

Why is The Grim Reaper so Grim?

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I work with Death on a daily basis and over the years have come to know him quite well. On an average week I visit about twenty dying folks, more than three hundred terminal individuals annually, and over the past twelve years I have provided spiritual care for nearly two thousand people who have died.

I'm a hospice chaplain.^[1]

A little context might be helpful. Nearly all of the folks I meet and serve are north of 70 years of age. Most often, people in their 80's, 90's and even 100's. Also, I work in a relatively safe middle-class environment. By and large, the people I serve have at least had a shot at a good life. These facts color my experience with Death. I'm sure ministers who work with dying children or in places of great poverty and privation might have different feelings about my friend Death.

Now generally I don't tell people what I do for a living. I mean, when you tell someone you're a hospice chaplain, they tend to just tilt their head knowingly and look at you with big doe eyes like you're Brother Teresa.

And I'm not.

It's not that I don't love what I do or am not proud of it. Actually, I find my work both inspiring and refreshing, inspiring because of the courage and strength I witness everyday by patients and family members.

Refreshing in that I encounter very little in the way of nonsense. By the time I get to meet our patients most of the nonsense has been kicked out of them – either by a doctor's terminal diagnosis or by some painfully failed therapy – or both.

Most clergy by and large have to put up with a lot of nonsense. I sure did when I was a pastor. It usually sounds something like this: "Why do we have to sing the same songs every Sunday?" or "You know, if we could just get out 15 minutes earlier we could beat the Baptists to all the good restaurants." or "That was a wonderful sermon pastor, one of your best!" Pure nonsense.

Hospice patients know they don't have time for such silliness. Every alert minute takes on profound importance when you know there are precious few left. I find the brutal honesty of conversations with such people incredibly rich and refreshing. There's so little pretense, so little posturing. The sacredness of such moments often demands my full attention and it feels as though time simply stands still in silent homage.

That's not to say such conversations are always serious. They're not. But what they are is real.

For example, I remember when Carolyn was telling me about how depressed she became after

her doctor told her cancer was inoperable and she only had a few months of life left.

“I stayed in bed for three or four days just crying,” she said. “I didn’t get dressed or shower – I just cried. Then one morning my daughter Jennifer came in and brought me breakfast. I started yelling at her that I didn’t want any God damned food, and if I’d had a bag I’d just put it over my head and end it all right now!”

‘Paper or plastic?’ Jennifer asked.

Well, how can you stay depressed when someone treats you like that? So I got up and ate and decided to continue living until I can’t anymore.”

Such folks are daily reminders for me to live intentionally now – while I can. Because the reality is none of us is promised tomorrow. I would say this is the supreme lesson the dying have taught me about living. I call it the dying well paradox: *contemplating my death compels me to live a fully engaged life now and living a fully engaged life now is the best preparation for my death*. I imagine you’ve heard something like this somewhere before. So the real question is how do we engage this wisdom to actually impact our day to day existence? How can this insight shape our spiritual maturation?

Vital Signs

What can be considered as evidence of spiritual maturity anyway? Church attendance? Tithing records? Number of memorized Bible verses? Faithful rotations in the nursery? I suggest signs of an authentic spiritual life must go deeper than these.

Now one of the drawbacks in being a minister is most everyone lies to you at a first meeting about their life of faith. For example, when I meet a new hospice patient or their family as a chaplain and ask, “How is everyone doing?”

They usually all say, “Fine.” Or, “Praise God, I’m good ... I’m just waiting to go to heaven.”

Often those are simply deflections.

Those are the responses we’re all trained to tell the minister to keep him or her far away from doing any harm. If we actually tell the truth, the minister would likely try to probe deeper and unearth all the little tawdry dark family secrets that have caused enormous pain for years – and no one wants that!

To circumvent the social niceties that deflect against really getting to know folks I’ve developed a list of *spiritual vital signs* to help determine what’s really going on inside someone’s soul. Here’s my list of *spiritual vitals*: gratitude, generosity, submission to reality, and an ability to shower the people you love with love. (I know I stole that last one from James Taylor.) These are the qualities I look for in meeting a new patient to help determine the relative health of his or her soul. These are signs I look for to see if someone is really alive.

Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast has famously promoted the mantra, “It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It's gratefulness that makes us happy.”^[2] A brief scan of the TED Talks library gives you an indication of the growing awareness on the importance gratitude holds for spiritual and mental well being. I've learned that gratitude is something we cultivate. It's also magnetic. The more I express gratitude the more I find to be grateful for. Sadly, I've also learned the same is true for ingratitude. The more I bitch – the more I find to bitch about.

In recent years there has been a growing body of research to demonstrate that simply doing three kind things a day for others can help lift depression, improve sleep, and increase spiritual resilience. Generous behavior is evidence of a soul that has been humbled by the reception of grace and understands the deep connection we all have with each other. I have never met a truly generous person who was not aware of how much they have been given as gift and the natural response is to share that gift with others (see the story of the four lepers in 2 Kings Chapter 7). Conversely, stinginess and a sense of entitlement are symptoms of a grace starved soul.

By submission to reality I mean one's ability to simply and humbly accept the impermanent nature of life. All living things die. Over the years the folks I've met and served who can accept this fact generally die a much less painful death. Those who insist on fighting the inevitable, who refuse to give up when the end is in sight, often need far more analgesics (heavy duty pain killers).

In serving nearly 2,000 departed souls I have never once had someone say to me, “I wish I had gone to more football games.” or “I wish I had spent more time on line.” or “I wish I could have gone shopping more often.” What matters most to those at the end of their life are the people they love and those who love them. Jesus taught there is no more important investment we can make in this life than loving God and those whom God places in our lives (see Mark 12:28-31). For so many years as a practicing Christian I thought this is what I needed to do to make God happy. To my joyful surprise, I have discovered that this what truly makes me happy.

So these are my spiritual vital signs, signs to give me an indication of how really alive someone's soul is. Are they truly awake to the wonder of life? Or are they asleep, simply eking out an existence without truly engaging this miraculous gift?

Why is The Grim Reaper So Grim?

In the years that I've worked with Death and felt his presence at the bedside of a dying patient, I've thought about his costume. I mean, what's with the hooded cowl?

I wonder if Death uses the cowl to hide his own grief, grief at having to come and collect folks who have never really lived? Never given their hearts freedom to love and be loved? So afraid of what others think, seduced by culturally unachievable standards of wealth, beauty, and knowledge, or traumatized by painful life experiences that they spent their limited precious moments in a self absorbed sleep walk. Why is the Grim Reaper so grim? Maybe because he aches so deeply for the missed opportunities we all had to really live?

Of late I have been working to strengthen my own spiritual vital signs. I want to be alive while I

still can. So I look for opportunities to be generous, especially with my time (which is very hard for me)--surrendering to the things I cannot change, battling the ones I can and praying to know the difference between the two. I start each day praying for the grace and courage to be Chaplain Fred for yet another day and ask God for the openness of heart to use the day as a treasure hunt. In the midst of my tasks – the daily phone calls, traffic, charting, emails, meetings – I pray to really see at least three people this day. I mean really see them, see what is beautiful and special about them, and then find some kind way of communicating that to them. Then as I sit for prayer in the evenings I try to reflect on those folks I saw and pray for them. What I find can be big or little – but I want to find and bless at least three people. I so want my life to be a blessing for others.

I have come to the realization that all I seek at this point in my life is to be a good man. I want to spend my remaining days telling the people I love why I love them. I want to reflect back to them the beauty I see within them. I want to be a conduit of God's grace rather than a participant in the fear of "not enough." I want to be kind and generous – trusting that if I give myself to these tasks I might become the son God dreams me to be. I want at the end of my days as I lie on my deathbed for the last words to cross my lips to be "Thank you." I want my friend Death not to be crying when he comes for me – but to have a gentle smile and knowing glance indicating that I really lived.

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[1] Portions of this article are taken from the author's forthcoming book, Fred Grewe, *Time to Talk About Dying: How Clergy and Chaplains Can Help Senior Adults Prepare for a Good Death* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018). See <https://www.jkp.com/>

[2] David Steindl-Rast, *Want to Be Happy? Be Grateful* (TED). https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful/transcript?language=en