Though my body wastes away

Pursuing a healthy spirituality while dying

Barbara Bowman

In North American culture, the expression "dying well" has gained recognition in both religious and secular contexts. But this expression raises some questions: *What does it mean to die well? How can someone die well? If we are all going to die anyway, why does dying well matter?* To die well sounds like an oxymoron. It is perplexing to hold the thought of death and anything good as compatible. A more complicated but intriguing question might be this: *Is it possible to have a healthy spirituality as the body dies?* All are valid questions and ones worth exploring both theologically and personally.

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However, to answer these questions one must ask some more foundational questions: *What is death? Is death the enemy or does death mean hope for resurrection? How does the knowledge that I am going to die inform how I choose to live?* The answers to these questions are both personal and based in one's theology of life and death. Of all the events within creation, birth into life and one's departure in death are experiences we all have in common, but each can only be perceived as individuals. Our perceptions about death come from what we have heard and what we have experienced.

Pondering the nuances of death and dying well requires the exploration of theological and culturally personal perspectives. Gaining this awareness can then inform a healthy spirituality that prepares oneself and loved ones for the inevitable death experience. The ultimate hope is to be empowered to embrace practices that inform dying well in a way that honors both life and death in body and in spirit.

Difficulties dealing with death and dying

It is not impossible to imagine death as part of life. We unquestioningly recognize birth and death in the animal world as the way the life cycle works. "Dying is a natural thing, and left to its natural self, each living

thing knows how to die."[1] However, when it comes to our own thoughts of dying or the death of a loved one, death and dying can carry more theological, cultural, and emotional baggage. This baggage is our embedded theology—thinking and beliefs that we gather implicitly from our cultural surroundings or religious teachings. Generally speaking, we don't like to talk about death. Theologically, it is difficult to explain. Culturally, it may carry a variety of implications that can feel burdensome. Emotionally, it requires a level of vulnerability and maturity that can be elusive.

In addition, our perceptions of death and dying often do not surface until we are directly faced with it. This is complicated by the fact that these are times when we are enveloped in highly stressful circumstances. During these stressful times, our embedded theology may feel inadequate and our dependence on a deliberative theology may prove to be more useful. Deliberative reflection allows a person to step back from the immediate situation and one's preconceptions to reflect on alternative understandings and pertinent data to formulate a meaning of faith that makes sense to them.[2] So how does one maintain a healthy spiritual self in tension with the death of the body?

Religious conceptions of death and dying

In Genesis 1–2 God creates light and darkness; land, sea, and sky; plants and animals; and, finally, humankind in God's image. God creates these all to work together, each having what it needs to be sustained and to thrive. We can see life in plants bursting forth from the earth, fish swimming in the seas, and animals grazing in the fields. As we inhale and exhale, we can experience life itself in the *ruah*, the breath or spirit of God breathed into Adam's nostrils as Adam "became a living being" (Gen 2:7). The implication is that "at death the life-breath returns to God and the flesh returns to earth; hence human destiny is already implied or anticipated in the creation of [humans]."[3] The understanding of death being a natural boundary of life can run in contrast to the interpretation of death

1 Stephen Jenkinson, *Die Wise: A Manifesto for Sanity and Soul* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 51.

2 Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke. "Faith, Understanding, and Reflection," in *How to Think Theologically*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 2013), 13–28, especially 18–20.

3 Ronald Hendel, "Genesis," in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 8.

as the enemy, present in much of the Hebrew Bible, where "death is presented as a destructive force."[4]

Paul S. Fiddes articulates the influence of scriptural references that undergird this ambiguity. He interprets Psalm 88:11–12 and 115:18 as identifying death as a loss of "relationships within family and the nation and between persons and God."[5] He highlights the finality of death in the Hebrew understanding that corresponds more with a modern biological view of psychosomatic unity versus the Greek view of a soul imprisoned in the body. According to Fiddes, death "is the event that ends the whole human person, not just the cracking of an outer cocoon of flesh so that the butterfly of an 'eternal' soul can emerge."[6] These fundamental differences can have significant implications regarding not only how one perceives death but also how one may choose to view life in the acknowledgement of the inevitability of death.

Discerning what an individual believes about death and what comes after is useful for understanding how that individual may be experiencing the inevitability of their death.

