

Dying Well

BY JOEL SHUMAN

We most often die as we have lived, and the hope for a “good” death demands a faithful life. The authors of the four books reviewed here make this point, arguing that preparation for death is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship and that the “art of dying” is a skill requiring lifelong cultivation.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) wrote:

God give us each our own death,
the dying that proceeds
from each of our lives:

the way we loved,
the meanings we made
our need.[†]

Rilke was no theologian, but his poem expresses a sentiment from which Christians might learn: we most often die as we have lived, and the hope for a “good” death demands a faithful life. The authors of the four books reviewed here all work to make this point, arguing that preparation for death is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship and that the “art of dying” is a skill requiring lifelong cultivation.

Three of the books share, at least in part, a common title: Allen Verhey’s *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011, 409 pp., \$30.00), Christopher Vogt’s *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004, 161 pp., \$26.95), and Rob Moll’s *The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010, 192 pp., \$16.00) all take their inspiration from the Christian practice of *ars moriendi*,

the art of dying. And while all three authors have a good deal to say about the need for contemporary modifications to these classical texts, they agree that we have a great deal to learn from our sisters and brothers of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, who learned from one another what it meant to die well.

Verhey and Vogt have written important, theologically sophisticated works that have a great deal in common. Both lament the current state of Christian preparation for death, arguing that Christians have capitulated to the contemporary culture and its medicalization of death. Both write from the perspective of the ethics of virtue, maintaining that certain habits must be cultivated among the membership of the Christian community in order to overcome the aforementioned capitulation. Both offer considerations of *Ars Moriendi* texts, finding them helpful but in need of amendment. And finally, both offer an account of a contemporary *ars moriendi* that takes its inspiration from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Yet there are some important differences in emphasis between Verhey and Vogt. While Vogt offers an overview of several texts from the *Ars Moriendi* tradition, Verhey gives his readers a detailed critical analysis of one of these texts – an anonymous work entitled, simply, *Ars Moriendi*. Their differing approaches to these late medieval texts make for somewhat different emphases in their constructive projects. Verhey, responding to the traditional text's beginning with a "commendation of death" (which he finds theologically problematic, for death is an enemy that can in no way be commended), begins his contemporary *ars* with a "commendation of life" focusing on the resurrection. His reading of the biblical narrative reveals a trajectory toward the expectation of a general resurrection of the dead as a sign of God's sovereign reign over history. The resurrection of Jesus is the "first fruits" of this general resurrection, and makes it possible to treat Jesus' death as exemplary for Christians, which Verhey goes on to do. Verhey's consideration of Jesus' death leads him to enumerate a catalogue of virtues for dying well, which he treats in the conclusion of his account of a contemporary *ars moriendi*.

When Vogt turns to his constructive project of offering a contemporary *ars moriendi* he begins with the Bible, focusing entirely on the death of Jesus in the Gospel according to Luke. He notes:

Three facts point toward the legitimacy of interpreting Luke's narrative as a model for Christian dying. First, there is a noticeable literary similarity between the Lucan passion narrative and the *exitus clarorum virorum*, a Greek literary genre in which the noble deaths of heroes are retold. Second, there is a similar affinity between the Lucan passion narrative and the Hebrew martyrology tradition. ... Finally, the parallels between the descriptions of Jesus' death in Luke's gospel and the account of the early Christian martyrs in Acts

indicate that the author had in mind a connection between Jesus' death and the way a Christian should approach dying. (p. 99)

Vogt sees in the Lucan passion narrative a Jesus who exemplifies the virtues of patience, compassion, and hope. Jesus is patient in the sense that he willingly accepts limits to his own personal freedom and "hands himself over" to God as his death approaches. Jesus is hopeful in that he understands that God will be with him in his impending suffering and death. And Jesus is compassionate in that he is gracious even to his executioners, praying that God would forgive them because they were acting in ignorance.

Vogt's treatment of the death of Jesus leads him to his concluding chapter, a short treatise on a contemporary *ars moriendi*. His emphasis here is on the lifelong cultivation of virtues that will empower Christians to face death well and to die faithfully, noting that "the *ars moriendi* will always be linked to the *ars viviendi*" (p. 133)—which is simply to say that a good death is usually the proper outcome of a well-lived life.

Verhey goes a good deal further than Vogt in explicating his contemporary *ars*. He concludes his book with an extensive section detailing the practices of Christian community that make possible good deaths and caring well for the dying. The very fact that the Church gathers regularly for worship is a sign that it is cultivating its membership to live well; by also engaging in practices like teaching about advance directives, discourse about mortality, and discernment, the Church is paving the way for the possibility of a good death. "When Christian churches...faithfully perform these practices, when they remember Jesus, they become communities that form people who can be trusted in the midst of moral ambiguity and who have the courage to make morally ambiguous decisions" (p. 365). People so formed are freed from the need to use technology to extend life *ad nauseam* and from the temptation to take control of death by hastening it (as through physician-assisted suicide); rather, they are freed to care for one another in the often difficult times that accompany the dying process.

