

Living and Growing Into Death

BY NANCY STOUT, RN

I recently had the privilege of sharing the final weeks of a woman's journey from this life into death. The courage she showed, her continuing involvement in life, and her faith in God's love were a tremendous inspiration. I found I was called to look into myself to determine how well I was living—and whether my death would be simply an end to my being or the culmination of all that I am and have been.

I met Mary on the first hospital call I made as my church's parish nurse. She had been a patient for more than two months. She had been hospitalized for injuries from an automobile accident and, while in the hospital, had a recurrence of throat cancer, which had plagued her for years.

I could see immediately that Mary was a strong and independent woman who had lived a long, full life. Though visibly uncomfortable and weak, she maintained a sense of dignity. She had a love-

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ly gray wig in place and glasses on, and she welcomed me with a smile. Although Mary acknowledged her distress about her situation, she did not complain. She spoke repeatedly of how good others had been to her—family who visited, friends who sent cards and called—not a negative word about anyone.

Mary was devoted to her husband, children, and grandchildren and was a key person in each of their lives. What impressed me the most was that she was still involved in all that happened around her—events in the lives of her friends and family, as well as what was going on in her church and in the world.

She was even caring toward the hospital staff and aware of some of their joys and sorrows. One of Mary's nurses was pregnant at the time. Whenever she came on duty, Mary would ask for the latest news—how her recent checkup went,

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whether she could feel the baby move yet.

Mary had not in any way "given in" to her illness and her disabilities. At the same time, however, she did not neglect her inner self and her struggles as she contemplated death and the continuation of loved ones' lives without her. She told me that she had no fear of death. In fact, she welcomed it as a new adventure, a glorious passage. Mary did express concern about how her family would carry on without her, how her invalid husband would manage to care for their children. But she was secure in her belief that she would join God when she died.

Mary's deeply rooted faith, lifelong religious commitment, and disciplined spiritual life were the keys to her optimism. Though confined to the hospital, she received Holy Communion regularly, continued her own prayer rituals, and welcomed the visits and blessings of her pastor and other friends from her church. Her faith was central to her life, and it gave her strength to endure her increasing physical pain and her despair over the time it was taking for her to die.

Mary truly lived into her death. Not long before she went into a coma, we sat together and chose music and scriptures for her funeral. She selected two favorite hymns—"Be Not Afraid" and "How Great Thou Art"—and the 23d Psalm. She was ready to "finish business" in her life so she could be at peace.

Living into death and growing into death are processes we are called to

engage in from the beginning of our lives. We need to consider, early on, our guidelines for making this journey. How will we grow into death as we age? Mary's manner of living did not change abruptly as she became older and ill. She continued the pattern she had followed throughout her life: being actively involved in life, giving and receiving, practicing her faith, seeking answers for life's struggles, and taking responsibility for herself and others.

My experiences with Mary taught me much about the ministry I am carrying out as I work with those who are either approaching death themselves or helping loved ones in the process. Mary's example deepened for me the meaning of the familiar passage from Psalm 23: "I will fear no evil, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, for Thou art with me."

God alone can accompany us as we meet death. Mary knew this, and she trusted in the process completely. She was ready to take the next step—to abandon the physical, the known, and the familiar—and to enter into a place where there is no structure and no boundary and no limit to what is possible.

Living and growing into death involves letting go at our deepest level of being and giving in to what may be sensed and felt only by our hearts. Each of us will go about this process in a unique way. If we are blessed by the experience of making the journey first with another person, as I was with Mary, we may be better prepared when our time comes. □

*Coming in the
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