

Death and Our Legacy  
Steven Epperson, Parish Minister  
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UCV

It seems almost like a dream now. Over twenty years ago, and a graduate student in the Religious Studies department at Temple University, I was asked to teach a course created by the department on death and dying. It was one of the most popular at the university; created to respond to a deep seated need that was not, and still is not addressed for the most part in contemporary culture: and that is how to help people cope with the mystery and emotional trauma involved in the process of death and how to deal with its aftermath. The students who filled the room were basically of two kinds. There were young undergrads drawn to the course either from curiosity over the subject or as a way, perhaps a meaningful one, to fulfill a humanities requirement for graduation. The second group was older and more experienced in the realities of what was being taught than what their younger instructor could have imagined. Many of them arrived still dressed in the uniforms of their professions: nurses in loose fitting blue and green scrubs; police officers in dark blue and shiny metal badges, buttons and guns. Together, the innocent and the experienced, we read through and discussed, among other sources, Kubler-Ross's "five stages of grief" and Tolstoy's devastating account of Ivan Illych's lonely death.

Since then, I have come closer to death, not through teaching courses, or clinical accounts and fiction's truth, but by experiencing it. I watched my mother die. I cleaned up the mess in the aftermath of my father's death. I eulogised and buried them both. Save for one aunt, my grandparents' and parents' generations have now all passed away. During a four months residency as a student chaplain in a large city hospital, I attended dying patients, aggrieved relatives, and on one unforgettable occasion, rallied and worked with a shell-shocked group of nurses to prepare a body and the room in which the patient had struggled and died, to make them presentable for family members who were rushing desperately to the hospital in the middle of the night. And for six years now, I have attended to our own deaths; and with you, grieved and celebrated as those we knew and loved have departed irrevocably from us and from life.

These experiences have left an indelible impression upon me; they have changed my life: rendering it deeper, sadder, more complex, more vivid and precious than ever it has been. It is a burden and a gift; perhaps the greatest. "Upon a holy mountain I walk," a Native American chant speaks, "I have climbed with gods too long...soon the trail of beauty will turn and descend. Then I will walk with a god down to the valley." (Jacob Trapp)

Before I get too elegiac, let's step back for a moment. Within weeks of my arrival here, one day there was a knock on the church office door. On the threshold stood two diminutive, wizened, old men. We looked at each other awkwardly for a moment, then one man asked simply: "Death with dignity?" Death with dignity: to our knowledge as it currently stands, among all living beings we humans are alone in knowing that we must die. (Arthur E. Imhof, "An Ars Moriendi for Our Time..." Hereafter AR) And in spite of the fact that our average life expectancy has doubled, even tripled in the recent past, we know that death is an inevitable, universal part of life. As poet and pastor John Donne declared, "Death comes equally to us all and makes us all equal when it comes."

On this day of Mahashivratri (Ma-hash-iv-raw-tri), where Hindu women and men around the world celebrate the god Shiva, whose dynamic cosmic dance creates, preserves, destroys and recreates the world, I want us to explore together that ultimate and universal trail of beauty that turns for all of us one day into a descent to the valley of death.

Especially, I want to talk plainly, I want us to consider concretely, how we can prepare for death in such a

way that we can ease its burden, as best we can, for ourselves and for those who know and care and love us. And finally, because mortality is not a medical problem, indeed death and dying well is not usually part of medical studies and systems, as we saw last week tragically in the case of Fanny Albo who was separated from her husband of seventy years, transferred a 100 kilometers away to a long-term-care facility where she died alone 48 hours later; since death and dying well is a bedrock existential phenomenon; since it deals essentially with the question of the shape of a life and its meaning; because of that fact, here in this place and in this community dedicated to achieving the vision of a compassionate, just, and meaningful life, we must, from time to time, talk about death and the quality of the legacy of living and dying that we ourselves experience and will want ultimately to bequeath to others.

Separated by only a matter of months, the circumstances and aftermath of my parents' deaths could not have more different. One passed away peacefully after a short illness; the other's was sudden and violent. One had anticipated and provided for her death, the disposition of her body, and of her worldly effects. The other had made no plans at all. The result was that their adult children faced utterly dissimilar situations and states of affair. Because Iris had prepared for her death while she was still living and in full possession of her faculties, she enabled her children to move quickly and with assurance through the mechanics and business of the disposition of her corpse, through that and on to what really mattered to her and us; which was lamenting her death and celebrating her life.

