

# Death

## Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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UNIVERSITY

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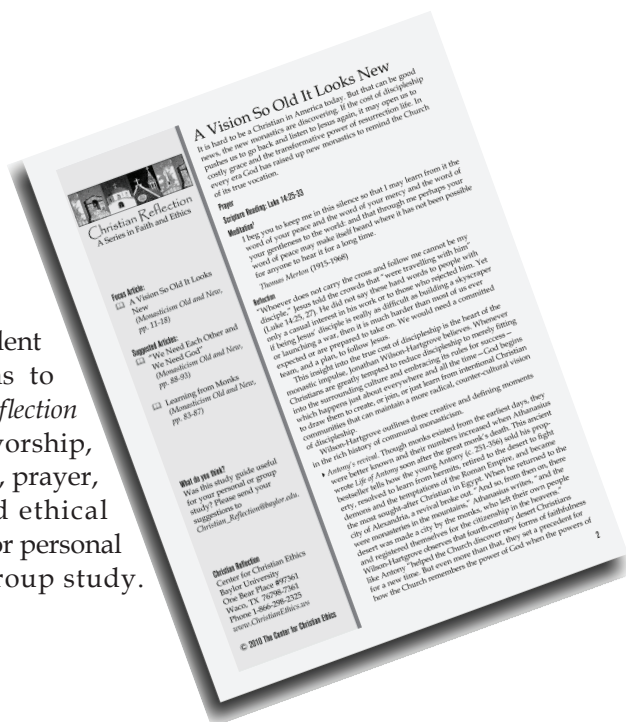
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By baptism “you died and were born,” a fourth century catechism teaches. “The saving water was your tomb and at the same time a womb.” When we are born to new life in those ‘maternal waters,’ we celebrate and receive grace that shapes how we live and die.

### DEFENDING LIFE BY EMBRACING DEATH

In a Christian equipoise between death-seeking and death-avoidance, we would not be especially disposed to postpone our deaths; neither would we be disposed to seek them. We would want to continue to give our lives away as we have received them, as sheer gift. But can we be disposed to equipoise in an immoralist culture?

### THE VIRTUES FOR DYING WELL

We can learn a great deal from the *Ars Moriendi* literature of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Focusing on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus, it emphasized the importance of faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God.

### LOVING OUR LAST ENEMY

Unaided human reason may teach us to face death fearlessly, but it can do no more. To make peace with death—to embrace our end—we need more by way of wisdom. More by way of wisdom is part of what the Church claims to have in Christ.

### REMEMBERING THE DEAD RIGHTLY

We can over-identify with powerful emotions that accompany grieving, make an idol of the deceased, or harbor the poison of estranged or hostile relationships with them. Remembering the dead rightly—with love that is undistorted by our passions—is a difficult spiritual discipline.

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# Introduction

R O B E R T   B .   K R U S C H W I T Z

**Our contributors explore how to provide better care for the dying, remember the dead rightly, and prepare for our own deaths—for these, they explain, respond to dimensions of the same problem, our avoidance of death.**

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**M**any of us die badly not because we're wicked or weak people, but because we simply haven't been taught how to die *well*," Kerry Walters has noted. Our not being ready for death is unsurprising, he suggests, because "You can't really prepare for something you spend a lifetime avoiding." In this issue our contributors attend to death from a Christian perspective. They explore how to provide better care for the dying, remember the dead rightly, and prepare for our own deaths—for these, they explain, respond to dimensions of the same problem.

Christians begin preparing for their death through baptism. Indeed, the act of baptism by immersion is "an *augury*, [or] omen of the Christian journey of dying to self and rising to new life," Eric Howell explains in *How the Tomb Becomes a Womb* (p. 11). "The dying-and-rising of our own baptisms," he says, leads to an "awakening vision that now our lives are caught up in Christ as those over whom death has no ultimate dominion. Christians are to live like this and die like this."

"Death's inevitability and apparent imminence are always matters for simultaneous rejoicing and lament. The extent to which you lack one or other of these two fundamental responses is the extent to which you are not responding as a Christian," Paul Griffiths claims in *Defending Life by Embracing Death* (p. 19). Death is an enemy because it painfully destroys relationships, but also a friend which "marks a transition to a new condition that we hope will be immeasurably better than the agony of this life." We live in an "immortalist" culture that spends immense resources to delay death. So, Griffiths explores how we can achieve a "Christian equipoise between



death-seeking and death-avoidance" in which we do not seek death, but neither are we inordinately disposed to postpone it.

Brett McCarty and Allen Verhey discover rich resources for Griffith's project in the *Ars Moriendi* literature of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. In *The Virtues for Dying Well* (p. 26), they reject the tradition's "Platonic dualism" that sees death as freeing an immortal soul from the body, but endorse its "focus on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus in order to learn how to die well." We would do well to "learn faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God."

Remembering the dead rightly, with love that is undistorted by our passions, is a difficult spiritual discipline. When someone has died, we can over-identify with powerful emotions that accompany our grieving, make an idol of the deceased, or harbor the poison of estranged or hostile relationships with them, Regina Easley-Young observes in *Remembering the Dead Rightly* (p. 34). As a remedy she explores what early Christians called *apatheia*, a state of emotional maturity in which we are not ruled by passions, but are free to approach others in love.

Easley-Young does acknowledge a very different, productive role for grief in moving us toward *apatheia* and love: "Grief forces us to acknowledge hard, objective truths such as the wonderful gift that someone's life was to us and the demand that now we must give them up to death." This reality-orienting movement of grief is what Glenn Sanders has learned from his college students. In *What My Students Teach Me about Death* (p. 69) he writes, "The rawness of my students' experiences reminds me that it is the unremitting, mysterious reality of death that helps us, not some superficial comprehension of it. I need this lesson, because death can seem like a commonplace."

The worship service (p. 52) by Eric Mathis is for the Feast of All Saints. Many congregations remember their deceased members, or saints, along with historic saints in a special Sunday service. This liturgy can prepare us to face our own death, even as it leads us to grieve the dead well. It includes David Music's new hymn, "When Life Well Lived Is at an End" which draws the connection between remembering and preparing this way: as we recall that "men and women of the past bore witness to the Light... / Their faithfulness in life and death declares unto our day / that we, like them, may have a faith that will not pass away."

The *Ars Moriendi* literature had a parallel in the *Vanitas* paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In *All My Life Is Vanity* (p. 42), Heidi Hornik contrasts a typical example of the visual genre to David Bailly's more complex and original composition, *Vanitas: Self-portrait of the Artist, Still Life*. She examines Gustav Klimt's *Death and Life* (on the cover) in *The Grim Reaper* (p. 46). In this masterwork of Expressionism based on the medieval motif of the dance of death, she writes, "the figure of Death gazes

toward a vibrant patterning of figure and color which symbolizes, perhaps, not only life but resurrection."

Today we prolong the dying process, but often isolate dying persons and fail to acknowledge death. For funerals we substitute memorial services that focus on the deceased's life and legacy. "In response to this cultural denial of death, the Church's hope of resurrection and community support for the dying and the grieving can be good news indeed," Charles Christian writes in *Restoring the Christian Funeral* (p. 87). He reviews Fred Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith's *Speaking of Dying: Recovering the Church's Voice in the Face of Death* and Thomas Long's *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, two recent books that "seek to restore a distinctively Christian voice to how we understand the dying process and death, and how we collectively articulate their meaning in the funeral service." Terry Lester's *It's Time to Get Up!* (p. 64) elicits the Christian good news from the story of Jesus' reviving his friend Lazarus from death, which Lester describes as "parabolic" of God's raising Christ to resurrection life.

"Unaided human reason may teach us to face death fearlessly, but it can do no more. To make peace with death—to embrace our end—we need more by way of wisdom," Todd Buras writes in *Loving Our Last Enemy* (p. 79). "More by way of wisdom is part of what the Church claims to have in Christ." These points are brought home powerfully in Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections* and Henri Nouwen's *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring*. "Death is always a double test of faith," Buras explains. "For those succumbing, the challenge is to do so in faith, hope, and love. For those who remain, the test is to bear loss as one who expects the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come." On the subject of grieving, he commends two insightful personal works, C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* and Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son*.

In *Dying Well* (p. 74), Joel Shuman commends three books—Allen Verhey's *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus*, Christopher Vogt's *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well*, and Rob Moll's *The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come*—for drawing insights from the *Ars Moriendi* tradition, and *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, edited by Richard Payne and John Swinton, for "tempering the hegemony of modern medicine where end-of-life care is concerned." While these "deserve a wide readership among clinicians, pastors, scholars, and Christian laity interested in end-of-life care," he wonders if they promise too much control over death. "In spite of our best efforts to domesticate it, death remains wild and often untamable, and the best-lived lives sometimes end in a less than desirable death. 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." ❖

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# How the Tomb Becomes a Womb

BY ERIC HOWELL

**By baptism “you died and were born,” a fourth-century catechism teaches. “The saving water was your tomb and at the same time a womb.” When we are born to new life in those ‘maternal waters,’ we celebrate and receive grace that shapes how we live and die.**

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Following an extended argument in which the grace given to us through Christ is set over against the sinful nature we inherit from Adam, the Apostle Paul asks: “What shall we say then?” (Romans 6:1, ESV)<sup>1</sup> and the implied answer is clear: grace wins. This is especially clear in the crescendo of his argument: “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:20b-21, ESV).

Immediately Paul recognizes that his argument sets a dangerous theological trap to be sprung. He must now disarm the derivation from his premise of a devious conclusion: namely, since more sin equals more grace, therefore, sin more!

Before the trap can be sprung, Paul spins on the point and asks, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (6:1, ESV) No way! How can we who died to sin still live in it? For Paul, the gift of God’s grace is an invitation to a new way of life, a radical discipleship to Jesus Christ that puts to death the old life and gives birth to new life.

To make this point, Paul turns to baptism. He is not trying to convince readers of the importance of baptism, nor is he making an evangelistic appeal. Rather, writing to people who (presumably) have already been baptized, in the weightiest language imaginable Paul interprets baptism as a metaphorical and effective act that changes people as decidedly as birth and death do.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might walk in newness of life.

*Romans 6:3-4*

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**Baptismal grace is the frequent memory of the dying-and-rising of our own baptisms, which is revealed again to us each time the Church gathers for this celebration.**

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Perhaps the image of walking “in newness of life” includes the promise of life after death for those who are saved, but in light of the case Paul is making for the shape of life on this side of the grave, it seems that walking in newness of life is the walk that we begin dripping wet as we step out of the baptistery.<sup>2</sup> In other

words, Paul is saying that grace is not a convenient equation for cancelling the penalty of sin, it is a gifted newness of life in Christ that is witnessed to and shaped by baptism. Baptismal grace is the frequent memory of the dying-and-rising of our own baptisms, which is revealed again to us each time the Church gathers for this celebration. It is the awakening vision that now our lives are caught up in Christ as those over whom death has no ultimate dominion. Christians are to live like this and die like this.

## **LIVING TOWARD A GOOD DEATH**

At fifty-three years old, Eugene O’Kelly was in the prime of his life and by all accounts his life was a prime one to live. He was in the third year of a six-year term as the Chairman and CEO of KPMG (US), one of the largest accounting firms in the world. Though he and his wife dreamed of someday retiring to Arizona, he loved his work with so much energy and drive that he would go to extreme lengths to land big-time clients. On one occasion when he was having a hard time scheduling a meeting, O’Kelly learned the client’s travel plans and booked a seat next to him on a flight from Los Angeles to Sydney, Australia. During the flight, he won the client’s account. As soon as they arrived in Australia, O’Kelly boarded the next plane and flew back home. He was good at what he did and dedicated to it.

But in a moment his world changed. In May 2005, O’Kelly was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor and given three months to live. He faced the very real question: What would you do if you had only three months to live?

Prior to his diagnosis O’Kelly had not considered his own death carefully at all. He was too busy living life and working too hard to be attentive to his own mortality. Faced with death, he applied the same intentional, focused approach to dying as he had to working. It was all he knew how to do. He

quickly put into place a succession plan at KPMG and left his position as soon as he could. He wrote letters to old friends. He spent more time at home with his wife and family. He tightened his circle of friends closer as the months crept on and his death loomed near.

Reflecting on these experiences in his memoir, *Chasing Delight*, O'Kelly came to see his diagnosis as a gift. Knowing he had only a short time to live, it was as though he decided to fight the good fight of dying well as a blessing to his family and friends, and to run the race that was set before him. This is what he concluded:

I was blessed. I was told I had three months to live. You think that to put those two sentences back to back, I must be joking. Or crazy. Perhaps that I had lived a miserable, unfulfilled life, and the sooner it was done, the better. ... Hardly. I loved my life. Adored my family. Enjoyed my friends, the career I had, the big-hearted organizations I was part of, the golf I played. And I'm quite sane. And also quite serious: The verdict I received the last week of May 2005—that it was unlikely I'd make it to my daughter Gina's first day of eighth grade, the opening week of September—turned out to be a gift. Honestly. Because I was forced to think seriously about my own death. Which meant I was forced to think more deeply about my life than I'd ever done.<sup>3</sup>

Like many people who face the reality of their own mortality, O'Kelly experienced an unlikely awakening. For years, life, and all that it asked and required from him, was all he saw. But now, with death in front of him, he was able to see life in richer, deeper, fuller ways. He wrote,

I'd attained a new level of awareness, one I didn't possess the first 53 years of my life. It's just about impossible for me to imagine going back to that other way of thinking, when this new way has enriched me so. I lost something precious, but I also gained something precious.<sup>4</sup>

## **BECOMING AWARE OF BAPTISMAL GRACE**

O'Kelly experienced the gift of life in the shadow of death. This is surely an analogue of the grace that we experience in Christian baptism. Indeed, it is this baptismal grace that prepares us to live well and die well. But to understand our baptisms in this way, we need to clear some ground around the baptistery and what we do there.

Let me place an image in your mind. The baptistery at our church is outside. It is actually an old cow trough left over from the days when our land was a dairy farm. We fill it up with water to bury persons by baptism into Christ's death and raise them to walk in new life. We come out of the sanctuary into the sunshine and gather around the trough to sing a song, hear a testimony, confess our faith together, and clap. It is the one moment

when our loafers get shelved for our down-to-the-river boots, and we love it. Celebrating baptism in this open-air, no-walls manner is my favorite moment in ministry – by a wide margin. So, when I suggest we might need to “clear some ground” around the baptistery to speak of baptismal grace, that is coming from someone who swings a bare foot from the grass and

fire ants up over into the baptistery and back out dripping wet.

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**The Christian tradition variously describes baptism as a sacrament, an ordinance, and a sign. Perhaps we should also describe baptism as an augury, for it is an omen of the Christian journey of dying to self and rising to new life.**

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In our thinking, we often construct walls around the baptismal moment, separating it from the rest of the Christian life that follows. For instance, some of us as evangelicals understand baptism as the culmination of a period of preparation. We pair baptism with the “walk down the aisle” as the public marks that a person (often a child) has made a decision

for Christ and is ready to become a Christian. This is well and good, but it is also incomplete. Paul says that baptism is not just dying to the life we had before, but also rising to new life. In baptism we should see an image of the entire Christian life.

The Christian tradition variously describes baptism as a *sacrament* to highlight the mysterious work that God does through its practice, as an *ordinance* to emphasize our obedience to Jesus’ command to perform it, and as a *sign* to indicate the symbolic nature of the lowering and raising of the candidate. Perhaps we should also describe baptism as an *augury*, for it is an omen of what will happen in the future. If you fear that the word is too bleak for this purpose, consider the brighter connotation of it in these opening lines from William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence”:

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
and a heaven in a wild flower,  
hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
and eternity in an hour.

Blake expresses a mystical belief that the microcosm symbolizes the macrocosm such that it is possible to experience the latter by contemplating the former. In the grain of sand observed with patience, the whole world comes into view. In the wild flower experienced with each of our senses and all our being, we really do see heaven. From this perspective, the palm of one’s hand is as large as infinity and an hour is as long as eternity.



Certainly baptism is an augury in Blake's sense. When we view baptism with our whole being, with all our senses, we can see the death and resurrection of Christ and our own death and resurrection. The movement we see in baptism is the shape of what is to come: the Christian journey of dying to self and rising to new life. So, with apologies to William Blake, I offer a pastor's view:

To see our world in a moment expand:  
death and life in an augur...  
hold a man in the palm of your hand,  
and lower him into the water.

Baptism as an *augury* is not just a celebration of the moment, but the means by which we see the shape of the whole Christian life.

