

St John's

Church of St John the Evangelist, Princes Street
www.stjohns-edinburgh.org.uk

REFLECTIONS ON DEATH AND DYING



*Articles by Angus Mitchell, David Grossart and Clephane Hume
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REFLECTIONS ON DEATH AND DYING

The subjects of death and dying are considered by many to be something of a taboo, yet being open about these, and being prepared for one's own death and that of others, is very healthy. For many who grieve, the ability to express one's own feelings and emotions is an essential part of the process.

The articles published in this small booklet are written by Angus Mitchell, Clephane Hume and David Grossart, all members of St John's at the time of writing, and were published in the church's magazine, *Cornerstone*. The first, by Angus, provides some practical advice on how to prepare for one's own death; the second, and third by Clephane contain further practical advice; the fourth, by David, is a poetic reflection after the loss of a child and the final articles, by Clephane, deals with mourning.

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How to die - in 9 easy lessons

Reflections by Angus Mitchell

Please accept my apologies for a title which is not only flippant but rather misleading. The flippancy is intended simply to catch the eye of the casual reader, but may be thought by some to be unworthy of a serious subject. The title is misleading in that this article relates mainly to the period when death is not an immediate prospect, but not to the later stage when death is imminent. You can read about the reactions to approaching death of a man with terminal cancer in a book just published – ‘When I die: Lessons from the Death Zone’ by the late Philip Gould, one of Tony Blair’s advisers.

A more accurate title for my article might be ‘Suggestions for consideration by those who think it is time to start getting ready for death’. I am one of that band, although I do not intend to die just yet if I can avoid it. This article is not about palliative care, euthanasia or assisted dying; we shall no doubt hear much more about these contentious questions if Margo MacDonald’s Bill proceeds through the Scottish Parliament for a second time.

I recently saw a leaflet by a firm of solicitors which was very properly intended to persuade people to make a will, and which included the sentence ‘Nobody likes to think about their death, let alone its consequences’. While that is regrettably true of many people, the word ‘nobody’ is debatable; I doubt if I am the only pensioner who sometimes likes to think about death.

As we are all going to die sooner or later, it seems strange that not many people want to talk about it before it happens. That reluctance may be partly due to the huge improvements in public health over the last 2 centuries; early death was a common experience in many families in 19th century Britain, and a constant reminder of human frailty, whereas we now expect the NHS and social work services to keep us alive much longer. The average life expectancy at birth in Scotland is now over 79 for women and 74 for men; so why should anybody under 70 bother to read this article, unless they are in a hazardous occupation or planning a dangerous journey? Answer: death may come to any of us without much (if any) warning when we least expect it.

Like many other octogenarians, I was taught in the army that ‘time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted’. Why should anybody be embarrassed or frightened by a discussion on how best to get ready for death, which is going to face us all in due course? Why is death commonly regarded as having replaced sex as a taboo subject at the dinner table? Everyone ought to give some thought to death as an unavoidable future event, but our lives vary so much that the following suggestions (not listed in any special order) may not be acceptable to you all - so take your pick!

1. *THINK ABOUT IT.* Will death be a gateway to everlasting life, a welcome end to all one's troubles, a relief to one's family, a strange mystery that none of us can quite understand, or something else? To sleep, perchance to dream? Read the Bible, or search on Google, to find out what others have thought about the meaning of death. A good Dictionary of Quotations will provide a variety of memorable sayings, ranging from the sublime (e.g. Keats) to the ridiculous (e.g. Woody Allen).

2. *TALK ABOUT IT.* It's good to talk, as the telephone commercials used to say. Some of your friends may not care to discuss your death, but may be willing to talk about their own ideas, about death in general, or about these suggestions. People with cancer can now meet fellow patients at Maggie's Centres in Edinburgh and elsewhere to discuss their concerns, but when will this facility be available for others? If you feel hesitant about talking to a friend, look for a priest, a counsellor or (last resort) a comforting website.

3. *PLAN YOUR FUNERAL.* Although you will not, alas, be there to enjoy it yourself, your family and friends will no doubt gather to exchange happy memories of you, and to grieve over your loss. Is it best to leave them to decide on the order of service, or to save them the trouble by planning it all yourself, like Churchill and many others? Where and how? Burial or cremation? Did you know that you can get your ashes turned into a glass paperweight? Do you want to follow the example of one man I know who startled his friends by leaving a tape-recording of his own voice to be played at his funeral service? Who would you most like to come to your funeral to sing your praises? Why not make a list of the main points you want to be mentioned (or better not mentioned!) in your funeral oration?

