



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Death and Dying by Laura Brekke



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Death is an essential part of the human experience, and yet it's one of the most difficult things for people to talk about. How can we confront this conversation without fear? How should people of faith approach the reality of death?

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The Hardest Conversation

Founding Father Benjamin Franklin is famously attributed as saying, “In this world, nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” While Franklin’s quip was likely more concerned with taxes than death, it’s a grim reality that we must face our mortality every day. In our modern world, more than 100 people die every minute, according to a recent article in *The Economist*. However, despite the unavoidable nature of death, American society—the church included—has shied away from addressing this difficult subject.

What’s made us so afraid of the inevitable? In her new book *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer*, author Barbara Ehrenreich explores the complex world of aging and dying. Much of our modern “preventative care,” she proposes, is essentially an attempt to exert control over our bodies, which don’t always act in ways that we would wish. Exercise, healthy eating, even meditation—all prescribed as strategies to slow aging and prevent illness—may not have the effects that we believe. In fact, cells may have a degree of agency, doing what they wish to do, instead of what we want them to do. Ehrenreich writes, “If there is a lesson here it has to do with humility. . . . We are not the sole authors of our destinies or of anything else.”

This insight may signal a paradigm shift in how researchers think about health and disease. For Ehrenreich, it served as a personal reminder that despite the control

she exerts now in her life, she will one day have to relinquish that control and accept death. That acceptance inevitably comes for each person, writes Victoria Sweet, doctor and author of *God's Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Healing*. In a recent article for *The Atlantic*, Sweet writes, "I've noticed that everyone I've seen die does come to accept the inevitable loss of control. . . . At the end, something magical appears to occur—something beautiful, something Other—that seems to heal the spirit, ally all fear, and settle, finally, the struggle for control."

This acceptance comes at different times for different individuals. Some take months or even years to accept the inevitability of death. Others take days, hours, even minutes. But, Sweet writes, "People die the way they've lived. . . . The brave die bravely; the curious, with curiosity; the optimistic, optimistically. Those who are by nature accepters, accept; those who by nature fight for control die fighting for control."

REFLECT:

- How often do you think about death? How does the inevitability of death shape the way you live your life?
- How does your Christian faith shape your understanding and view of death?
- What do you think about Victoria Sweet's statement that people die the way they live?

A 21st-Century Funeral

Changing funerary rituals reflect changing attitudes toward death and dying in our world today. A 2015 study found that over 60 percent of Americans, middle age and older, would consider a "green" burial, one that excluded embalming and used a biodegradable casket. It would be inconsistent, says Jimmy Olson, a "green" undertaker in Wisconsin, "for someone who's recycled all their life and drives a Prius to then be put under the ground in a concrete vault, plastic-sealed casket and with their body pumped full of chemicals."

Additionally, over half of all Americans are cremated, which allows for funerals or "life celebra-

tions" to be hosted at a variety of venues. Startup companies catering to the bereaved also offer a number of new opportunities. One company offers to spread your loved one's ashes in space; another promises to extract a strand of DNA from a loved one's remains to be returned to you in a stainless steel capsule. Linda Cronin, who works in the funerary industry, has earrings made out of her mother's ashes. She says, "My Mom is in my ears, I take her wherever I go, I even swim with her."

Social media coaches are working to bring the funerary business into the 21st century. Moving away from images of coffins and hearses, these coaches advise funeral homes to advertise the services they offer, such as live-stream funerals or nontraditional life celebrations. As innovation and new technologies allow mourners to approach the physical reality of death in new ways, the question remains: How should we talk about death and dying in the meantime?

REFLECT:

- How would you like to be buried? Have you discussed your funerary plans with your loved ones? Why or why not?
- Are nontraditional burials in line with Christian theology of the resurrection?

"Death Cafe"

Despite the discomfort most people have discussing death, it appears that a growing number of people are hungry for places to do just that. The Death Cafe movement, started by Jon Underwood, a British website designer, has flourished over the last seven years. Built on the ideas of Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz, the movement seeks to "increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives," according to the website DeathCafe.com.