Rob Moll's *The Art of Dying* reads like a popularized version of Verhey's and Vogt's more scholarly works. Like them, Moll is concerned about the medicalization of death and the way it takes the dying process out of the hands of the members of the Christian community and gives it over, often exclusively, to the hands of professional caregivers in institutional settings. This is a particular concern of Moll's, as he believes that it is in caring for our dying sisters and brothers that we learn to face death faithfully. By sequestering death in hospitals and nursing homes we deprive ourselves of the gift of caring for the dying, a gift that we at once give and receive.

Moll further echoes Verhey and Vogt by considering the *Ars Moriendi* tradition. Moll goes beyond the *Ars Moriendi* texts of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries to consider the preaching of the great English poet and preacher John Donne, whose final sermon, "Death's Duel," is an exhortation

for Christians to prepare themselves for death well before it arrives. Moreover, he offers an account of Martin Luther's "Sermon on Preparing to Die," noting that Luther offered an important corrective to the standard *Ars Moriendi* texts, many of which depicted dying as an agonal event; Luther, on the other hand, saw the deathbed as "a place to rest in Christ,...not battle the forces of evil. ... The deathbed is the culmination of the Christian life, not its cataclysmic scene" (p. 60).

The final similarity between Moll and the other texts mentioned above is their common regard for Christ's death as normative for Christian dying. "Christians," says Moll, "must reconcile their approach to death with Jesus, the Son of God, whose death and resurrection provides a very specific example of how to die and offers the hope to all Christians of a bodily resurrection in the last day" (p. 21).

None of this is to suggest that Moll is writing a "dying well for dummies." His book is merely aimed at a different audience than Vogt or Verhey. Perhaps the greatest strength of Moll's text is its dependence on narrative description for making its points. Moll has obviously spent extensive time talking with physicians, nurses, clergy, and hospice volunteers (he is himself such a volunteer), and that expenditure pays dividends in the anecdotes he shares with his readers. Often moving and always instructive, these stories make concrete the author's arguments about how best to approach dying or caring for the dying.

The fourth volume under consideration here is a somewhat different kind of book. Edited by Richard Payne and John Swinton, *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009, 287 pp., \$25.00) is a collection of essays aimed, ostensibly, at tempering the hegemony of modern medicine where end-of-life care is concerned. The editors explain that, given Saint Paul's claim that not even death can separate us from God:

***Ars moriendi* frees us from the need to use technology to extend life *ad nauseam* and from the temptation to take control of death by hastening it. We are freed to care for one another in the often difficult times that accompany the dying process.**

First, to "die well" requires more than can be told within the narrative of scientific medicine alone. Dying well requires a wider narrative that transforms the stories told by medicine by placing them in a different context and engaging them in forms of conversation that draw out fresh perspectives and new promises. The key point is not

simply what medicine does but *where* it does what it does. Medicine is always practiced within *creation* — that is, it is carried out within a world that is not our own. The boundaries and goals of medicine, as with all things, are therefore defined and shaped by God’s story of creation and redemption. (p. xvii, emphasis original)

The editors hope to accomplish this recontextualization of dying through what they call practical theology, which is “*theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world with a view to enabling faithful discipleship*” (p. xx, emphasis original). Such practices, they argue, form the members of the Christian community to live well, which in turn makes it possible for those members to assist each other with the difficult task of learning to die well. This is a point of emphasis in several of the essays: dying well is not something that is learned at the last minute, but through the entire course of life, for “the nature of the life that an individual has lived will, to a greater or lesser extent, determine the ways in which he or she understands and faces death” (p. 5). That being said, most of the essays do a solid job of naming and describing the practices that make for such a life.

It is difficult to find fault with these books. They all deserve a wide readership among clinicians, pastors, scholars, and Christian laity interested in end-of-life care. Yet one wonders whether, in their efforts to name ways to help Christians prepare each other for a faithful death, they tend to assume that death can be controlled by the proper application of certain practices. In spite of our best efforts to domesticate it, death remains wild and often untamable, and the best-lived lives sometimes end in less than desirable deaths. This is not a dismissal of the need for Christians to prepare for life’s end, but a gentle reminder that our futures, including and perhaps especially our deaths, should be commended to the sovereignty of God, who remains faithful even when we lose faith in the midst of dying.

NOTE

† Rainer Maria Rilke, “O Herr, gib jedem seinen Tod,” in *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 131.

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