While we are clearing ground around baptism, let us also clear some ground around grace. We should not limit grace to merely the means by which salvation is transacted. Surely by God's grace we are saved, and to this truth we give testimony in our baptisms. But while salvific grace finds full expression in baptism, it is not finished with us there. The full expression of grace in our baptisms signifies the presence and power of grace that will sustain us through our lives. As the Orthodox theologian Olivier Clement observes,

Baptism is the total immersion in the choking water of death, from which we emerge in the joy of breathing once again, of "breathing the Spirit." For the water, changed from lethal into life-giving, embodies the resurrectional power of the Spirit, of which it is a natural symbol.<sup>5</sup>

Echoing the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3, Clement beautifully expresses the baptismal and spiritual shape of the Christian life:

The Spirit, then, shapes the person who has been renewed in water, which has become maternal, just as [the Spirit] brooded over the original waters, but this time his work is *re-creation*. In the water, the hard growths of the soul, the callouses of the heart, are dissolved. The person becomes once again tractable and receives a form of life, which is symbolized by the white garment put on after he or she emerges, the symbol of the glorified body.<sup>6</sup>

So, now we have cleared a bit of ground around both baptism and grace. Let the baptismal waters splash out of the cow trough onto the grass and dirt, and flow under and around, and rise and cover our down-to-the-river boots. Let them continue rising all around us until the flood of these Spirit-hovered waters brings continual re-creation to the lives of all the saints. It is the *Church's* baptism, after all.

In a fourth century book of catechetical instruction attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem we find this striking image of baptism: “By this action you died and were born. The saving water was your tomb and at the same time a womb.”<sup>7</sup> For those who are born to new life in the ‘maternal waters,’ grace is more expansive than the means to a profession of faith. Grace is

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**The funeral service echoes the baptismal service. Even as we trust that a baptized person will be raised from the water, so we trust that the person we lower into the ground will rise again.**

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the whole gift of God to the whole person for the whole of life and the whole of salvation. Clement explains it this way:

Life in the spirit means gradually becoming aware of ‘baptismal grace,’ and this awareness transforms the whole person. The baptismal sequence of death and resurrection is repeated throughout

our pilgrimage, enlightening its ‘initiatory’ moments. When everything seems lost, baptismal grace, if we pay heed to it, can convert a situation of death into one of resurrection, an apparent deadlock into a necessary breakthrough. We have to learn—and this is the whole meaning of asceticism—to get round obstacles, to tear away dead skin, to let the very life of Christ arise in us by the power of his resurrection. Each present moment has to become baptismal: a moment of anguish and death if I seek to cling to it and so experience its non-existence, but a moment of resurrection if I accept it humbly as ‘present’ in both senses of the word. ... We come finally to the moment of agony when we are overwhelmed by the waters of death. Through our baptism, according to the measure of our faith, they will be transformed into the womb of eternity.<sup>8</sup>

## **CELEBRATING AT TWO BLESSED GRAVES**

Eugene O’Kelly came to realize that his central question might have been asked years before his diagnosis, not just weeks before his death: how can life become filled with the awareness of gift? As Christians we should be asking how our lives can become suffused with the awareness of baptismal grace.

We might take our cue from St. Benedict of Nursia, who instructed his monks to “Keep death daily before your eyes.”<sup>9</sup> The fourth-century desert mystic Evagrius shared similar wisdom: “Always keep your death in mind and do not forget the eternal judgment, then there will be no fault in your



soul.”<sup>10</sup> This ancient Christian wisdom is irony for sure: we most fully experience life when we are most mindful of our deaths. Similarly, we most fully experience baptismal grace when we contemplate the reality of death. Perhaps this is so because the grace that we will receive for resurrection upon our deaths is so richly augured in baptism.

In this way baptismal grace puts us in touch with what Paul called “the power of [Christ’s] resurrection” (Philippians 3:10)—a power that can shape how we endure suffering right now, live like Christ, and one day die like Christ. This resurrection power not only assures life with God after death, but transforms daily life before God in light of the coming rebirth in “the womb of eternity.”

In *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Tom Long explores the liturgical, dramatic, and narrative connections that run between baptismal services and Christian funerals. He writes,

When a Christian dies, the church gathers to act out the story of what this death means in the light of the gospel, but it is a story that began long before the person died. It is a story that began at baptism. Since a funeral is built on the foundation of baptism, we cannot fully grasp the dramatic aspects of a funeral without seeing them in baptism as well.<sup>11</sup>

Just as I have attempted to reclaim baptism as an augury for the life of discipleship that follows, so Long is concerned to reclaim the funeral as both an echo of that Christian pilgrimage and an augury of the life with God after death. In his view,

A Christian funeral is a continuation and elaboration of the baptismal service. If baptism is a form of worshipful drama performed at the beginning of the Christian life, a funeral is—or should be—an equally dramatic, and symmetrical, performance of worship performed at the end of life....

The funeral, then, is not just a connection of inspiring words said on the occasion of someone’s death. It is, rather, a dramatic event in which the church acts out what it believes to be happening from the perspective of faith.<sup>12</sup>

The funeral service echoes the baptismal service. In both cases the congregation celebrates and receives God’s grace for a person’s life shaped by dying and rising. In the baptismal service the person is lowered into and then raised from the waters. In the funeral service the person is lowered into death to be raised to new life. Even as we trust that a baptized person will be raised from the water, so we trust that the person we lower into the ground will rise again.

When John Chrysostom teaches in the fourth century, “Nothing is more blessed than that grave over which all rejoice, both angels and human

beings and the Master of angels,” the blessed grave he is speaking about is the baptistery.<sup>13</sup> By God’s grace may we come to receive both the watery grave and the earthen grave as blessed, as auguries of new life in Christ, and therefore as occasions for rejoicing in hope.

## NOTES

1 Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently develops this theme in a letter to Eberhard Bethge. Because throughout the Old Testament redemption is on this side of the grave, Bonhoeffer notes, we make a mistake in emphasis when we read Christian hope as exclusively redemption on the other side of the grave. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 8 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2009), 447.

3 Eugene O’Kelly, *Chasing Daylight: How My Forthcoming Death Transformed My Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 1.

4 Ibid., 6.

5 Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (New York: New City Press, 1993), 103.

6 Ibid., 104.

7 Quoted in Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 105.

8 Ibid., 106

9 *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4.47

10 Benedicta Ward, trans., *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 63.

11 Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 79.

12 Ibid., 81.

13 John Chrysostom, “On Colossians Homily 7,” in Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, eds., *John Chrysostom, The Early Church Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 77.

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# Defending Life by Embracing Death

BY PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

In a Christian equipoise between death-seeking and death-avoidance, we would not be especially disposed to postpone our deaths; neither would we be disposed to seek them. We would want to continue to give our lives away as we have received them, as sheer gift. But can we be disposed to equipoise in an immortalist culture?

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Let me ask you to perform a thought-experiment. Imagine that you have a friend, that this person has been your friend for as long as you can remember — as long as you have had any sense of yourself as a person — and that this friendship has largely defined your character and the sense you have of what it is like to be yourself. Without this friend's friendship, it seems to you, you would be a different person, and you find that person hard to imagine. But that's not all. In addition to anticipating this friend's visits exactly as the visits of a friend, you also dread them. Your anticipation of them causes trembling and sleepless nights, and you know that when they happen, when your friend is with you, you will lament and wail and rend your garments even as you rejoice in the friend's presence. Lament and delight are inextricably bound together when you are with this friend. This is an unusual friendship. But it is a friendship we all have. It is a friendship with death.

Reflecting on the nature and meaning of human mortality in *City of God*, Augustine says *nihil sit aliud tempus vitae huius quam cursus ad mortem* (the whole duration of our life is nothing but a progression toward death).<sup>†</sup>

May Christians think about death as a good thing, even as a friend or lover, as my opening thought-experiment suggested? The answer is double, both yes and no.

No. Death is among the results of the fall. It is the reward of sin, part of the curse laid upon Adam and Eve and thus on us all; and its omnipresence is the clearest evidence we have that things are not as they should be, that both we and the world we find ourselves in are profoundly damaged, that they suffer from the after-effects of an aboriginal calamity. On this under-

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**Death's inevitability and apparent imminence are always matters for simultaneous rejoicing and lament. The extent to which you lack one or other of these two fundamental responses is the extent to which you are not responding as a Christian.**

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standing, death is a horror and an offence, something we do and should make efforts to postpone in both our own case and that of others, and something we do and should lament when it comes to others. Jesus beseeches the Father that he might avoid his own imminent and painful death; and Mary, his mother, laments the death of her son at the foot of the cross.

But also yes. The body's death marks a transition to a new condition that we hope will be immeasurably better than the agony of this life; and so it has been a commonplace of the Christian tradition to welcome death exactly as the gateway to eternal life. The day on which a saint is remembered in the church calendar is her death-day, her *dies natalis*, which means, literally, birthday, day on which she is born to eternal life. And so, death is to be welcomed, even if not sought. And although Jesus was reluctant to die, he willingly accepted death and died by violence and with great suffering; this makes it possible for Christians to see their own deaths as participating in his, and themselves as thereby conformed to him. The acceptance of death in this way can become a mode of imitating Christ, and this fundamentally important fact, evident everywhere in the Church's iconography, liturgy, and hagiography, is the central ingredient in the standard Christian claim that the ideal death is that of the martyr, a Christian who joyfully accepts death when it is offered as a mode of witness to the truth of the faith.

There is an ambivalence here, clearly. Death is a friend and death is an enemy; death is a cause for lament and a cause for rejoicing. However, ambivalence is often a good thing. To overlook that death is a horror to be lamented easily leads to support for suicide, euthanasia, or the refusal of medical treatment to those who might benefit from it. To overlook the view that death is a friend to be welcomed suggests a blindness to life eternal and a fixation on postponing death at all costs and for as long as possible. That fixation, because of our ever-increasing capacity to keep the body alive, now

often leads to tormenting the body, and thus the person, by refusing to permit death to do its work. The wealthy, because they can afford the treatment, are now approaching the unenviable situation of being able to die only if they are killed: once in the grip of a doctor determined not to let you die, it is not easy to escape even if you want to.

While many now believe that death is without remainder an evil, it was not always so. Christians have often celebrated death, even if always with reservations. For example, the third-century Christian martyr Perpetua embraced death, even to the point of guiding the gladiator's blade to her jugular as she died refusing to sacrifice to the Roman emperors. She understood her death to be a victory and the blood in which she was washed to be a second baptism into eternal life. Similarly, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), a saint and doctor of the Church, welcomed the diagnosis of her tuberculosis, seeing her inevitable death as a sign that she would be more fully conformed to her savior. Nevertheless, even for the saints of the Church, while death leads to eternal life, grief is not absent. Augustine grieved for the death of his mother, Monica, although he knew he should be rejoicing for her birth into eternal life. His tears, he came to think, healed the wound of separation, acting as a balm and deepening his intimacy with the Lord.

However, even if these examples show that death is something that can be embraced, they do not celebrate death *simpliciter*. It is always both welcome and lamentable. Augustine grieves the death of another, but he is also deeply aware that there is, from a Christian point of view, something odd about such grief. His default position is approximately the opposite of ours. Where we find it hard to imagine a situation in which death should be celebrated, embraced, or sought, he finds it difficult to imagine a situation in which it should be lamented, and has to struggle to see that lament is not simply a compromise with human weakness, but also an element proper to a fully Christian response to death.



These examples suggest some syntactical rules for Christian thought about an affective response to our own deaths.

The first is that your death's inevitability and apparent imminence are always matters for simultaneous rejoicing and lament. The extent to which you lack one or other of these two fundamental responses is the extent to which you are not responding as a Christian.

The second has to do with the gamut of possible responses to particular instances of the perceived imminence of your own death. At one extreme lies the response of doing everything within your power to stave it off, to delay it; at the other is doing what you can to help it along and bring it to consummation, delighting in its approach as you do so. For Christians there is no default response to this gamut (as there is, say,

to idolatry or lying or adultery); rather, the Christian seeks equipoise between immortalism and self-annihilation.

The third is that the length of your life has no great or final significance. Augustine is again helpful here, pointing out in *City of God* that what matters is that your life has been well lived and your death is a good one, not how

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**Your life was received by you as gift,  
unasked; and the principal purpose of the  
gift, given you by the Lord, is that you should  
hand it on and over to others, as Jesus  
Christ handed his over for us all.**

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long you have lived. A good death is neither necrophiliac nor necrophobic.

Informing this syntax of proper response to your own death is the central Christian claim that your life is not yours. This is an important point. Your life was received by you as gift, unasked; and the principal purpose of the gift, given you by the Lord, is that you should hand it on and over

to others, as Jesus Christ handed his over for us all. Suicide contradicts the claim that your life is not yours because the gesture of self-slaughter is one of mastery and ownership. But suicide is not the only means by which the idea of life as a gift can be contradicted: the in-principle and no-holds-barred attempt to preserve your life against death is also a kind of mastery that cannot be had — a mastery over death by grasping for immortality. Those who enter into this pattern of thought and action behave as though death were always to be resisted, and as though the ideal human life were one that did not involve the body's death. The discernment ought in every case to resonate to life's giftedness, and to the fact that life is given to you but not for you.



This Christian grammar and syntax of death has something to offer to the question of health care in our current cultural crisis about that matter. Therefore, I will conclude by trying to sort out, schematically, what that offer comes to, and thereby commending a particular set of attitudes and practices to Christians. I do not think that these attitudes and practices are likely to be accepted — or even that they should be accepted — by pagans. Their understandings of what it is to be human and, therefore, of human life and human death, are too distant from Christian understandings to permit easy communication. Changes of mind are even less likely.

It is clear enough that many of our death-practices are predicated on the idea that death should be staved off whenever and by all means possible.

The prevalence and depth of this immortalist assumption is evident in a number of ways. First, we see it when doctors recommend a particular diagnostic test for everyone, whether currently sick or not, based on data that points to a significant decrease in mortality-rate causally linked to early diagnosis made possible by use of the test. The thought here is that anything which reduces mortality is *ipso facto* good. Second, it is witnessed to in the prevalence of the use of battle metaphors for talking about illness. We *fight* cancer; we *battle* Alzheimer's; we *struggle* with leukemia. We do not, at the moment, easily talk about embracing what we shall succumb to as an ally (even if once upon a time we allowed pneumonia to be an old person's friend). A third evidence of immortalism's importance for us is the fact that we do not grow old gracefully and happily. The signs of aging, physical and mental, are among the signs of death's approach, and we frequently deny and obscure them, spending vast quantities of time and money on anti-aging activities and products. And fourth, additional proof of immortalism's prevenience is seen in the fact that a startlingly high proportion of what we spend, nationally, on health care is devoted to medical work done on patients in the last six months of their lives. Doctors appear to hew to a default position of administering treatment if it will extend life even for a few weeks.

Immortalism is especially tempting to the American and European middle classes. It is the fundamental grammar of their – of our – understanding of and response to death. It is less tempting to the poor, however, because they have neither the time nor the money to consider death in these ways. For them, whether in the developed or developing world, the question is typically short-term: how can I live through this day, this week, this month? Health care, for the poor, is largely a question of response to immediate need, whereas for the middle class it is a project, and almost without exception an immortalist one. It is no accident that the poor are much better at lamenting death than the middle class: the funerary and memorial practices of the middle classes are by comparison impoverished. If death is a reality at which you cannot look, it is not likely that you will be able either to lament it or to delight in it. Those harmonies and discords will not be in your repertoire. You will, instead, have only the low-intensity fugue of battle, denial, loss, and regret, whether directed at your own imminent death, or that of someone else. None of that is remotely Christian.



What is Christian is the position of equipoise between death-seeking and death-avoidance. People who occupy that position are not especially disposed to postpone their deaths; neither are they disposed to seek them. What they want is to continue to give their lives away as they have received them, as sheer gift. But how can people become disposed to equipoise in an



immortalist culture? Some recommendations are in order here, and they must be recommendations of practices extended over time: it is much too late to reconfigure your attitude to your own death when you have strong reason to believe that you have only weeks or months to live. Your life needs to be a preparation for death—which is, you may hope, the precursor to eternal life.

The first recommendation is that death and dying should be more visible than they are. Children should, as a matter of course and from a young age, be both permitted and encouraged to see dead bodies and the processes that lead to dying. The closed casket and the crematorium's flames are in part designed to occlude what should be visible, and Christians should, to the extent possible, and within the constraints of prudence, oppose them. Parents and teachers should talk to children about death—their own and others'. Death is not, for Christians, a private matter, but rather something that belongs to the economy of the communion of saints.

The second recommendation is that the symbols of death, so visible in premodern Christian art and architecture, should be an ordinary part of every Christian life. There is a sense in which they inevitably are: we cannot get far in our lives as Christians without being confronted by crosses and crucifixes and the narratives of the passion. But it is too easy for those Christ-specific symbols to become affectively and practically divorced from our understanding of our own deaths. That is why, like Saint Jerome, who is typically depicted with a skull on his desk, we need to have before us symbols that bring our own deaths to mind.

The third recommendation has to do with funerary practices. These too need to reflect and encourage not only deep lament but also celebration. The liturgy preserves the essentials: it permits the fact of the dead person's death not to be obscured (there may be an open casket or other opportunities for viewing the dead), and both death in general and this death in particular are in that way depicted starkly as horrors. But the celebratory aspect of death is also there: its principal liturgical signal is the draping of the coffin in white as recapitulation of the clothing of the newly-baptized with white. This death, the liturgical action says, is as much cause for celebration as was the dead person's baptism, and for the same reason: she was reborn then as a member of Christ's body; she has been reborn now, we may hope, into eternal life. Nevertheless, too often we do not do well at weeping and rending our garments because we are not good at public lament; and we do even less well at celebrating the fact of death as an inevitable transition to eternal life. What we celebrate, when we celebrate, is the memory of the dead person's life here below. That is good, but it is not the deepest reason for celebration.

