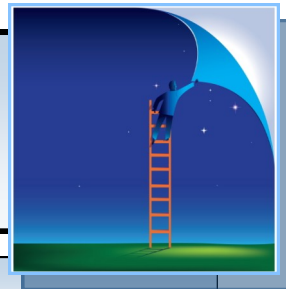




TO YOUR HEALTH

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SPIRITUALITY AT THE END-OF-LIFE

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Death is a spiritual as well as a physical event. None of us can know for certain what happens after we die. We live in an Information Age that allows us to gather evidence to support any number of beliefs. Each of us has to discern what rings true for us. Some religions offer a promise of an afterlife. What if we believe that we will cease to exist when our physical body dies? How do we cope with a terminal illness then?

According to Dr. Harold Koenig, Director of the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health at Duke University, *"At least two-thirds of Americans say that religion is important in their daily lives, and religion becomes even more important when they become sick...People who are acutely or chronically ill are often grappling with fear, uncertainty, and distressing physical symptoms from illness, and many of them turn to religion to cope (90% in some surveys)... Religious beliefs often influence the medical decisions that patients make when confronting severe medical illness or facing end-of-life situations... Despite this, neither patients nor physicians usually have discussions about spiritual matters."*

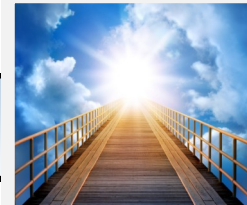
Certainly doctors cannot prescribe religion, nor should they. But why do we exclude our spiritual beliefs altogether from these important conversations?

Dr. Koenig goes on to say, *"Not only do patients' religious beliefs influence the medical decisions they make, but the religious beliefs of physicians influence the kinds of treatments they are willing to offer patients."* In recent years, medical schools

have begun to increase the training of medical students in the area of spirituality and health. As medicine has advanced and cardiopulmonary resuscitation has brought people back from the brink of death, some people have found comfort in hearing accounts of near death experiences (NDEs). Dr. Raymond Moody interviewed many people from different countries and various spiritual beliefs who relayed their NDEs. His book, *"Life After Life"* explores this phenomenon. Common factors in their experiences were 1. moving through a tunnel, 2. seeing a bright light, and 3. having one's life reviewed. Science counters that these experiences are hallucinations that our brains create.

In his book, *"Proof of Heaven"*, Dr. Eben Alexander describes his experience when he was in a coma for a week during a bout with bacterial meningitis. He is a neurosurgeon who is intimately familiar with the parts of the brain that would be responsible for creating hallucinations. While he was being closely monitored in the hospital during his illness, his neocortex was completely *"offline"* in his words. Yet he maintains that his consciousness saw and heard remarkable, otherworldly places and beings. As can be expected, some people are critical of his claims while others find his experience comforting. Regardless of what we believe about an afterlife, none of us can truly know whether our consciousness continues or ends when we die.

Does a belief in a reward in the afterlife influence our behavior here and now? Conversely, if we believe that this life on earth is our only existence, do we view our time as more precious and fritter



away less of it? If our spiritual beliefs are a guidepost for how to live, then how do they inform the way we die? Each of us develops our own personal beliefs according to our experiences, culture, family, background, hopes, fears, and wisdom. Spirituality is a deeply personal aspect of our lives. Our beliefs can carry us through times of stress, loss, illness, and death. Regardless of our beliefs, most people experience some existential anxiety when they imagine their death. The unknowable is inherently fearful.

In her book, *“Talking About Death”*, Virginia Morris offers these insights. *“Whatever your own fears and dreads and concerns are, tease them out, one by one, examine them carefully, try to address them, and then revisit them... As for concerns about the ego and the disappearance of the Self, well, that requires deep soul-searching and a lifetime of religious and spiritual review. Do we continue to exist, and what does life mean in its finite form?... Are you worried about leaving things unfinished, unfulfilled, unresolved? Then find time to take a postponed trip, to mend a frayed relationship, to finish a half-baked project. Are you frightened by the legacy you will leave? Think about the memories you can still create, the impact you can still have, the gifts you can still give... How might you become the kind of person you want them to remember? Are you afraid of pain? Talk with your doctor and loved ones about this issue so they know that you want them to treat pain...None of this is easy. And examining your fears won’t make them disappear...But it is better to address them than to ignore them and then discover later that they are there...”*

When each of us is faced with the end of our physical bodies on this earth, how will we find meaning at life’s end? Death is a spiritual as well as a physical event.

Encounter

We were riding through frozen fields
in a wagon at dawn.
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the
road.
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of
them is alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made
the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are
they going?
The flash of a hand, streak of
movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in
wonder.

~ Czeslaw Milosz ~

Announcement

This fall, the *Living Fully, Dying Well* program and Hospice of the North Shore and Greater Boston will offer a series of lectures about grief. The lectures will be in the Auditorium starting in October. They will address various topics and offer ways to cope with sudden loss, the loss of a partner and how to support a friend who is sick. Please watch for announcements of the specific dates of these lectures in Bits and Pieces and on the Activities bulletin board.