

Learning to live with death

By Theodore Hengesbach
NC News Service

I recently read an article by a young Detroit Free Press reporter who described how he learned to deal with terminal cancer.

He said the most profound thing he learned was what it was like to be afraid: "afraid of the clock, afraid of the calendar, afraid of the day the doctors finally find trouble in a new place."

However, he also said the feeling that "I will always be afraid" did not paralyze him. Instead it spawned in him "a last stand kind of strength." Living with the constant fear of death gave the young reporter a new awareness of life and a "heightened trust" in such fundamentals as his family and friends. With their support, he said, "the future seemed manageable" after all.

The young man no longer could simply take life as it comes; instead, he began to appreciate the little things of life in a heightened way. His fear of death gave him the ability to live life instead of simply letting life

happen to him.

But not everyone reacts just the way this young reporter did.

Ronald Parent was the 45-year-old editor of Notre Dame University's alumni magazine when his illness was diagnosed as terminal in early July 1982. With stunning swiftness he died in August.

Parent seemed to have everything to live for. He had a close marriage for 23 years. He had seen his three children graduate from high school and go on to college. He had received professional recognition and awards for his journalistic accomplishments.

Yet, asked during his final weeks about his feelings on death, Parent replied: "I don't fear death at all...I've raised my family and have gone about as far as I can in my profession. I've lived a full life. I have no regrets."

His apparent calm in the face of death, it seems safe to say, didn't happen by chance. His "full life," as he called it, his life "with no regrets," surely couldn't have resulted from an attitude of "whatever will be will be." But, having lived life as responsibly as he knew how, Parent could accept death without fear.

For the newspaper reporter and the magazine editor, the reality of death led to a new appreciation for life itself. It caused each to reflect on what is really important and what responsibility one might have over life.

For the reporter, it led to a renewed commitment to living the events of every day in a fuller, more appreciative manner. For the editor, it led to a re-evaluation of his life and to the realization that his life had been satisfying and full.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who has worked extensively with the dying, has documented how the acceptance of one's impending death usually comes only after a struggle. She says most people go through several stages in coming to terms with death.

Nevertheless, the famous physician thinks it is possible for people to accept death and to turn that acceptance into a more joyous life.

So, knowing that death is in my future can wake me up. It can alert me to the need to live with purpose, to be sensitive to the potentially glorious events that occur in each person's daily existence.

Lived that way, life can be managed, and life can be full, in the face of death.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

(Hengesbach teaches at Indiana University, South Bend.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Day after day for two years, Carlos Stark watched as the woman visited the grave of her 22-year-old son. A medical student with a shining future, the youth was electrocuted when he accidentally touched a live wire, explained Stark, vice president of Flagler Memorial Park in Miami, Fla.

Concerned about the woman, a nurse, Stark finally asked her if she knew anything about Compassionate Friends, a support group for bereaved parents. But "she wasn't ready then," Stark said.

Somewhat later, Stark encountered another grieving couple: the parents of a 25-year-old man, who shot and killed himself with his father's gun. As often happens in such cases, Stark said, the youth's father blamed himself for the death.

Distressed at the elderly parents' grief, Stark suggested to the first woman, the nurse, that she was in a unique position to help them, especially since she could speak to them in their native Spanish.

Stark explained that when one bereaved parent tells another, "I understand what you are going through," it is credible. Group support "can change lives," Stark thinks. People begin to realize "they are in a tunnel but that

eventually they will come out of it," as they see others doing so.

After the three parents met, Stark again suggested Compassionate Friends and then drove the people to the first meeting. They agreed to go, he said, but then they "didn't understand what was going on." Only English was spoken at the meeting.

Then, with the aid of his Spanish-speaking wife, Stark set about seeing what could be done for bereaved Spanish-speaking parents through the Archdiocese of Miami.

Through their efforts, there is now a Spanish-speaking chapter of Compassionate Friends that meets at St. Brendan's Church in Miami.

Stark explained that the purpose of Compassionate Friends is to provide understanding and mutual support to parents when they lose a child. It's "a place where you can open up with other people. You're not alone," he said.

Since joining Compassionate Friends, the woman who used to come to the cemetery every day has found some solace, Stark indicated. Last Christmas, for the first time since her son's death four years ago, she was able to celebrate the holiday with her family.

...for discussion

1. What attitude should a Christian take toward death in your opinion? What is your attitude toward death?
2. Father John Castelot suggests that death is a hard reality for Christians, as it is for others. Do you agree?
3. In Father John Castelot's article, why was St. Paul's response unusual when his life was hanging in the balance in the Ephesus prison?
4. What does Dolores Leckey say was her reaction on first really becoming aware that she would die one day?
5. Do you think people are reluctant to think concretely about their own death? Why?
6. How did Patricia Davis help a parish family adjust to an approaching death? What did she learn from the experience?

7. Theodore Hengesbach tells of two men's attitudes toward their imminent death. How do the men differ? How are they similar?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Easter: A Wake-up Call for a Rise-and-Shine Faith," by Jesuit Father Gerald O'Collins. What difference does the resurrection make in life anyway? The author says that question, posed by a student years ago, stimulated him to draw some connections between the resurrection and a Christian's daily existence. For Father Collins: "Believing in the resurrection deeply affects both the way Christians interpret their personal experience and the kind of life believers wish to live for the future." (U.S. Catholic magazine, April, 1984, 221 W. Madison St., Chicago, Ill. 60606. Single issue, \$1.25.)

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grieve like people "who have no hope."

Grief lightened by hope can be cleansing; hopeless grief is overwhelming, crushing.

What makes it possible for Christians to hope is their belief in the resurrection of Jesus, which Paul observes is the pledge and model of our own resurrection. Jesus' resurrection was not an isolated event, Paul says. Instead, Jesus "will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pattern of his glorified body" (Philippians 3:21).

No wonder Paul can cry out triumphantly, almost defiantly: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?...Thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)