

A COMPASSIONATE WAY TO FACE OUR DEATH AND THAT OF THOSE WE LOVE

Homily preached by the Rev. Lilia Cuervo
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Today, I want to share with you two very effective and compassionate ways to face our own death and the deaths of those we love, especially when one still has the chance to prepare for them. These ways are anticipatory grieving, and giving and receiving final gifts. I also want to share my own experience of applying these ways when my mother was dying and the great benefits I received by doing so.

In her book How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Diesⁱ, Therese A. Rando, explains that Anticipatory Grief means *grieving the loss of a loved one in the future and still be involved with the person in the present*. She recommends *recognizing your separateness from your loved one and learning to tolerate the awareness that the loved one will die while you will continue to live*. She says that *one should remain as involved as possible with your dying loving one, promoting whatever continued communication, interaction, dignity, control, living, and meaning remain available*. She suggests *starting slowly to incorporate changes in your identity, roles, experiences, and expectations that reflect the present and will begin to prepare you for a world without your loved one*.

In their revolutionary book Final Giftsⁱⁱ, Callanan and Kelley express their excitement at discovering that the dying people actually give messages. According to them *these fall into two main categories: the first, are descriptions of experiences such as being in the presence of someone not alive, the need to prepare for travel or change, mention of some place they alone could see and their knowledge of when death would occur. The second category consists of messages about something, or someone needed so death could be peaceful: the desire to reconcile personal, spiritual or moral relationships and requests to remove some barrier to achieve this peace*. They suggest, *Try not to give advice or to look for solutions. Dying people need the company of those who will listen, those willing to understand their situations, those who continue to offer love and friendship in the face of death*.

Although my mother and I didn't have a smooth relationship, especially during my married life, losing her was the most painful and indescribable experience I ever had. Yet, because I was able to prepare and accompany her through her terminal illness, and because she gave me the gift of dying in my arms, I still remember her death with sadness, but also with love and a profound sense of satisfaction.

My mother was a fiercely independent woman who had a deeply ingrained work ethic, taking very seriously her calling to serve the poorest of the poor as a public health nurse. She lived in small towns where she established and served health posts, becoming in her long life the healer of hundreds, if not thousands. In 1991, she started feeling weak and losing her appetite. I was crushed and bewildered, learning from the doctors the extent of the damage caused by a now active tropical parasite which had been dormant in her liver for many years. Leaving the hospital the day we received the diagnosis, I was numb with the realization that my most terrifying and feared time was at hand. My mother was terminally ill. I was going to lose her. In a rush, doctors, nurses, medical technology, hospital beds, blood, tears, pain, scans, my office duties, my home life, her church, my church, friends, even what to wear to her viewing, passed through my mind. Yet, she was there, holding onto my arm as we descended the stairs to the parking lot. Oh, how I tried to calm my mind and to practice being in the moment. I told her that we both were going to go through ups and downs but that we were there for each other and that we had good friends and family that cared for and loved us.

At the time, my youngest daughter wanted to visit some campuses in search of a college. Since my mother always loved to travel and meet new people, I invited her to join us. At first, she was apprehensive; then she reasoned that, if she was going to die, she might as well do something meaningful and fun while there still was time. We all shared a wonderful experience visiting national parks and colleges in the West.

Before my mother got sick, I had been volunteering with Hospice Care of Long Island. There I had learned how to tend to the emotional and physical needs of the dying. Now that my mother had become terminally ill, it was my opportunity to apply what I had learned and accompany her in a nurturing, compassionate way. Right after our trip, one of the first actions I took was to prepare a room in my house, and to invite her to use it as she wished. I wanted to ease the transition

from her independent life to a more restricted one. As my emerging feelings of sadness started to intensify, I realized that I was experiencing anticipatory grief.

Ironically, at the time I had converted to Unitarian Universalism, my mother had become a Seventh Day Adventist. From time to time, we would have heated arguments about religion and other matters. But now that she was ill, I wanted to give her a major final gift, that of praying together. At first, I would just listen to her praying, sometimes silently criticizing her theology. Then I started saying the words with her, listening for the sentiment, not the theology, and finally holding hands during our prayers. Other gifts from this time were talking about death, and about our beliefs in the afterlife, reassuring her many times how interesting and valuable her life had been, asking her to remember the thousands of people that she had helped during her career as a nurse and later when she volunteered in so many places, telling her that if I had the chance to be born again and were allowed to choose my mother, I would surely choose her. I also told her that I wanted to become a minister in part following her example of caring service. We talked about funeral arrangements and what to do with her ashes.

As her death approached, my mother became very peaceful and even sweet most of the time. Her demands decreased and she was much more accepting of my religion, my ideas, the way I was raising my children, and even my cooking! This made it easy for me to become more affectionate and open regarding her religion and her idiosyncrasies. Yet, our new-found level of acceptance made it more difficult for me to leave her when I went to work. I would wait for the weekends with anticipation knowing that I could be around her for longer periods. At times, when holding hands, I would close my eyes and say to myself: *Imprint the warm touch of her hands in yours; soon you will never feel it again.*

On the afternoon of the day my mother died, I put on soft music in her room and brought her fresh flowers. Around 3:30, I was alone with her, and I felt moved to put one of my hands on her forehead and the other over her heart. I told her that I loved her very much, I thanked her for all she had done for me and my children, and I told her that it was okay to leave if she was ready. I recited her mantra, *Your will be done, not mine*, several times. These moments were as perfect as I have ever experienced in my life.

Later when I entered the room, I asked my mother how she was feeling. She turned towards me and said with her sweetest voice: *My love*. After dinner, I decided to lie by her side with one of my arms under her head. All of us who were present with her -- myself, my children, and a friend that were with us -- noted a feeling of serenity permeating the room. I was still holding my mother in my arms when, at 11:55 pm, she breathed for the last time.

Although I was very sad and missed my mother terribly, thanks to my anticipatory grieving I did not feel guilt or major regrets after her death. Even today, I feel peace and love every time I remember her and our exchange of final gifts. As I mentioned, I gave her the final gifts of holding hands while praying, learning to enjoy when she read from her Bible to me, reassuring her many times how interesting and valuable her life had been and telling her that it was okay to leave if she was ready. My mother gave me so many final gifts - accepting my becoming a Unitarian Universalist, surrendering control and letting me tend to her basic needs, and being open with her wishes after she died.

When faced with the impending loss of those we love and the loss of our own life it is greatly satisfactory to be able to change fear and anger into love and peace, indifference and denial into awareness and care. Although extremely difficult at times, these changes are especially important and rewarding when our relationships have been fraught with conflict, or disappointment or anger, like mine was for a long time. Finding ways to practice Anticipatory Grief as we contemplate our own mortality and that of those we love, and exchanging Final Gifts with those facing death or with those caring for us when facing ours, is a compassionate way to insure both peaceful and loving transitions and a satisfied and guiltless conscience.

May we all be able to resolve the big questions in our hearts, before it is too late. May we all be able to exchange nurturing final gifts. May the Spirit of Life sustain us and those we love, that when the time comes, we may be able to peacefully transition into the realm of the great divine mystery, our final resting home. Amen and blessed be.

ⁱ Therese A. Rando, Ph.D. How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies. Bantam Books. 1988.

ⁱⁱ Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley. Final Gifts. Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying. Bantam Books. 1992.