

ESSAY REVIEW

Elizabeth Mackinlay. (2012). *Palliative Care, Ageing and Spirituality: A Guide for Older People, Carers and Families*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. ISBN 978-1-84905-290-0

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Introduction

This short book talks about dying and about death. This last important journey in life is one that we each want to get 'right', a time to reflect on life and to prepare for death. The experience of each dying person and his or her family is unique, but there are also similarities of experience with others. The person brings his or her whole life experience, genetic background, ways of coping, beliefs and culture, educational background and family supports into this process of dying. Hope and fear are important components as are attitudes to life and to death. The purpose of the book is to provide a guide to living in the face of dying. The holistic view addresses questions such as: "What does it feel like to be facing my own death? What does it feel like to journey with my loved one in the final stages of life?" Some aspects of physical dying will be addressed, but the focus of this book is on psychosocial, emotional and spiritual issues of the 'final life career'. The term 'final life career' is used deliberately to indicate that this last stage is still an important part of life. The final life career is a time of preparing for this final journey and it is also a time of handing over to the coming generations. It can be a time of struggle, but also of joy and completion; a journey that, at best, is travelled together with loved ones and carers.

In Western societies, dying has become much more closely associated with ageing. Many people as they grow older live with chronic illnesses, including heart disease, chronic lung disease and diabetes, to name the most commonly occurring chronic illnesses. Dementia, too, becomes much more common in later life, simply because more people are living longer. As well, frailty is more likely in people aged more than 80 or 90 years of age and may lead to death. At some point in the lifespan of each person, if they have not succumbed to illnesses or conditions, the physical body begins to lose its ability to mend itself, or to replace old cells and energy levels fall.

This is so even though much can now be done to maintain good physical health for much longer.

Intended Audience

We read in the preface that: "This book is written as a guide for those older people who are dying and their loved ones as they make this important final journey of life. However, it may also be of value to those who provide care for older people in community or residential care." The author's purpose and target audience are completely valid. The book may serve as a resource for holistic care. Dying is so often feared in current Western societies; largely it is a fear of the unknown, but it is also a fear built on the basis of a society that sees death as failure. This book seeks to uncover the process of this final life career into death as a part of life through which there is still hope and a time in which loved ones can grow, strengthened by the hard times that they face together. For those who have a religious faith, this is a time of moving closer to God and, for Christians and those of many other faiths, the promise of eternal life. For the many without a religious faith, being able to face this final life career with loved ones, being able to speak of death at emotional and spiritual levels, can be a source of strength for all - those who care and those who are dying.

Prayer is personal and each of us has the right to say how, or even if, we want prayer. Some people are happy knowing that others are praying for them, but do not necessarily want people in the room praying with them. The best way to pray is in the person's own way. There are also many written prayers that may provide the control needed at any given time. Various faiths and cultures have their own ways of praying and chaplains, or someone from a local church or faith community, are usually available to assist. Sometimes people who have never prayed before will turn to prayer in their time of approaching death. Great sensitivity is needed to ensure that the appropriate steps are

taken to give the person requesting prayer the comfort he or she is seeking.

How the book is organized

The book starts by discussing about growing older, dying and death, with a consideration of grief and loss: as a part of life, the fear of dying, the final life career: is this only a time of waiting for death? Or is there something more? There is an acceptance that death will come followed by pain, distress and suffering and in Chapter 6, for example, prayer is considered. Chapters 7 and 8 explain responding to meaning: symbol and ritual. These chapters are followed by an examination of transcendence in the process of death and dying and the healing of relationships. This naturally leads on to intimacy and dying. The specific issue of dementia and dying and the ethical and moral issues in dying and death are examined and then the final days and hours of the journey. The book concludes with a discussion of learning to live without one's partner. The appendices address: Leading Chronic Diseases of Older People and Leading Causes of Death of Older People.