Each approach to death, each incident of dying, presents those who are passing away and those who love and who are responsible for the dying person, with complicated "housekeeping" chores. {The Knot/Braid} It's like a knot, or braid, whose threads need to be carefully, thoughtfully, and effectively separated so that we can pass through the difficult business of dying, in order to get at what, in the end, really matters: and that is the quality of our living, our dying, and of our celebrating the dead. Consider:

- ◆ How can I be sure that my wishes regarding personal health decisions, medical treatment, and the timely cessation of medical intervention will be respected?
- ◆ What do I need to do now, while I still have my wits, to be sure that when I don't, someone I trust will have the enduring authority to act for me in financial and legal matters?
- ◆ How do I know, or what plans can I make now, to be sure that my corpse will be dealt with respectfully and disposed of in a manner congruent with my values and in a way that will not unduly burden my next-of-kin financially?

In this Province, the legally authoritative tool that you need for assuring that your personal health and medical treatment decisions are respected is called a "Representational Agreement." Since 2002, Representational Agreements, at least in their legal scope and reach, have taken the place of Living Wills. In a Representational Agreement, you appoint someone as your legal representative to handle your personal health decisions if you are unable to make them on your own. The agreement can be limited to cover straightforward everyday decisions; or it can be comprehensive, where you authorise someone to deal with complex legal and health matters, such as refusing life support if you become terminally ill. For more information, and for obtaining Representational Agreement documents, schedules, etc., you should contact the Representational Agreement Resource Centre. I have printed the Centre's web-site address and telephone number on the "Sunday Unitarian" insert.

In order for us to be better informed about and to anticipate the kind of scenarios, treatment plans, and options for medical care that will arise when disease, terminal illnesses and accidents occur, National Book Award winning author and doctor Sherwin Nuland, writes that, "it behooves every patient to study his or her own disease and to learn enough about it to recognise the onset of that time when further treatment becomes a debatable issue. Such an education begins with learning how the normal body works, which [will greatly simplify our] familiarity with the ways in which it is affected by disease." (Shewin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter*, 260. Hereafter HWD)

To better understand and then give clear directions about how we wish to be cared for, it's really helpful for us to consult and fill out what's called an "Advanced Care Plan." To obtain, review and fill out an Advanced Care Plan, a good resource is Fraser Health BC. Again, I have printed the web-site address and telephone number of Fraser Health BC in the "Sunday Unitarian" insert.

Now what about dealing with our financial and legal matters when we are no longer capable ourselves due to disease or death? In this case, again, don't wait. Anticipate this eventuality. Each of us needs to fill out a "Power of Attorney" form and have it notarised. Powers of Attorney allow us to give another person the authority to act for us in making financial and legal decisions when we are no longer capable ourselves. There are Notaries Public all over town from whom we can obtain these forms. Find the one nearest to you, or one you know, and fill out a "Power of Attorney" now, so that someone you know and trust will be able to make the right decisions in your name when the time comes; otherwise the Province will make those decisions for you and at significant expense to your family and friends.

One more housekeeping step: "The uniqueness of each of us extends even to the way we die... Every one of death's diverse appearances is as distinctive as that singular face we each show the world during the days of our life." (HWD, 3) And yet, each of us has a body that will come terminally to rest. Knowing that, and knowing that a whole predatory industry has grown around the disposition of the dead, we can foresee, and I think we should give clear directions about how we want our body to be cared for and in what manner we want it returned to the earth. I will say this again, remember: we can bless those who we leave behind as we pass away from this life; bless them so that they will know clearly what to do with our bodies so that they can experience what truly matters when we die: and that is grieving over our death and celebrating our life.

Knowing this, fifty years ago, members of this congregation and others helped to create the Memorial Society of British Columbia whose purpose is to assure its members access to simple, dignified, and low-cost means for conveying the deceased to a funeral home, conferencing with next-of-kin and others, filling out required documents, and arranging for cremation or burials. Other non-profit memorial societies exist in this Province; since this particular group is known best to us, and has been used most frequently by members of this congregation, it came to mind as I was preparing this sermon. So I have also printed the web-site address and telephone number of the Memorial Society in the "Sunday Unitarian" insert. As well, you can find and pick up Memorial Society brochures in the foyer as you leave this service. The pamphlets provide detailed information about its philosophy, membership, its range of services, fee scales, and other arrangement forms.