4. *GET POSITIVE* by counting the blessings of your present situation. Your friends will quite understand if you are no longer able to be as hospitable as before, or to make long journeys to see them - so take it easy and enjoy life! If any negatives lie on your mind, death will remove them before very long. You need not now worry too much about the National Debt, the next election, or the rising sea level in 30 years time. Take pride in what you have done for others, and try to do some more. You may have wisdom and experience that could help the young (if you can get them to listen). Rejoice that you live in a city with excellent health facilities, including palliative care for those who need it.

5. *GIVE THANKS* for all God's many mercies, and especially to those who have helped you in any way. Avoid the risk of remembering on your deathbed, alas too late, that you never thanked Mrs X properly for her kindness last year; much better to telephone or write to her now.

6. *CLEAR OUT OLD PAPERS AND JUNK* to save trouble for your family and executors; label and file any documents or photographs that your descendants might enjoy, or donate to a museum or library anything that might interest future historians. Do you really need to keep all that stuff in the attic and the garage? First consult any relations who might like to help you to sort out your family archives.

7. *SEARCH YOUR CONSCIENCE* for any shortcomings that could still be put right by an apology, remedial action or confession. If you have done wrong to somebody who has died, and have not already been forgiven, it is not too late to atone. Would a charitable donation, or a bequest in your will, help to set your mind at rest?

8. *MAKE A WILL*, or check up on the one you have already made, in case it needs updating. This is a rare opportunity to be generous to your family, friends, St John's or other worthy causes without loss to your own pocket. It's obviously best to get legal advice on your will, and also on an enduring power of attorney and an advance statement or 'living will' (in case you are incapacitated); but if you are worried about legal fees, free advice is available in booklets and on the internet.

9. *PLAN YOUR MEMORIAL*. This optional extra will not appeal to everyone, because of the British antipathy to self-aggrandisement, but it is a respectable tradition to have your name remembered in years to come. That will be no problem if you are already a well-known author, criminal or politician, but not many of us have done enough newsworthy things to earn an obituary in the local newspaper. If you are lucky enough to have a family gravestone, tell your executors to add your name to it; and if not, tell them whether you want to have a gravestone, memorial bench, plant or tree of your own. You could also write or tape-record your own memoirs, not necessarily for publication, but to tell your descendants something of your life. I began to make my own preparations for death some time ago, and do not at present know how long they will take; indeed some items (such as 1, 5 and 7 above) may never be completed, but ought to be repeated indefinitely until life ends.

If you disagree with any of my suggestions, or would like to add some more of your own, I hope you will extend the debate by asking the Editor to print your comments in the next issue of *Cornerstone*.

Old gravestone inscription in Glasgow:

Remember, Man, as you pass by
As you are now, so once was I;
As I am now, so you must be.
Therefore prepare to follow me.

And written later on the stone in chalk:

To follow you I'm not content
Until I know which way you went.

Forward planning

Clephane Hume

Recently, when preparing for a funeral, I discovered that one member of the congregation had provided details of hymns and readings, plus some prayers she particularly wanted said at her funeral. Such information is kept safe at church.

It's always very helpful for both the family or friends and the member of the clergy who will be conducting the funeral service to have such information, and to know that the deceased person's wishes are being met.

But this lady was different. A single person, she had, twenty years previously, also provided details of her life history. This she said firmly, was not a CV, just some notes. But they were extremely useful. As one person pointed out, not even your children necessarily know much about your childhood. And if you are of really senior years, your school friends may not be around to help.

In this instance there were no family members nearby but the daughter of a good friend had been a regular visitor and was able to supply some more recent information.

Some people make memory boxes or write family histories for grandchildren. But some folk who are single don't feel that it is worth it. But it is! We can then provide a more complete picture of you when the time comes. And meanwhile, it would be something to refer to when sharing reminiscences with your pastoral visitor - or anyone else you feel inclined.

So think about helping us to do justice to your memory.

In case of emergency

Clephane Hume

A message directed (but not exclusively) to those members of the congregation who live alone. And especially those who have no relatives in Edinburgh.

I've written about this before, but was recently reminded of the idea by an elderly friend who told me that her minister had information about everybody in his congregation who was on his or her own. 'And' she said, 'he has been round to see me recently to ask me a few questions about my life. I think he is making notes for my funeral!'