Set up as a casual conversation, Death Cafes traditionally offer tea and cake along with their challenging topic of discussion. In a 2013 NPR article, Underwood said, "When people sit down to talk about death, the pretense kind of falls away, and people talk very openly and authentically." These

authentic conversations about human mortality draw people from every demographic, from aging baby boomers to middle-aged couples to young adults looking for ways to discuss death more honestly.

“In the long run,” says Angela Hennessy, mother of a seven-year-old boy, “my hope is that [participating in a Death Cafe] eases the fear and the strain for him in his understanding of what it means when someone dies.” Hennessy and her son went to a Death Cafe following the death of his great-grandmother.

Linda Siniard has facilitated several Death Cafes since the death of her son. She explains, “A lot of us had sort of put dying and death—and definitely grief—into these very secretive closets, because we weren’t welcomed into the conversation.” Death Cafes also offer a safe and supportive environment to discuss all of the different parts of life

that accompany death and dying, from end-of-life care to grieving rituals.

In the NPR article, Underwood said, “When we acknowledge that we’re going to die, it falls back on ourselves to ask the question, ‘Well, in this limited time that I’ve got, what’s important for me to do?’” Underwood’s perspective has become more poignant in the wake of his own untimely death from acute promyelocytic leukemia in June 2017 at the age of 44. The work of the Death Cafe movement has been carried on by Underwood’s mother, Sue Barsky Reid, and sister, Jools Barsky.

REFLECT:

- Would you host a Death Cafe? Why or why not?
- Why are people looking to spaces like Death Cafes to talk about death?
- What role should faith play in our conversations about death and dying?

An Irish Approach to Death

In an online video released by BBC Ideas, Kevin Toolis, author of the book *My Father’s Wake: How the Irish Teach Us to Live, Love, and Die*, talks about the experience of his father’s death and how this traditional Irish approach to death helped him to deal with his grief and make the entire process of death and dying into a communal experience. One of the Toolis’s primary focal points relates to both his father’s death and the immediate aftermath. He remarks that he stood at the foot of his father’s deathbed and that at least a dozen other people stood around the room as his father passed away. Many of these people were friends that Toolis didn’t know personally. As a group, the friends and companions prayed and, as Toolis says, “cradled” his father into death as if singing him a lullaby.

Oftentimes we think of death as something lonely and almost clinical. However, this isn’t the way death has always been addressed. Before we created specialized occupations to handle death, the job of preparing the dead for burial often fell to the family itself. Therefore, the family and loved ones were all intimately involved in the death of their family member. Toolis mentions that in some ways, this helped to drain the emotion and grief from the process and to accelerate the acceptance that his father was indeed gone and wouldn’t return.

REFLECT:

- Watch the video “What’s the Best Way to Face Death?” (See “Helpful Links.”) Then answer the following questions.
- Have you ever attended a wake before? What was your experience like?
- Would you like to celebrate a loved one in this way? Would you like your family to celebrate you in such a way? Why or why not?

Core Bible Passages

As Christians, we're called to approach death with confidence because of our faith in the resurrection. In **John 11:25-26**, we see Jesus telling Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." We have confidence that even though we leave our bodies one day, we will still have eternal life with God and will be raised again on the last day. The story of Lazarus and his own bodily resurrection, which is recorded in this chapter, reminds us that God's power overcomes even the hold of death.

In **1 Corinthians 15:55**, the apostle Paul writes, "*Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting?*" Through Jesus, we've been given victory over the grave, and Paul anticipates that the second coming of Jesus is imminent. In Paul's words, we hear an echo of the Old Testament prophet Hosea, who asked, "Death, where are your diseases? Grave, where is your destruction?" (**Hosea 13:14**). Trust in God has been enough to lead people of faith to stand firm in the face of death for generations.

REFLECT:

- What do you think the resurrection of the dead means for Christians living so long after Jesus' resurrection?
- Paul had great confidence in God's power over death, yet many Christians fear death. Why do you think this is so? How can the church better equip individuals to face their own deaths and the deaths of those they love?

