

The Spirituality of Dying

1. Introduction

- a. Proportionate anticipation – all the four following elements need to be present:
 - i. death accepted/faced as fact and event [Richard Rohr in *Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* – one of the hard facts]. Peterson, *The Pastor*, the monastery with the tomb between chapel, refectory, and cell. Room for the next monk.
 - ii. death interpreted as metaphor – the meanings we give to the journey towards death, the experience of dying.
 - iii. death told as my story: we also have **unique stories** which may cohere or clash with the metaphors. In the comfortable or uncomfortable conversations between personal story and cultural myths, or experience of death is thrashed out. [We are called to understand and alert to the myths, and assist in the telling of the stories...]
 - iv. death revered as mystery - Henry Ward Beecher: *Now comes the mystery*. In the face of the mystery, humility, openness, honesty, vulnerability.

2. **Particular myths 1**: death as glorious martyrdom [what a different world we live in!] This is one version of death as solution. Suicide is another: no time to go here.

- a. Militarized versions: Kamikaze – the tradition of death rather than defeat, capture and shame. Cf the Crusades
- b. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* – Poem by Wilfred Owen
- c. Perpetua and Felicitas: *Possibly such a woman could not have been slain unless she herself had willed it, because she was feared by the impure spirit.*
- d. Positives:
 - i. purposeful and confident death
 - ii. is seen as giving meaning to pain
 - iii. death as a vocation
 - iv. dying with the blessing of God
- e. Negatives:
 - i. devalues the ordinary life lived towards God
 - ii. ennobles violence and pain, potentially abusive
 - iii. Fatalism and passivity

3. **Particular myths 2**: Tamed death: controlled death [Aries moves from shared ideas to death of me to death of the other]

- a. The sociologist Michael Kearsley has remarked that in the past *death has been woven into the fabric of life.*¹

¹

Michael Kearsley, 1989, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying*, Oxford: OUP, page 7

- b. Death shared: the shared experience of each person's dying that John Donne so memorably described: *any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee...*
 - c. Positives:
 - i. The conscious decision to take hold of the journey – if not autonomy, yet controlled
 - ii. Rooted in a strong structure of faith
 - d. Negatives:
 - i. The obvious truth that death can never be fully tamed: the collapse of this in the face of the Black Death. [Poe: And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.]
 - ii. The shallow consolation of the faux-Christian *All will be well because God is with you.*
 - iii. the African overcrowding of my space
4. **Particular myths 3**: Romantic death
- a. The movement, reacting vs. Enlightenment, privileging passion rather than reason, the sublime rather than the logical and terror rather than civilization.
 - b. Positives
 - i. Fear faced
 - ii. Death as challenge to be engaged in rather than passively waited for
 - iii. Sister Death in the Canticle of the Sun: *Laudato si mi signore per sora nostra morte corporale. da la quale nulla homo uiuente po skappare.*
 - c. Negatives
 - i. In literature, the luxury of the dramatic, vs. the banality of the experience of many as they die
 - ii. The bracketing out of pain
5. **Particular myths 4**: Death as non-existent
- a. Christian Science Monitor till 1959
 - b. We are familiar with the metaphorical language of avoidance - www.you-can-be-funny.com/Euphemisms-For-Death.html some of which are quite offensive – the scatological language of death.
 - c. Susan Sontag on TB, cancer and AIDS: *All this lying to and by cancer patients is a measure of how much harder it has become in advanced industrial societies to come to terms with death. As death is now an offensively meaningless event, so that disease widely considered a synonym for death is experienced as something to hide. [Illness as Metaphor, 1979, 8]*
 - d. George Soros on his father's death: *I let him die alone. The day after he died I went to my office. I didn't talk about his death. I certainly didn't participate in it. After reading Kübler-Ross, I learned that ... I could have held his hand as*

he lay dying. . . . I just didn't know that it might have made a difference—for both of us. (1995, p. 3)²

We are carried by these metaphors and myths, they shape, though they do not control, how we walk this journey. We can be grandiose and attempt to change the myths, and offer people creative metaphors rather than destructive ones! Additionally, we can – in our own gentle way – invite reorientation [conversion?] – My Barnstaple story.

Nourishing a healthy spirituality of dying

1. Enable meaningful dying (opposite of *full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*)
 - a. telling of the story - listeners
 - b. The shaping of the story - interpreters
 - c. The weaving of God into the story - gossellers
 - d. The completion of the story
 - e. Accompaniment in the story - priests
2. Give permission
 - a. Let me be me: I am who I am [echoes of Exodus 3.16]
 - b. Individuality and uniqueness. I am not qualified to speak about physiological or psychological variations in the way pain is experienced, but I do know how it diminishes me when others tell me who I am, what I am feeling, how much I must be hurting, or what matters to me. My West Indian identity is a case in point here. To be told that I am not a real one (presumably because I'm white) lacks integrity.
 - c. Similarly, when we journey with a dying person, we are aware that they are more experienced in the art of dying than we are, that they have a unique life narrative (whether they remember it or not) and that in some sense all dying people experience this as aloneness or separateness. It may take the form of dereliction (as with Jesus) or terror, it may have the more measured tones of a private memoir, or it may simply be a sense of loneliness while others walk forward on continuing journeys. It may be a gentle, content experience or strangely detached. But above all, it is a unique experience.
 - d. Because those who are dying often experience loss of control in so many ways, this loss may be interpreted as others' denial of who we are, or as a withdrawal of rights, the right to be who I am, to choose to be myself, to go where I want to go. Everyone else seems at that point to know best. I wonder whether for some such loss of control feels like a subtle form of identity theft.
3. Let God be God – be a gosseller [expanded from above]:
 - a. the one who holds the questions with courage and without fear:
 - i. A note on the complexity of believing: Bertrand Russell once famously said that *belief systems provide a programme which relieves the necessity of thought.* When my head is hot with thinking too much, I'm tempted to wish that he were right. He was so wrong! But his aphorism is a warning to us in our consideration of death, lest we think that in-