Once upon a time in Western cultures, we knew the art of dying. More often than not, we died at home surrounded by those who knew and loved us. We knew that they would wash, anoint, and prepare our bodies to be returned gravely, lovingly to the earth. We died with the blessed assurance that our families and community would sit shiva, say kaddish, or bid farewell to us in a funeral mass. We had not yet isolated death and dying from the flow of daily life, nor conveyed responsibility for its procession to the technical expertise and institutions of our hospitals, care facilities, and mortuaries. Wisely, we are reclaiming the human drama and art of dying and death; more and more our voices are being heard, our wishes acknowledged, and our last days of parting from life take place at home, surrounded by those we know and love.

We are reclaiming an ancient wisdom: that we need to accompany and to be companioned as that "trail of beauty, which was our life... turns and descends," as the Navajo prayer tells us, "and we will walk with a god down to the valley." For centuries, small books of woodcut illustrations showing deathbed scenes, like those reproduced in the order of service insert, instructed us that for each person a final drama was taking place in the presence of others. The legacy of a person's life was being lifted up for her or him finally to embrace at death's door.

The question here is: what will that legacy, what will our bequest to the living who will survive us, look like? As well, what can we, who will survive our loved ones' deaths, bequeath to them? Believe me, I have not been morbid, or hard-hearted when I talked about Representational Agreements, Powers of Attorney, Advanced Care Planning and Memorial Societies. I have seen too many families and friends denied one the most important gifts we can give them: and that is empowering them to move clearly through and beyond the housekeeping of our dying and death, so that they get at what is really important: and that to lament our passing and to celebrate our life. While we are still of sound mind, let us learn and embody the "modern art" of dying that includes advanced decision making and preparation about our financial and legal affairs, our health and treatment plans and wishes, and our desires regarding the respectful care and final disposition of our dear, dead bodies.

As well, may we who live and who will survive a loved one's death, realise that what the dying need most is our "non-judgmental curiosity" and our companionship during life's final scenes. That can be our most important legacy, or gift, to them. Even as each of us is a unique being, so too is each person's approach to death. Some of us will rage against the dying of the light, some us will gladly welcome it with equanimity; some if us will deny its inevitability until our last breath. We will fear it, curse it, and bless its arrival. For those of us who live and survive, let us not deny the dying their emotions and their need to express them. Let us listen with an open heart, so that we can learn about and bless our dear departing friends, partners, and family members. Let us not pass judgment upon them, or try force them to pass from this life in a way most convenient to our own needs, our own preconceptions about what dying should be. There are no shoulds in death; there are only unique facts, events, and needs. (Thanks to UCV member and professional "grief" counselor Margaret Fletcher for these insights.)

In conclusion, I want to say this: the greatest legacy, the greatest gift that we can share with each other as we approach death, is the quality, character and shape of a life well-lived. Time and again, in the memorial services we have shared together, this is what has impressed me most deeply. I have walked away grateful to have participated in the celebration of unique and worthy lives lived fully; lives that, in spite of all our weaknesses and failings, also embodied and made manifest precious, undying human qualities of compassion, justice, courage, fidelity, wisdom, zest, and love.

May we live while we are still alive! May we bless those dear to us by taking responsibility for the housekeeping that attends our own passing from life! Let us be companionable and non-judgmental with those who are irrevocably parting from us. And may we individually and as a community live life fully and thoughtfully for the dear, unique, and precious gift that it is.

How to Prepare: Some Resources

- ◆ Representational Agreements: [www.rarc.ca](http://www.rarc.ca) or call 604.408.7414
- ◆ Advanced care planning: [www.fraserhealth.ca](http://www.fraserhealth.ca) (click on "Advanced Care Planning") or call 604.587.4600
- ◆ Transportation of the Deceased, Cremation, and Other Funeral Arrangements : [www.memorialsocietybc.org](http://www.memorialsocietybc.org) or call 604.733.7705