

“Dying Well” – presentation as part of the Aging Well series,
Sunnybrook United Church, October 24, 2019

What does it mean to “die well?”

- in some cultures, what it means to die well is pretty clear: an honourable death in battle is the preferred option for men
- in some cultures people prepare a deathbed speech or song, so that their life philosophy can be remembered and passed on
- In our culture, we spend so much time avoiding death that most of us don't have a clear idea of what it means to die well. A lot of the conversation about dying well in recent years has been focused on having control, choosing our own time, and Medically Assisted Dying. I am not opposed to MAID, but I think even a person who chose the time of their own death may not die well, if they do not know how to live well.

This is a topic of particular interest to me since I was diagnosed with cancer a couple of years ago. I have been doing chemo and radiation and hormone therapy and, so far at least, I hope to live a good many more years, but even so, a diagnosis like that makes me think about my own mortality

For me, what it means to die well is pretty much the same as what it means to live well. In other words, I want to live as fully and richly as I can, giving and receiving love, until I die.

Let me tell you a story about a person who, in my opinion, did not die well. I tell this story in part because I think I failed this person, because I was unable to help him understand what it means to die well. This happened thirty years ago, so my memory is a bit fuzzy, but there are some things I remember as if they happened yesterday.

There was no way in which this death could have been a good death. The fellow in question was 16 years old and had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia. I had never met him before, but his cousin called me and asked me to visit. He had just been told that his cancer was terminal and there was nothing more that could be done medically. He had been so positive up to that point, I was told. He had been so confident that he would beat the cancer, but now, he thought, the cancer had beaten him, and he had just given up.

So I phoned and made an appointment and went to his house. His parents were there, and they explained that he spent most of his time in his basement room, playing video games, distracting himself so that he didn't have to think about the future. My impression was that he was putting in time, killing time, killing the time that was killing him. There was a strange irony there, that he was so upset that he had so little time left that he was wasting the little time he had left.

His parents called him upstairs, and we all sat around a table in a sunlit porch and drank tea. I tried to get this young man talking. I asked him how he was feeling about what was happening, but he was not in a talkative mood. Not being able to get him to talk, I couldn't think what else to do or say. I probably did assure him that he had nothing to fear, that to enter eternity is to live in the presence of love. But he was consumed with this life and with the tragedy of his own impending death. He needed to know how to die well. And in the face of that, I had nothing to offer. So there we sat, in an awkward silence, making awkward small talk. Small talk is inadequate; the time of death is a time for big talk, honest talk, and we squandered it talking awkwardly about small things. It is the awkwardness I remember most clearly. It was awkward, because in the face of the great mystery of death, we were very much aware that there were things that should have been said, but we didn't know what they were.

That is my memory of this young man. I probably saw him again in the hospital, and probably conducted his funeral - I don't really remember - but we never again had an opportunity for an honest talk about big questions. I missed that opportunity to help him die well. And so I have continued to wonder, what could I have said to help him die well? If I could do it again, what would I do?

I could, for example, have acknowledged that what was happening to him was unfair, as a way of validating his feelings and his sense of the unfairness of what was happening. I could have quoted the last words of Jesus who said, as he was being tortured to death: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Life is often not fair, I could have told him, and your illness is not fair. It is not fair that you will not graduate from high school, never experience love, sex, vocation, parenthood, or the blessings of a full and long life. I could have given him permission to grieve. There was so much of life that he was going to miss. It was unfair, and he needed to use some of the time he had left to grieve. I could have

quoted Dylan Thomas' great poem to him: "Go not go gentle into that good night; rage, rage against the dying of the light." I could have encouraged him to grieve and to rage. Raging against death would have been better than avoiding it, numbing his feelings with video games.

But ultimately, I would have hoped that he would have moved past raging. I could have told him that I hoped that he would also "Live, Live against the dying of the light." "When the time becomes short," I could have said, "then it also becomes precious, and there are so many important things to do and say in the short time you have left. So be honest. Find a way to say what you really feel. Write it in a journal first, if necessary, but eventually, say it aloud. Take the time you have left to live courageously and speak courageously with each of the people precious to you: speak from your heart, express your grief, your remorse, to ask forgiveness for when you have hurt those you love, to offer forgiveness for the hurts you have received, and ultimately, to give thanks for all the gifts of love and joy and hope and generosity you have received."

I wish that I had said all of that, or better yet, helped him to grasp it. I wish that I could have lived my own advice and lived fully and courageously in the time I had with him. I wish I could have spoken from my heart. I wish I could have said, "It sucks that you are dying, yes. But the reason that it sucks is that life is a great gift. Many people who live to be ninety squander that gift. So, whatever time you have left, claim it as a gift, live the time you have fully, honestly, richly. Cherish the time you have, the relationships you have, the blessings you have."

I wish I had said all of that, but I didn't. We made small talk in the face of the big mystery.

Looking back, and looking forward, what does it mean to die well? If I was to prepare my dying song or my deathbed speech, it would be honest, heartfelt words of gratitude for the gift of life and the gift of love. To die with gratitude in my heart and on my lips would be to die well.

I want to close with a poem by Mary Oliver: "When Death Comes:"

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from
his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity,
wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and
real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this
world

