

Dying Gives Us a Chance to Confront Truth

Since my wife entered hospice, we've grown closer together and deeper in our faith.

by C. Kavin Rowe
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Years ago I preached a sermon on death to a relatively young congregation. As I greeted people after the service, many smiled a polite Southern smile that means, “We know our *manners* but don't like what you *said*.” Yet one elderly couple stopped to talk:

“We've never heard a sermon on *death* here,” I recall the wife saying. “We needed one. We're old. We know what's coming.”

The recent pandemic has swept away illusions that led that congregation — and much of our modern world — to ignore death. The coronavirus will kill only a small minority of us. Yet its prevalence reminds people everywhere that if Covid-19 doesn't take them, something else will.

This realization recalls a truth central to the Christian tradition: *No one gets out of this world alive.*

Over time Christians developed a set of practices to help us tell this truth and to prepare ourselves for death. In the Middle Ages this was called the *ars moriendi*, the “art of dying.”

Today, a “quick death” is often seen as the ideal. Yet the *ars moriendi* holds the opposite view: It is a good thing to see death coming and be able to prepare. Time and habit provide the chance to live fully and — even at the last hour — become a mature human being, one who tells the truth.

I know this firsthand because my young, dying wife tells the truth. When she was referred to hospice some time ago, after a long and painful decline, she simply noted, “I don't want to die. I want to finish raising our son.”

Through attentive care, hospice has extended her life — and with it the chance to talk about our successes, failures, hopes, sorrows, beliefs, doubts. The demand to face death created a new chance to grow closer together and deeper in our faith. We don't have time to argue about what a “messy kitchen” means when we're focused on sharing the truths we need to hear:

- **I love you.**
- **I wish we could grow old together.**
- **I wanted to know our son's wife and our grandchildren.**
- **I will be with you until the end.**

My wife and I have long read the Bible. But facing death has brought it near. Its words now speak directly to us. We find comfort in the Psalms:

- **“He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay.”**
- **“Taste and see that the Lord is good.”**

And in the words of Jesus:

- **“Let not your heart be troubled; and do not be afraid.”**
- **“I am the resurrection and the life.”**

And, when my wife has breath enough, we also sing the haunting *Kyrie eleison*. Lord, have mercy.

And God *has* had mercy: Jesus teaches that *the way to a full life is through facing death.*

That teaching holds up. My wife has not been healed and will never get better. But somehow we are on the path of life.

Telling the truth and training for death is agonizing, but it also has provided consolation. Death no longer seems far away; training for it and experiencing its closeness has brought certain gifts. These gifts of *clarity of purpose* and *love* are what human beings spend much of their lives longing for and failing to find.

Covid-19 is not a blessing. It is one more obvious, terrible instance of a broken world. But amid all the reasonable concern, we shouldn't lose sight of the deeper cause of our anxiety (our mortal fear) and the unprecedented chance in this life to become fuller, richer and more joyful human beings.

When we accept the truth about our *mortality*, we can also experience remarkable *freedom*: to take the time to say “I love you.” To stop nursing our resentments, thinking that forgiveness can always wait for another day. To cease pretending that little annoying things matter so much. To pick up our heads and take in the beauty of our world. To examine our beliefs about what really, *really* counts in life. To mend relationships. And, for those who have never tried it before, even to pray.

No sane person would ever give thanks for a pandemic. But if we take the chance it gives us to become truth-tellers, lovers and reconcilers, we may well wind up giving thanks for what this time enabled us to become.

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