

Pass It On®...

The Adventure of Life and the Gifts That Come from Facing Death.

How William Shatner and his daughter Melanie Shatner Gretsch faced down cancer and discovered the universe. From the “No Time But Now” podcast.

Life’s voyage takes us to places we never planned on and requires more of us than maybe we thought possible. In 2022, William Shatner got a call from his youngest daughter, Melanie Shatner Gretsch. She needed him.

“I think I’m dying,” she told him. She was in the throes of chemotherapy for stage 4 breast cancer and needed the support of her father. He was there in 15 minutes, his arms around her in a bear hug.

“This will be a blip in your life,” he told her. “It will soon be a distant memory.”

She fought on. Then, while still undergoing treatment herself, came another blow. Gretsch got a call from her father. He had just been diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma. “I didn’t think I had the strength to take care of myself and lose my father,” Gretsch remembers.

But the universe reveals itself in mysterious ways. They found a combined strength and a spiritual, mystical epiphany on the other side of dread.

“I was always the most scared child,” Gretsch recalls with a smile. “Truly, the monsters under the bed were always there to get me. But when I actually saw the face of something I feared, I was able to sit with it, get to know it, make friends with it. While I was waiting for the biopsy results, I went outside; I remember being overwhelmed by the color of the sky. It was the bluest blue. My senses were sharpened in a way I can’t really explain.”

Her father’s experience was different. “I thought, okay, so I got cancer, and they’ll cure it,” he says, laughing. “I felt like I could go out and conquer the universe.” For Shatner, surviving cancer reinforced an impulse that has long defined him, to keep moving, keep asking questions, keep saying yes to what comes next.

Cancer brought father and daughter toward a similar conclusion: Life demanded their attention now. Gretsch, who had spent much of her life anticipating what might go wrong, discovered a new capacity to inhabit the present. Her priorities became intensely concrete: her family and the possibility that telling her story might help someone else facing the same fears.

“I made this deliberate choice to live my life,” Gretsch says. “To spend precious moments with my husband, my family, the people I love.”

Cancer made mortality hard to ignore. As Shatner puts it, “When death is close, everything is sharpened. I found myself thinking about the universe and how beautifully mysterious it is. How capable the human mind is.”

Shatner, 95, and Gretsch, 61, tease each other about who has more life left. They finish each other’s sentences and laugh at the memories of being a young family. Listening to them together, it becomes clear that Shatner made quite an impression on his three daughters from their earliest days. “I think that you’ve given my sisters and I that sense of wonder and awe. That was your battle cry for us our whole lives. It was look outside, look at the sunset, look at the moon,” Gretsch recalls.

Cancer did not so much give father and daughter a new philosophy but rather deepened what was already there. For Gretsch, facing what she had always feared changed her relationship to fear itself. For Shatner, it underscored the urgency of staying curious and engaged for however much time remains. And now, having come through it together, they want to make something useful of what they learned.

“I hope we can help other people do that when they are facing a similar crisis, to move through the fear and see the gifts that can come from it,” Gretsch says.

Father and daughter want to share their gifts — what they’ve learned — by talking about it, together, and with others. As Shatner puts it, “There’s no time but now to lead your life.”

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