The fourth recommendation is of ascetical moderation with respect to the rhetoric of immortalism, and especially with respect to the language of battle against death-producing illness. Such talk is not Christian, being



neither the language of celebration nor that of lament. And because it immediately stereotypes all illness as inimical and labels it as a foe, it prevents proper discernment.

A population that accepts the underlying rationale of a health-care régime will behave differently from a population that does not: acceptance will be marked by compliance. But if death and the dying are more visible, the symbols of death more present, funerary practices reconfigured, and immortalist rhetoric jettisoned, Christians might be less likely to abide by what the current health-care régime commends.

Were this to happen to any significant extent, Christians would begin to be marked off from the population at large by our less frequent adoption of standard recommendations as to diagnosis and treatment. We might begin to be known as a people who would, in certain circumstances, refuse what the medical profession might take to be ordinary life-extending care because we take it that life here below is not a good always to be extended; and we might thereby contribute to a gradual re-assessment, even on the part of non-Christians, of what dignity means to mortal but rational animals such as ourselves.

Unfortunately, we are far from that at the moment.

#### NOTE

† Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, 13.10, translated by R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 550.



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# The Virtues for Dying Well

BY BRETT MCCARTY  
AND ALLEN VERHEY

With the *Ars Moriendi* tradition, we should focus on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus in order to learn how to die well. We would learn faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God.

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Ask typical Americans how they would prefer to die and they are likely to say quickly, painlessly, and in their sleep—that is, if they have even given much thought to their own death. For many, Christian or not, the thought of dying under the fluorescent lights of a sterile ICU, hooked up to countless machines, is the stuff of nightmares. This lingering and dehumanizing process is instinctively understood as a bad way to die, but often we do not have the imagination to offer a robust alternative. So we try to avoid the process of dying altogether, preferring either an unconscious demise or, as some recent polls indicate, a quick and controlled death through physician-assisted suicide. If we are honest with ourselves, however, we recognize that this escapist impulse does not serve us very well. A good death, if any death can truly be called good, occurs when one dies at peace with others and with God, and this peace is hard to find in the modern ICU or in sudden deaths. Modern medicine's emphasis on technological progress and patient autonomy offers little in the way of fostering this kind of peaceful death.<sup>1</sup>

In order to find resources for a good death, Christians can learn from the riches of their tradition. In particular, we can turn to the fifteenth century and to the *Ars Moriendi*, a self-help handbook for dying well in an age filled with the specter of death. Numerous editions of this small pamphlet were published and read widely.<sup>2</sup> This literature did Christians a great service,

for it identified the process of dying as suffused with theological and moral significance, not simply as a medical event. Viewed in this light, death is something that we can and should prepare for as part of a faithful life of discipleship. *Ars Moriendi* assisted in this process by naming the temptations that the dying would face, and it recommended particular virtues to combat these evil inclinations. In intricate woodblock carvings, these scenes of temptation and their corresponding virtues for dying well were visually rendered. Moreover, the *Ars Moriendi* literature emphasized the paradigmatic significance of the story of Jesus, and it couched the process of dying within the community of faith. By reading these texts and meditating on their images, Christians could begin the process of preparing to die well, a process that should begin well before death is imminent.<sup>3</sup>

However, the *Ars Moriendi* literature is not without its problems. Assuming a Platonic dualism, it commends death as the liberation of the immortal soul from the body. Because of this, it disparages the “carnal relations” of embodied and communal life and so has no place for lament. This emphasis in *Ars Moriendi* could lead to forms of alienation not unlike those in modern medicalized dying. Therefore, a retrieval of the late medieval *Ars Moriendi* cannot include a dualistic commendation of death, but must instead begin with a holistic commendation of life.

### **TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY *ARS MORIENDI***

We would do well to follow the *Ars Moriendi* tradition and focus on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus in order to learn how to die well. In doing so, we will find the clues to overcome the greatest flaw in that tradition, its commendation of death. This is because attention to the death of Jesus demands attention to his life and resurrection. His life began with the incarnation, as the Word of God took on flesh in a fundamental affirmation of human existence. “All things came into being through him,” proclaims the beginning of the Gospel of John, and “in him was life” (John 1:3-4). The same triune God who created all of life and proclaimed it very good was present in every moment of Jesus’ life. As Jesus announced that the good future of God was at hand, he proclaimed that the cause of God was, is, and ever will be abundant life. So if we disconnect the story of his dying from the story of his birth and his ministry, we risk disconnecting the passion story from Jesus’ passion for the reign of God. Similarly, focusing on the death of Jesus distorts his story if we forget the resurrection. The resurrection is not a commendation of death, but is instead a celebration of God’s love and power, the love that is stronger than death, the power that defeated death. Therefore, attending to the story of Jesus means that we will begin with a commendation of life. His birth, life, death, and resurrection all point toward the cause of God being life, not death.<sup>4</sup>

With this understanding of the story of Jesus in mind, we are now prepared to appropriate the virtues for dying well given by the *Ars Moriendi*

literature. Each of the virtues given corresponds to a temptation faced by the dying, starting with the first—the temptation to lose faith. In the agony and loneliness of dying, faith in God can seem to be a difficult, if not impossible, prospect. During these darkest moments, *Ars Moriendi* is right to turn our gaze toward the faith of Jesus, who displayed his trust in God and God's cause even unto death. It is important to observe that Jesus is not just an example of faith; in our living and in our dying, Christians can have faith because of his faithfulness. But his faith is paradigmatic for a Christian's dying well. In Jesus' faithful death, we see that the practice of lament is not opposed to faith. Indeed, his words from the cross demonstrate that the psalms of lament are resources for all who follow him. From his cry of dereliction (Psalm 22:1) to his final words, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31:5), the psalms of lament are part of Jesus' faithful death. Moreover, faith in God meant that Jesus valued God's cause over his own life. Although a contemporary *Ars Moriendi* should begin with a commendation of life, not death, it is important to remember that though life is a great good, it is not the greatest good. Desperately clinging to one's own survival is not the kind of life God commends. To die well, no less than to live well, one has to care about life, but some things must be cared for more than survival. Even though God's cause seems to be thwarted by the powers of sin and death, we can follow Jesus and know that life, not death, will have the final word. God vindicated the faithfulness of Jesus in the resurrection, and because he was raised, we look to Jesus as "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2) and to his faith as the paradigm for our living and our dying.

The second temptation faced by the dying is to despair, and it is met by the virtue of hope. Death threatens not just an end to one's existence but the unraveling of meaning, the severing of relationships, the shattering of hopes. In the shadow of death, hope seems like folly. But the God of Ezekiel who promised to make a valley of dry bones live is the God of Jesus Christ, and the hope of Jesus in the face of death is our hope. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has given us grounds to hope that death will not have the last word in our world or upon our lives. Christians do not deny the awful reality of death, but they do insist that death will not have the last word, that the last word belongs to God, and it is not death but life, not suffering but *shalom*. With faith in God they share the hope of the Church and of its creed. The Apostles' Creed, for example, closes with these words of hope: "I believe...in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." This hope, like the creed, is Trinitarian. Christians hope because they know the faithfulness of the one who made all things, because they know the story of one who was raised from the dead, and because they know a life-giving Spirit.<sup>5</sup> And because this hope must be fitting to the story given in Scripture, it should not shrink to an egocentric desire for a solitary individual to experience the bliss of heaven. Instead, the scope of Christian hope is nothing less than cosmic. The story begins with the creation of all

things and it reaches finally to all things made new. And in light of this cosmic scope, Christian hope is also inalienably personal. The same Son of God who ordered all of creation spoke words of hope to the thief on the cross. As with faith, Jesus' words from the cross remind us that Christian hope also makes room for lament, as we decry the ways in which God's good future is still sadly not yet. Therefore, in Jesus' dying, Christians find the paradigm of hope: a hope that need not cling desperately to life, a hope that makes room for lament, a hope grounded in the steadfast love of God.

The *Ars Moriendi* literature names the third temptation for the dying as impatience, and it is met by the virtues of love and patience. The great pain and suffering that can accompany dying makes patience difficult in the smallest of things. The daily care received from doctors, nurses, and loved ones can be spurned, and this impatience in the face of death receives its most terrible expression in suicide. *Ars Moriendi* is right to connect this impatience to a lack of charity, as the threat of death often makes it difficult for us to love God and the good things of God (including our own life). However, where the *Ars Moriendi* literature focuses on how to overcome, or at least ignore, temporal and bodily suffering through an escapist love of God, a better understanding of the virtue of love has no room for spurning our "carnal relations." Instead, by loving God and all else as it relates to God, we learn to properly love our bodies, our lives, and the innumerable relationships that define who we are. Because of this, there is room to lament when death threatens these loves. By participating in God's steadfast love as revealed in the passion of Christ, Christians can learn what it means for love to be patient as it endures all things. Jesus' commitment to God and God's cause above all else meant that he was willing to suffer unto death, but this display of love's patience is not a glorification of suffering. Instead, Jesus endured the cross because of his love for God and all of

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**Each virtue given in the *Ars Moriendi* literature corresponds to a temptation faced by the dying, starting with the first—the temptation to lose faith. In the agony and loneliness of dying, faith in God can be a difficult, if not impossible, prospect.**

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God's creation. Though it is generally discussed in terms of cosmic reconciliation, Jesus' patient love is also seen in his longing for the companionship of the disciples and his instructions to the beloved disciple to care for his mother and to his mother to care for John. We can participate in this affective affirmation of the other by offering gracious and generous attention to the needs of others even as we are dying. The work of patient love can also take

form in instruments as prosaic as a will and instructions for one's care as one is withering and dying. In all these ways, then, we can learn patient love from the one who loved us from birth to death, and we can trust that love through its affirmation in the resurrection.

After meditating on the virtues of faith, hope, and patient love, the dying may begin to congratulate themselves on how well they are doing. Just at this moment they fall into a diabolically clever temptation: the danger of pride. Pride is a difficult thing to face, especially in a culture that promotes autonomy and independence. Any effort to resist it through one's own efforts can feed into the very problem one is attempting to overcome, lending credence to the illusion of self-reliance. Instead, *Ars Moriendi* instructs the dying to inculcate the virtue of humility, found not by focusing on one's own efforts but instead through fixing one's gaze on the grace of God. This grace is embodied in the humility of Jesus Christ, who "emptied himself" in the incarnation and "humbled himself" in a life of obedience that led to the cross (Philippians 2:5-8). In humble faithfulness Christ was willing to endure humiliation and even allowed others to care for him in the midst of it. This can be a word of comfort to those who depend on others to change their bedpans and bathe their failing bodies.<sup>6</sup> By attending to God and the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, we can begin to learn humility. Attentive to God, we can acknowledge our neediness and no longer fear it. Attentive to the grace of God, we need not pretend that it is our little righteousness that makes us worthy of God's care (or anyone else's); we can learn to receive care graciously. Attentive to God's power, that exalted the crucified and humiliated Jesus (Philippians 2:9), we can even cope with the humiliation of dying. Attentive to God, we need not anxiously hoard the little resources we think we have against our vulnerability to suffering and death; we can be a little less anxious, a little more carefree.

This freedom from the anxiety that prompts us to hoard the resources we think we have against our vulnerability to suffering and death brings us to the final temptation named in *Ars Moriendi*, the temptation of avarice. This temptation manifests itself in an anxious, tightfisted grasping, a desperate and idolatrous clinging to life above all else. We hardly know how to name the corresponding virtue, and intermittently call it the virtue of letting go, of serenity, and of generosity. This virtue is both endorsed and embodied by Jesus, who told us to observe the example of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:25-34) and who displayed this virtue on the cross. Without commending death, he was able to face it without fear because he was confident in the grace of God, and this confidence was confirmed in his resurrection. Therefore, even at the limits of our lives, we need not be anxious, for we may know that God's love is stronger than death. In that confidence we may let ourselves go into the hands of God. We may let go also of those we love and must leave behind, confident of God's care for them. Dying well and faithfully will mean commending them into the

hands of a God who can be trusted. This virtue does not mean that we hold our lives and our loved ones in contempt, but instead calls us to give them over to God after a life filled with loving them faithfully. In this way, our living and our dying are brought under the lordship of the one who lived and died for us.

All of these virtues – faithfulness, hope, a love that is patient, humility, and serenity – finally support another virtue, namely, courage in the face of death. We may learn the courage we need in the face of death from the death of Jesus. His faithfulness was on display in his steady and heroic fidelity to God and to the cause of God, even when it was clear that it would end in death. He knew that there are some goods more important than survival, some duties more compelling than the preservation of one's own life. His confidence that God would display faithfulness and finally establish the good future that he had announced nurtured and sustained his courage. His self-giving and forgiving love was the very image of the Father's love, and the model for those who would follow him. That love was patient, not indifferent. He acknowledged his dependence upon a God who could be trusted. Like the God he trusted, he was slow to anger and quick to forgive. Without celebrating suffering, he was ready to suffer with others, ready to share the human cry of lament. Without celebrating death, he courageously endured even dying for the sake of God's cause, the neighbor's good, and his own integrity. That love was humble. Though he was master and lord, he was among us as one who served. He trusted the God who could make the last first, who promised to exalt the humble. His humility enabled him to endure with courage even the humiliation of the cross. His confidence in God allowed him, in the midst of lament, still to let himself go into the hands of God. Perhaps that "letting go" was the greatest display of his courage.

We are not Jesus. Our deaths do not have the cosmic significance that his did. Still, the *Ars Moriendi*

had it right: by remembering Jesus and his dying, we may find a paradigm for dying well and faithfully. We find and follow that paradigm, however, only in the light of the resurrection. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God won the victory over death. This is no commendation of death. The *Ars Moriendi* went badly wrong when it made death a good. We live and die with the confidence that death will not have the last word. God's victory

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**The final temptation named in *Ars Moriendi* is avarice, which manifests in an anxious, tightfisted grasping, a desperate and idolatrous clinging to life above all else.**

**The corresponding virtue might be called letting go, serenity, or generosity.**

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over death has robbed death of its sting and of its terrors. The resurrection assures us that we will not finally be alienated from our flesh or from the community, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is that assurance that nurtures our own courage in the face of death. It nurtures the faithful readiness to acknowledge that at the end of life and at the limits of human power God can still be trusted. Precisely because death will not have the last word, we need not always resist it. And because the triumph over death is finally not a technological victory, but a divine victory, we will resist not only the commendation of death but also the medicalization of dying.

### **LEARNING THE *ARS MORIENDI* IN THE CHURCH**

Dying well in America is hard work – and American Christianity has not helped much. By accepting the medicalization of death, Christians learn to ship off their dying to hospital beds and ICU units, abandoning them to the medical experts under the guise of promoting professional help. While many of the advances of modern medical care are to be applauded, this privatization of death is a terrible force that must be resisted. Simply put, we are not meant to die alone. We must learn what it means to live *and* to die together as fellow Christians. In doing so, we begin with a seemingly straightforward task, to visit the sick and dying. However, when done well, this practice is an act of political witness that disrupts the cruel collusion of the privatization of death and religious belief. By transforming death and dying into public acts, we open up space for further practices of the Church to begin stitching together the dismembered body of Christ through the healing power of the Spirit.

Congregations and their practices can form our imagination and habits while we are healthy so that, when we are dying, we may die well and faithfully. As we have already noted, central among these practices is gathering together as the body of Christ, and this gathering occurs both in the church building and around the bedside of the dying. We gather as a community formed by the practice of reading Scripture, which teaches us to remember the story of Jesus in the ways we have described above. We gather as a praying community that can discern when it is fitting to invoke, confess, praise, petition, and lament to God, knowing through the psalmists that prayer takes a variety of faithful forms. We gather as a community shaped by the sacraments, baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, eating the bread of life even as our bodies waste away. Having gathered as the Church in these ways, we continue to faithfully prepare to die through the practices of mourning and comforting, the practice of funerals, and the practice of remembering the saints. These gathered communities learn to proclaim Christ as Lord in all aspects of living and dying, and this may mean offering workshops at church about the writing of advanced directives for health care. This proclamation will certainly involve lifelong catechesis concerning death and dying, with continued moral discourse and communal discernment



concerning the ways people die and care for the dying. In all these ways, we open ourselves up to the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us what it means to live and die faithfully as people claimed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In so doing, we may begin to learn the virtues of faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1 The modern hospice movement, as started by Dame Cicely Saunders, is a very visible and viable alternative. In many ways, it hearkens back to the premodern *ars moriendi* described in this article.

2 Many of the English *Ars Moriendi* texts are conveniently compiled in an anthology edited by David William Atkinson, *The English Ars Moriendi, Renaissance and Baroque Studies and Texts*, 5 (New York: Peter Lang, 1992). The text considered in this paper is part of a much larger genre compiled by Atkinson.

3 In fact, this preparation begins with the moment of baptism.

4 Similarly, Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God and his resurrection draw together two strands in the story of Israel, as seen in the prophetic and apocalyptic literature.

