

Dying Well

BY ABIGAIL RIAN EVANS

How can we confront suffering and our fear of death? The words of the HEIDELBERG CATECHISM—“That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ”—ring in our ears. Dying well begins with our perspective on life and living well.

During a retreat several years ago, a group of Princeton Theological Seminary faculty members were asked to choose the analogy which most closely matched their view of life: life is a race; life is a pilgrimage; life is meaningless; life is a mystery; life is a dream; or life is a gift. By far, the largest group identified with “life is a gift.”

At those times in our lives when we experience joy and fulfillment, we more readily identify with life as a gift. Yet when we encounter the fragility of life in a sudden death, life does not feel like a gift. For some people in the midst of suffering and immense pain, life is a gift that they would like to relinquish back to God. They may turn to euthanasia in fear; they want to get dying out of the way or at least be rid of their pain and suffering.

Oddly enough, until we understand the meaning of life we cannot face death, since how we live often determines how we die. Dying well begins with our perspective on life and living well.

THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

Scripture calls us to place a high value on the creation, and particularly on human life, because these are God’s good gifts. God gave humans the responsibility to care for and nurture life on earth. Later, in the sixth commandment God instructs us to respect human life and not commit murder (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:7). This prohibition is a protection of the sacredness of life valued and instituted by God. Jesus commends this rule to the rich young man as the first commandment to keep (Matthew 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20), and in the Sermon on the Mount he extends it to

include not being angry with and insulting a brother or sister (Matthew 5:22). The Apostle Paul teaches that we fulfill this commandment (and others) through loving all people: “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:9-10).

Reflecting on this commandment and the larger biblical witness of our obligation not to kill, Lewis Smedes writes: “True, if everyone merely kept his hands off his neighbor’s throat, life in our ravaged world would at least have a chance. But fulfilled in love this commandment requires much more. We have not read its real demands unless we hear it in God’s will for us to do all we can to protect our neighbor’s human life and help it flourish.”¹

Therefore, we should honor life with great respect and reverence. “Respect is man’s astonishment, humility, and awe . . . at majesty, dignity, holiness, a mystery which compels him to withdraw, and keep his distance, to handle modestly, circumspectly, and carefully,” Karl Barth writes.²

Smedes observes, “The basis for the sixth commandment lies not so much in the sacredness of human beings as in God’s creative authority.”³ Our value as persons is bestowed on us by the Creator, and we are to live in joyful service before God. As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* expresses it, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.”⁴

How can the high value of human life that I am sketching be reconciled with Christian views that sometimes we should not resist death? Can we continue to honor self-sacrifice and martyrdom in certain situations, for example? We can if we remember that human life has not only this intrinsic value, but also instrumental value: life is a gift that can be laid down for a higher value—for instance, to remain faithful to God or to save another.

The more difficult cases involve our revering, honoring, and caring for persons who are dying. This, of course, brings us to the heart of the dilemma we face in modern medicine: when is it appropriate to prolong a person’s dying? When is God ready to receive them? If God is the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of life and if God is the Lord over life and death, are we trying to usurp God’s role? We must step back from the struggle to survive, as Richard McCormick has expressed it, and distinguish when the medical treatment is merely prolonging the dying, rather than enhancing the living. In this case, we can refuse the treatment and let the disease run its course without usurping God’s authority.

The famous words from the *Heidelberg Catechism*—“That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ”—ring in our ears.⁵ We cling to this truth and God’s promise “that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). We face death with ultimate confidence in Christ’s victory over the last enemy, death (1 Corinthians 15);

through his resurrection, “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (15:54b).

THE QUESTIONS RAISED BY SUFFERING

Nevertheless, for Christians death remains a very real enemy. It is not illusionary. Death represents a great loss as those we love are snatched away from us, often unexpectedly with a tearing, wrenching force which leaves us wounded, stripped, and yes, even angry at the God we worship.