There are things in life that we don't necessarily want to think about, but which are important, and this importance is often only recognised with hindsight. Reality dictates that emergencies may happen. Do we know how to find your relatives / friends if you suddenly become ill? Some people have provided us with lists of contact people and key holders. (I am one of them). These are treated as confidential information and are potentially very helpful in saving time on detective work.

Do you have a lawyer? Some years ago I wrote about the importance of having a will, (which I do not intend to reiterate here) and of having Power of Attorney in place before it is required. Now that it is possible to have Power of Welfare Attorney, you can appoint someone to take care of your social / welfare needs if you are unable to make these known yourself. It may seem a morbid topic, but planning for the future is never without value. And you are never too young to think about it.

In a file in the Vestry, we have several letters of instructions for funerals, covering people whose ages cross a span of nearly sixty years. It is so much easier to plan a funeral when you know it is what the person would have liked.....

Please would you seriously consider providing us with information. (In an envelope with your name on, marked funeral / contacts and give it to the Office or one of the clergy.) We promise to keep it carefully and would of course discuss it with you if you so wish.

Last but not least, if you go away leaving elderly relatives at home, please put information concerning your whereabouts in a visible place, not carefully hidden in a desk drawer. (Those of you who tried to locate me on holiday when my father was dying will know what I mean!) And make sure you have adequate travel insurance.....

Help us to help you

The Cross

David Grossart

Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn to joy (John 16 v. 20-21)

The Cross

Out of the depths, a cross,
transcendent blue of loss,
a splintered crown of lapis
lazuli, the debris of the sea.

From the six day joy of paradise, a perfect new born boy, suddenly taken. Needles pushed quickly into wrists and feet ; arms splinted, spread out like a cross . Alone and blindfolded, placed on a gauze, crying in a drum of lights. Tiny, fragile fingernails, ringed with blood, holding on to your own precious thumbs . Six hours later, the blood exchange abandoned ; morphine given at last. Intubation, kidney failure and seizures still to come. But, like the miracle of your perfect birth, you came back to us, alive, for a few precious weeks. Then that dark, lonely night, when we held your tiny body, wrapped in a blue and white striped blanket, like a prayer shawl. Lord, Jesus have mercy.

We are told of debts cancelled ;
of sin and guilt and sacrifice.
But the mystery remains ;
the cross ; the Way
of brokenness and loss ;
a prayer beyond prayer
when there are no words ;
the death of our selves
in this defended world,
the door to love's cry " I AM "

* * *

By boat, we cross a turquoise sea to an island in the sun, where the song of the darting swallows stretches free across the surf. There, we pin a prayer on a driftwood cross and walk together on the shore. And, as our tears fall, we return home ; new life already growing, secretly inside us, the breath of Iona's sand.

Good mourning?

Clephane Hume

'You cannot stop the birds of sorrow from landing on your shoulder, but you can stop them, nesting in your hair.'

Chinese Proverb

In modern Western society death is not readily talked about. It is something largely removed from day to day life but with the growth of the hospice movement, people began to confront the issues. Paradoxically, this may also be one of the consequences of AIDS, natural disasters, terrorism and war.

Loss is an important topic, and one which also encroaches on all aspects of life through loss of health, employment, a broken relationship, an opportunity which did not materialise. The subjective experiences are very similar to those of bereavement. No two people will grieve in the same way, but there are some common reactions which it is helpful to understand.

This is written in response to Angus Mitchell's article about preparing for dying. How can we deal with the inevitable sequel?

Needless to say, I don't have a neat answer, but I hope some musings on grief, and how we can help ourselves and others, might be useful.

Grieving

The actual process of bereavement may begin before someone dies – in anticipation of what is to come. Watching the person slowly fade away. Sudden and unexpected death is obviously traumatic, but the reality of loss after days or weeks of hospital or care home visiting nevertheless comes as a shock.

Initially people may keep going automatically – there is so much to do – and it is only later that the numbness wears off and there is time to feel the pain of the loss.

They may respond by weeping, feeling guilty, being angry - with the person who has died and those round about, or as CS Lewis asked '...where is God? '.

It can be difficult to concentrate, make decisions, and there is loneliness, the sense of being 'a half instead of a whole', which may drive people into being busy, avoiding being at home on their own. They are vulnerable to infections, and perplexed by their change in status. And because we feel inadequate to help, we may exacerbate this. As one lady, herself a grief counsellor, put it thus, 'I'd heard of people crossing the street to avoid you when someone has died, but it actually happened to me'.