5 Therefore, Christian hope is not fundamentally grounded in the immortality of the soul, but instead looks to the faithful presence and activity of the triune God.

6 It is important to note that the humility of Jesus and his humiliation are two separate things. His humility came through steadfast, faithful obedience to God, and only in a fallen world bent towards death does that lead to the humiliation of the cross. Similarly, the humiliation that is experienced by the dying is not a necessary prerequisite of humility, but is instead a postlapsarian reality. Through humble obedience this humiliation can be (though it is not necessarily) endured faithfully.

7 In this article we borrow and adapt material from Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), especially chapter 13, "The Virtues for Dying Well."



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# Remembering the Dead Rightly

BY REGINA EASLEY-YOUNG

**We can over-identify with powerful emotions that accompany grieving, make an idol of the deceased, or harbor the poison of estranged or hostile relationships with them. Remembering the dead rightly—with love that is undistorted by our passions—is a difficult spiritual discipline.**

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Catherine and Robert were married for fifty-eight years. Though terribly sad after Catherine's death, Robert found himself filled with gratitude for their life together. After her husband Joe's funeral, Linda had nothing but resentment about his never having time for her and their children.

Jerry and Susan found their twenty-two-year-old son dead in his bedroom. While admitting their continuing doubts about God's love and providence, after three years they have glimpses of peace from time to time. Their neighbor's teenage daughter died in a car accident, and after three years the parents cannot seem to move past their bitterness over this tragedy.

Karen's alcoholic father had been abusive. After his death, over time, she eventually came to terms with the kind of life he had lived. Janice, from a similar family, could never be honest enough, even with herself, to admit to the kind of man her father had been.

As these contrasting stories show, remembering those who have died is rarely easy and straightforward. Indeed, remembering them rightly is a difficult spiritual discipline. In this essay I will explore three related questions: From where does the right remembering of the dead arise? What can grief teach us about right remembering? Can the Church help us to do this well?

Before we turn our focus to remembering *others* who have died, let us note that within the Christian tradition the spiritual matrix for the right remembering of the dead begins with the practice of frequently and rightly remembering that we will die one day ourselves. The writings of the fourth-century ascetical fathers and mothers of the desert regularly insist that we remember, and not evade, the thought of our own deaths. For example, Evagrius of Pontus, the most educated and prolific writer of the desert fathers, teaches, “[One] should always act as if he was going to die tomorrow; yet he should treat his body as if it was going to live for many years.”<sup>1</sup> St. Hesychios the Priest gives the following instruction: “Be watchful as you travel each day the narrow but joyous and exhilarating road of the mind, keeping your attention humbly in your heart...thinking of your death and invoking Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> The early monastics were regularly taken to the monastery’s ossarium where the bones of their dead brethren were stored. The point of the visit was to remind the monks of the inevitability of their own deaths.

Remembering our own death, then, is not a morbid activity. Rather, it is a powerful spiritual practice that causes us, at least for a few moments, to abandon our preoccupation with illusory concerns. It lays the spiritual groundwork for thinking about the meaning of death and for remembering the dead rightly.

## THE NATURE OF GRIEF

Grief is a natural, yet painful, response to our suffering the irrevocable loss of someone to death. We are created to be in relationship with one another as the Creator is in relationship with the created. We are made to be co-creators of life and of love; we are made to know and to be known. Because of this, when we love other persons we experience pain at their death. The separation from a loved one through death can usher us into the process of grief that may seem, at times, to trample our souls.

The phases of grief—shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—are well known. Most of us make our way through each phase, though not always in this order. Some may be frozen temporarily in one phase (typically, anger or depression), and in unusual cases a griever may remain frozen in a phase and not move through the cycle. Our experience of grief will certainly be tinged with particular issues of estrangement, anger, guilt, or forgiveness toward the person who has died. Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider these phases of grief and why they often occur in the order listed above. The initial shock and denial of a loved one’s death, along with the lingering ache that accompanies a time of grief, can plunge us to unwelcome depths. Anger and depression often settle in for a time. We may experience a spiritual crisis as our beliefs about how life works come unraveled. We may struggle with theological questions about God’s control and God’s love, reliance on the Church’s teachings, and the effectiveness of prayer. In my own experiences of grief and in the experience of those I have

walked beside as a hospice chaplain, these hard questions were asked, but silence was the answer. We press for answers to the questions of “Why?” or “Why me?” but often we are given only more mystery.

The amount of internal turmoil that comes in grief’s wake can be immense. This is the way of grief. Grieve, we must. It is simply the normal response when a great loss occurs in our lives.

## **TWO ROLES GRIEF PLAYS IN REMEMBERING**

Grief often plays a distorting role in remembering the dead. It leads us down the road to despair which distracts us from remembering them truthfully and with love. For this reason, to rightly remember the dead requires the emotional maturity of *apatheia*. The early Christian spiritual writers used this Greek word to describe the spiritual stage in which our thinking and loving are not controlled by our passions, including grief and despair.

St. Isaiah the Solitary’s words pertain here: “Be attentive...guard your heart...so that nothing destructive can separate you from the love of God.”<sup>3</sup> Our human love is immature and inadequate. It must be strengthened by mature love, or *agape*—the selfless and self-giving love that God has for us and that we, in turn, can learn to have for God and others. It is this mature love that allows us to remember the dead rightly. *Agape* can only grow within the context of *apatheia*, but its maturation there comes at an advanced stage at the end of a long spiritual journey.

For this reason *apatheia*, the state of not being distracted from love by our passions, is the first and proximate goal of the Christian journey toward remembering the dead rightly. Though few people attain *apatheia*, it remains the norm for the Christian life. It is our spiritual task to translate all of our relationships and remembering into this new level of being.<sup>4</sup> But we do well to note that *apatheia* is not our ultimate goal. As Christians, we are called to remember those who have died with a spiritual love, *agape*. The state of *apatheia* is simply the fertile ground in which this spiritual love—which is unselfish, non-clinging, and non-sentimental—can grow.<sup>5</sup> “*Agape* is the progeny of *apatheia*,” Evagrius writes, and “in front of love [*agape*], passionlessness [*apatheia*] marches.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, to practice love at its purest, we must live in the mode of Christian *apatheia*, and in this mode we will be wary of grief and despair distracting us from or distorting our remembering the dead.

So far I have described how the powerful emotion of grief over someone’s death might inhibit our remembering the dead rightly. But grief can play a very different, productive role which surprisingly may move us toward *apatheia* and *agape*. Grief forces us to acknowledge hard, objective truths such as the wonderful gift that someone’s life was to us and the demand that now we must give them up to death. When a loved one dies, a common question is “How can the Creator of life ask us to let go of this one we have loved?” Indeed, it can feel like part of us dies when a loved one has died. This reality-orienting movement of grief, however, can lead us to the pattern

of love nurtured by *apatheia*. Grief plays this productive role when it causes us to give up some of our “normal” responses to death, such as a prideful demand for intellectual answers, a desire to avoid any suffering, the illusion of control over death, and the false impression that we have life all figured out. Grief can lead us to a surrender, a giving over, a sacrifice. If we allow our hearts to be open to it, over time (though, often a very long time) grief can instruct us in ways of detachment and humility. For this we can be grateful.

### **BARRIERS TO REMEMBERING RIGHTLY**

One barrier to rightly remembering the dead is over-identifying with the powerful emotions that accompany grieving – that is, we unconsciously assume that “I am my feelings.” When our loss is acute, we may be tempted to live as if sorrow and despondency comprise all of who we are. We live in a cocoon of these feelings. Our emotions become even more overwhelming when the deaths we grieve are complicated by homicide or suicide, result from preventable accident, or involve the innocent in miscarriage or childhood.

Grievers may not want to let go of their feelings for fear of forgetting their deceased loved one; they inordinately cherish the feelings themselves as a connection with the departed. The length of time that we should carry this kind of pain may depend on several factors; the work of grief is more tender and agonizing with certain kinds of deaths. However, we should beware of over-identifying with our feelings in a way that leads to despair. It would be much better if, in due course as our hearts stay open, this suffering should cast us onto the way of transformation. To remember God in our pain is one way to overcome this barrier and remember the dead rightly. St. Mark the Ascetic urges, “Let all involuntary suffering teach you to remember God.”<sup>7</sup>

Another barrier is making an idol out of the deceased. This reveals our unhealthy state of dependence on our loved one. We want to feel happy and feel like our needs will always be met, and we believe it was the deceased who gave this to us. We do not want to face the fact that our loved one will no longer be present to meet our needs. We do not want to be reminded that we are now alone, because the one we depended on has died. So, we grow depressed and isolated, we live in the past, and we are unable to deal with the challenges of the present. As one family member of a deceased hospice patient said to me, “If I could only feel her with me, then I would be OK.” This is making an idol of the deceased.

In order to maintain the illusion of their sufficiency, grievors may remember only the good about the deceased and ignore the negative. This is a second illusion, of course, and it is not right remembering either. It would be much better if, in due course, this sentimental clutching the memory of the deceased should reveal to us the immaturity of our over-attachment to them.

The illusion that we cannot live without the loved one might then be transcended, and we would free them from taking the place of God in our lives.

A third barrier to rightly remembering the dead is our estranged or hostile relationships with them. Perhaps while they were alive our relationships were damaged by divorce, the abandonment of children, (their or our) addiction or abuse, or other trauma. Even after their death, such relationships may continue to poison our spirits and limit our ability to love them and others.

In order to maintain our equilibrium, we may not admit these unresolved relationships (to ourselves or others) or acknowledge our lingering anger and resentment. These deceptions are not right remembering either. While the process is complex and easier described than submitted to, it would be better if, in due course, grief led us to acknowledge the reality of these relationships and to release the deceased and our thirst for vengeance into God's hands.

## **THE ROAD OF GRATITUDE**

Though few of us achieve the state of *apatheia* and love one another with *agape*, we are pilgrims on a journey toward these spiritual ideals. So, how do we know we are making progress toward them, especially in regard to transcending the powerful barriers we face to rightly remembering the dead? I think a harbinger of progress in most situations is the emotion of gratitude.

John Claypool, a former Baptist and Episcopalian pastor, writes in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* about grieving his eight-year-old daughter Laura Lue's death from leukemia. In sermons he preached over a span of three and a half years, he traces his reaction to her diagnosis, a relapse, the shock of her death, and the reality of his grief. He confesses doubts, asks probing questions, and shares his suffering while striving to remain true to his faith and scriptural teachings and to seek solace in his congregation.

Claypool describes three paths available to griever. Some travel the "road of unquestioning resignation" which counsels "We must not question God." Others follow the "road of total intellectual understanding," which is "the way of explaining everything completely or tying up all loose ends in a tidy answer." Claypool tried each of those paths, but found they were "dead ends." Only the the third "road of gratitude" held promise for leading him out of the darkness of grief.<sup>8</sup>

Claypool's understanding of gratitude was shaped by a seminal childhood experience. His parents had borrowed a neighbor's washing machine at the beginning of World War II, and over the time of using it he had forgotten how it came into his family's possession. So, when the neighbors reclaimed the washing machine, Claypool was quite upset. His mother put things in perspective for him. "Wait a minute, son," she admonished. "You must remember, that machine never belonged to us in the first place. That we ever got to use it at all was a gift. So, instead of being mad at its being taken away, let's use this occasion to be grateful that we had it at all."<sup>9</sup>

Such gratitude “seems to me to be the best way down from the Mountain of Loss,” Claypool concludes. “Laura Lue was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to try and thank God that I was ever given her in the first place.”<sup>10</sup>

## THE CHURCH’S TASK

We have seen how the right remembering of the dead arises from a state of *apatheia* that nurtures *agape*, and explored the roles that the powerful emotion of grief plays both in distorting our remembering and in orienting it toward reality. Now I turn to my final question: how can the Church guide us on the spiritual journey toward remembering the dead rightly?

First, the Church can teach the spiritual disciplines such as surrender, detachment, compassion, and forgiveness that lead toward the way of *apatheia* and *agape*. This is the way of Christ, the “essential gesture of his life, his willingness to die on the cross to all he had known and loved.”<sup>11</sup> There is a well-delineated path that leads persons to *apatheia*, taught through the centuries but largely unknown in the Protestant West. It requires a community and mentors, for persons cannot reach spiritual maturity on their own.

Second, the Church can provide rituals for right remembering. Powerful ceremonial acts speak to us at a deeper level than mere words. In the church year, for example, All Saints’ Day reminds us of those who followed Christ before us and showed the way of *apatheia* and *agape*, and Ash Wednesday is rich with symbols that remind us of our mortality.

My congregation has more local rituals that profoundly affect peoples’ remembering. One of these rituals is literally walking beside the person who has

experienced a tragic death. For several years, a group of church friends accompanied a mother to the gravesite of her deceased teenage son on his birthday. Bringing flowers and sitting on blankets beside the grave with her, we listened as she remembered and told stories of his life. This has been a solace to the mother that she is not alone in her grief; the congregation has not forgotten her. This helped her to remember rightly. After a few years,

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**How do we know we are making progress toward the spiritual ideal of undistorted love when it comes to remembering the dead? A harbinger of progress in most situations is the emotion of gratitude.**

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she no longer needed this ritual. Another local ritual of the congregation occurs in the support group for young parents who have experienced miscarriage and infant loss. The parents share their feelings of loss and then light candles in memory of their babies. This addresses in a non-verbal, symbolic way the parents' doubts and confusion, theological questions, and isolation. One participant said that the group changed her life, moving her from despair to wholeness by helping her to rightly remember. A final example is the Service of Light and Darkness held during Advent. As the names of the deceased are read aloud during this liturgy, grieving persons light a candle in their memory. This ritual helps participants to remember rightly during a time of the secular year – the anticipation of family joy at Christmas – that can distort remembering the dead with added pain, loneliness, or sentimentality. It provides a place for the grieving to acknowledge again their suffering and reminds them that the Church and God walk beside them.

Third, the Church can teach and model gratitude for life and for all that it brings. Scripture does not counsel an "attitude of gratitude." It shows us how to move beyond exhausting intellectual discussions, complaining, and striving, to resting in the reality and goodness of what our lives are. A friend relates the relief he felt while walking a prayer labyrinth as a spiritual exercise. He found himself praying, "Thank you for my path." He had never felt thankful for the sometimes difficult route his life had taken. He was able to let go of disappointment and resentment for the way his life had gone, and of wishing for other things that had not happened. As John Claypool observes, remembering our loved ones with gratitude to God provides a route beyond the darkness of despair.

## CONCLUSION

We will die. Our loved ones will die. "What is your life?" the author of James asks in regard to the fragility of our existence, "For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4:14b). For these reasons it is essential that we learn to think rightly about our own deaths, and to rightly remember others who have died. "When we love and remember the dead [with *apatheia* and *agape*]," Vigen Guroian says, "we prepare ourselves for the mystery of death and eternal life."<sup>12</sup>

As we reflect on our own death and endeavor to remember rightly the deaths of our loved ones, let us recall these words from Theognostos the Priest.

When you are no longer at the mercy of your obsessions and you feel the love of God burning ever more deeply in your heart, when you come to the stage when the thought of death no longer fills you with dread – for you look on it merely as a dream of the night or, more to the point, as a welcome liberation – then you have indeed found the pledge of your salvation. On that day you will be filled with ineffable joy, for you carry the Kingdom of God within you.<sup>13</sup>



## NOTES

1 Evagrius the Solitary, "Extracts from the Texts on Watchfulness," §1, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, compiled by St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, and translated from the Greek and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 53. Available online at [archive.org/details/Philokalia-TheCompleteText](http://archive.org/details/Philokalia-TheCompleteText) (accessed May 15, 2013).

2 St. Hesychios the Priest, "On Watchfulness and Holiness," §29, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 166.

3 St. Isaiah the Solitary, "On Guarding the Intellect," §22, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 26.

4 Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2003), 103.

5 Robin Amis, *A Different Christianity: Early Christian Esotericism and Modern Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 326.

6 These quotes are drawn respectively from *Praktikos* §81, in Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O. (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 36, and *Ad Monachos* §67, in Evagrius Ponticus, *Ad Monachos*, translated by Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B. (Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2003), 53.

7 St. Mark the Ascetic, "On the Spiritual Law," §57, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 114.

8 John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing through Grief*, revised edition (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2004 [1974]), 54 and 58.

9 *Ibid.*, 64.

10 *Ibid.*, 64-65.

11 Cynthia Bourgeault, *Wisdom Way of Knowing* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 67.

12 Vigen Guroian, *Life's Living toward Dying* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 39.

13 Theognostos the Priest, "On the Practice of the Virtue," §12, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 2, 361. This translation is from John Anthony McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters: Meditations on the Soul's Ascent, from the Desert Fathers and Other Early Christian Contemplatives* (Boston, MA: Shambala Press, 2003), 125.



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In this remarkable composition, David Bailly weighs his own life, loves, and accomplishments by combining them with the traditional *vanitas* emblems.