Intense suffering and the prospect of death, either our own or of someone we love, brings to the fore our deepest questions about God’s goodness and power. Commenting on this fact, C. S. Lewis writes: “Bridge players tell me that there must be some money on the game ‘or else people won’t take it seriously.’ Apparently it’s like that. Your bid – for God or no God, for a good God or a cosmic sadist, for eternal life or nonentity – will not be serious if nothing much is staked upon it. And you will never discover how high until you find that you are playing not for counters or for sixpences but for every penny you have in the world.”⁶

We question the “why,” the “how,” and the “what” of suffering. The “why” question is Job’s question of theodicy: Where is God in the midst of this tragic world? How could a good and loving God permit pain, suffering, and death? We know that this is an over-simplification, for we live in a broken world which collectively we have corrupted. Death is indeed a consequence of our sin – “just as

sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned,” writes Paul, “the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:12, 17b) – though one person’s wrongdoing does not always end in sickness. In fact, the Psalmist cries,

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“Why do the evil prosper and the righteous suffer?” for there is no necessary correlation between an individual’s sin, sickness, and death. Ultimately, then, there is no satisfactory answer to the “why” of suffering.

The “what” question concerns our response to another’s suffering – that is, compassion – what we can do to help someone else. The “how” of suffering is our response to our own suffering.

Only if we learn to confront suffering and our fear of death can we die well. The first step, then, is to view our own suffering and dying through the prism of “how” rather than “why.” What can we do in the face of grief, pain, loss, crisis, and sickness to cope and to grow? The great men and women of faith are those who have redeemed their sufferings, overcome adversity, and clung to hope in the midst of overwhelming odds. How we face suffering says more about us than anything else because it reflects the way we value life.

PREPARING FOR OUR OWN SUFFERING AND DYING

What can we do about suffering in our life? One step we can take is to prepare our hearts and souls before we face illness, death, or other forms of loss. And when we are in the midst of suffering, there are hopes to which we can cling. The following suggestions are not to be interpreted as a vaccine against suffering, but rather as reflections on preparing for and confronting the overwhelming nature of suffering and the spectrum of death. First, I will consider the ways we can prepare ourselves for suffering.

Develop deep wellsprings of spiritual strength and insight. Memorize the Scriptures and they will come to you as a source of grace. Ernest Gordon famously wrote of the Japanese prison camp in the valley of the Kwai where a young man transformed the inhumanity of that camp by sharing the words of the Bible.⁷ I can remember as vividly as yesterday when in 1963 I was arranging for the burial of my infant daughter in the interior town of Chapéco, Brazil. The words of Psalm 1:3 came to me:

They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.

Rely on a support community. This community – whether it is one intimate friend or a larger group we relate to on a deeper level – becomes a safety net, as those we have helped in the past come to us in our hour of need. We can reduce suffering by sharing our burden, pain, and secrets with others in support groups, a close group of friends, or our church community.

CONFRONTING OUR OWN SUFFERING AND DYING

Preparing for suffering does not make us immune to it. Here I suggest a few options for confronting the illness, death, and loss which we inevitably must endure.

Trust in God’s power. From first to last we live with absolute confidence in the power of God. This requires us consciously to repudiate dominative power, to quit denying our neediness, and to quit manipulating and “fixing” others’ weaknesses. This means that every act of service to others involves some measure of deprivation. A Christian’s service never succeeds – and never means to succeed – in freeing others entirely from their

needs and weaknesses.⁸

Our belief in God's ultimate control over the world and our lives means that we need not fear what sickness, suffering, and death can bring us. As we acknowledge the reality of despair felt in the face of death, the answer is that God is with us. The mystery is that God does not remove our suffering, but there is nowhere that we can go where God is not present. As the psalmist writes in 139:7-12,

Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
 even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.

Communicate to others what we need and how we feel. Sometimes we not only need their words, gestures, touch, or acts, but we also need their silence. "If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom!" Job said to his friends (Job 13:5). Just letting others know what would be helpful is cathartic in itself. Surveys have shown that dying people want to talk about death, but those around them avoid the subject.

