



# Walking on the Path Toward Peaceful Death

CARRIE MEYER McGRATH, MDiv, MAS

It seems to me that the evening prayers of the Catholic Church are strangely attentive to death. In Compline, the formal night prayer of the church, we pray, *May the all-powerful Lord grant us a restful night and a peaceful death*. Perhaps to soothe the sting of thinking about death, we then pray that Mary be with and intercede for us, and essentially tuck us into bed.

Our children experience the same thing. The classic bedtime prayer can seem very odd: *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take*. The oddity strikes me again in recent nights when I put my toddler to bed and prompt him to practice his prayer as he lisps along. It raises no small amount of parental panic, being confronted with the possibility of a child's death.

I have to wonder, what is a peaceful death? What is a good death? Moreover, for whom — the dying, or the ones left behind? Certainly, as we teach our children to pray, it is with faith that God is near the sick and dying, present to both the dying and the bereaved. When considering our own death, once we move past denial and fear, we may begin to paint a picture of what our hoped-for last moments in life will include.

We want to be at peace, we want to be comfortable, surrounded by love.

We want to have enough time, time to prepare and be ready. Time enough to say goodbye and leave meaningful last words. We want time enough on Earth to fulfill our hopes and dreams, to seek and offer forgiveness, to love well and live fully.

The one thing we want — time — is the one thing we can never be sure of. None of us knows the hour or moment of our own death or, more frighteningly, the deaths of those we hold most dear. The only time we have to prepare for a good death is now. Now is the acceptable time.

To help answer the question of what it means to have a good death, the Catholic Church of England and Ireland commissioned the website *The Art of Dying Well*, ([www.artofdyingwell.org](http://www.artofdyingwell.org)). Bringing centuries of ministry to the dying and bereaved to bear, in approachable language, video and imagery, *The Art of Dying Well* suggests

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*The Art of Dying Well*

a shift in thinking about death, saying, “If you think about death as a journey, not just as a specific moment, it may help you understand what it means to die well. But as with any journey, you need to prepare for it.”

The question remains for each of us, how do we simultaneously live and prepare for our death, and, just as importantly, the death of those people dear to us? What preparations must we make for ourselves so that our journey from birth to death might find us prepared, ready and at peace? How do we encourage others to prepare as well?

One simple and effective way is to talk about death. We have lost touch with death and view it from such a distance that we mostly ignore it until it is upon us. The human fear of death is exacerbated by a cultural worship of youth and beauty and our detachment from death as a natural thing. With longer life expectancies, and most deaths happening out of the home, we simply are not used to the reality of life coming to an end.

Openly talking about death in an honest way begins to break the taboos that perpetuate fear and worry. We can normalize the inevitable by sharing our wishes and fears, asking about those of family and friends, talking about our experiences of death and remembering those who have died.

Another tactic is to spend time with the dying and the bereaved. Being in close relationship with an experience demystifies it. I am grateful for the moments I have been near to those at the end of life. Their vulnerability, honesty, fear, laughter and faith have shown me how to live death well.

It is not only a privilege to be near those who are coming to the end of the journey, it is also our Christian call. We walk with our loved ones on the path, journeying together as long as we can,

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bearing them up until we can go no further. When the moment finally comes, we entrust them to the love of God that has always surrounded them.

Soon we will be thick in the season of Advent, journeying with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and preparing for the birth of Jesus. Advent is a time of quiet reflection in darkness as we consider the fallen nature of the world. Advent also is a time of hope as we light candles to dispel the darkness. So too is the end of life, which brings reflection on what has been, while simultaneously expressing hope for what is to come. As the only two experiences we all share, birth and death bookend our moral lives and mark us as creatures and not God. Birth and death, our own and those of others, provide landmarks for our journey.

Another prayer I remember from my childhood is an Advent Gospel acclamation: *Stay awake, be ready. You do not know the hour when the Lord is coming. Stay awake, be ready. The Lord is coming soon. Alleluia, Alleluia! The Lord is coming soon.*

We cannot know when we will die, when Christ will call us home, yet in the darkness and fear around death, we can light candles, prepare ourselves, talk about our wishes, draw near and murmur our own prayers as we wait on the Lord, who is always coming soon.

**CARRIE MEYER McGRATH** is director, mission services, the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, November - December 2017  
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