Rednock assembly Jan 2015

Theory of Everything

I went to the cinema the other day as a birthday treat. I went to see the Theory of Everything – the story of the relationship between Stephen Hawking and Jane Wilde. It is in the running for the Oscars next month in the best film, actor and actress categories. The lead roles played by Eddie Redmayne and Felicity Jones are superbly acted.

Hopefully you all know who Stephen Hawking is, one of the world’s leading theoretical physicists, who is consigned to a wheelchair and can only speak now by using a single cheek muscle through a speech generating device.

The story starts in the 1960s, when Cambridge University students Stephen Hawking and Jane Wilde fall in love. At 21, Hawking learns that he has motor neurone disease. Despite this - and with Jane at his side - he begins an ambitious study of time, of which he has very little left, according to his doctor. He and Jane defy terrible odds and break new ground in the fields of medicine and science, achieving more than either could hope to imagine. It’s a very thought provoking film and I commend it you.

I thought I’d talk about the film. Sorry if you haven’t’ seen it – there are some spoiler alerts! Three things that stood out for me that I want to comment on. Legs, Love and Logic.

**Legs.**

There is a scene where Hawking is running through a college and his legs go from under him. This leads to the diagnosis of motor neurone disease. The doctor tells him he only has two years to live. I have known people who have been given the same diagnosis and they have all died roughly within about two years. Miraculously Hawking is still alive 50 years later. The film shows how he reacts to the news of his diagnosis by withdrawing, getting depressed, angry and feeling that no one will want to be near him anymore. He has this moment where he is giving up on himself and pushing people away, but Jane pursues him, loves him, and supports him through everything.

Many people use adversity to spur them on to achievement and even success.

Great scientific innovators typically face strong struggles. For example, the late Steve Jobs is known for creating the *Apple* technology. Despite his success, he suffered with severe pancreatic cancer most of his life, yet he lived longer than doctors expected. Albert Einstein failed math in school and was assumed to be mute at an early age, yet he became a world-renown scientist. I am convinced that Steve Job's adversity pushed him to share his innovations quickly. I believe Albert Einstein's frustration led him to communicate complex math in clear ways. Without their adversity, new inventions would not exist.

In the movie, Stephen Hawking's character fights to communicate his black hole theory with limited physical capability. Later in the movie, Hawking loses his ability to talk. Despite his struggle, he summons the will to write his book. The movie implies Stephen Hawking's illness played an important role in inspiring him to share his innovative theories globally. He didn’t know how much time he had left – so he made the best use of it. He was initially tempted to give up, be a victim, curse life, shrivel and die but he used what ability he had to great affect. Which is why he is such an inspiration to so many, especially those with disabilities. Yet I think the film helps us to continue to see the personality and character of the man and not just see his disability and this contorted lifeless body in a wheelchair. We still know he is a person in his own right.

**Love**

Arguably the main reason why he faced and overcame adversity was the love and support of friends and especially Jane. Instead of walking away from him after his diagnosis she ended up marrying him and sticking by him for 30 years. The film shows what sacrifice that was for her and her career. It portrays her as someone who is determined to show his family and friends that she has the strength and courage to love and care for Stephen. But as the years go on and the demand of care grows, that love is tested.

She keeps her sanity by joining a church choir. As a church minster it would be remiss of me not to point that out to you. Come to church and stay sane!

She makes a friendship with a choirmaster and musician whilst Stephen Hawking falls for his nurse and divorces Jane in 1995. They are friends though once again and both appeared together at the world premiere of the movie. But the film is realistic about the up and downs and the struggles of real love.

In a fortnight times will be Valentine’s Day and even now you may be agonising over whom or if you should send a valentine to? This type of love is the romantic frothy type, led by your hormones. The love in the film *Theory of Everything* has that, a bit of flirting and the flush of romance, but goes beyond it to study love, particularly love in adversity.

In real life, caregivers have one of two emotions when dealing with a spouse's severe injury or illness. It is either to stay, or to go. According to a recent survey,"30% of marriages with an ill spouse end in divorce: study," illnesses pose hardships on marriages. In the movie Jane is pushed to the breaking point, she is posed with an option to leave him. In the mid-1985, Hawking contracted [pneumonia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pneumonia) which in his condition was life-threatening; he was so ill that Jane was asked if life support should be terminated. She refused but the consequence was a [tracheotomy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tracheotomy), which would require round-the-clock nursing care, and remove what remained of his speech.

