

Christian Perspectives: Live life to the fullest, right until the very end

June is traditionally the month of weddings. But this June has been the month of funerals for me. And lots of palliative care.

Palliative care arrives when the medical world concludes that they can no longer heal someone, but can only 'keep them comfortable.' There is always some sense that they have failed at their job of keeping people alive. This is foolish, of course, because no one stays alive forever. Death cannot be avoided. And no amount of chemo, or radiation, or wishful thinking can make it otherwise.

But living fully in the last part of our lives can offer the richest of rewards - a deepening of our faith, whatever that may be, and a fuller understanding of our place in the grand landscape of humanity. When approached properly, it can offer a chance to offer forgiveness, to reassess one's viewpoints, to bring peace to fractious situations, and, peace to oneself. So, here follow a few things I have learned in the twenty-two years of being with people as they journey to their last breath. I hope they are helpful.

Talk about it. One of the things I see happen again and again is that no one will speak about death and dying. It is the elephant in the room. This is very stressful for the person who is in the middle of the process because you can't make proper decisions if you don't know what you are deciding. Would you like to die at home? Would you like to go to a palliative home? Which palliative home? What would dying at home require? Who would you like to see? Who would you not like to see? What would you like to do?

Dying is the last great adventure. It is a journey into the unknown, and this can be fearful. But how can a person speak of this fear if no one will speak about it? The greatest gift you may offer a dying person, is a quiet discussion of their experience. A person who is dying does not require great words of wisdom so much as space to expand their thinking and to reflect on their journey.

It is always better to put things in order early. The sooner everyone gets on board with the dying process, the easier it will be all along. There are certain matters that require attention. Who will be the person's power of attorney for their health and property? How will you choose that person? What is required? Decisions about organ donation, do not resuscitate orders, and the myriad of possibilities around end of life care need consideration. When these thoughts can be considered in a quiet, peaceful environment ? hopefully with someone who has experience in these areas ? it will make for a gentler journey.

It is also important to note, that even in the best of families, imminent death can bring a level of anxiety and stress that is often unexpected. Each person will view the situation through a different lens, and bring their own opinion to the collective table, along with possible past grievances. What is most required is a large measure of grace ? unmerited gift ? spread liberally around. Patience, kindness, and compassion are the order of the day. And in this way, there can be much healing in and between family members.

'I'm sorry.' That is a phrase that is heard often from the dying. And indeed, all of us have things for which we are sorry in our messy lives. In one way, if we have the luxury of having some months or weeks before we die, it can be a time to put things in right order with others. And it may be that apologies need to be made. But it may well be noted, that while we are healthy and living our daily life, we could take time to contemplate the time when we will no longer be here, and consider if forgiveness is required, and ask, or receive it, now, rather than later.

'I'm afraid.' This is the other phrase heard often, both by the dying, and by those attending them.

If you have any further questions, or would like me to visit you for further discussion, please just ask. It does not matter if you are part of the churches where I serve. The church serves the community at large, and everyone in it, and that means you.

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