

Dying Gives Us a Chance to Confront Truth

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

By C. Kevin Rowe

Years ago I preached a sermon on death to a relatively young congregation. As I greeted congregants after the service, many smiled the 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 and we know what's coming."

The Covid-19 pandemic has swept away the illusions that led the congregation—and much of the world—to ignore death. The virus will kill only a small minority of the world. Yet its prevalence has reminded people everywhere that if Covid-19 doesn't kill them, something else will. This realization recalls a truth central to the Christian tradition: No one will get out of life alive.

Over time Christians developed a set of practices to help us tell this truth and to prepare for death. In the Middle Ages this was called the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying. Today, a quick death often is seen as ideal. Yet the *ars*

moriendi holds the opposite view: It's a good thing to see death coming and to have time 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 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, and 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.

We have long read the Bible. But facing death has brought it near, and 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 Kyrie eleison. Lord, have mercy.

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

And he 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 within 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 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 look at the beauty of the world; to examine our beliefs about what really, really counts in life; to mend relationships; and, for those who've 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 we have become.

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