David Bailly (1584–1657), *VANITAS: SELF-PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST, STILL LIFE* (1651). Oil on wood panel. 25 ½" x 38 3/8". Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden, The Netherlands. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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# All My Life Is Vanity

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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David Bailly is generally considered the father of *vanitas* still-life painting in Leiden, The Netherlands, even though he was almost exclusively a portraitist at the beginning of his career.<sup>1</sup> Through an analysis of *Vanitas: Self-portrait of the Artist, Still Life*, art historian Naomi Popper-Voskuil has established that Bailly's contribution to Dutch painting was creating a *vanitas* composition that fused self-portraiture and still life. Artists continued to blend the *vanitas* still-life tradition (the depiction of objects that symbolize the meaninglessness of earthly life and the transient nature of earthly goods) with self-portraiture into the eighteenth century.

The iconographic program of Bailly's painting is complex and original in how it combines figure and still-life to depict the transience of life and the necessity of death. Here is one example of the image's originality: it incorporates a large number of art objects (sculptures, drawings, paintings) among the *vanitas* emblems, including portraits of the artist and his wife. The artist is shown seated as a young man who holds with his left hand a portrait of himself as a middle-aged man (painted in 1642), though Bailly was actually sixty-seven years old at the time he signed and dated this work in 1651. Thus the painting becomes something like a self-portrait within a self-portrait. Popper-Voskuil notes that the medallion of the young woman is not the original companion-piece to the 1642 self-portrait, but rather an idealized image of Bailly's young bride Agneta van Swanenburgh.<sup>2</sup> These details suggest that Bailly is not depicting a transitory moment in his life, but is reviewing the artistic works completed through his lifetime. This is how the artist wanted to be remembered after his death.

Bailly presents the figure of his younger self sitting at a table, but not in his studio or engaged in some creative or intellectual activity as was common in the earlier self-portraiture tradition. The figure looks at the viewer directly, drawing us to examine the various objects in the room that create the *vanitas* theme of the composition. In his right hand he holds an instrument of his trade, a maulstick. Several other items—for example, the skull, hourglass, extinguished candle, books, and rolled up paper—are traditional *vanitas* emblems to indicate the passing of time and inevitable decline in a person's life. It was common in the sixteenth century for self-portraitists to depict a single moment in their life, and include the skull as a warning. But Bailly

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Artist Unknown, *VANITAS* (seventeenth century). Exhibition Asnieres, Seine 1991. Photo: Alfredo Dagli Orti/The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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defies expectations. His composition is based on the more complex thought of the entire process of human life summarized through his own fate: if we take the heart of the painting to be the 1642 self-portrait, then behind the artist stands his own youth (and his companion in life, portrayed in her youth) and in front of him is death (in the form of the skull). The table holds objects that symbolize his worldly achievements and wealth, while at the far end of it, as a summary of his life's experience, is a parchment which says "Vanitas Vanitum et Omnis Vanitas, David Bailly pinxit A[nn]o 1651."<sup>3</sup> This combines an allusion to Ecclesiastes 1:2b ("Vanity of vanities, all is vanity") with the artist's signature for the painting. Bailly is at a crossroads, trying to preserve his life through his painting, yet both his youthful and middle-aged selves have become elements in a *nature morte* (literally "nature dead," or still life). Perhaps he is suggesting the futility of an artist's achievement given the transience of human life.

A flute-glass (representing the pleasure of drinking) divides the artworks on the table, with the two-dimensional works on the left and three-dimensional works on the right. Other *vanitas* symbols on the table refer specifically to the life enjoyed by artists and the cultured literati of Holland: the musical instruments (flute and lute), silver boxes (for remedy and jewelry), and roses (living and dead).<sup>4</sup> The three soap bubbles are emblematic of the fragility and brevity of life.

Bailly's originality stands in vivid contrast to more traditional *vanitas* compositions like the one by an unknown French artist of the seventeenth century which is illustrated here (p. 44). That composition is simply a still-life composed of various objects representing worldly enjoyments (the jewelry, music, musical instruments, globe, and sculptures) with two symbols of death (the skull and extinguished candle) prominently placed in the foreground center. This *vanitas* still life invokes our contemplation of life's fleeting pleasures and the inevitability of death. It is direct and universal. Yet it cannot resonate with us in a personal way as Bailly's image does. Bailly reveals to viewers his own life, loves, and accomplishments in combination with the traditional *vanitas* emblems.

## NOTES

1 N. Popper-Voskuil, "Self-portraiture and Vanitas Still-Life Painting in 17th-century Holland in Reference to David Bailly's *Vanitas Oeuvre*," *Pantheon* 31 (January, 1973), 58-74.

2 Ibid., 63.

3 Ibid., 65.

4 For further discussion of theories related to the terracotta bust, the grisaille drawings on the wall and in the background, and the statue of the Christian martyr St. Sebastian (died c. 288), see Popper-Voskuil, 67-68.



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In Gustav Klimt's masterwork, the figure of Death gazes toward a vibrant patterning of figure and color which symbolizes, perhaps, not only life but resurrection.

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# The Grim Reaper

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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Although inspired by his mother's death, Gustav Klimt's painting *Death and Life* is as much about life as death. The allegorical work depicts the Grim Reaper holding a club instead of the usual scythe or hourglass. His dark robes are covered with crosses symbolic of the Church, cemeteries, and death. He gazes across the canvas toward a vibrant patterning of figure and color which symbolizes, perhaps, not only life but resurrection. At least three generations, from infant to grandmother, are depicted with their limbs intertwining and overlapping. It may be possible for death to take individuals from life, but life as a whole will escape and continue to survive.

The motif of the dance of death coming to everyone, wealthy or poor, derives from a medieval print tradition.<sup>1</sup> Most of the figures have their eyes closed, perhaps in a dream state. This may be an influence of the writings of the artist's friend, Sigmund Freud. Klimt described this painting, which won first prize in the 1911 International Art Exhibition in Rome, as his most important figurative work.<sup>2</sup>

For some reason, Klimt reworked *Death and Life* in 1915 by changing the gold background to grey and adding ornaments and patterning to the figures of death and life.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps he wanted to create a more somber overall tone and to increase the contrast between the figures.

Gustav Klimt was born the second of seven children in a poor family in Baumgarten, a suburb of Vienna. He showed significant artistic talent in school and a relative convinced his mother to let him, at the age of fourteen, take an examination that secured a place for him at the exclusive School of the Arts and Crafts in Vienna. He studied there for seven years along with his brother Ernst. His style at that time was hyper realistic.

In 1892, Klimt received a government commission from the Ministry of Culture and Education to decorate the Great Hall of the University on the subject of the theological virtues. He painted allegories for Philosophy, Jurisprudence, and Medicine, but these nude females were considered scandalous and he was incriminated for "pornography" and "excessive perversion." Private commissions during this time allowed him more artistic freedom. He became somewhat of a rebel by joining the Association of Austrian Visual Artists (better known as the Vienna Secession) which



provided young artists with regular opportunities to exhibit their work, brought the best foreign artists to Vienna, and published its own magazine, *Ver Sacrum*. The Vienna Secession played a foundational role in the development of Modernism by establishing a countercurrent against the official academic school and bourgeois conservatism of the time.<sup>4</sup>

Klimt was the dominant force in the art world from about 1900 until his death in 1918. He remained in Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which rivaled Paris and London as a cultural center with such luminaries as Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schönberg, and Stefan Zweig. Klimt lost interest in his first style, the Golden Style, with the beginning of Expressionism. It became necessary to have more varied and strong colors to allow the paintings to depict emotion. His influences were Edvard Munch, Pierre Bonnard, and Henri Matisse; on his travels to Paris he discovered the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and the Fauvists.

Klimt suffered a stroke while getting dressed on the morning of January 11, 1918. It paralyzed the right side of his body so that he could no longer paint. This had been one of his fears throughout his life. Less than a month later he died in the pneumonia epidemic in Vienna. The State provided a grave and an elaborate ceremony which was attended by national representatives. Obituaries credited him with not only reviving Viennese painting but also putting it on an international stage.

## NOTES

1 Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, "Klimt's Death and Life," *Smarthistory* at *smarthistory.khanacademy.org/klimt-death-and-life.html* (accessed June 13, 2013).

2 "Gustav Klimt, *Death and Life*," Leopold Museum, *www.leopoldmuseum.org/en/leopoldcollection/masterpieces/41* (accessed June 13, 2013).

3 Julian Damy, "Gustav Klimt: His Life and Work," *iklimt.com* (accessed June 13, 2013).

4 "Gustav Klimt, *Death and Life*," The Leopold Museum.

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# When Life Well Lived Is at an End

D A V I D   W .   M U S I C

---

When life well lived is at an end and human powers cease,  
the God who gave us life and breath will be our rest and peace.  
If we believe that Jesus died and that he rose again,  
we know that we shall also rise a new life to begin.

As men and women of the past bore witness to the Light,  
they passed from life into a world of comfort and delight.  
Their faithfulness in life and death declares unto our day  
that we, like them, may have a faith that will not pass away.

So let us live, that when the hour of death for us is here,  
we go in trust to meet our God without regret or fear,  
as people of a living faith, by faith to God restored;  
and in the future we shall be forever with the Lord.

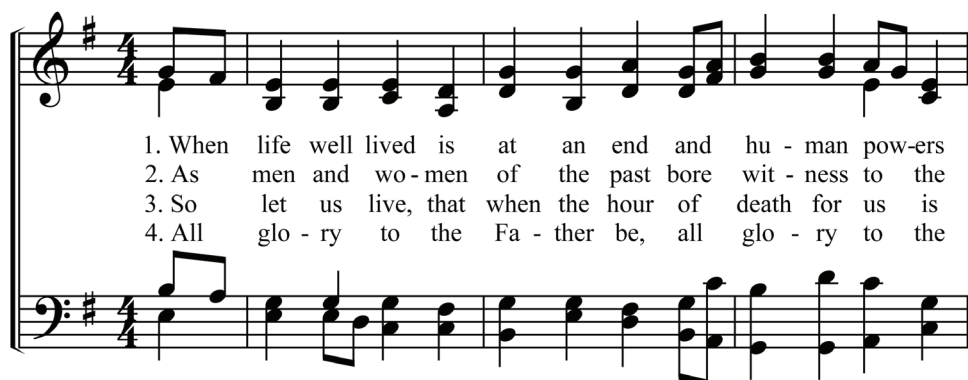
All glory to the Father be, all glory to the Son,  
and to the Spirit, one in three, and also three in one;  
through seasons of eternity that are and that have been,  
and in the ages yet to come, world without end. Amen.

# When Life Well Lived Is at an End


DAVID W. MUSIC

TRADITIONAL ENGLISH MELODY

ARR. RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS



1. When life well lived is at an end and hu - man pow - ers  
 2. As men and wo - men of the past bore wit - ness to the  
 3. So let us live, that when the hour of death for us is  
 4. All glo - ry to the Fa - ther be, all glo - ry to the



cease, the God who gave us life and breath will  
 Light, they passed from life in - to a world of  
 here, we go in trust to meet our God with -  
 Son, and to the Spir - it, one in three, and



be our rest and peace. If we be - lieve that  
 com - fort and de - light. Their faith - ful - ness in  
 out re - gret or fear, as peo - ple of a  
 al - so three in one; through sea - sons of e -



Je - sus died and that he rose a - gain, we  
life and death de - clares un - to our day that  
liv - ing faith, by faith to God re - stored; and  
ter - ni - ty that are and that have been, and



know that we shall al - so rise a new life to be - gin.  
we, like them, may have a faith that will not pass a - way.  
in the fu - ture we shall be for - ev - er with the Lord.  
in the a - ges yet to come, world with-out end. A - men.

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Baylor University, Waco, TX

Tune: KINGSFOLD  
C.M.D.

# Worship Service

BY ERIC L. MATHIS

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## PREPARING FOR WORSHIP ON THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

### *Meditation*

[The worthy Christian mentors] we rightly revere are “God’s saints” in the sense that God creates them by grace. Men and women do not by sheer determination and self-discipline become saints. Sanctity is a divine gift. It is indeed the power of the resurrection at work in human lives. Thus commemorating the saints is nothing other than a way of affirming that the transformative power of Christ is at work all about us in human lives. ...

We are saints because God’s sanctity is at work in us, not because on our own we have come to great spiritual attainment. In exploring the lives of the historic saints, it is necessary to be thoroughly honest about their limitations and faults, for only in this way do we come to believe that God can also work in the people around us and even in us, whose faults we know fully well.

*Lawrence Hull Stookey<sup>1</sup>*

### *Prelude*



## AT THE INTERSECTION OF TIME AND ETERNITY: PRAISING THE GOD OF LIFE AND DEATH

### *Call to Worship: 1 Corinthians 15:51-56*

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. **For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.**

For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

**When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."**

*"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"*

**The sting of death is sin, and power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

### *Invocation*

Eternal God, neither death nor life can separate us from your love.  
Grant that we may serve you faithfully here on earth, and rejoice  
with all your saints who proclaim your glory with unending praise.  
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and  
the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. **Amen.**

### *Hymn of Praise*

*"Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones"*

Ye watchers and ye holy ones,  
bright seraphs, cherubim, and thrones,  
raise the glad strain: "Alleluia!"  
Cry out, dominions, principedoms, powers,  
virtues, archangels, angels' choirs:  
*"Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"*

O higher than the cherubim,  
more glorious than the seraphim,  
lead their praises: "Alleluia!"  
Thou bearer of th' eternal Word,  
most gracious, magnify the Lord:  
*"Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"*

Respond, ye souls in endless rest,  
ye patriarchs and prophets blest,  
*"Alleluia! Alleluia!"*  
ye holy twelve, ye martyrs strong,  
all saints triumphant, raise the song:  
*"Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"*

O friends, in gladness let us sing,  
supernal anthems echoing,  
*"Alleluia! Alleluia!"*  
To God the Father, God the Son,  
and God the Spirit, Three in One:  
*Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*John Athelstan Laurie Riley (1858-1945)*

*Tune: LASST UNS ERFREUEN*



**WHAT WAS AND IS TO COME:  
REMEMBERING THE PAST AND ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE**

*Prayer of Confession*

Holy God, in every age you have raised up men and women  
who have lived and died in faith.  
On this day, we are burdened by our indifference to you and to your will.  
You have called us to speak, but we have remained silent.  
You have called us to act with justice, but we have remained timid.  
You have called us to acknowledge our limitations,  
but we have remained full of pride.  
Keep before us your faithful servants  
who have lived lives of courage, love, hope, and humility.  
Teach us to follow their example,  
so that we, too, may inherit the kingdom promised in Jesus Christ.  
**Amen.**

*Assurance of Pardon: Ephesians 2:19-22*

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

*Hymn of Comfort*

*"Come, Ye Disconsolate"*

Come, ye disconsolate, wherever ye languish;  
come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel;  
here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish:  
earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

Joy of the desolate, light of the straying,  
hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure,  
here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,  
"Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot cure."

Here see the Bread of Life; see waters flowing  
forth from the throne of God, pure from above;  
come to the feast of love; come, ever knowing  
earth has no sorrow but heaven can remove.



*Thomas Moore* (1816), vv. 1-2; *Thomas Hastings* (1832), v. 3  
*Tune*: CONSOLATION (Webbe)

*The First Reading: Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9*

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,  
and no torment will ever touch them.  
In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died,  
and their departure was thought to be a disaster,  
and their going from us to be their destruction;  
but they are at peace.  
For though in the sight of others they were punished,  
their hope is full of immortality.  
Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good,  
because God tested them and found them worthy of himself;  
like gold in the furnace he tried them,  
and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.  
In the time of their visitation they will shine forth,  
and will run like sparks through the stubble.  
They will govern nations and rule over peoples,  
and the Lord will reign over them forever.  
Those who trust in him will understand truth,  
and the faithful will abide with him in love,  
because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones,  
and he watches over his elect.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.  
**Thanks be to God.**

*Hymn of Life and Death*

"When Life Well Lived Is at an End" (vv. 1-2)

When life well lived is at an end and human powers cease,  
the God who gave us life and breath will be our rest and peace.  
If we believe that Jesus died and that he rose again,  
we know that we shall also rise a new life to begin.

As men and women of the past bore witness to the Light,  
they passed from life into a world of comfort and delight.  
Their faithfulness in life and death declares unto our day  
that we, like them, may have a faith that will not pass away.

*David W. Music* (2013)  
*Tune*: KINGSFOLD

*The Second Reading: Revelation 21:1-7*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.  
**Thanks be to God.**

*Hymn of Life and Death*

“When Life Well Lived Is at an End” (vv. 3-4)

So let us live, that when the hour of death for us is here,  
we go in trust to meet our God without regret or fear,  
as people of a living faith, by faith to God restored;  
and in the future we shall be forever with the Lord.

All glory to the Father be, all glory to the Son,  
and to the Spirit, one in three, and also three in one;  
through seasons of eternity that are and that have been,  
and in the ages yet to come, world without end. Amen.

*David W. Music* (2013)  
*Tune: KINGSFOLD*



**WHAT IS:  
LIVING IN THE PRESENT**

*The Gospel Reading: Luke 6:20-31*

Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.  
Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.  
Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.  
Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

The Gospel of the Savior.  
**Praise to You, Lord Christ.**

*Sermon*

## *Hymn of Response*

“By All Your Saints Still Striving”

By all your saints still striving, for all your saints at rest,  
your holy name, O Jesus, forevermore be blessed!  
For you arose victorious that they might wear the crown  
and share the light of glory reflected from your throne.

For Luke, beloved physician, all praise, whose Gospel shows  
the healer of the nations, the one who shares our woes.  
Your wine and oil, O Savior, upon our spirits pour,  
and with true balm of Gilead anoint us evermore.

Apostles, prophets, martyrs, and all the noble throng  
who wear the spotless raiment and raise the ceaseless song—  
for these passed on before us, we sing our praise anew  
and, walking in their footsteps would live our lives for you.

*Horatio Bolton Nelson (1864), alt.*

*Tune: NYLAND*

## *Prayers of the People<sup>2</sup>*

I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count,  
from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,  
standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white,  
with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice,  
saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne,  
and to the Lamb!”

Let us give thanks for all those who have lived and died in the faith.  
(*Congregants may speak names aloud or a prepared list may be read.*)

Gracious God, we give thanks for these lives that intersected with  
ours, and we thank you for using them to point others to you. We  
are especially grateful for the great cloud of witnesses which now  
surrounds your throne:

for apostles and early believers,  
for those from the early church,  
for martyrs of all ages,  
for those who have reformed the Church in every age,  
for those who have ministered to us.

As we join in the communion of saints, may we follow their example  
and be counted worthy of wearing your name:

in our care of creation,  
in our work with people of other nations and ethnicities,

in our respect for those in authority,  
in our attention to those in our community,  
in our solidarity with Christians around the world,  
in our daily lives of ministry.

God, as we live our lives in the present, fill our hearts with anticipation for the day when we, too, will join our voices with those around your throne to praise the one eternal God, forever and ever. **Amen.**

### *Offering*

A musical setting of *Te Deum Laudamus* (4<sup>th</sup> Century, Latin) is appropriate.

We praise thee, O God: we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.  
All the earth doth worship thee: the Father everlasting.  
To thee all angels cry aloud, the heavens, and all the powers therein.  
To thee cherubim and seraphim continually do cry:  
Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth;  
Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of thy glory.

The glorious company of the apostles praise thee.  
The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise thee.  
The noble army of martyrs praise thee.  
The holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee,  
the Father, of an infinite majesty,  
thine honorable, true, and only Son,  
also the Holy Ghost the Comforter.

Thou art the King of glory, O Christ.  
Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.  
When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man,  
thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb.  
When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death,  
thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.  
Thou sittest at the right hand of God, in the glory of the Father.

We believe that thou shalt come to be our judge.  
We therefore pray thee, help thy servants  
whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood.  
Make them to be numbered with thy saints, in glory everlasting.

O Lord, save thy people, and bless thine heritage.  
Govern them, and lift them up forever.  
Day by day we magnify thee;  
and we worship thy name, ever world without end.

Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this day without sin.  
O Lord, have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us.  
O Lord, let thy mercy lighten upon us, as our trust is in thee.  
O Lord, in thee have I trusted, let me never be confounded.

### *Doxology*<sup>3</sup>

“As Saints of Old”

As saints of old their first-fruits brought of orchard, flock, and field  
to God, the giver of all good, the source of bounteous yield,  
so we today first-fruits would bring, the wealth of this good land,  
of farm and market, shop and home, of mind and heart and hand.

A world in need now summons us to labor, love, and give;  
to make our life an offering to God, that all may live.  
The church of Christ is calling us to make the dream come true:  
a world redeemed by Christ-like love; all life in Christ made new.

In gratitude and humble trust we bring our best today  
to serve your cause and share your love with all along life’s way.  
O God, who gave yourself to us in Jesus Christ your Son,  
teach us to give ourselves each day until life’s work is done.

*Frank von Christerson* (1900-1996), alt.

*Tune:* FOREST GREEN

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### *Spoken Benediction*

And now, may God the Father,  
    who remains faithful in life and death,  
God’s Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,  
    whose own death and resurrection give us the promise of new life,  
and the power of the Holy Spirit,  
    whose daily presence transforms our world,  
empower your journey towards sanctity  
    and fill you with the hope of resurrection and new life. **Amen.**

### *Sung Benediction*

“For All the Saints” (vv. 1-4, 7, 8)

For all the saints who from their labors rest,  
who thee by faith before the world confessed,  
thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might;  
thou, Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight;  
thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Oh, blest communion, fellowship divine,  
we feebly struggle, they in glory shine;  
yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

But then there breaks a yet more glorious day:  
the saints triumphant rise in bright array;  
the King of glory passes on his way.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,  
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,  
singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

*William W. How (1864), alt.*  
*Tune: SINE NOMINE*

### *Dismissal*

Let us go forth and live in the hope of Christ.  
**Thanks be to God.**

### **NOTES**

1 Lawrence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 141-142.

2 Portions of this prayer are based on 1 Corinthians 2:9, Hebrews 12:1-2, and Revelation 7:9-10.

3 One or all stanzas may be sung as the offerings are presented.



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## ❧ Other Voices ❧

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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. ... 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.

**A BIGAIL RIAN EVANS**, “Dying Well,” in *Health, Christian Reflection*, 22 (2007)

Taking Jesus as a model, it is necessary for Christians to come to see their own dying as a venue where the possibility exists to find deepened self-understanding and to bear witness to God. In other words, dying must be made a part of living in the sense that one’s efforts at discipleship persist through this stage of life. Dying is not a time or a task that is devoid of meaning, divorced from God’s presence.

**CHRISTOPHER P. VOGT**, *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (2004)

Are we preparing ourselves for our death, or are we ignoring death by keeping busy? Are we helping each other to die, or do we simply assume we are going to always be here for each other? Will our death give new life, new hope, and new faith to our friends, or will it be no more than another cause for sadness? The main question is not, How much will we still be able to do during the few years we have left to live? but rather, How can we prepare ourselves for our death in such a way that our dying will be a new way for us to send our and God’s spirit to those whom we have loved and who have loved us?

**HENRI NOUWEN**, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Death and Caring* (1994)

This preparation for death must be practiced through our whole life, and the spark of faith must be continually fanned so that it grows and gains strength. Love, joined to it, will attract hope, which gives no cause for shame. None of these things, however, comes from us; rather they are gifts

of God to be sought by continuous prayers and petitions if we lack them; if they should be present, they must be strengthened so that they grow. ... [A]n action continually repeated will become a habit, the habit will become a state, and the state become part of your nature.

**ERASMUS**, “Preparing for Death” (1553)

I have found that most people answer the question [“How do you want to die?”] this way: “I want to die quickly, painlessly, in my sleep, and without being a burden.” Most of us do not want to be a burden because we don’t trust our children and/or other primary caretakers to make decisions about how we will die. We want to die quickly, painlessly, and in our sleep because when we die we do not want to know we are dying. Accordingly, we ask physicians to keep us alive up to the point that we will not know we are dying – and then we blame them for keeping people alive to no point. It is a wonderful double-bind game we play out on ourselves as well as on those committed to caring for us through the office of medicine.

**STANLEY HAUERWAS**, “Forward” in John Swinton and Richard Payne, eds., *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care* (2009)

What does dying well mean for those who suffer “bad deaths” and for the loved ones they leave behind? Here the fact that dying well is not an individual practice but a shared one is especially significant. Death marks the end only of physical life; an individual’s presence, however, extends beyond death as one’s life is remembered and absorbed redemptively into the community that remains. The extent to which it is possible for the bereaved to find redemptive significance in the “bad death” of a loved one depends in large part on the practices of the community to which they belong. And the knowledge that one’s life will continue to matter to the community even after one’s death can be a powerful source of comfort for individuals living with the threat of sudden or violent death.

**AMY PLANTINGA PAUW**, “Dying Well,” in Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (1997)

Many of us die badly not because we’re wicked or weak people, but because we simply haven’t been taught how to die *well*.... Death is frightening enough as it is. But our collective refusal to face up to it makes it so much more terrifying than it need be that we retreat ever deeper into denial, and this doesn’t bode well for how we’ll cope with our dying when it comes. You can’t really prepare for something you spend a lifetime avoiding.

**KERRY WALTERS**, *The Art of Dying and Living* (2011)

# It's Time to Get Up!

BY TERRY T. LESTER

The raising of Lazarus is a preview that prompts us to trust and to glorify God. For in a few short days Jesus too will face his dying and death. But on Easter morn the voice of God echoes into the mystery and darkness of death, "It's time to get up!" And Jesus, the risen Christ, comes forth!

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When I was a child my mother would call to my brother and me in the morning, "Boys, it's time to get up!" And if we didn't get up when this voice alarm sounded, my Daddy would come, with shaving brush in hand, and brush our faces with shaving cream! It was definitely time to get up.

When our boys were small, my wife Jan and I would sing to them on Sunday mornings a silly chorus we composed, "Wake up, it's time to go to Sunday School. Wake up, it's time to go to Sunday School."

In the eleventh chapter of John's Gospel we hear a clear call to get up, but the voice that calls is rousing more than the sleep rhythms of the night. The voice pierces through the shrouded darkness and deep sleep of death. This Gospel story, which some consider to be almost parabolic, begins with Jesus receiving an urgent message about his good friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. The word from Bethany is simply "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3b).

This is an all too familiar message in most of our lives and families, "the one who you love is ill." Being in human skin means we are vulnerable to myriad diseases and conditions that produce suffering. It was Good Friday when our family gathered with my father-in-law in the oncologist's office. We heard the distressing news that his blood cancer was terminal and he had only a short time to live. Following this

dire prognosis, the oncologist Dr. Hicks, the son of my seminary professor, Dr. Bryant Hicks, joined hands with us as he led a beautiful prayer affirming our faith and hope in Christ in the face of dying and death. Cancer, heart attacks, strokes, Alzheimer's – many catastrophic diseases threaten our loved ones' lives.

All of us will eventually surrender to the sleep of death, even if it is from old age. This month I celebrated my sixtieth birthday. Sixty is not old, but it is sure not young! Wendell Berry muses in his poem, *Seventy Years*, "Well, anyhow, I am not going to die young." My mother will turn eighty next month and she is dreading this milestone. We Baby Boomers remember the Steve Miller Band singing, "Time keeps on slippin', slippin' into the future," and it is true.



When Jesus receives the news about Lazarus's illness, he offers a surprising prognosis, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (11:4). Jesus divinely knows something beyond mere human knowledge. And John, the Gospel writer, also wants us to unequivocally know, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (11:5). It is a bit puzzling that in spite of Jesus' deep love for this family, he does not immediately drop everything he is doing to go and see ailing Lazarus. His timing appears off, for what could be more important than to attend to the needs of a sick friend?

In his time Jesus says to his disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples remind him that there are people in Judea who want to kill him, so they ask "are you going there again?" Sometimes death is not by natural causes, accidents, or old age, but from tragic acts of violence and war.

Every day I drive past Sgt. Chris Hamlin Memorial Lane on Highway 229. I visited with Chris at our church recreation center shortly before his deployment to Iraq. We spoke of serious matters pertaining to life and death and faith. Chris assured me of his preparedness to enter into harm's way. Tragically, this young man's life was cut short by the ravages of the war in Iraq. For Jesus, to go to Jerusalem is to enter harm's way and to face dying and death. Even Thomas, the Doubter, has no doubts about this solemn reality for he says to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16). The noted psychologist Rollo May (1909-1994) once noted, "Commitment is healthiest when it is not *without* doubt but *in spite of* doubt."<sup>†</sup>

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to awaken him," Jesus explains (11:11). The disciples think he is speaking literally: "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right" (11:12). But Jesus

clarifies, “Lazarus is dead” (11:13). In fact, by the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days and many mourners have gathered at Mary and Martha’s house to grieve.

Martha greets Jesus with a bittersweet affirmation, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died” (11:21). The power of God present in Jesus is not limited by time and space—he healed the centurion’s servant at a distance (Matthew 8:5-13; cf. Luke 7:2-10). But Jesus did not stop Lazarus’s dying any more than he stops our dying. Knowing Jesus is not a shield against death. Our faith does not protect us from the unavoidable and inevitable. As he promised, Jesus is with us always, but his presence is no hedge against our dying.



But now John’s story takes us to another place, to another dimension. For in “the valley of the shadow,” in the throes of grief and loss, Jesus speaks death-defying words: “Your brother will rise again” (11:23). Martha thinks Jesus is speaking of a long-distant resurrection, on “the last day,” but Jesus amplifies, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (11:25-26) And Martha confesses a faith she does not fully understand, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (11:27).

What follows defies human explanation or understanding; it takes us to the place of faith. Jesus makes his way to Lazarus’s tomb, where he hears a similarly disappointed word from Martha’s weeping sister, Mary: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:32b). In this moment of terrible loss, we see another glimpse of Jesus’ compassionate heart. For when Jesus sees all the grieving people, he is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (11:33b). What children learn in Sunday School is the shortest verse in the Bible, speaks succinctly to Jesus’ humanity and identity with our grief: “Jesus wept” (11:34, KJV). Jesus, the very Son of God who merely spoke to calm the storms, weeps unashamedly, unapologetically. He is as Isaiah prophesied, “A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3a, KJV). People who see Jesus weeping remark “See how he loved him!” but some could not keep from wondering “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (John 11:36-37) Death often leaves us with unanswered questions.

In spite of his love for Lazarus, Jesus does not prevent his good friend from dying. He experiences the same painful emotions of grief and loss that accompany us on every trip to the cemetery with a departed loved one. But on this day something extraordinary takes place. Jesus,

who is the resurrection and the life, asks for the stone covering the entrance of Lazarus's tomb to be removed. Martha, who is not at all comfortable with what Jesus is doing, reminds him of the four days that have elapsed since her brother's death and the inevitable decay of the body that has begun. But Jesus reminds Martha of what he said earlier, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (11:40) So the stone is removed.

Jesus prays to the Father, who always hears, that people will indeed believe that he has been sent by the Father to this grieving, dying world. Then he cries out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (11:43) It's time to get up!

John gives the result of this wake-up call: "The dead man came out" (11:44a).



The raising of Lazarus is more than just another miracle story of Jesus. It is a preview of things to come that prompts us to trust and to glorify God. For in a few short days Jesus too will face his dying and death. His flesh, like ours, will meet its end. Like Lazarus, Jesus's lifeless body will be taken to a cemetery and placed in a tomb. But on Easter morn the voice of God echoes into the mystery and darkness of death, "It's time to get up!" And Jesus, the risen Christ, comes forth!

Following our visit to my father-in-law's oncologist on Good Friday, our family gathered at his house on Easter Sunday afternoon. We took turns holding his hand and expressing our love to "Grandbuddy." That night he was troubled for a while, though eventually a sense of peace stilled his suffering body. Shortly before midnight, he closed his eyes and slowly drifted into the sleep of death. Our hearts were broken and we still miss him, but we believe with all our hearts that God, who is the "resurrection and the life," called to Jan's Dad, and will one day call to all of us who have ears to hear, "It's time to get up!"

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**John's story about Lazarus's dying and death now takes us to another dimension. For in "the valley of the shadow," in the throes of grief and loss, Jesus speaks these death-defying words to Martha: "Your brother will rise again."**

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An ancient Christian hymn echoes this call to the Church. Glory to God!

Sleeper, awake!  
Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.

*Ephesians 5:24b*

**NOTE**

† Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 21.

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# What My Students Teach Me about Death

BY GLENN E. SANDERS

**The class lesson on the practice of dying well is mainly about how a community can comfort the dying and react in spiritually positive ways to death. But the discussion always turns to the students' experiences of death. One should never assume that young adults know little about death.**

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**T**he mark of a good local church seems to be its ability to bury its members. If a church gets to this point, it is likely doing well. It has attracted members with the right teaching, testimony, and prayer. Its members have learned to hang on, surely in love for one another, or they would not be there for one another at the end. They have cared for one another at the worst moments – the last moments. They have proclaimed the presence and power of God in Christ by loving and mourning their brother or sister, and by promising to continue on for the next person who dies, all in the hope of the resurrection.

If a good local church is one that can care for its members in the face of death, a good college classroom can be measured in a similar way, but from a different end of the process, so to speak – from near the beginning, when young adults are preparing to live, to join good communities, to continue on in the optimism and strength of youth, at least for a while. Death has importance for them, too, but a different importance.

I teach at a small Baptist college. My annual contract says that I teach history, and I do teach the subject. But during the weekly routine of the semester, I teach other things too. And, more important, I get taught. I get taught and reminded about the most important things, like death.

The cliché is that teachers learn more from their students than their students learn from them. I don't know. But, after twenty-five years on



the job, I feel the symbiosis of teacher and student more than ever: “no teacher, no student; no student, no teacher.” In that mix of things, my students’ encounters with death and my own encounters—including those few moments of disorientation when I have *really* entertained mortality—mesh together. In that process I have learned (or re-learned) something worth proclaiming.