Often, when faced with illness or the impending death of oneself or a loved one, individuals may seek understanding or solace in religious traditions or beliefs. Discerning what an individual believes about death and what comes after is useful for understanding how that individual may be experiencing the inevitability of their death or that of a loved one. For example, if a dying individual believes in a final judgment as with many Christians and Muslims, they may be distressed if they feel they are not "worthy." For those who embrace Hindu beliefs in reincarnation, there may be relief in anticipating the soul's movement on its path to Nirvana (heaven).[7] Similarly, Scientologists may find comfort in their immortal spiritual being simply moving into a new life.[8] "Among Native American tribes and certain segments of Buddhism, the dead and the living coexist,

4 Paul S. Fiddes, "Acceptance and Resistance in a Theology of Death," *Modern Believing* 56, no. 2 (2015): 223 and 226.

5 Fiddes, "Acceptance and Resistance," 226.

6 Fiddes, "Acceptance and Resistance," 226.

7 "An Outline of Different Cultural Beliefs at the Time of Death," Loddon Mallee Regional Palliative Care Consortium, https://lmrpcc.org.au/admin/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Customs-Beliefs-Death-Dying.pdf.

8 "Outline of Different Cultural Beliefs," 14.

and the dead can influence the well-being of the living."[9] In some cultures, death is seen as an "abrupt and permanent disengagement."[10] There are those who believe that death is the ultimate enemy, that God did not intend death for mankind. They believe that the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden resulted in humans having to experience suffering and death. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:26, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Interpretations may vary even among Christians regarding God's intention for creation, but if one's theodicy is that death is an enemy or God's punishment for sin, this will surely color one's experience of death and dying.

North American experiences of death and dying

North America is a melding pot of religious and cultural influences, which makes it difficult to identify a specific death culture. These influences can add tremendous richness to life—and death—experiences but can just as easily create insecurity and anxiety and even conflict within families during a stressful time. Nevertheless, there are some commonalities among North American experiences of death and dying, which stem from current North American medical care practices.

From his decades of experience sitting with hundreds of dying patients and their families, Stephen Jenkinson refers to North America as a "death-phobic culture" that "despises dying for the competence-reducing, control-dismissing, meaning-annihilating random chaos it makes of the end of someone's life."[11] Contributing to the death-phobia is the lack of direct experience with dying in North America. Prior to the twentieth century, death was frequently witnessed in person as families cared for the dying in their homes from illness to burial. Changes in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century made experiences of death invisible.[12] Medical advances allowed "physicians and hospitals to assume control over dying, death, and mourning became private, the handling of dead bodies and funeral rites were transferred from private

9 James Gire, "How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2014): 4, https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1120&context=orpc.

10 Gire, "How Death Imitates Life," 5.

11 Jenkinson, *Die Wise*, 85.

12 Deborah Carr, "Death and Dying in the Contemporary United States: What are the Psychological Implications of Anticipated Death?" *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 185.

homes to funeral parlors, and people were encouraged to deny the inevitability of death and stake their hopes on the promise of nascent medical technologies."[13]

Prolonging the life of the body has become a dominant medical expectation in North America. We expend much effort on prevention of disease. If that doesn't work, we expect that the offending body part or system can be replaced or repaired. When those things fail and specialists can do no more to help, we are left to care for the dying—a task for which we are largely unprepared. As with any life experience, when we are centered in fear or misunderstanding, we rely unintentionally on embedded thinking or beliefs that may or may not serve us well in the areas of decision-making. There may be inconsistencies or unexplainable reasoning that can cause confusion and uneasiness within the individual and among loved ones. With less visibility and few, if any, hands-on experiences with the intimacy of death, we have become unfamiliar with death and dying. When faced with death for oneself or one's loved ones, this unfamiliarity can breed fear, death-anxiety, and misunderstanding.

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Finding meaning in death and dying

In his research into various studies of cultural influences on conceptions of death and dying, James Gire notes that "it is the reward expectation of afterlife rather than a mere belief in it that is associated with low death anxiety. Even if a person believes in life after death but the person also happens to expect to encounter punishment and not reward, such a person would display much higher death anxiety than even those who do not believe in an afterlife."[14] Gire acknowledges that discovering the underlying reasons for death anxiety is probably more important that qualifying the level of anxiety within a society. [15] What seems to be most important is that the individual is able to acknowledge and see how their own perception of death and dying informs their thinking. Once that is unveiled, the work of dying well—and living well, for that matter—can begin. Out of