²

www.deathreference.com/Sh-Sy/Spiritual-Crisis.html

roducing God into the equation simplifies matters. The simplest approach to death is possibly to say that we live, we die, we are finished. Sebastian Faulks in his 1994 novel 'Birdsong' gives us a version of this when Stephen finds himself in the cathedral in Amiens: *Its [the cathedral's] limited success was in giving dignity through stone and lapidary inscription to the trite occurrence of death. The pretence was made through memorial that the blink of light between two eternities of darkness could be saved and held out of time, though in the bowed heads of the people who prayed there was only submission. So many dead, he thought, only waiting for another eyelid's flicker before this generation joins them. The difference between living and dying was not one of quality, only of time.* [71-72]

- ii. God is not troubled by our questions. Some Christians indeed believe 'for this life only' but dare not voice that 'heresy'. How do we walk with others who believe less, or differently?
 - iii. My confidence in the gospel enables me to stand in the face of the unconfidence of others, without being driven to persuade. Hope is contagious, not persuasive.
- b. The one who makes the introductions, the ambassador – my Barnstaple story. Ray when he dies?
- i. The offer of prayer
 - ii. The Sid encounter
 - iii. The role of the occasional office – preaching our mortality
- c. The iconic role of the Christian as priest: Let death be accompanied: *we are with you always, even unto the end of the age...*
- i. There is a counterpoint to the integrity of the self in the journey of death. Let me for a moment be personal. My mother was diagnosed in early 1996 with an aggressive tumour which led to her death in July of the same year at the age of 68. I treasure her memory, I respect the fact that she hastened her death by not telling anyone until it was too late because she didn't want to get in the way of other people getting on with their lives. But in my darker moments, I sometimes wish she had asked me what I thought. Her bell tolled for me too. In each individual experience of death, we are also a community of dying.
 - ii. The provision of Safe Passage: 'I came across this description of the duties of a physician, from an 1858 lecture to medical students: diagnosis, treatment, the relief of symptoms, and the provision of safe passage.'³
 - iii. The provision of Christlike accompaniment – the sacrament of the presence of Christ in the one who watches, waits and prays in the presence of Christ.

³

Joe Gibes, <http://blogs.tiu.edu/bioethics/2011/08/05/safe-passage/>

Sources:

Encyclopaedia of Death and Dying, www.deathreference.com

Facebook contributions:

[Jody Stowell](#) Any endings we do now (leaving jobs, home, moving house etc) are rehearsals for death. We must learn to do all our endings well and as priests that is our job.

[Rosanna Jane Mahmood](#) All I can say is that I heard a lady talking on radio 4 last year and her husband was dying of cancer but over many many month he suffered in so much pain. she had phoned the hospital to ask how much pain relief she could give and he was relieved of life. She was devastated but relieved for him, and would not change a thing now even if given another chance. Having helped Asher, in his life with cancer, I would say I would struggle to be with him in that kind of unconscious pain which leads to certain death at some point. Thankfully he wanted to live no matter how much pain. But I am sure in olden days this question has been discussed with all sorts of potions and methods.

[Mal Rogers](#) Morning Adrian. Hope you are well. My experience has been that significant moments often follow discussion around fear. I'm sure you know the kind of conversation, that comes after most other words have stopped, in the stillness and perhaps after several visits... "Are you afraid...?" seems to unlock all kinds of spiritual questions and anxieties, and certainly takes the pastoral relationship to another level. It is also often the first time that I hear folk acknowledge that they are dying. It nearly always precedes prayer which can be very emotionally and spiritually healing.

[Philip Seddon](#) In his recent book Falling Upwards, Richard Rohr begins by presenting a set of hard facts (which he then balances later). One of these is: You're going to die.

[Rosalind Smyth](#) From personal experience and observing others in hospital: It is possible to die in a way that blesses other people or in a way that curses them. The dying person has a lot of power over the relatives and friends and this point and if they use that with compassion, then it makes life a lot easier for everyone else. Dad made a point of thanking everyone for absolutely every little thing they did for him and he also made sure that people knew how they had blessed him in his life. His minister's disabled daughter used to call his name at church and he even thanked her for that in a little talk he'd written for his memorial service. Dad also was considerate to Mum. When she couldn't cope any more with his care at home, he told her to go and stay with friends until there was a bed for him in hospital. He found dying an isolating experience, even though we were there with him to within hours of the end. As a carer, there is absolutely nothing you can do about that, even if you are constantly physically present, that part of the journey is between the dying person and God. I was struck by the fact that there was nothing I could do: I couldn't cook a meal he'd like to eat, I could buy anything that would make him more comfortable or make life easier, I couldn't move him to anywhere that would be more comfortable. I found that powerlessness and uselessness of money in some ways liberating because it was showing something bigger was happening and in other ways frustrating, because it would have been nice to be able to do something constructive. Dad did say that he felt his life was a bit short and it irritated him that the TV seemed to be full of news items about how people are living longer than ever when his life was about to end. It is frightening facing death. Faith is believing what we cannot prove. As you look down the barrel of the gun, you are bound to ask "Is it really true?". "I hope so", is the best answer you are going to get at that point in time and fanciful imaginings about what death might or might not be like do not help.

[Simon Bradford](#) I'd like to hear thoughts on Jesus giving up his life.