It is important that we *share with others our anger and grief*. Once again, we have the good example of Job as he raged against God and confronted his friends and wife with how unhelpful they were (Job 3:1-26;

7:13-16). When faced with such catastrophes as Job's, most people would curse God or commit suicide. But Job's reaction, even in his bitterest times, was to believe in God and God's justice. As the drama unfolds we read of the various stages of Job's emotions—numbness, uncertainty, rage, doubt, discouragement, hope, repentance, and vindication. Job was torn between believing that God was so powerful and therefore unapproachable, and

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trusting that God would answer him directly. He realized the gulf between himself and God and wanted an arbitrator between them (Job 9:32-33):

For [God] is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him,
that we should come to trial together.
There is no umpire between us,
who might lay his hand upon us both.

Job confidently yearns for someone to bring his case before God “as a man pleads for his friends” (16:21, NIV).⁹ He calls for a *goel* before God (19:25), one who can be a “vindicator” or “advocate” for him (though the term is usually translated as “redeemer”).

Pierre Wolf, a spiritual director, recounts the stories of two women for whom expressing anger was an important part of the healing process. As the first woman was caring for a small child who fell from a fifth floor window and later died, she prayed, “God, I hate you because you let this happen!” The second woman, whose son was killed in a senseless accident rebelled against God and felt her faith disappearing. Wolf writes, “The Lord is certainly as saddened as she is right now, how could [God] accept such an accident caused by negligence and imprudence? And all of a sudden I understood that she was for us a witness to the sorrow of God. This was affirmed for me when I saw her engulfed in profound peace as I said to her, ‘Do not accuse the Lord; he is probably thinking the same thing you are. Do not think you are against him; he is beside you, speaking through you. Our Father has also ‘lost’ a child.”¹⁰

When Diedra Kriewald relates her response to the death of her young husband in a car accident in Mexico, she admits, “Anger did not come easily to me those days.” Later, as she got in touch with her anger, she realized that God suffers with us in response to our anger.¹¹

Write a spiritual journal. We can write our own book of Job, so to speak, and in this way accept our feelings. We should not judge our feelings as right or wrong, since the object is to express them, to give them over to God. Keeping a journal or writing poetry can become a kind of prayer as we face our own mortality. This is what my friend, Lucy Atkinson Rose, a former professor of preaching and worship at Columbia Theological Seminary, did as she wrote *Songs in the Night*, the journal of her dying of cancer.

Prayerfully read the Bible. The Bible is full of stories of the sufferings of God’s people, and these can be a source of encouragement, insight, and comfort to us. The Book of Psalms is filled with lamentations; the Gospels proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection; the Book of Acts tells of the suffering and victory of the early Christians; and the Pauline epistles reflect a Christian theology of suffering, dying, and life eternal. These Scriptures become our source of inspiration in the face of overwhelming odds.

Join in a Christian community for worship, study, fellowship, support, and service. Suffering tends to separate us from our friends and family members.

The resulting isolation, loneliness, and alienation intensify our pain. When we are able to share our suffering and fear with Christian friends, it helps to ease them. This does not mean we should not have time to be alone and apart from others, but the sustenance of an ongoing group is crucial. The community should be characterized by *shalom*—wholeness, harmony, tranquility, well-being, and friendship. This is health in the fullest sense of the word.

HELPING OTHERS IN THEIR SUFFERING AND DYING

Now that we have considered how we face our own suffering and dying, we can examine how to help others.

Stand in solidarity with others. We are to share in one another's suffering. "Rejoice with those who rejoice," Paul instructs the Christians at Rome, "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). Arthur McGill notes that we are "called, not simply to notice those who suffer and to sympathize with them, but to recognize our own identity with them in their pain and in the deceptions about power in which they are entangled. In short, the Christian has no secure and happy vantage point from which to view sorrow and pain."¹² As Christ suffered and died for us, we recognize that suffering is part of being human. When we stand in solidarity with others as they face death, we share in Christ's death and resurrection. So Paul writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

We can identify with others, even those who are facing death, because our grief, loss, and bereavement at our alteration or loss of physical function through sickness or accident are similar to their experiences.

Whether we are a football player who becomes a paraplegic, a physicist with the early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, or a person grieving over the death of a loved one, we know what it means to cease to be the person we were. We no longer understand who we are. Even when we are cured, we are never the same person.

