

Mourning the lost springtime

By Dolores Leckey
NC News Service

I was 4 when Aunt Jenny died. It is my earliest memory of death.

My father and his large family of brothers and sisters were all terribly saddened by the unexpected loss of their sister at the age of 42.

But what I saw as a small child was simply another family gathering, even a celebration in my grandparents' house. There were, however, some noticeable differences from other celebrations. People were eating and drinking and singing Irish songs, as my family always did at parties. But this time they were crying too.

In the living room was beautiful Aunt Jenny, surrounded by flowers and wearing a pretty dress with a white lace collar. I have never forgotten how cold and still she looked, like a stone worn smooth.

While that memory continued to live with me, I think that during childhood and early adolescence I didn't allow myself to think about death, my own or anyone else's.

Later, youth and the steady flame of hope continued to pull me toward my own life tasks. Marriage and children and work and community became the focus of my thoughts and prayer. Death seemed far away.

Then one day, a spring day filled with dogwood and azaleas and the almost heartbreaking newness which spring signals, it came to me: I wouldn't always be here for springtime. I recall crying out to God, "I cannot bear never to see or smell another springtime!"

For the first time, my own death registered as a distinct possibility. For some time afterward, the change of seasons regularly drew forth tears. I, like others, was grateful for the works of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

Her interviews with people who had been declared clinically dead and who "had come back to life" suggested a peaceful transition from this life to the next. Patients spoke to her about an embracing light and about the presence of an absolute love.

"Well," I thought to myself, "perhaps the light contains all the springtimes there are."

"The Dialogue," a book by St. Catherine of Genoa, a 15th century lay woman and mystic, provides depth to contemporary investigations into the afterlife. In the book, St. Catherine, a married lay woman, described

purgatory as a fundamentally happy state because the soul is becoming less ego-centered and steadily more God-centered: It is still growing.

There would be pain, she felt, but it would be the pain of growth, and thus accompanied by joy.

I too think the joys and the struggles of earthly life are not lost. I think that in some sense we take them along to the next stage of existence.

And I no longer mourn my lost springtimes. I think they will be there for me and for others, brighter and more fragrant than the present reality.

Now I am more conscious that each day of my life brings me closer to that moment of knowing. The issue is how to live out the measure of the days. Each day is a gift; each day offers opportunities to work honestly, to love concretely, to pray always.

If it is true that we die as we live, then perhaps daily efforts at conscious living will eventually lead us to the attitude described in Annie Dillard's "Pilgrimage at Tinker Creek." She says that at the end of life she hopes to be able to say to God, "Thank you for the great gift of life" rather than, "Please, not yet."

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Facing the executioner: Paul's letter from

By Father John J. Castelot
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St. Paul's fate was hanging in the balance when he wrote to the Philippians from prison in Ephesus. Would he be released unharmed? Or would he be executed?

An ordinary person, faced with these alternatives, might be expected to ask prayers for his freedom. But Paul was no ordinary person. His reaction to the dilemma was a magnificent statement of the Christian attitude toward death.

"I have full confidence that now as always Christ will be exalted through me, whether I live or die. For to me 'life' means Christ. Hence dying is so much gain. If, on the one hand, I am to go on living in the flesh, that means productive toil for me — and I do not know which to prefer."

Paul goes on to say: "I am

strongly attracted to both: I long to be freed from this life and to be with Christ, for that is the far better thing; yet it is more urgent that I stay alive for your sakes."

It is not that dying was a pleasant prospect for Paul. It was evil, the ultimate evil humans face.

As Paul wrote in another letter, speaking of the ultimate victory of God over all evil: "Christ must reign until God has put all enemies under his feet, and the last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25-26).

Speaking of the same ultimate triumph, the author of the New Testament book of Revelation wrote with typical imagery: "Then death and the nether world were hurled into the pool of fire, which is the second death... God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more mourning, crying out or pain, for the former world has passed away" (Revelation

20:14; 21:4).

Christians do not whistle in the dark, pretending that death is a fun thing to be taken lightly or laughed off. The prospect of dying is as terrifying for the Christian as for anyone else. But there is one big difference, an all-important one. For the Christian, death has meaning. Death is not the absurd final curtain rung down on an absurd play.

So, when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, who were upset over the deaths of their loved ones, he had this to say: "We would have you be clear about those who sleep in death, brothers; otherwise you might yield to grief like those who have no hope."

Paul does not object to their grief. For grief is inevitable if one has a spark of humanity.

And grief is emotionally healthy in the bargain. Pent-up sorrow can be a time bomb. But Paul doesn't want Christians to