

## Final benedictions

Rudy Baergen

**D**eath, for the ill and elderly, comes as the mysterious acquiescence of complex physical, spiritual, and emotional impulses one to the other. A significant moment for pastoral care arises when these impulses battle one another in the stages of dying.

Many of us know people who no longer find sustaining joy or meaning in the routines of living, whose loving relationships have ended, and whose spirits have made peace with death, yet their physical organs defiantly maintain the pulse of life. For years my monthly visits to a gentleman paralysed from his neck down

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always ended with his plea that I pray for his death. My prayers voiced gratitude for his life and for fond memories of his deceased wife. I acknowledged his readiness to die and committed him into God's hands. But his heart kept beating. He had a good heart, we agreed. When I left that pastorate, he said a tearful goodbye. Since I was leaving for an assignment overseas I told him that I hoped I *wouldn't* see him again, and he chuckled. Several months later his prayer for death was finally answered. I was sorry I could not be at his funeral to celebrate his release.

Perhaps more common within our congregations and communities are the many who in the face of death are not yet ready spiritually and emotionally to let go. They continue to love life, they want to see children or grandchildren grow up, for them the promise of a glorious acceptance in the heaven beyond does not yet hold an allure equal to life on earth, difficult as it may be.

Often our emotional and spiritual yearnings can do little to change our body's genetic time clock. Yet as a pastor I have had experiences with rituals and prayers of release that give me pause to reflect on the holistic nature of death.

Few people are as attuned to their dying as Kevin was. I came to know him when he was in his midthirties and battling the debilitation of cystic fibrosis. He had a zest for life and a fighting spirit that had enabled him to hold death at bay much longer than expected. But the disease took its toll, and his lungs continued to deteriorate until his survival depended on getting a double lung transplant. Waiting his turn for a matching set of lungs became an endurance struggle against death. Could he hang on long enough? His spirit was strong, he had much to live for, and in my weekly visits my prayer was for his health and life. That prayer was answered. He received a transplant, and his recovery went well. I was privileged to officiate at his wedding. He was intensely aware that someone else's death had allowed him to live.

Shortly after his wedding, his body began to reject the transplanted organs, and his deterioration went quickly. Eventually in one of my visits he told me he thought he was dying, that he didn't expect to live long enough to keep his appointment a month later with his specialist. A few weeks later he confided that he knew his time was short—a week at most, he thought. My prayer for him, while still a request for health and healing, now began to ask for strength for “the facing of this hour.”

Some days later I was called to his home. He had said goodbye to the members of his family, one by one, and now he wanted me to have a final prayer with him before the advanced stages of his dying took control. His breath was short, interrupted by difficult coughing spells; he did not anticipate living through the night. We chatted and exchanged farewell words that I will never forget. He sensed when it was time for me to leave. I prayed, thanking God for Kevin, for his person and his gifts, for the good that he had known in his life, for all whom he had touched with his passionate love for life, and we commended the things that had not been so good into God's hands. I left the room knowing that I would not see him again. He died within hours.

Aden at age eighty-eight had lived a long, full life. He had accomplished much and continued to take a keen interest in things around him. He loved to tell stories and was a veritable encyclopaedia of Mennonite history. He seemed to want to stay around forever to see how that history would yet unfold! He

persisted in attending many public functions, including church services, in his wheelchair—long after others thought he should submit to his reality.

Eventually he was hospitalised with a terminal illness, but his spirit vigorously resisted death, and he returned home, declaring that he would recover more quickly there. He continued to request prayer for healing and renewed health while I gently tried to prepare him and his daughter for the death that waited at his door.

Then one afternoon his daughter telephoned. “Daddy says that he is ready. Can you come?” When I arrived at his bedside, he was conscious and whispered haltingly that his time had come and that he was ready to die. I prayed that he could let go of his caregiving daughter and that she could release him into God’s care. It was a tearful moment, but the miracle of release had happened. By the next morning Aden had passed on into God’s eternal keeping.

Perhaps more than any other, Ruby’s death taught me the importance of prayers of release. Ruby was a woman of great dignity, a quiet woman who shunned attention as she accepted the reality of

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her terminal cancer. On my return from Mennonite World Assembly in India, I learned that Ruby was lingering in a coma. I found her family at her bedside. They had been with her all night, hoping that she would not need to suffer much longer. But she held on.

As I talked with her husband at her bedside about the struggles and joys of their more than fifty years together, I noticed that Ruby was becoming restless. I suggested that

we have a word of prayer with her. My simple prayer committed Ruby into God’s care and asked that she would know the fullness of God’s everlasting peace and that her family would be able to accept her death. We gave thanks for her life, her love, her family, and for God’s care for her over the years. As I said the amen, she became calm, breathed one last time, and then no more. In that mysterious, holy moment, she had passed on to the next life. It

was a moment of grief but also a moment of relief, of praise and awe. Was the timing coincidental? Or had Ruby's spirit been waiting in some inexplicable way for a final benediction?

Vernice's release was not as dramatic. I visited her, a woman in her eighties, soon after she had been told she had terminal cancer. We talked about her impending death, and she hesitantly confessed

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that although she felt ready to die, she was afraid of the dying itself. She was afraid that the pain and the medication would overwhelm her and she would no longer be able to pray. I reminded her of the Gospel story in which the friends of the paralytic man lowered him into the presence of Jesus. I assured her that like those friends her church community would carry her in prayer until the moment of her release.

There was no quick and easy release from the pain and deterioration for her, but her family and congregation supported her as she journeyed that lonely road. One of the last

things she told me before she slipped into unconsciousness was "Thank you for that story. It has helped me through." Although her struggle was long and difficult, Vernice had experienced her own victory over the fear of death through the prayers of release offered by her community.

We confess that God is the source of life. God breathes the breath of life into our nostrils, and when we die our breath returns to God. Perhaps we are not mere bystanders in this great mystery of life and death. Just as rituals and prayers can enable us throughout our lives to embrace life, so prayers of release can enable us to receive death in peace, as a friend who guides us into God's eternal care.

### **About the author**

Rudy Baergen is presently serving as academic dean and professor of Bible at the Seminario Bíblico Menonita in Bogotá, Colombia. Previously he served as pastor of First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, Ontario. He received his doctorate in New Testament from Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia.