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Facing Death With The Worth of One's Life

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Your Life Your Health

The Examiner

October 25, 2007

Two events motivate this meditation upon death. The first was the response to a note I sent my daughter and granddaughters on October 3rd of this year. I love fall colors and sent a bouquet of flowers in those colors to my wife, another to my daughter-in-law and her two daughters and a third to my daughter and her three daughters. The following note was attached:

“Most men have a single ‘girl.’ I have eight (wife, daughter, daughter-in-law and five granddaughters). The lyrics of *The September Song* remind me that our days are numbered:

“Oh, it's a long, long while from May to December
But the days grow short when you reach September
When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame
One hasn't got time for the waiting game

“Oh, the days dwindle down to a precious few
September, November
And these few precious days I'll spend with you
These precious days I'll spend with you’

“It is my joy to spend these precious days with each of you and with all of you. I love you and God bless you. Grandie”

The second was the chance meeting of a man on the elevator at my office. In our brief conversation, he lamented that his wife of many years had past away the week before. This column was provoked, however, by the responses to these two events.

When my daughter read the above note to her children, she noticed that my oldest granddaughter was very quiet and then she realized that she was softly and quietly sobbing. Her response to my daughter when asked why she cried was, “Is Grandie dying?” When the aforementioned gentleman and I briefly shared our mutual faith that we will see his beloved wife again, he responded joyfully, “And, maybe it will be soon.” Two different responses to the reality that we will all die and both are good responses. The answer to both inquiries is, “Yes, we are all dying,” and “Yes, we will all die soon,” when measured in terms of hundreds of years.

The September Song, whose lyrics are above, portrays life as months on the calendar. It is possible to arrive at the September of our years due to age or due to our condition. Which ever is the case, each of us will arrive there differently, but as we do, the days seem to pass much faster than they did in our youth. It is in the “September of our years”

that we must focus on the value of our lives, as that value will allow us to approach death with peace or with anxiety.

In healthcare, we focus on saving lives, but in reality one of the most important aspects of care-giving is helping people face the reality that we are all going to die. Sometimes death comes as a thief, stealing our hopes and dreams; other times it comes as a friend offering release from pain or loneliness.

The reality of the inevitability of death and the acknowledgement that death does not need to be a terror are the foundations of the hospice movement which is growing across the world. There comes a time in healthcare when further efforts to preserve life have become futile and rather than belabor an incurable condition, hospice offers the opportunity to compassionately, courageously, comfortably and appropriately accompany a person, a family and their friends through this last act of living.

As healthcare providers, we daily deal with the inevitability of death, and while we vigorously attempt to preserve life, it is obvious that the only true tragic death is one which is intentional, unnecessary, injurious to other innocent individuals, or due to foolishness, or carelessness. The other tragic death is one which occurs at the end of a meaningless life.

Death should never be acquiesced to without an appropriate struggle. And, death should always be accompanied by grief, both of the one who is dying and of those who love and care for that one. Grief is the emotion which allows us to invest value in our life and in the life of one whom we have lost, or are losing. However, grief should always be tempered both by hope and by the celebration of the life of the one who faces death.

Thinking about death brings to thought deaths of all kinds: tragic, senseless, heroic, natural, inevitable.... Few things are as effective in portraying death as cinema. Few human feelings have caused so much tragic death as prejudice and the senseless hatred which produces that death. Yet, on the other side of the senseless death, caused by prejudice, there is the nobility and heroism of those who lived such a purposeful life as to result in their death.

Portrayed in a movie, *Mississippi Burning*, and more accurately told in the book, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*, the tragic but heroic death of three young men in 1964 reminds us that there is never a righteous reason to kill innocent people, as no end, no motive, no cause justifies the killing of the innocent. Yet, our purpose is to find meaning in life so as to give direction and definition to our grief. All men and women of good will grieve the tragedy which occurred in Philadelphia, Mississippi, yet, the nobility of the purpose which these young men served gives more meaning to their lives than many who will live three times their ages. The greatest tragedy is a death at the end of an empty, meaningless life, no matter the age of the deceased, or the manner of death.

The senselessness and the cyclical nature of death caused by prejudice and hatred were examined in the musical, *Westside Story*. The deaths of two essentially decent young men were caused by the cycle of hatred which demands retribution and only produces further hatred and death. The truth that the only hope for the living is the breaking of this cycle of hatred was accurately portrayed in the simple act of “enemies” honoring the life of a foe in death by carrying his lifeless body.

Cry Freedom portrayed the life and death of Steve Biko, a South African activist who was killed by police September 12, 1977. Hatred killed Steve, but the nobility and purposefulness of his life made his death, while tragic, possible to be endured with grief tempered by his life. In his biography of Steve Biko, entitled, *Biko*, Donald Woods, friend, confidant and admirer of Steve, relates how the senselessness and tragedy of Steve’s death is made bearable by the goodness of his life. Yet, the final words on this tragic death, made meaningful by a noble life, which words resulted in the fulfillment of the ideas and ideals for which Steve Biko lived and died, were spoken by Nelson Mandela, who stopped the cycle of violence with an act of forgiveness – which is the only solution to the madness of prejudice and hatred. Mandela proposed the forgiveness of the murderers of Steve Biko. In the unthinkable act of forgiving worthless men, who had killed one so worthy, Mandela showed statesmanship and wisdom which staggers the imagination. And, he invested even greater value in Steve Biko’s life than those of us who would have sought revenge.

While these accounts portray dramatic illustrations of value and reconciliation, most of our lives’ value are not so public and are not so dramatic. And, even those who are celebrated are most often remembered for smaller things. Albert Einstein was remembered on the 100th anniversary of his birth by his neighbors and friends who summarized his life by saying, “He was kind.” No mention of physics, mathematics, or theories of relativity.

It is as same as the picture which hangs outside of Mark Wilson’s office which states, “Priority: A hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I live in, or the kind of car I drove, but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child..” Our priorities will ultimately define our lives and that definition will give value and meaning to our lives no matter how or when we die.

Life is never, ever given significance by killing others. While there have been “just wars” in man’s history, war has more often been unjust and more often caused by tyrants, greed, hatred and delusions of righteousness. Life is never, ever given significance by killing others. And, while “just war” requires that men and women fight and die, their lives are given significance more by their efforts to avoid war and killing, for in truth there is no one who hates war more than the “just warrior.” Furthermore, there is never, ever a justification for terrorism, i.e., for the killing or the harming, indiscriminately, of the innocent for a political, social or religious end.

Life is given significance by giving to others, living for others, loving others, serving others and by being loved by others in return. Whether we draw near to our appointment

with death in the fullness of our life at an old age, or we face it in what we would consider untimeliness or prematurity, the nobility of our life gives us and others comfort in our death.

As healthcare professionals, we will continue to work to preserve life, yet also by our example and by our professional efforts, we must encourage ourselves and others to live lives worthy of honor and lives filled with value, so that when the hour of our death arrives, it will not be the capstone of a meaningless life.