I regularly team-teach a two-semester course known locally as “Western Civ.” It integrates a survey of major literary works with an essential historical narrative to introduce the chief themes of the western tradition, primarily to sophomores. Over the past few years I have used this class to introduce my students to important Christian spiritual practices, such as hospitality and Sabbath-keeping. One practice that sticks with us all is “dying well.” The practice grows out of the biblical injunction to reflect on death in order to gain wisdom, as reflected in this psalm:

You turn people back to dust,  
    saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.”  
A thousand years in your sight  
    are like a day that has just gone by,  
    or like a watch in the night.  
Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—  
    they are like the new grass of the morning:  
In the morning it springs up new,  
    but by evening it is dry and withered.  
  
Our days may come to seventy years,  
    or eighty, if our strength endures;  
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,  
    for they quickly pass, and we fly away.  
If only we knew the power of your anger!  
    Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.  
Teach us to number our days,  
    that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

*Psalms 90:3-6, 10-12 (NIV)<sup>†</sup>*

The lesson on the practice of dying well is mainly about the ways that a community can comfort the dying and react in spiritually positive ways to death. But the discussion always turns to my students’ experiences of death. One should never assume that young adults know little about death. I often ask for a show of hands to the question, “How many of you have experienced the death of a relative or close friend?” Only a few students cannot raise a hand.

Generally I can channel this information-sharing toward some general principle. But last year something different happened. A student came up afterward and said, “My good friend recently had a child, but it died. She’s beside herself. What should I do?” The next day another student came to me and said, “My best friend just killed his mother. I was close to both of them. What should I do?”

Confusion, pain, and sadness were clear on their faces. In both instances I could think of nothing to say. Everything I had ever heard about the “consolation of presence” with the bereft seemed paltry at best. All I could do was sputter.

The mystery and immensity and banality of it all overwhelmed these students as well. Without the ability of “getting on” that they will gain later, the young more intensely feel the pain, that sting that St. Paul mentions (1 Corinthians 15:55-56). They want to understand or encompass or give meaning to what happened, and they have yet to learn that they will *never* be able to.

The rawness of my students’ experiences reminds me that *it is the unremitting, mysterious reality of death that helps us, not some superficial comprehension of it*. I need this lesson, because death can seem like a commonplace. It accompanies aging and, like an ugly scab, can inure me to pain better than a good explanation might. Numbed by mourning, I could get used to death and then maybe give in to my own sense of futility and despair. But even the jaded student retains some sense of hope, wanting something more than the anguish of loss. My students remind me that, no matter how many people I bury, *if I am not overwhelmed, I am not alive*.



I do not teach spiritual practices in isolation from other realities. After all, “Western Civ.” emphasizes the synthesis of ideas from history and literature. The spiritual practice of the week flows from the particular sub-

ject of the morning’s lesson. I link “dying well” to the devastation of the Black Death and the morality play *Everyman*. With the Black Death I introduce the *memento mori*, those images of decaying bodies and desiccated skulls that late medieval art, in its devotional wisdom and tolerance for reality, introduced to religious life. They intruded on the everyday lives of surviving

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Europeans, and they have the same effect on us today—at least when we use them. I teach my students that “dying well” concerns such collective responses to mystery and pain—not “lessons learned” from death, but a visceral cry to *live better now*, with the dead in our memories: live more soberly, more faithfully, more mercifully, more charitably.

*Everyman* teaches a similar lesson. Ostensibly a boiled-down introduction to the traditional sacramental system, the play invariably becomes more. The students identify with the materialistic lead character and begin to understand why medieval believers often treated death as a *friend* who would remind them that superficial relationships and the possession of things lead one to forget sin and neglect the doing of good. Contrition, confession, and satisfaction—the three parts of traditional penance—become the true way to blessedness.

To experience the overwhelming character of death can improve life now—nothing new there. A reading of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* provides a similar exposure in a later lesson, this time with a psychological intensity and a critique of materialism that dig deep into my students’ middle-class sensibilities. And the honesty of their reactions always keeps me picking at that hard scab over my heart.

But alongside Tolstoy’s latter morality tale we read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which presents the banal reality of death as utterly without reconciliation or resurrection. Marlow describes death as biting into rotten fruit—nothing to learn there but a bad taste and the consistency of decay. Conrad’s dark view suggests the extreme—against it we must gain renewal as a community of forgiveness in the presence of death, or with it we will suffer withering despair, alone in unbelief.

The glorious thing is this: my students get this message and struggle on. They do not ignore it, nor do they return to simple nostrums that would betray both insensitivity and ignorance. They begin to become wise.

Here is where my students serve one another as the good congregation that buries its members does. Their collective freshness and flexibility may arise from youth and not yet have matured into deliberate faithfulness, but they have the same effect. They teach hope. They teach openness to mystery. They teach the wisdom necessary to live our numbered days well, alone and with others and before God.

When St. Paul wanted to emphasize the most important things, he reminded the Corinthians that “now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, NIV). My experience of symbiosis—“no teacher, no student; no student, no teacher”—is likely the closest that I will get to such comfort and intimacy, outside marriage, family life, a few close friends, and a good church. The church will bury me. The students help me live well. They both teach me that God’s knowing love is stronger than death.

**NOTE**

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# 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.

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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.<sup>†</sup>

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 vivendi*" (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:

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*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.

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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 eigen 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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# Loving Our Last Enemy

BY TODD BURAS

Unaided human reason may teach us to face death fearlessly, but it can do no more. To make peace with death—to embrace our end—we need more by way of wisdom. This is part of what the Church claims to have in Christ.

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Plato reports that on the eve of his execution Socrates consoled his followers by discussing the philosopher's attitude toward death.<sup>1</sup> The topic emerged not only because of the hemlock lurking ominously in the offing, but also because of the equanimity with which Socrates accepted his fate—a fate brought upon him by the practice of philosophy itself.

Plato's narration is poignant and unusually informative. For the most part, Plato's *Dialogues* attribute very little by way of positive teaching to Socrates. Socrates typically plays the critic, tenaciously debunking intellectual pretensions without revealing his own views. But death has a way of drawing us out. The teachings that Socrates reveals in his confrontation with death are more consistent with his characteristic professions of ignorance than it may appear. They also cast in sharp relief the recent Christian reflections on death that I survey in this essay.

Philosophy has come down to us from Socrates as a certain sort of inquiry that, as its name suggests, aims at wisdom (*philosophia* means "love of wisdom"). Wisdom is more than knowledge. Knowledge is our best guess at the truth in some domain given our most rigorous methods of inquiry, but wisdom is an integration of all the things we know into a coherent view of ourselves and the world. The key wisdom question is, How ought we live in light of all we know? A compelling answer requires convincing responses to a litany of other 'big questions': Where did we come from? Why are we here? What is it for us to flourish? Our answers to these questions orient us in death as well as life, for the question of how best to live and how to be prepared for death are flip-sides of the same coin. For this reason, Socrates says that "the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death" (p. 107).

We prize knowledge for the power it gives us to achieve our ends. We prize wisdom for the way it allows us to make reasoned judgments about the ends worth pursuing in the first place. Given the overarching character of wisdom questions, Hebrew sages prized wisdom above all other intellectual goods: "Wisdom is the principal thing" (Proverbs 4:7a, ASV), they teach, and "She [wisdom] is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her" (Proverbs 3:15; cf. 8:11). Socrates's public defense of philosophy memorably echoes this assessment:

So long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, "My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?" (p. 61)

Socrates and the Hebrew sages also agree that, apart from divine revelation, wisdom is vanishingly rare. In an irony for the ages, human intellectual life is oriented toward a goal that lies beyond the reach of our abilities. The writer of Proverbs thus urges those who seek wisdom to "not rely on your own insight"; rather, "In all your ways acknowledge [the LORD], and he will make straight your paths" (3:5-6). We are reminded that "the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (2:6); and "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (9:10). Socrates concurs that "real wisdom is the property of God" (p. 52). Human wisdom, he explained, consists in the recognition of what we do not know (p. 49). Indeed, it was his penchant for drawing attention to the dearth of human wisdom that brought him into conflict with fellow Athenians in the first place, and earned him the epithet "gadfly of Athens."

Given the connection between wisdom and the proper attitude toward death, one might expect our lack of wisdom to ramify into confusion and uncertainty about death. But we do not find Socrates teaching that no one can say how best to think of death. Rather, we find him parlaying ignorance into fearlessness.

[L]et me tell you, gentlemen, that to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not; it is to think that one knows what one does not know. No one knows with regard to death whether it is not really the greatest blessing that can happen to a man; but people dread it as though they were certain that it is the greatest evil; and this ignorance, which thinks that it knows what it does not, must surely be ignorance most culpable. (p. 60)

Socrates's teachings about the philosopher's attitude toward death involve much more than leveraging of human ignorance.<sup>2</sup> But for present purposes,

the important point is that the most human wisdom can do to reconcile us to death is to ground fearlessness. No one has any wisdom. So no one knows our ultimate end. So no one knows our end is dreadful. So no one has reason to fear.

At several junctures, Socrates reaches for more, suggesting that there are grounds for hope. In his public defense, for example, he says that a good man—a man who does his best to do his duty as he sees it—may expect post-mortem blessing (pp. 73-76). For death is either a “dreamless sleep” or a “migration” of the soul into another life. Socrates is inexplicably willing to call a dreamless sleep a sort of blessing. Even more inexplicably, he is confident that migration is a promising prospect. His reason is that “the fortunes of a good man are not a matter of indifference to the gods” (p. 76). Given his disavowals of wisdom, this optimism has no clear justification. Socrates is either reposing blind faith in the goodness of the world order, or resting on the truth of some undisclosed divine revelation. Unaided human reason may teach us to face death fearlessly, but it can do no more. To make peace with death—to embrace our end—we need more by way of wisdom.



More by way of wisdom is part of what the Church claims to have in Christ. The identification of Jesus Christ with the *Logos* or Word—another term for the goal of philosophical inquiry—is by one modest estimate “the single most remarkable thing to have happened in Western intellectual history.”<sup>3</sup> The remarkable

identification positions the Christian proclamation as the answer to our wisdom questions. The riveting suggestion here is not that, by faith, Christians have answers. Given the failure of human reason to settle the wisdom questions, and the inevitability of answering them, everyone accepts answers by faith. The riveting claim is that God acted in Christ to alleviate the profound

ignorance at the center of human life. God has filled the gaping hole at the apex of human understanding by the person and work of Christ. This is how the Apostle Paul presents the gospel in his famous sermon at the heart of the ancient world. He proclaims to the Athenians that what they recognize as unknown has now been revealed in the one raised from the dead (Acts 17:16-34).<sup>4</sup>

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**The identification of Jesus Christ with the *Logos* or Word—another term for the goal of philosophical inquiry— is a riveting claim.**

**God has acted in the person and work of Christ to alleviate the profound ignorance at the center of human life.**

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Given the connection Socrates established between attaining wisdom and preparing for death, the Christian claim to have attained a share of divine wisdom in Christ leads inevitably to a reassessment of death. The project of understanding human mortality in light of the revelation of God in Christ is as old as the faith itself, and is given new life by each painful confrontation with the grave. This essay surveys relatively recent contributions to the genre. But the basic themes are established by Scripture, and they do indeed go far beyond fearlessness grounded on ignorance.

Fearlessness is still part of the story, to be sure. But the basis of Christian fearlessness grounds hope as well. For Christian fearlessness is based on faith that, in Christ, God submitted himself to death and rose again victorious (Philippians 2:5-11). This means nothing – not even the grave – can separate us from the God who is love (Romans 8:35). Christians can say, literally: “if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there” (Psalm 139:8); and “even in the valley of the shadow of death...you are with me” (Psalm 23:4). That God is with us in death grounds fearlessness; hence, “I will fear no evil” (Psalm 23:4). That God is perfect love grounds our hope. For in love God raised Jesus from the dead, and made us joint heirs of the glory to which he was raised, a glory that engulfs the sufferings of this present life (Romans 8:10-11, 18; 1 Corinthians 15).

Where Christ’s death and resurrection grounds Christian fearlessness and hopefulness, his teachings go further still. For Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies (Matthew 5:43), and, according to Scripture, death is our last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). We are “more than conquerors through [Christ] who loved us” (Romans 8:37). Christ not only gives us the victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:57), but he calls us to embrace even our own demise in love, and in this way to be “like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10-11). Seen through the eyes of faith, death does not become a good thing; nor do the goods of this life become bad things, unworthy of genuine attachment. The goods of this life remain a blessing, and death is a thief that robs us of them. But in Christ even enemies may be embraced, even thieves befriended.



The wisdom of God revealed in Christ is thus better news than pagan philosophers dreamt, and also more challenging. Both points are brought home powerfully by two popular Christian reflections on death: Joseph Cardinal Bernardin’s *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections* (New York: Image Books, 1998, 176 pp., \$13.95) and Henri Nouwen’s *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* (New York: HarperOne, 2009 [1994], 128 pp., \$11.99).

Cardinal Bernardin’s reflection is written in the throes of a battle with pancreatic cancer, which he lost finally in 1996. The narrative also recounts a battle against false charges of sexual abuse, which he ultimately won in 1994. The two struggles were both very public, and the memoir characterizes the first as preparation for the last. When accused of misconduct, the Cardinal

held firmly to the great good of his reputation and the integrity of the communion he led; and he did so in trust that the truth would prevail. But he did more. He reached out to his accuser to bless the one who was persecuting him. Even as the case against him unraveled, the Cardinal and his accuser met and were joyfully reconciled.

This pattern of reaching out in love even to one's enemies characterized the Cardinal's battle with cancer as well. Even while he held firmly to the good gifts of this life—reconnecting with family and ministering to his church—he was able to embrace his death fearlessly and hopefully. "Although I do not know what to expect in the afterlife, I do know that just as God has called me to serve him to the best of my abilities throughout my life on earth, he is now calling me home" (p. 152). By faith he managed to adopt the sort of attitude Socrates could only grope for: "While I know that, humanly speaking, I will have to deal with difficult moments, I can say in all sincerity that I am at peace. I consider this God's special gift to me at this moment in my life" (p. 134).

This use of the language of gift was homage to Nouwen. The two were friends, and Nouwen visited the Cardinal as his battle with cancer took a turn for the worse. Nouwen himself died suddenly just months before his friend. But Nouwen's words animated the Cardinal's last days. Nouwen's book is more therapeutic in orientation than Bernadin's memoir. His question is how we can get beyond merely facing death fearlessly and actually befriend it (p. xiii), and how we can minister to the dying by helping them do the same (p. 51).

The question is animated by deeply Christian convictions. Who else would seek to befriend one's own death? But the actual advice is, for the most part, something even a pagan philosopher could admire. He recommends seeing life as lived from one mode of dependence to another (p. 14), recognizing the unity of the human family in death

(p. 26), and embracing our role as parent to future generations (p. 41). The resurrection plays little role in Nouwen's thinking—as he notes in his concluding remarks (pp. 105-111). The reason seems to be that believing we will live again in Christ primarily grounds fearlessness and hopefulness in death. The resurrection "is God's way of revealing that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste," which is indeed heartening (p. 109). But the

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question is how we can embrace our ultimate enemy, even as it robs us of every earthly good (p. 108).

Buried in the midst of his answer is a wonderful story about a conversation with—curiously enough—the leader of a troupe of trapeze artists named Rodleigh. The secret to the relationship between the catcher and flyer, Rodleigh explains, is that the flyer does nothing except trust the catcher. The more cleanly the flyer lets go, and the more passively he awaits rescue, the better things go. This becomes a powerful metaphor in Nouwen's hands, and goes some way toward depicting how life's final steps can be taken with gusto and delight. Dying well "is trusting the catcher," as Jesus did when he said, "Father into your hands I commend my Spirit." "He will be there when you make your long jump," Nouwen urges, "just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust" (p. 67).



Death is always a double test of faith. For those succumbing, the challenge is to do so in faith, hope, and love. For those who remain, the test is to bear loss as one who expects the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come. Until death is finally "swallowed up in victory," its "sting" is still very real (1 Corinthians 15:54-55), especially for those left behind. Understanding all things in light of the wisdom revealed in Christ means understanding human grief as well as human mortality. Paul tells us that we are not to "grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). But what does it look like to grieve death in a way that befits a Christian?

This is the question addressed by a second pair of late twentieth-century reflections on death written by insightful Christian thinkers in the wake of profound personal loss. C. S. Lewis penned *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperOne, 2009 [1961], 76 pp., \$12.99) after cancer took his wife of four years, Joy Davidman. Nicholas Wolterstorff composed *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987, 111 pp., \$12.00) after the loss of his son Eric in a mountain-climbing accident. Both share their personal struggle to grieve faithfully in hope of helping others who, as Wolterstorff says, "sit beside us on the mourning bench" (p. 5).

Neither thinker is easily comforted. Lewis chafes at the thought that death is of no consequence (p. 28) and spurns popular images of family reunions "on the further shore" (p. 37). Wolterstorff patiently identifies the inadequacy of the many kind words offered by friends (e.g., pp. 34-35), but has no patience for books on grief that turn attention away from the reality of loss (54). Neither thinker finds any consolation in the hope for life in the world to come. "Don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand," says Lewis (p. 37). Similarly Wolterstorff says, "If I had forgotten that hope, then it would indeed have brought life into my life to be reminded of it. But I did not think of death as a bottomless pit. I did not grieve as one who has no hope" (p. 31).