Jane is seen deciding whether to switch off his life support and knowing that she could be released from caring for Hawking and be able to start a new life with the choirmaster. But her principles kick in. Her respect for the sanctity of life tells her that life is precious and should be protected at all costs. Hawking is of course still alive today as a result of her decision.

**Logic**

Unlike Hawking, Jane his wife was a Christian and throughout the film there is this undercurrent of debate about the relationship between science and faith and the value or not of belief.

Earlier in the film Stephen Hawking and Jane have intellectual debates about the existence of God – Hawking the rational scientists implies that he doesn’t deal with beliefs but only with empirical fact, scientific reasoning, what you can causally prove. Logic is king. He doesn’t want to believe in a ‘celestial dictator’. People always have interesting ideas about who they believe God is. When people tell me they don’t believe in God I ask them to tell me what kind of God they don’t believe in – because more often than not it is the same God I don’t believe in either.

At the end of the film he is asked what philosophy of life sustains him and keeps him going as he has declared he does not believe in God. He does though say that where there is life there is hope. Hope is a difficult category for scientists. It is bracketed in the category of wishful thinking – even wishful thinking against any evidence to the contrary.

That statement ‘where there is life there is hope’, comes after an imaginary sequence. Hawking is asked the question in the context of what hope sustains him, if he doesn’t believe in God. At that moment a woman in the audience in front of him drops her pen on the floor and Hawking imagines himself getting up out of his wheelchair and picking up the pen. He imagines a transformed body with his full ability again. Then we come back to reality and he makes a statement about where there is life there is hope.

I haven’t got time to go into the science faith debate – suffice to say that Hawking has declared that he is an atheist. Other scientists declare that they believe in God. . I have a number of scientists with doctorates in my church, nuclear physicists, chemist, metallurgist who have spoken of why they believe in God.

I went to a lecture a few months back by professor John Lennox, Professor of Mathematics at oxford University and Philosophy of Science. He noted how Hawking’s for years had appeared to leave the question of God open. At the end of his bestselling A Brief History of time he wrote ‘if we discover a complete theory… it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason –for then we would know the mind of God’. But in his latest book ‘the Grand design’ he claims there is no room for God. Lennox speculates that because religion has become toxic in our modern age and is seen a source of violence and terror this is prejudicing people’s opinion towards it. In his lecture he gave an intellectual rebuff to Hawking by asking the question ‘whose design is it anyway’.

Suffice to say there is another side to the argument but, and this is my opinion, the media is heavily biased towards giving us a secular humanistic and atheistic viewpoint.

During Lent and the run up to Easter I will be hosting some talks that will be held at The Bank Café in town on Tuesdays evenings from February 24th to March 25th. They are called Christianity Explored – which hopefully does what it says on the tin. They are open meetings to explore, discuss and debate faith and belief. If you come along you get to answer me back.

Easter is the pivotal festival for Christians when we believe in hope – we believe in hope because we believe Jesus died for us and rose again. Its more hope than you can take in. resurrection hope hopes for a transformation – that one day Stephen Hawking may be free of the limitations of is physical body and know that liberation and salvation.

Last year I visited an elderly gentleman in a nursing home. In his nineties, his eyesight was falling, he was virtually deaf, and he was incontinent and could hardly stand up, never mind walk. I came to bring him Easter greetings – though saying ‘Happy Easter’ to a person in such a pitiful state could on the face of it sound tasteless. I gave him a crème egg and a palm cross. Hardly able to see he felt the palm cross and clasped it with all the strength he could muster. And then he brought it to his lips and kissed it and then held it to his chest. We didn’t need to speak. We didn’t need words. That was his hope. That was what he was holding on to.

Issues of faith and belief are played out in the film through the central characters of Stephen and Jane Hawking. Arguably Jane’s faith results in this sacrificial love towards her husband that changes his life. On paper it doesn’t seem logical.

Legs love and Logic – some thoughts about the theory of everything. Go and see it for yourself.