

Lessons of Illness and Death

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December 21, 2015



In my capacity as chaplain in an inner-city hospital, I deal with end-of-life situations as frequently as two or three times a day. My faith as a Unificationist accepts death as normal and part of God's plan. I know that if God is in our life, then He must also be in our death, and this gives me a sense of comfort and the strength to offer spiritual support to the patient, family and staff.

When I enter the room and see the patient lying on the bed, the family is generally gathered around or standing outside in the hallway or hurriedly on their way to the hospital. The air is thick with emotion. My heart never fails to be moved by the sincerity and tears. I am deeply touched by the weeping and what I call "quiet tears" where I know the family's feelings are building up inside and ready to overflow.

I try to provide a compassionate presence even if the patient is unresponsive. I always assume their spirit self or inner being is awake and appreciative of companionship.

When a person knows that death is imminent, what happens next really depends on their values and beliefs. Faith and spirituality often become very important even if he or she hasn't set foot in a house of worship for years. Many appreciate hearing sacred words and prayer. Most often people request Psalm 23. It is known to everyone and provides a comfortable assurance that Heavenly Parent is in the room.

Besides the patient, I offer spiritual support to the family and loved ones through companionship, prayers, and a listening heart. Essentially the chaplain is a reminder that life has a spiritual dimension. I try to help them deal with the situation and find some sense of spiritual peace.



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I'm always been inspired by how God opens the hearts of the families. Although I am a total stranger, I am immediately welcomed into the center of an emotionally intimate situation, certainly not as an individual, but rather as what the chaplain represents. The family wants to feel the presence of God. They want the assurance that God is in charge and that he's there, even when things aren't going according to their own wishes or expected plan.

Father Moon spoke often about the spiritual world and taught that there is purpose behind everything in creation, including death. When he said, "Do you know why I am talking about death? I talk about death in order to teach the meaning of life," I understand this to mean we need to prioritize our life values.

Most people get caught up in the materialistic side of life and often it is only at the time of illness and death that we get our priorities straight.

From the many experiences of journeying with families during these heartwarming and sensitive moments, illness and death have taught me five lessons.

Lessons of Illness and Death

- **The importance of presence.** When I'm with a patient and family in an end-of-life situation, I realize how important it is to be in the moment, not to worry about any should've, could've, would've mind distractions, but to be present both in the physical and emotional sense. Death is something that reminds us that the only thing that is certain is right now, this moment.

I had an experience with a 67-year-old patient who wanted "someone to speak with." He had been suffering from headaches and been admitted for tests. He was feeling anxious about the results and wanted to "rule out the bad stuff." He said, "I called for help and then you came." The wife said, "You are his angel." We held hands and I offered a prayer. I've learned that presence can come in different forms. It could be the chaplain, or prayer, or scripture – but basically, it's to bring God into the room and to deliver the message: "You are not alone."

- **Every day is a gift.** Popular sayings like, "Oh, it's Monday again; I have to get back to the grindstone," and "TGIF," give the impression that life doesn't begin until after the 9 to 5 job and that the week is

something we have to endure until the weekend. I've come to understand that death reminds us that life is precious, and not something to be taken for granted, whether it's the weekday or weekend. Many times I've heard the doctor tell the family, "We've done all we can," and the family responds, "Please, doctor, just one more day, more family is coming and we all want to say goodbye." It seems we don't recognize the preciousness of life until it's about to end. The life lesson is straightforward: live each day to the fullest.

I recall a visit with a 53-year-old patient diagnosed with schizophrenia along with cardiac issues. With his buoyant personality, we talked almost an hour. I asked about his favorite Scripture quotes, and then I gently asked what was his greatest fear. He paused so long I thought he was going to burst into tears. Finally, he looked at me and said, "Not enough time. There's so much I want to do."

• **I am not my résumé.** Catholic philosopher John O'Donohue, said: "Your identity is not equivalent to your biography." There's no doubt that everyone can point to a list of accomplishments and credentials but that does not define who we are, nor is it how we'll be remembered or even how we want to be remembered. Rather, we want to be remembered not because of what we did but because of who we are.

I recall visiting a patient over a period of a month before he passed away. He was a successful and well-known aeronautical engineer and had many accomplishments and patents to his name, but when the family gathered to say goodbye, that's not what they spoke about. Instead, he was remembered for his kindness, intelligence and sense of humor.



• **Illness and death present opportunities for growth and reconciliation.** Many times I've entered a situation to find a dying patient, perhaps the matriarch, and can tell that the children have not spoken to each other or even to their parent for months or years. Ironically, it's death that brings the family together.

I met a 53-year-old patient who had tried to commit suicide. He has three grown children and eight grandchildren. "I was so stupid. I didn't know what I was thinking. I want to tell them I'm sorry." Somehow it seems like people come down with temporary amnesia and forget about God, and it's my role to remind them that God is real.

Another patient told me he'd come out to his family as gay and was now diagnosed as HIV positive. I asked what he wants and what would give him purpose. He said his family has never fully forgiven him. "I want to rid myself of the shame and humiliation that my family has made me feel. I want a day of thanksgiving, so I can thank God, my community, and my family." It took a health crisis for him *and* his family to realize that time was running out and that biases and differences have to be faced and dealt with.

• **The importance of love.** In our culture, we talk a lot about love but the focus is often mostly on sexual love. The love that I've learned from death deals with the emotions that bind us together and have nothing to do with money, possessions, beauty, or achievements. And this is most crucial: only through the power of love do we realize what is truly important in this life.

When I entered the room of one patient, her face lit up. I hadn't actually said a word. She seemed to know exactly who I was. I don't wear a collar or carry a Bible, but she *knew*. She freely talked and shared her spiritual concerns. I said, "I felt guided to come here." "I know, I know," she said, "I had just finished asking the Lord to send me a preacher, and there you were!"

Love and gratitude seem like religion in themselves. During rounds in the burn unit, we put on gowns, mask, head cover, and go into a patient's room for an examination. One patient, 60 years old, was lying on the bed – naked with a look of pure fright on his face, a catheter in his penis, and his body completely covered with burns and open wounds. My first thought: I had entered *hell*. Yet somehow in the midst of all those faces peering at him, we spiritually caught each other's eye and without thinking, the words of the Lord's Prayer came out of my mouth. Over and over I quietly recited the prayer and tried to project God's love and strength.

Conclusion

As people of faith, we possess an awesome truth that has the power to release all humanity from the fear of death. "I talk about death in order to teach the meaning of life" is a profound statement. In times of crisis, we express our love in simple ways – a daughter feeding her mother or father, a husband arranging the pillow for his wife, wiping a loved one's face with a washcloth – these are acts of love. It's in times of illness and death that we realize the meaning of life is not just about physical possessions or accomplishments, but about family, relationships, and love.

More than anything, the experience working as a hospital chaplain has awakened within me an enormous appreciation of the blessing of *shimjung*, the original heart of God. How empty and meaningless life would be without the heart to know we are made in the image of God. It is in those crisis moments, those *shimjung* moments, when all external superficialities are stripped away, that I have a direct experience of Cheon Il Guk and understand the meaning of original, God-centered peace.

Dr. William Selig is a hospital chaplain in Washington, DC. He is the author of several books on the Seonghwa ministry including Preparing for the Afterlife Based on the Teachings of Sun Myung Moon; True Family and the Seonghwa Ceremony; and Guide to the Seonghwa Ceremony: The Third Stage of Life.