As Eric Cassell has pointed out, illness is not like a knapsack attached to the side, but rather it affects our body, mind, and spirit. If we talk about

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wholistic health, we also need to recognize wholistic illness. We can help others accept what is happening to them and help them rest in the freedom which comes from that acceptance. As people face the many losses created by a serious illness, they are preparing to accept the ultimate loss through death.

Give a voice to others' stories. Despair or pain can be so overwhelming for those who suffer that they cannot speak or express the depth of their suffering. When Jack O'Shea was discussing spiritual wisdom with several women in their eighties, he told them a story about a woman who had lost her husband: the grieving woman went to see a holy man about her grief, but he asked her first to gather wood from every house nearby that had not lost anyone. "She didn't get any wood," three of the women listening to O'Shea's story replied in unison. Another woman whose husband's Alzheimer's had become uncontrollable thoughtfully responded, "But her grief lifted."¹³

I encourage storytelling and use biographical case studies with my seminary students to help them find a connection between others' stories of grief and loss and their own. We need to help those who are suffering find their voice, simply by listening to them express their grief and helping them to take responsibility for where they are in their grief. We do not need to have an agenda or a set list of things to do.

FINDING HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DESPAIR

Most people respond to suffering and death by trying to avoid despair, but this coping mechanism only works for a time. Extreme loss and grief eventually immobilize us if they are never addressed. As Christians, we can help people reframe and reinterpret their experiences instead. Our liturgical calendar is a reminder that the grief of Good Friday comes before the joy of Easter Sunday. In this new framework, grief and loss no longer have the same power over us; they become empowering rather than overpowering.

Stewart D. Govig, an advocate for persons with disabilities, reminds us how the broken places in life can become the strongest: when a wound heals, tougher skin creates a scar over the wound.¹⁴ Places of grief can become our strongest places. This is why we find that those who are dying often minister to us — as their body diminishes their spirit grows stronger.

Pastors and chaplains are especially privileged to help people turn from despair and start the journey toward hope. Peter Speck, an Anglican chaplain, tells of a father who surprised his daughter with a moped. After teaching her how to use the bike, he watched her take her first ride to the end of the street. There the moped skidded on a greasy patch of road and slid under a passing truck, and his daughter was fatally injured. In the hospital, the doctors put her on life support and the father did not want it removed. Out of his guilt the father angrily demanded that the hospital chaplain produce a miracle from God. The chaplain joined the father on the floor and

embraced him as he relayed the events leading to his daughter's accident. Then the chaplain invited the family to gather at the daughter's bedside for prayer. A few hours later the father agreed to remove the life support. The family asked the chaplain to join them to say goodbye and to pray with them as their daughter died; there was healing that occurred for them because of the chaplain's compassionate presence.¹⁵

We are called to kneel, to listen, and to wait patiently with people in their suffering and death. God will use us to help families and friends grieve the loss of their loved ones. God will use us to help people die well.

NOTES

1 Lewis B. Smedes, "Respect for Human Life: 'Thou Shalt Not Kill'" in Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, eds., *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 145.

2 Quoted in Smedes, "Respect for Human Life," 146.

3 Ibid.

4 *The Book of Confessions: Study Edition*, Presbyterian Church (USA) (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Distribution Services, 1999), 7.001.

5 *The Book of Confessions*, 4.001.

6 C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 43.

7 Ernest Gordon, *Miracle on the River Kwai* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), reprinted as *To End All Wars* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

8 Arthur C. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 116.

9 Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

10 Pierre Wolf, *May I Hate God?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 37.

11 Diedra Kriewald, *Hallelujah Anyway! Suffering and the Christian Community of Faith* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1986), 3.

12 McGill, *Suffering*, 116.

13 Jack O'Shea, "Part of the Ocean: Spiritual Wisdom and Aging," *The Park Center Bulletin, Aging*: 6 (October/November, 1998), 3.

14 Stewart D. Govig, *Strong at the Broken Places* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).

15 Peter W. Speck, *Being There: Pastoral Care in Time of Illness* (London: SPCK, 1995), 26-28.



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