United Methodist Perspective

According to historical record, John Wesley, the intellectual founder of Methodism, repeated these final words on his death bed: "The best of all is, God is with us." In our ministry with those who are dying, United Methodists continue to share this good news that whether in life or in death, the best knowledge of all is that God is with us.

For people of faith, the funeral often plays an integral role in the process of grief and is likely the way we're most familiar with confronting death. The Reverend Taylor Burton-Edwards, director of worship resources for Discipleship Ministries, explains that the funeral service "is the opportunity for the community gathering in response to the death of the person, to proclaim our solidarity with each other through this time of grief." But more importantly, continues Burton-Edwards, the funeral provides an opportunity "to proclaim our faith in the resurrection of the dead and the hope of new creation, promised by Christ."

In *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016*, the "Nurturing Community" section of the Social Principles addresses how we should care for the dying and reminds us that "as Christians we must always be prepared to surrender the gift of mortal life and claim the gift of eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

REFLECT:

- Have you been to a funeral recently? If so, how did the service "proclaim our faith in the resurrection of the dead and the hope of new creation, promised by Christ," in the words of Taylor Burton-Edwards?
- How does Wesley's affirmation "The best of all is, God is with us" help shape the way we live? How does it help shape the way we die?

Helpful Links

- For more information about the Death Cafe movement, check out the following links:
 - » The Death Cafe website: <https://deathcafe.com/>
 - » “Why I Talk About Death” video: <https://youtu.be/iVMBCZjk4c0>
 - » “Death Cafes Breathe Life into Conversations About Dying,” an audio interview from NPR: <https://www.npr.org/2013/03/08/173808940/death-cafes-breathe-life-into-conversations-about-dying>
- “Barbara Ehrenreich on Our Obsession with Aging,” an audio interview from Midday WNYC: <https://www.wnyc.org/story/aging-cellular-level-persists/>
- “What’s the Best Way to Face Death?” BBC video from Kevin Toolis, author of *My Father’s Wake*: <https://www.facebook.com/bbc/videos/2226882743993579/>
- “Why Undertakers Are Worried,” the *Economist* article referenced in the main essay: <https://www.economist.com/international/2018/04/12/why-undertakers-are-worried>
- “Your Body Is a Teeming Battleground,” Victoria Sweet’s article from *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/05/barbara-ehrenreich-natural-causes/556859/>

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Next Week in FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

A Trip to Israel and Palestine

by Alex Joyner

Recently, *FaithLink* writer Alex Joyner spent ten days in Israel and Palestine. During his journey, he explored some of the main sources of tension preventing peace in the region. What are these sources of tension? How can people of faith promote a greater understanding of the reality of the conflict and the possibilities for peace?

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Opening Prayer

God of our living and of our dying, remind us that we belong to you. In the strength of youth and the maturity of age, we belong to you as children in your image. Open our hearts that we might face difficult conversations with an attitude of joy instead of fear. In the name of Jesus our risen Lord we pray. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Invite participants to share recent experiences they've had with confronting death. If you don't want this to be overly personal, perhaps discuss the death of a prominent public figure and what the public response was to that person's death. If anyone has been to a funeral lately or perhaps a memorial service or life celebration, ask them how that particular service addressed the issues of death and mortality.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Watch the Death Cafe video on YouTube (see "Helpful Links"). Ask: Would you host a Death Cafe? Why or why not? Would it be appropriate for our church? Why or why not?
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

- Ask participants to research funeral options in their community. Do any of these serve your needs or those of your relatives? Would an alternative burial arrangement (such as a green burial or having your ashes blasted into space) be appealing? Why or why not?
- Visit a local funeral home and have a conversation with the director. What services do they offer? Is cremation an option? Investigate options for alternative burials or life celebrations.
- Ask participants to design their own funeral. What Scripture, hymns, or rituals would be meaningful? Discuss how this activity made them feel.
- Visit a local cemetery, especially if it's a family cemetery. Clean up the gravestones. Discuss care for the dead.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, we remember that to you, our life is but a handbreadth. Empower us to live in service to you. Call us to your heart so that on our last day, we may turn with joy from this life to the next. In the steadfast name of Jesus we pray. Amen.