Dealing with practicalities may concern the person one day (after my parents died, a friend taught me how to use their flymo to counteract the thriving lawn!) whereas at other times the sheer emotional impact of the loss is overwhelming.

With time, people come to terms with what has happened, develop new patterns of living and face the future with hope. Sometimes, it has to be said, they take on a whole new lease of life.....

As reactions to loss vary according to the individual situation, so does the timescale during which the intensity of feelings may be experienced. It may reasonably be expected that sad and painful feelings will diminish with time, but it would be wrong to assume that they will completely disappear.

Loss may also be experienced in the following contexts:

- *Episodic*: Feelings experienced from time to time, particularly in relation to lack of achievement of normal milestones, for example, by the parents of the young man who would have been graduating with his peer group this year.
- *Future*: The parents of this young man will never be grandparents.
- *Anniversaries*: It was on this date, 5 years ago, that X was diagnosed / Y died / Z had his birthday.

It should be noted that feelings of loss will fluctuate, and apparently small losses may add to the cumulative experience. Breaking a mug given by a deceased person may trigger a grief reaction which far outweighs that which might have been expected, due to the personal significance of the object. Isolated events may trigger feelings at any time, possibly producing unexpected 'flash back' reactions which demonstrate the fickle and enduring nature of the experience.

Theories of loss have been documented by authors working in different contexts, and are continually evolving. Briefly, these theories describe common features and pathways towards the resolution of grief:

- *Denial – disbelief and numbness*
- *Anger – usually directed towards God, or the person for going away*
- *Guilt - if only.....*
- *Depression – the pain of reality and realisation of the permanence of the situation*
- *Acceptance – gradual accommodation to the situation.*

The cumulative effect of multiple losses should be recognized. Talking of his wife's final admission after years of treatment for cancer, M said, 'The dog died two days before she went back into the hospice.' This left him completely alone.

So what do we do?

Remember, grief is a normal reaction to loss. The pain, whether individual or shared, cannot be avoided and needs to find expression within a supportive relationship. Some may feel a lack of support from others (real or perceived), so what the person seeks, above all, is someone who has time to listen. Conversely, people do not always want 'heavy' talk and contact with the ongoing world is important.

Worries about upsetting someone or saying the wrong thing are natural, but tears need to be shed and it is preferable for this to happen in a homely environment rather than the supermarket. Hugs are not for everyone, but non tactile people can usually make their feelings obvious!

Social pressures and expectations may also contribute to feelings of loss. However, grieving is a lonely experience and the world can be very critical of those who have not recovered after a period of time. People must be allowed to grieve at their own pace, according to the nature of their loss and their changed role.

Restructuring of life, might include the acquisition of practical skills and building social networks. People need support and encouragement in undertaking new roles or in doing things alone, eg different hobbies, going on holiday, but giving helpful advice should be resisted unless requested.

Consider the impact of your caring. It is only the stony-hearted who remain unmoved by the pain of others, but remember that whilst unwanted help can be irritating, people suffer more, from lack of attention.

Never be tempted to compare your own experience of grief with the person and say, 'I know how you feel.' You do not. Although your experiences may help you to understand, the person's sense of loss is unique.

In summary, be there for the person and stay there. People may choose not to accept help – it is one's right to refuse offers of assistance. Do not take an initial refusal of an offer (eg to come for a meal, a lift somewhere) as an indicator of total rejection. The person may welcome an invitation at a later date.

And when it happens to you?

Be gentle with yourself. Allow the tears to flow. Feelings may well up when you return to church. That is ok! Grief is a powerful emotional experience but it is possible to get through it in time. Don't hesitate to accept support from others. You would do the same for them, wouldn't you?

Sources of help

There will be occasions when someone needs 'outside' confidential help. This is not an admission of failure - there are specialist organisations out there for the purpose. The best known is Cruse Bereavement Care. There are also groups such as WAY (Widowed and Young), SOBS (Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide), SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society), Compassionate Friends (death of a child) and the Miscarriage Association.

In conclusion –

My dog collar hides a scar. The surgeon did an impressively neat job and the line is not nearly as visible as it used to be, so that a lot of people do not notice it. However, I know that it is there and I shall always be aware of it. Sometimes it twinges.

A quote from Rory Maclean, from The Oatmeal Ark – 'A man remembered never dies'.

The Church of St John the Evangelist
Princes Street, Edinburgh EH2 4BJ
www.stjohns-edinburgh.org.uk
office@stjohns-edinburgh.org.uk
0131 229 7565
SC012836