13 Carr, "Death and Dying," 185, quoting R. Blauner, "Death and social structure," *Psychiatry* 25 (1966): 378–399.

14 Gire, "How Death Imitates Life," 9.

15 Gire, "How Death Imitates Life," 10.

his own tragedy of losing three generations of his family in a car accident, Jerry Sittser shares his evolution back to God: "in coming to the end of ourselves, we can also come to the beginning of a vital relationship with God. Our failures can lead us to grace and to a profound spiritual awakening."[16]

Dorothy Jean Weaver reflects on Paul's passionate proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus as the power of God to transform lives: "For Paul the powerful hope of the resurrection to come brings all of life into focus and calls forth faithful living in every moment of every day."[17] This hope of resurrection has already manifested in Jesus but is awaiting believers. This time of waiting for the future glory described in Romans 8:18–30 can hold those who trust in Christ during challenging times. In these verses there is hope to be set free from bondage and redemption of our bodies. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Many find comfort and reassurance in Paul's words: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). For some it is too hard at the point of facing their mortality to find solace in an intangible God, particularly if their faith has not been part of what has sustained them through past trials.

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The old saying, "There are no atheists in a foxhole," implies that fear of imminent death inspires a desire to believe in some sort of a supreme being. It reflects the thought that this fear of death pushes people toward relying on religion and its promise that there is something yet to hope for. As Christel Manning writes, "Many people assume that facing death without religion renders life pointless and unbearable, that only exceptionally strong and stoic individuals can face the void that is death without a religious

16 Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*, enlarged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 90.

17 Dorothy Jean Weaver, "The redemption of our bodies: A Pauline primer on resurrection," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 10.

framework."[18] Yet, in her two-year study on seniors in nursing homes, in senior centers, and in their own homes, Manning found that "awareness of death pushes us to find meaning, and secular sources like science can be as rich a source of meaning making as religion is."[19] She explains:

> *Religion is often touted as the only way to address the fear of death, but perhaps it's just the oldest and most popular. What I've found significant about these generic secular narratives is how well they work to give meaning in the face of death. Secular meaning-making maps are actually quite similar to religious ones, at least in structure and function: they build coherence and control, they place human experience in relation to something bigger than ourselves, and they lend moral significance to our lives as we face its inevitable end.*[20]

Regardless of the source of meaning, the knowledge that we are closer to death—either by age or illness—leads us to search for meaning in life. Finding that meaning informs how to die well.

Conclusion

Dying well matters because it allows for both the one who is dying and their loved ones to feel a sense of completion of the life cycle. Stephen Jenkinson presents a beautiful and poignant representation of the inevitability of death and the process of dying: "How we die is the ripples of the river of life, little signs for others to come; that we die is the shore that the river of life obeys."[21] As one comes to terms with mortality, there is opportunity to resolve unfinished business within oneself, with others, and with one's beliefs regarding what is after death. Attempting to define a *good death* is challenging because individual religious and cultural influences and one's level of exposure to death and dying impacts one's perceptions of dying well. It is a common sentiment among hospice and palliative care workers and those who research death and dying that the more prepared one is for dying, the better. This preparation comes in the form of exposure to

18 Christal Manning, "Facing Death without Religion: Secular sources like science work well for meaning making," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Autumn/Winter 2019, https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/facing-death-without-religion/.

19 Manning, "Facing Death without Religion."

20 Manning, "Facing Death without Religion."

21 Jenkinson, *Die Wise*, 16.

the dying, recognition of one's beliefs about life, death, and dying, and communication with loved ones about end-of-life issues.

The goal of dying well is to live while dying rather than dying to live. This is counterintuitive to the contemporary North American medical climate. While theological perspectives, cultural interpretations, and personal experiences of death are varied, what binds us together in our humanity is that we are born and we will die. We share this commonality with those who have gone before us, those with whom we are present, and those who will come after us. Birthing and dying are opportunities to teach and to learn, to be cared for and to care for one another. A healthy spirituality acknowledges that this journey from birth to death is part of sharing in the circle of life's fullness. It honors death as the natural boundary of life that returns the *ruah*—God's breath of life—back to the Creator with whom one's spirit rests in peace, grace, and hope.

About the author

Barbara Bowman is a hospice chaplain in Harrisonburg, Virginia, who recently completed her MDiv at Eastern Mennonite Seminary. She is a healing touch practitioner with training as an end-of-life doula and has a Bachelor of Science in nursing from Villanova University. She is passionate about encouraging individuals toward healing and wholeness of body, mind, and spirit.