Purpose of the Book

The spiritual needs of a dying person can sometimes be overlooked in the busyness of physical care. However, for those experiencing it, spiritual distress is very real. If we understand spirituality as purpose or core meaning in life and relationship, this provides a starting point for thinking about ways of meeting spiritual needs of those who are facing either their own death or the death of their loved ones. The person who has a clear sense of their meaning and purpose in life will more likely have a sense of peace as he or she approaches death. For some people, becoming aware of their purpose in life is key to facing death with a sense of completion and a life well lived. Some others may face their dying with a sense of things left undone; of relationships to be reconciled, forgiveness to be given or to be sought and a lack of peace and hope. People who practise a religion may gain great strength at this stage through the rituals, prayers and worship of their community of faith. Even for those without a religion, the use of ritual and symbol is often of great value.

Thesis of the book

This book may serve as a resource for holistic care. Dying is so often feared in current Western societies; largely it is a fear of the unknown, but it is also a fear built on the basis of a dominant view in Society that sees death as 'the end', a failure. This book seeks to uncover the process of this final life career into death as a part of life through which there is still hope and a time in which loved ones can grow, strengthened by the hard times that they face together. The focus of this book is on the often unspoken things; the

emotional and spiritual aspects of dying and death, acknowledging that death does lie ahead (as it does for each one of us). In contrast, the author focused little on the physical aspects of dying, except where she believed a fuller account may be helpful to the reader - for instance, in the final stages of dying. Obviously, pain is an important topic and so accounts of both physical and existential (related to meaning, suffering and deep yearning) pain have been included.

There are, as the volume describes important ethical and moral issues around dying and quality of life. There are also myths about the process of dying. To address these, the book provides some guidelines that will be helpful in decision-making in these difficult issues and improve quality of life for the older person who is dying. For example, it is hard to think clearly and make the best decisions when there is a sudden change in the person's condition, or when an emergency occurs. Here, 'Advance Directives' are valuable to have in place, even for middle-aged or younger adults. Advance Directives give the person the opportunity to set out their desires for treatment and withholding of treatment in end-of-life decisions, if they are not able to communicate their wishes at that time. A trusted person, usually a family member, can be appointed with Enduring Power of Attorney (EPA) to follow through on the person's wishes as recorded in the Advance Directive form. The person EPA must also have the documents and inform other family members, as needed, of the wishes of the person dying.

Style of writing

The informal style of the author's writing is very appropriate to the intended audience. It is original, coherent, clear and powerful. The personal anecdotes very clearly communicate the author's skill in understanding the needs of older people, carers and families facing death. The author is speaking directly to the intended readership. The title is suitably informative and relevant papers are cited in the references section.

Conclusion

One of the opportunities in the process of dying may be the opportunity to review one's life and to come to a sense of reconciliation with those we love and perhaps from whom we have been separated over the years. Issues over incidents that happened perhaps many years ago may still colour our lives and anger, bitterness and resentment may prevent us coming to a sense of hope and peace as we face death, whether it be our own, or the death of someone we love. We do not always realise the things we need to change or to deal with, until a crisis hits. In concluding, let us consider the following story that illustrates some of these issues.

Edith (76 years) describes her change of attitude after recovering from a cardiac arrest. She said that "she thought she was back to all her miseries again it took her a while to

adjust to being back (alive)". She explained how she regretted being brought back to life and that everything in her life seemed to be wrong. She blamed herself for her husband's death and she hated people. Later, she concluded that she should be allowed to die hating. She concluded that she had been brought back to show why she still had a purpose in life, even if it was only a short one. She felt that was one of the things in her life that was very wrong. And when she had the cardiac arrest and then the bypass surgery she found she was looking at things differently. She did not find herself angry anymore. She was looking at things with an entirely different opinion. She felt that she was going to die hating and should not be allowed to die hating. She had been brought back to show the reason for it and why she still had a purpose in life, even if it was only a short one. Edith asked an important question, "Why was I brought back?" Her response to her question was important in her search. This resulted in finding a new purpose and meaning in life. As Edith reflected on her journey, both before and after her arrest, she was moved to write a poem on fear. The poem illustrates some of the difficulties she has struggled with over the last years and the working through and changing of her attitudes:

*'Tis fear that I'm really afraid of,
that I'll not be able to conceal it
and I'll show my shame to all
I would like to live a little longer,
to see my grandsons grow taller
please Lord, grant me courage to face it well
let me laugh when I feel like screaming loud
let me think of those who gave a helping hand
and let me cast out the anger I had
at those who hurt me through the pages of my lift
anger, fears, and contempt.*

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.