Both identify the loss of an irreplaceable good in this life as the heart of their grief. It is no comfort to know that a loved one is with God, Lewis explains, when what you are grieving is the fact that they are not with you (pp. 35-37). "There is a hole in the world now," Wolterstorff says. "In the place where he was, there's now just nothing" (p. 33). Both writers also shudder at the finality of the loss. Even the glories of life in the world to come do not change the fact that our days on this earth are marked by separation and absence from goods beyond measure. Wolterstorff: "It's the *neverness* that is so painful. *Never* again to be here with us.... All the rest of our lives we must live without him" (p. 15). Lewis: "the thing I want is exactly the thing I can never get" (p. 37).

The question of why God would see fit to deprive us of the great goods he once bestowed, to sever the bonds of love that so enrich our lives, heightens the anguish of loss for both writers. "My wound," says Wolterstorff, "is an unanswered question" (p. 68). "I cannot fit it all together by saying, 'He did it,' but neither can I do so by saying, 'There was nothing he could do about it.' I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure" (p. 67). Lewis reasons that "if they [i.e., the torments of death and loss] are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't" (pp. 55-56). But when it comes to seeing why the torments are necessary, he confesses, "I get no answer. But a rather special sort of 'No answer.' It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent...gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child, you don't understand'" (p. 81).

Though neither Lewis nor Wolterstorff purports to understand God's reasons for allowing humanity to be so savagely robbed of the goods bestowed on them, both are prepared to reject some answers. Wolterstorff roundly rejects the suggestion

that God shook the mountain under Eric's feet. He can see death in no other way than as demonic, having no role to play in God's normal dealings with humanity (p. 66-67). When God's peace reigns, he reminds us, death will be no more (p. 63). Lewis, too, rejects the picture of God as Cosmic Sadist, a deity with no real concern for our well-being (p. 43). But he adds "the terrible thing is that a perfectly good God is in this matter hardly less formidable

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**Death is always a double test of faith. For those succumbing, the challenge is to do so in faith, hope, and love. For those who remain, the test is to bear loss as one who expects the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come.**

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than a Cosmic Sadist. The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe there is any use in begging for tenderness" (p. 55).

Despite their lack of answers, grief tempts neither thinker to abandon faith. For neither expects the wisdom of God in Christ to answer all our questions; or, rather, neither expects to comprehend completely God's answer to our questions in Christ. There is more to the wisdom of God than anyone has yet been able to put into words. In the end both writers are held fast more by mystical insight than clear understanding. Lewis describes an experience like hearing a friendly chuckle in the dark, a disarmingly simply reassurance that all is well (p. 83). Wolterstorff aimed to "look at the world through tears" in hopes of seeing something that "dry-eyed I could not see" (p. 26). What he sees, in the end, is a vision of "God himself scraped and torn" (p. 80). "Instead of explaining our suffering," Wolterstorff says, "God shares it" (p. 81). "Through our tears we see the tears of God" (p. 80).

These visions assure both thinkers that whatever it is that makes the sufferings of this present life necessary — Lewis calls it God's "grand enterprise" (p. 85) — is something very good indeed. It is something so good, Lewis thinks, that it will not reconcile all our contradictory thoughts, but "knock them from under our feet" (p. 83). It is something good enough, Wolterstorff emphasizes, not only for God to impose suffering on humanity, but also to share it with them (p. 80). Even though we have only dim, poetic intimations of what awaits when the glory of the Lord is revealed (Isaiah 25:6-8, Revelations 21:1-5), there is a modicum of comfort here. In life and in death we belong to one who bears our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4) and is "making all things new" (Revelations 21:5).<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1 Plato depicts Socrates's death in the dialogue *Phaedo*. In the text I will give page references to the English translation by Hugh Tonnepich in Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro, The Apology, Crito, Phaedo* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 97-199.

2 The *Phaedo* also features a good deal of hostility toward the body (e.g., 109), and famously flawed arguments for the immortality of the soul (116-131).

3 William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 55.

4 Ephesians 3:8-10 and 1 Corinthians 1:21-24 also describe Christ "the wisdom of God."

5 For Ali, Monica, and Elise, whose losses confronted me with the questions addressed in this essay; and in memory of John W. and Irene Kesner, and Susan E. Colon, whose example helped me find something to say.



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# Restoring the Christian Funeral

BY CHARLES W. CHRISTIAN

Futile attempts to deny death and escape from dying pervade our society. The two books reviewed here seek to restore a distinctively Christian voice to how we understand the dying process and death, and how we articulate their meaning in the funeral service.

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The first funeral I officiated was for my beloved grandmother who died at ninety-three years of age. As the pastor in the family and her oldest grandson, I felt a special obligation to make sure not only that she was honored, but also that her faith in Christ, lived out in a small East Texas community for over eighty years, was well represented. An inexperienced pastor, overcome with grief myself, I struggled to bring comfort to others. I felt sorely inadequate.

Fortunately, many elements of the funeral service made the job of officiating this important home-going possible for me: she had died with her family near her, she had prepared for death and said her goodbyes, her Methodist congregation and family members had spoken honestly about the nearness of her death, many congregants gathered for the viewing of her body and the funeral service itself, and two ministers not only shared fond memories but also proclaimed how her story wove into the redemptive gospel of Christ. Somehow, we all grieved and celebrated at the same time.

Twenty years have passed since my grandmother's home-going, but I still struggle to officiate at funerals, primarily because of how we as Americans and Christians have come to approach death. Too often the elements of personal, family, and church community preparation that allowed my grandmother's funeral to fit into the context of her life and the congregation she served are entirely absent. In many cases the deceased's body is absent

from the funeral, or memorial. Their death was often lonely, with family members, friends, and even church family members relegating the dying loved one to a hospital room or nursing home. The funerals focus much on the life and “legacy” of the departed, but the gospel hope of resurrection and the worship of God are mere whispers in the service.

“Christ comes into the world to teach men how to die,” the Christian historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan observes, for Christ calls people to “accept their mortality and, by accepting it, to live through him.”<sup>1</sup> This affirmation of a Christian approach to life and death brings into view the dilemma of contemporary approaches to dying. For instance, the cover story of a recent *Time* magazine issue entitled “How to Die” decries Americans for denying the reality of death and focusing their attention on seemingly endless medical attempts at resuscitation. Drawing on the experience of witnessing his parents’ dying, author Joe Klein complains: “Doctors are trained to do whatever they can to save a patient, even an elderly one, and that is an excellent thing. But the Hippocratic impulse [“Do no harm”] has been subtly undermined by the rewards of fee-for-service medicine...” These and other factors “militate in favor of ordering the extra MRI or blood test or dialysis for a patient who probably has only weeks to live.”<sup>2</sup> Ironically we greatly prolong the dying process while isolating dying persons from view and failing to acknowledge death in funeral services.

In response to this cultural denial of death, the Church’s hope of resurrection and community support for the dying and the grieving can be good news indeed. The two books reviewed here—*Speaking of Dying* and *Accompany Them with Singing*—seek to restore a distinctively Christian voice to how we understand the dying process and death, and how we collectively articulate their meaning in the funeral service.



In the forward to Fred Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith’s *Speaking of Dying: Recovering the Church’s Voice in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012, 240 pp. \$19.99), Stanley Hauerwas notes that physicians’ insistent, alluring promise of “another procedure” to stave off death has moved dying and death from the province of community—specifically, the Church, which the authors describe as “the community of believers who have *already died* and are already in a new life and equipped to face physical dying in a radical new way” (pp. xvii-xix)—to the province of medicine. Consequently, Hauerwas laments, “The essential story—the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—that should form our dying as well as our living as Christians seems to have been lost” (p. x).

The authors allow church members to speak for themselves in this book. They begin with the stories of ten pastors who were diagnosed with a terminal illness and died while serving their congregations. One of the

narratives describes the dying of Janet Forts Goldsmith, the daughter of Dale Goldsmith, sister of Joy Goldsmith, and a former seminary student of their co-author Fred Craddock. Although the authors acknowledge the “unique circumstances of a dying pastor,” they argue that these extreme examples highlight “the modern church’s inadequacy in serving the dying and their families” (p. 2).

This book does not decry the positive contributions of modern medicine, but it warns that the realities of dying and death are more easily avoided and individualized in our medically advanced society. The authors explain, “Many Americans today see technology as an escape from the inevitability of death and believe that technological advances will fix any bodily damage suffered throughout their lives.” They identify three causes that contribute to the societal denial of death: lack of awareness about the dying process, high expectations of the medical profession’s ability to heal, and “the change from community-based religion to individualized religion” (p. 3). These factors are abundantly illustrated in the narratives of the ten pastors.

The Goldsmiths and Craddock interviewed congregants, church leaders, interim pastors, and denominational leaders in ten churches that experienced the dying and death of their minister. From these interviews the authors identify the problems covered in this book and glean insights for how churches can recapture a working theology of death and dying that witnesses to the hope found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The main problem involves how the ministers’ illnesses were communicated to the congregations. In each case there was a lack of clarity and forthrightness regarding the illness that affected the church’s approach to the minister’s workload (p. 10). In some congregations even talk about reducing the workload was taken as a sign of defeat, regardless of the physical toll of the work on the minister and the psychological toll on the congregation.

The pattern of overall avoidance of their minister’s terminal illness was indicative of deeper problems in church life. “Not only are these dying pastors denied the ministry of the church when they all—including the church—need it most, the larger mission and goal of the church to minister to the needs of the world is delivered a blow from which it is almost

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**We prolong the dying process, isolate dying persons, and fail to acknowledge death. In response to this cultural denial of death, the Church’s hope of resurrection and community support for the dying and the grieving is good news indeed.**

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impossible to recover" (p. 11). Most of the ten churches studied lost significant membership and resources. A chart tracing the impact in the ten churches shows their decline extended up to ten years beyond the death of the minister.

The foundation of the authors' Christ-centered response to these sometimes disastrous church narratives is found in the second chapter which contrasts the "Christian story" of death with the "secular story." The Church is not a voluntary organization gathering around a specific cause or set of affirmations, rather it is God's reborn community where all facets of life, including dying and death, become intertwined with God's redemptive story. Chapter three traces Jesus' "dying process" and death, from his first announcements to the disciples all the way to his crucifixion. This Christological outline provides the basis for renewed theological language and practices to face death biblically in a culture of denial.

In the middle chapters there are many helpful suggestions of how congregations can heighten members' awareness of what dying entails, listen to the dying and the grieving without avoidance or deflection, and minister to them as the body of Christ through worship and care that addresses death in a redemptive fashion.

The final chapter, "A Good Dying," introduces the acronym TABLE (which brings to mind the open table fellowship of Christ) for the five "useful tools" of communication that inform a congregation's renewed voice: Talk, Awareness, Body of Christ, Listening deeply, and Eucharist. The first two tools—talk and awareness—can help congregations overcome the deafening silence and denial that often accompanies dying and death in the wider culture. They should not be afraid to speak about death, because their hope is in Christ's resurrection. Their intentional awareness of the dying process, which stands in contrast to the cultural denial of death through hope in "one more treatment," motivates specific actions to comfort the dying and grieving, and to prepare the community of faith to turn its eyes upon God, who is guiding them from death to life. The last three tools—the Body of Christ, listening deeply, and the Eucharist—are reminders that all discipleship beginning with baptism is linked to death and the proclamation of death's defeat. These tools, passed down for generations in the Church, help us provide to and receive from one another the comfort found in Christ. Useful tables in this final chapter suggest specific congregational practices that make full use of these tools. These tables move the book from an academic exercise in the theology of dying to a helpful reference for pastors and congregations in ministering to the dying and the grieving.



If *Speaking of Dying* is a healthy guide for us to regain the Christian theology of death and dying, Thomas G. Long's *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 232 pp., \$12.98)

reminds us that the funeral service is a very practical outworking of this theology. Over the centuries the Church's theology of dying, death, and resurrection has shaped the development of the Christian funeral.

In the five chapters of the first part of the book, entitled "Background," Long explains how the Christian funeral, like the life of a believer, is to be marked by "simplicity, majesty, and the gathering of people" (p. xii). The simplicity of a Christian death and funeral service stand in stark contrast to the secular emphases on pageantry and ostentatious materialism. The majesty of the Christian funeral derives from the fact that the believer is a child of God. This majestic truth, according to Long, is not intended to cause separation from others, but to bear witness to the truth that "to follow Jesus, then, is to walk the royal road intended for all humanity, 'a way in the wilderness' (Isa. 43:19) toward God marked out for all people" (p. xii).

The communal act of Christian baptism begins the believer's journey which is marked by simplicity and majesty; its mirror, Christian funeral, should also be a communal act. Even Christians who die in the solitude of a modern nursing home or hospital bed are "surrounded by the prayers of the church, and they will be carried to God by the faithful, singing songs and hymns as they go" (p. xiii).

Long admits there does not exist today, nor has there ever been, a "perfect model" for a Christian funeral. Nevertheless, he sets out to eliminate some stumbling blocks to providing a healthy funeral, and gives examples of what a Christian funeral should be. Just as orthodoxy finds many modes of expression within the theological boundaries of the Church, so too can the funerals of believers reflect key doctrinal and historical emphases that allow them to be rightly called "Christian." Key chapters critique trends in American funeral practices that eliminate important rituals surrounding death and dying (chapter 1), decrease contact with the body of the deceased (chapter 2), and relegate the funeral service to the status of a personal memorial rather than an act of worship (chapters 4 and 5).

The third chapter, "The Future of the Dead in Christ," is a crucial theological reminder that the funeral of a believer revolves around telling two stories: the sad story of the severing of earthly bonds between the deceased brother or sister and the community, and the hope-filled story of Christ's resurrection that allows the deceased brother or sister to be carried "to the arms of God" (p. 46). Therefore, hiding the painful reality of an individual's death (in the manner of some contemporary memorial services) risks trivializing the second story about the reality of God's intervention through Christ to defeat death.

It is at this point that Long briefly addresses the idea of the "intermediate state," or the situation of the deceased after earthly death and before the resurrection. He concludes that regardless of the details of our theology about this, we must not deny the physicality of the resurrection (for example, by adopting a Platonist view of eternal souls), just as we must not ignore the



reality of the body at death. Such an escape from physicality shuns the God-given journey of the believer that includes birth and baptism and culminates in the community's recognition of the goodness of God's creation despite mortal decay.

Long insists that the Christian funeral should have an eschatological bent. By this he means that the service should closely examine the "goal" of the Christian life which completes the "Christian journey" that begins with baptism. Funeral practices that either distance us from the deceased's body or simply memorialize the deceased's life (and, thereby, fail to acknowledge the final part of the earthly journey and the hope of resurrection) tend to trivialize both life and death.

Four chapters in the second part of the book, "The Church's Ministry in Death," delineate practical steps for congregations to provide a Christian funeral. Like the authors of *Speaking of Dying*, Tom Long believes congregations need to move from denial to a truthful embrace of the dying process and death. Long describes tasks related to the final days of life (Chapter 6), funeral planning which is consistent with Christian theology (chapters 7 and 8), and key elements of funeral sermons (chapter 9).

In the chapter titled "The Marks of a Good Funeral" Long writes, "A good funeral is something that the people of God must do together. It is not a pastoral soliloquy; it is an ensemble performance" (p. 122). The performance includes a holy people, a holy place, and a "holy script": "The funeral is not about some friends of Bob going to the church to be with Bob's memory, but about Bob going to be with God" (p. 136). For the story of the deceased (which plays a legitimate role in the funeral story) to be more than the story of death's victory, it must also be the story of Christ's resurrection that "stakes out a victory over death" (p. 137).

Particularly useful for Christian pastors is the appendix dealing with the topic of "difficult funerals." This section addresses theological and practical approaches to funerals of children, suicide victims, and others whose deaths are particularly devastating for a community.<sup>3</sup>



As believers in Christ we enter God's family by dying and being born again in baptism. *Speaking of Dying* and *Accompany Them with Singing* remind us of the profound theology of death this entails. They also remind us of the futile attempts to deny death and escape from dying that pervade our society; Christian congregations trapped in this cultural milieu develop a "crown without a cross" mentality that can only end in materialism, emptiness, and a kind of living death that has no means of embracing resurrected life. Without a real death, there can be no true resurrection.<sup>4</sup> Death remains a real and often mysterious foe, but these works guide us to proclaim that death is now a defeated foe.

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## NOTES

1 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Shape of Death: Life, Death and Immortality in the Early Fathers* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961), 55.

2 Joe Klein, "The Long Goodbye," *Time* (June 11, 2012), [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2116137-1,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2116137-1,00.html) (accessed May 20, 2013).

3 On the subject of practical resources for planning funerals services, I can recommend two helpful collections of prayers and liturgies: Andy Langford, ed., *Christian Funerals* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010); and Paul Sheppy, ed., *In Sure and Certain Hope: Liturgies, Prayers, and Readings for Funerals and Memorials* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003).

4 See Karl Barth's discussion of Christian doctrinal beliefs regarding death in "Was Crucified, Dead, and Buried, He Descended into Hell," *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 114-120.

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