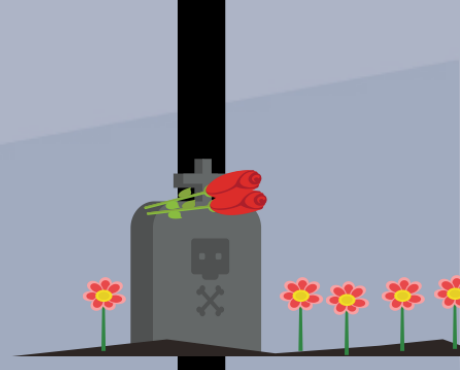


Death, Dying, Grief and Loss



#1

The following set of notes comes from a presentation that I give in churches about death and dying and the important conversations that should happen, but often don't.

While there are a number of conversations worthy of the subject, from my perspective two in particular are important for people in communities of faith.

They are: (1) the what you mean to me; and (2) here are my wishes.

Before we jump into exploring those conversations, it is important to note that death is a subject many people are uncomfortable talking about. We spend billions of dollars a year trying to stave off the effects of age and look and act younger. In fact, it is difficult for us to even utter word death with some people preferring euphemisms like:

Dirt nap • Pushing up daisies • Passed on • In a better place • Bite the dust • Bought the farm • Cashed in their chips • Give up the ghost • Croak • Kick the bucket • Sleeping the big sleep • Gone to feed the fishes • Six feet under • Expired • Resting in peace • Shuffled off this mortal coil • Joined the invisible choir • Crossed over • Belly up • Departed • Danced the last dance • No longer with us • Returned to the ground • With the ancestors • Going to the big house in the sky • Worm food • Answer the last call • End one's earthly career • A goner • Passed your sell-by date

#2

Dorothy Becvar talks about the death conversation in her book "In the Presence of Grief." In it she tells a story from Richard Kalish about the subject of death which takes on the image of a horse standing in the middle of the dining room table.

Every time people gather together to eat, it is sitting there crowding the room while the people grow increasingly uncomfortable as they are unable to eat or talk around it. Eventually, in the story, one group both sees the horse on the table and begins to talk about it. And as they do, the horse becomes smaller and smaller until it occupies such little space that the hosts and guests need no longer worry about it. The quote from the story that I find most valuable is this:

#3

My son, it is the horse on the dining-room table. It is a horse that visits every house and sits on every dining room table---the tables of the rich and of the poor, of the simple and of the wise. The horse just sits there, but its presence makes you wish to leave without speaking of it. If you leave, you will always fear the presence of the horse. When it sits on your table, you will wish to speak of it, but you may not be able to.

However, if you speak about the horse, then you will find that others can also speak about the horse---most others, at least, if you are gentle and kind as you speak. The horse will remain on the dining room table, but you will not be so distraught. You will enjoy your repast, and you will enjoy the company of the host and hostess. Or, if it is your table, you will enjoy the presence of your guests. You cannot make magic to have the horse disappear, but you can speak of the horse and thereby render it less powerful. (pp.5-6)

If we can speak about it gently and kindly, then over time it loses its power for most people (p. 5)

#4

I think there are a number of levels on which we can talk about the subject of death. Think about it in terms of your own family. Who has talked with a loved one about their wishes related to cremation or body burial? Who has talked with a loved one about where they wish their final resting place to be? Who has talked with their children about their death and about the care for a remaining spouse? Who has discussed their memorial service or hymns and scriptures that are important to them?

All of these reside on the nuts and bolts side of death and while meaningful, they tend to focus on the activities surrounding a death rather than its meaning.

#5

The meaning of one's death is another conversation. It is a conversation that has existential implications. Another way to put it is that it deals with what it means to die or to be dying; what it means to no longer be able to relate to loved ones in the ways we are accustomed to; and, what it means to miss someone and have them miss you.

This is a deeper level of conversation that is generally more difficult to talk about than the nuts and bolts of estate and memorial planning. While the other parts of the process of dying are important, it is this existential conversation that grasps at the richness of life and the relationships we share with one another. It is the kind of conversation that makes that horse grow smaller and smaller as it happens over and over again.

#6

The main struggle is how do we have this conversation with people we care about and not send them screaming into another room or glazing over.

The first hint is the easiest, don't wait until your final moments to talk about death, and certainly don't wait until you are about to die to tell the people you love that you will love and miss them. Usually, by this time people are stressed out, worried, anxious and distracted. While these kinds of confessions are sometimes well received, they can also be lost.

Instead, when you are healthy, rested, cheerful, and content remind people that you appreciate your relationship with them; remind them how much you care for them and love them. This is the setting that you want to begin talking about your feelings and sense of what it means to die. We don't just want to drop the "you know, I'm gonna die bomb on people."

#7

So, what do we do when we meet with resistance? As a culture, we tend to quarantine the dying, mentally and physically. Thus, the topic of death and dying can be uncomfortable for a lot of people.

First, we can't force people to have a conversation they aren't ready to have. If we meet with resistance, then we probably need to back off a little bit, while letting the person know that we will be bringing the topic up again at another date. We might start with educating a family member about our wishes for a memorial service or other details that can help make a person's death less stressful for the remaining family. Usually talking about a third object, a memorial service, will, burial, cremation, etc. is a little less threatening than the actual feelings around someone's death.

However, this conversation is not a substitute for actually talking about our feelings concerning death or the state of our relationships. Remember, be gentle and kind and the horse will continue to shrink until the subject loses its power to focus our energies

#8

How do you understand death and dying? How have you talked about it with others?

What are some of the theological ideas or points you would want to make relative to death and dying with someone? How would you phrase your conversation?

What resources have you found helpful in talking about death, dying, grief and loss? How are they helpful?

What message or themes do you derive from the readings this week? What is something new you are pondering having read them?