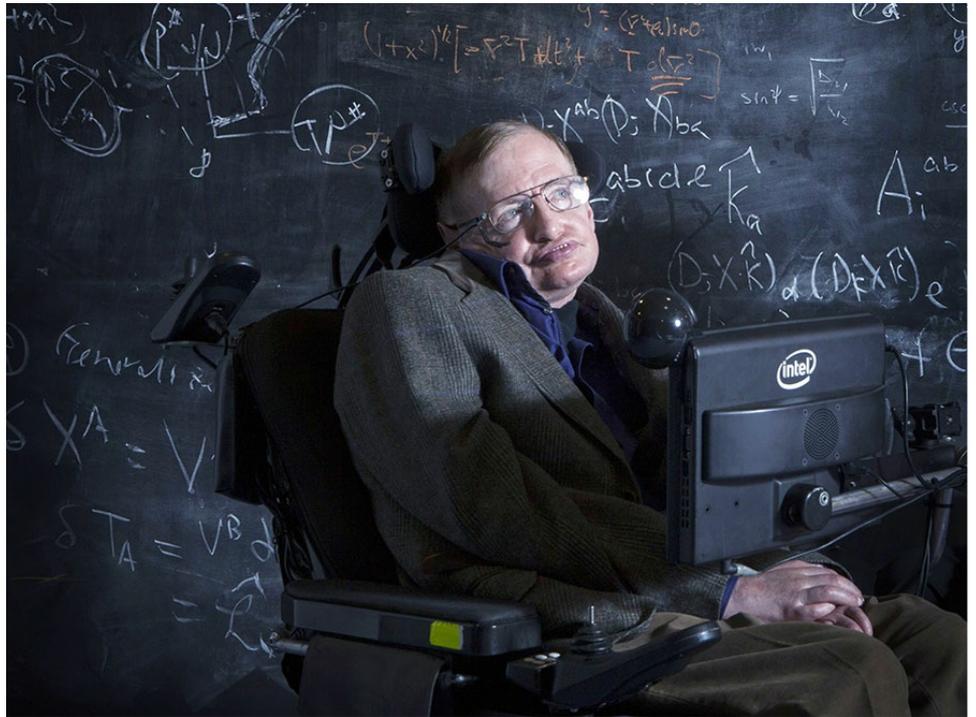


The true courage of science's brightest star

What can we learn from Stephen Hawking? Superstar physicist, renowned writer and inspiring teacher – Hawking achieved all this despite huge adversity. Some see a life lesson for us all.



Wise words: "Look up at the stars and not down at your feet ... be curious." © Getty

At 21, many believe their life is just beginning. But at that tender age in 1963, Stephen Hawking received devastating news. He was diagnosed with a rare **motor neurone disease**, and doctors gave him just two years to live. In the end, he defied their expectations by an extraordinary 53 years – becoming one of the world's most celebrated scientists in the process. He died yesterday aged 76.

While the world mourns his passing, for Hawking it was the very prospect of an early death which made his ambitions come to life. In his memoir he claimed that before his illness he was "bored with life". Only after the diagnosis did he suddenly realise the many "worthwhile things" he could do.

And many amazing things he did. His science career brought swift success, as he produced pioneering research on black holes and **cosmology** – all propelled by his huge, yet unerringly simple, ambition: "A complete understanding of the universe."

Prizes soon followed, including a fellowship

at the **Royal Society**, and a prestigious Cambridge professorship once held by Isaac Newton. Yet all the while he battled his terrible disease which put him in a wheelchair and robbed him of his **speech**.

It also gave him great difficulty writing, yet it was a book, *A Brief History of Time*, that secured his stardom. Spending an unprecedented 237 weeks on the *Sunday Times* bestseller list and translated into 40 languages, it introduced a mass audience to the most fundamental questions about the universe.

He returned to this audience time and again, delivering public **lectures** on theoretical physics with trademark wit and clarity (not to mention comical cameos on shows like *The Simpsons* and *The Big Bang Theory*).

But through all his personal triumphs and tribulations, he was also a **husband** and a father to three children. And as news of his death broke, Lucy, Robert and Tim released a statement quoting one of their father's most

cherished thoughts: "He once said: 'It would not be much of a universe if it wasn't home to the people you love.'"

What can we learn from the remarkable life of Stephen Hawking?

Timeless

His life is about triumph over adversity, some argue. Hawking's achievements stand alone. But that he did all those things while fighting a crippling disability is the true triumph. It shows that we can all overcome the direst circumstances if we only believe we can.

It is more subtle than that, others say. It is not that he overcame difficulty, but that adversity made him who he was – spurring him on to work harder, think more clearly and make the best of the time he had. The message is not that any hardship can be defeated, but that even the worst circumstances can produce wonderful things.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: Hawking died peacefully at his home in Cambridge on Wednesday, March 14. While he won many distinguished prizes, including the

Albert Einstein Award, he never received a Nobel Prize. He has also turned down a knighthood, and claimed that he did not pursue science "in the hope of winning prizes and medals".

Q: What do we not know?

A: The extent of Hawking's greatness purely as a scientist is hotly debated. When an interviewer proposed that he was the greatest physicist since Einstein, Hawking called the notion "rubbish" and "mere media hype".

YOU DECIDE

1. Can hardship be a good thing?
2. Is it possible to understand the entire universe?

ACTIVITIES

1. Write down the name of one famous person that you most admire. Share your choice with your classmates. Are there any popular choices? How many scientists did the class choose? Should scientists be more celebrated by society?
2. Do some research into one other famous physicists. Some suggestions are Isaac Newton, Paul Dirac or Albert Einstein. What famous discoveries did they make? How did that discovery change the world? Did their work influence Stephen Hawking?

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"However difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at."
Stephen Hawking

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Motor neurone disease – The condition causes neurons in the brain to break down. This causes muscles to slowly weaken making everyday tasks difficult or impossible.

Cosmology – The science of the origin and development of the universe.

Royal Society – Prestigious scientific

institution based in London, founded in 1660.

Speech – Hawking communicated with a computerised speech synthesiser that he controlled by moving his cheek. Its robotic voice became iconic, and Hawking claimed he would never change it for a more realistic British accent.

A Brief History of Time – First published in 1988, it has since sold over 10 million copies.

Lectures –

For example, in 2016 Hawking delivered the prestigious BBC Reith lectures – an annual series of radio talks which aim to enrich and advance the understanding of the general public.

Husband – Hawking was married to his first wife, Jane, for thirty years. Following their divorce he married Elaine Mason, who he was married to for 11 years before they divorced in 2006.

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 Notes

