

Toward to the Journey's End

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Abstract

People become aware of the human life finiteness when they reach middle age. If they are healthy, they believe they will reach old age with white hair. However, in old age, the awareness that the process of dying is slowly adding losses over losses will come. Therefore, we should cultivate dignity in life because we do not know how we will face death: probably with suffering without respectability, as we never imagine it.

Keywords

Dying, Death, End of Life

Each life is different from every other life and each death is different from every other death. We are unique in life and in death. We know that different illnesses will lead us to different deaths. Nevertheless, the same illness will give each of us a distinct way to die. We all want “a good death”, but it is improbable that we will die the way we planned to die. Not all our hopes are realized. An easy death is one of them, but we cannot know what will happen to us. Even suicides do not always end up according to plan.

During our life, we experience moments of joy and sadness, but in the death process we feel only sadness. Death may or may not be preceded by a long period of suffering; so, the relief from pain at life’s ending can be just another vain hope rather than an actual reality. Even when death comes quickly, on realizing that we are going to leave this life we adults feel more than just pain and sadness: there are unresolved conflicts, unfulfilled promises, and issues to be dealt with but, above all, awareness of the years that might have come but no longer will.

So perhaps there can be a “good death”, but the process of dying is never good. The fatal illness that nature will inflict upon us will greatly determine the atmosphere in which we take leave of life.

In the past, the time of death was, as far as circumstances allowed, a moment of

communion with those who were to be left behind, a moment of recollection before God and of expectation of another life beyond this one. Nowadays however, relatively fewer people than at any other time seek for the comfort of religion at the time of death, although some agnostics and even atheists are converted when they feel the end is near. “I will open the road to heaven even if it has to be with bullets” says the [Lima-Barreto \(1971\)](#)’s tragic hero Policarpo Quaresma on dying.

For most of us, it is comforting to believe in life after death. “Let me go to the house of the Father”, said Pope John Paul II when he felt that everything was being done to postpone his end ([Catholic News Agency](#)). One must remember that—for ourselves or for those we love—dying involves many things about which circumstances do not allow us to make choices, even taking into account the best possible medical knowledge available. So, let those we love die, when it is their turn. In our mourning, we should lament the loss of the person, without blaming ourselves for not having done more to sustain a mere thread of life.

We must be aware that our existence on the face of the Earth is finite and that our demise can happen at any moment. Nevertheless, we wish to leave good memories, a good story. There are people who find comfort in thinking about the accomplished mission. Therefore, dignity in death depends not on the actual demise, but on the dignity of the life which preceded it. Our hope is to achieve this kind of dignity and it is possible to fulfill this hope... but not always what we hope happens.

We have to accept that our life span is limited so as to permit the survival of the species. We die for the world to continue to live; we die so that others may live. Our death is the triumph of life that goes on. We have dignity when we face the thought of death with altruism. Of course, the price to pay for such serenity is high, but our short passage on earth should indeed be useful and compensatory.

[Guimarães-Rosa \(1965\)](#), a Brazilian writer, said: “Living is dangerous...because it is learning to live that is real living... A perilous crossing, but it is life’s crossing.” Well then: life is a simple crossing, although, as philosopher and writer [Bobbio \(1992\)](#) says, I believe that before birth I was not, and after death I will not be...Will I? Anyhow, I will not be myself unless I am in this body which has lived and suffered. For in death, we do not only lose our flesh, but all the life we had.

The classic image of dying with dignity should be changed or even discarded? Without doubt: the dignity that we look for in death must be found in the dignity with which we live our lives. It is not at the moment of death that we need to show dignity, but during our whole life.

Perhaps even those things that we did not do during our life could be in themselves a source of satisfaction, although this might appear to be a paradox, as [Nuland \(1995\)](#) says; for it is only those who are long dead who have no promises to fulfill or roads to take.

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