drip flow regulators have saved populations the size of small nations. One gets the impression that given a basket of bread and a handful of fish, Avery would manage to feed a hell of a lot more than five thousand.

He playfully scoffs when I suggest that his horrific past destined him to a life of philanthropy:

"Oh no, I certainly tried the devil's poison! I did the fast cars, women and flash houses but it didn't work, didn't make me happy. Helping others did that and made me a better person. It also led to me meeting my wife."

His wife, Anna, who runs her own charity, "saw something good" in Avery while working together in Nepal in the 1990s. They have two young daughters, Amelia and Anastasia, but even though fatherhood came relatively late to Sir Ray, now 65, he has no plans to slow down. If anything, he says that it has made his work even more urgent. As for retirement, that's out of the question.

"I still want to be creating and inventing things up until my last moments," he reflects. "As they're nailing the coffin shut, I'd like to crack open the lid, pass out a note and say 'give that one a go – that's a good idea!'"

You wouldn't bet against it now, would you?

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