
What My Students Teach Me about Death

BY GLENN E. SANDERS

The class lesson on the practice of dying well is mainly about how a community can comfort the dying and react in spiritually positive ways to death. But the discussion always turns to the students' experiences of death. One should never assume that young adults know little about death.

The mark of a good local church seems to be its ability to bury its members. If a church gets to this point, it is likely doing well. It has attracted members with the right teaching, testimony, and prayer. Its members have learned to hang on, surely in love for one another, or they would not be there for one another at the end. They have cared for one another at the worst moments – the last moments. They have proclaimed the presence and power of God in Christ by loving and mourning their brother or sister, and by promising to continue on for the next person who dies, all in the hope of the resurrection.

If a good local church is one that can care for its members in the face of death, a good college classroom can be measured in a similar way, but from a different end of the process, so to speak – from near the beginning, when young adults are preparing to live, to join good communities, to continue on in the optimism and strength of youth, at least for a while. Death has importance for them, too, but a different importance.

I teach at a small Baptist college. My annual contract says that I teach history, and I do teach the subject. But during the weekly routine of the semester, I teach other things too. And, more important, I get taught. I get taught and reminded about the most important things, like death.

The cliché is that teachers learn more from their students than their students learn from them. I don't know. But, after twenty-five years on

the job, I feel the symbiosis of teacher and student more than ever: “no teacher, no student; no student, no teacher.” In that mix of things, my students’ encounters with death and my own encounters—including those few moments of disorientation when I have *really* entertained mortality—mesh together. In that process I have learned (or re-learned) something worth proclaiming.



I regularly team-teach a two-semester course known locally as “Western Civ.” It integrates a survey of major literary works with an essential historical narrative to introduce the chief themes of the western tradition, primarily to sophomores. Over the past few years I have used this class to introduce my students to important Christian spiritual practices, such as hospitality and Sabbath-keeping. One practice that sticks with us all is “dying well.” The practice grows out of the biblical injunction to reflect on death in order to gain wisdom, as reflected in this psalm:

You turn people back to dust,
 saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.”
 A thousand years in your sight
 are like a day that has just gone by,
 or like a watch in the night.
 Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—
 they are like the new grass of the morning:
 In the morning it springs up new,
 but by evening it is dry and withered.

Our days may come to seventy years,
 or eighty, if our strength endures;
 yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
 for they quickly pass, and we fly away.
 If only we knew the power of your anger!
 Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.
 Teach us to number our days,
 that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Psalm 90:3-6, 10-12 (NIV)†

The lesson on the practice of dying well is mainly about the ways that a community can comfort the dying and react in spiritually positive ways to death. But the discussion always turns to my students’ experiences of death. One should never assume that young adults know little about death. I often ask for a show of hands to the question, “How many of you have experienced the death of a relative or close friend?” Only a few students cannot raise a hand.

Generally I can channel this information-sharing toward some general principle. But last year something different happened. A student came up afterward and said, "My good friend recently had a child, but it died. She's beside herself. What should I do?" The next day another student came to me and said, "My best friend just killed his mother. I was close to both of them. What should I do?"

Confusion, pain, and sadness were clear on their faces. In both instances I could think of nothing to say. Everything I had ever heard about the "consolation of presence" with the bereft seemed paltry at best. All I could do was sputter.

The mystery and immensity and banality of it all overwhelmed these students as well. Without the ability of "getting on" that they will gain later, the young more intensely feel the pain, that sting that St. Paul mentions (1 Corinthians 15:55-56). They want to understand or encompass or give meaning to what happened, and they have yet to learn that they will *never* be able to.

The rawness of my students' experiences reminds me that *it is the unremitting, mysterious reality of death that helps us, not some superficial comprehension of it*. I need this lesson, because death can seem like a commonplace. It accompanies aging and, like an ugly scab, can inure me to pain better than a good explanation might. Numbed by mourning, I could get used to death and then maybe give in to my own sense of futility and despair. But even the jaded student retains some sense of hope, wanting something more than the anguish of loss. My students remind me that, no matter how many people I bury, *if I am not overwhelmed, I am not alive*.



I do not teach spiritual practices in isolation from other realities. After all, "Western Civ." emphasizes the synthesis of ideas from history and literature. The spiritual practice of the week flows from the particular sub-

ject of the morning's lesson. I link "dying well" to the devastation of the Black Death and the morality play *Everyman*. With the Black Death I introduce the *memento mori*, those images of decaying bodies and desiccated skulls that late medieval art, in its devotional wisdom and tolerance for reality, introduced to religious life. They intruded on the everyday lives of surviving

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Europeans, and they have the same effect on us today – at least when we use them. I teach my students that “dying well” concerns such collective responses to mystery and pain – not “lessons learned” from death, but a visceral cry to *live better now*, with the dead in our memories: live more soberly, more faithfully, more mercifully, more charitably.

Everyman teaches a similar lesson. Ostensibly a boiled-down introduction to the traditional sacramental system, the play invariably becomes more. The students identify with the materialistic lead character and begin to understand why medieval believers often treated death as a *friend* who would remind them that superficial relationships and the possession of things lead one to forget sin and neglect the doing of good. Contrition, confession, and satisfaction – the three parts of traditional penance – become the true way to blessedness.

To experience the overwhelming character of death can improve life now – nothing new there. A reading of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* provides a similar exposure in a later lesson, this time with a psychological intensity and a critique of materialism that dig deep into my students’ middle-class sensibilities. And the honesty of their reactions always keeps me picking at that hard scab over my heart.

But alongside Tolstoy’s latter morality tale we read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which presents the banal reality of death as utterly without reconciliation or resurrection. Marlow describes death as biting into rotten fruit – nothing to learn there but a bad taste and the consistency of decay. Conrad’s dark view suggests the extreme – against it we must gain renewal as a community of forgiveness in the presence of death, or with it we will suffer withering despair, alone in unbelief.

The glorious thing is this: my students get this message and struggle on. They do not ignore it, nor do they return to simple nostrums that would betray both insensitivity and ignorance. They begin to become wise.

Here is where my students serve one another as the good congregation that buries its members does. Their collective freshness and flexibility may arise from youth and not yet have matured into deliberate faithfulness, but they have the same effect. They teach hope. They teach openness to mystery. They teach the wisdom necessary to live our numbered days well, alone and with others and before God.

When St. Paul wanted to emphasize the most important things, he reminded the Corinthians that “now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, NIV). My experience of symbiosis – “no teacher, no student; no student, no teacher” – is likely the closest that I will get to such comfort and intimacy, outside marriage, family life, a few close friends, and a good church. The church will bury me. The students help me live well. They both teach me that God’s knowing love is stronger than death.

NOTE

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**GLENN E. SANDERS**

is Professor of History at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Oklahoma.