

I Was Not Ready For Death. Are You?

Before my wife died, I thought I was ready for death. She and I had had all the conversations you should have about what to do with our bodies and what kind of service we wanted. We had done our advance directives—wills, beneficiary designees, health care proxies, etc. We were ready.

Right! The plan was for me to die and for her to be a widow. There was no plan for me to be a widower. And, let me tell you, I was not ready.

I was not ready for the emotional onslaught. I was not ready to find myself crying with little emotional provocation. I was not ready to be alone in our bed. I was not ready for her not to be there to talk to. As I said in my eulogy for her, when I finished writing it, I got up from my desk to go show it to her. I sat down stunned that she wasn't there.

There are people I talk with, but there's no one I share everyday with. No one with our shared history.

I wasn't ready for that.

I was not ready for the loneliness. I have done the right things. I keep very busy. I spend lots of time with people. It all helps, but it doesn't touch the loss of the core connection that she and I had. A connection that had been transformed over time from sexual passion to a shared life, a single life for the two of us.

I was not ready for the anger that I still feel. Anger at the universe, anger at the health care system, anger at her for abandoning me.

As I write this, I am crying. And I am not a person who cries.



One^{very} Old Man

I was not ready for any of this.

Of course, I had lost other people who I cared about, including my grandparents, my mother and father, an aunt and uncle I had been very close with, and some dear friends; but I did not really face the reality of death until my wife died.

Facing death is not something that we do well in our society. Maybe not in any society. I don't know about the others, but probably all cultures dress death up in ceremonies that strip away the reality of the person and of their death.

In this society, when you die, if you don't die suddenly, it will be said with admiration that you died after a battle with one dreaded disease or another. A battle!

There's a presumption that death is something to be fought.

Dylan Thomas, for example, in a beautiful but very cruel poem, urges his dying father, "Do not go gentle into that good night. Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

I beg to differ. People like my wife accept the inevitable. In fact, acceptance of death is one of the so-called "stages" of dying.

I certainly hope that when I die, I will be at peace with the life I have lived and that my daughter, unlike Thomas, will not urge me to fight the inevitable and will allow me to go gently into death.

So, what does it mean to be ready for death? At the most obvious level, it means having advance directives—wills, health care proxies, directions for how to dispose of your body. Do you have directives in place? Have you talked with the people who will survive you? Most people don't. If you don't, you're a damned fool. I don't want to reason with you. Just do it. You will die. Putting off a last will and testament will not keep you from dying. Just do it.



That's the easy part. The hard part is the emotional journey. There's a difficult journey for the person who is dying and a difficult journey for the survivors who care about them, especially spouses, partners, and parents.

I can't comment on the loss of a child. It is, I'm sure, the worst possible experience.

But loss of a spouse/life partner is also profoundly difficult, even though it is very common. As I only realized when my wife was dying, almost every marriage that doesn't end in divorce ends in widowhood.

I ask again: Are you ready? For your own death? For the death of your life partner?

Maybe you are at peace with the life that you've led and can say, as my wife did, "I've lived a long and happy life. I am ok with death."

Maybe you can accept your partner's death with equanimity. I confess I never made peace with my wife's death. I hated it. I still hate it. That, I think, is the essence of grief.

What can you do? Frankly, I'm not sure. I think, as I said in a previous post, that the health care system ought to be able to help you, especially at the point of fatal diagnosis. They can at least warn you about the very tough emotional journey. They can connect you with supports.

But it may very well be the case that you cannot ever be ready for the shattering of self and relationships that is the essence of death.

I'm very interested in what you think and would welcome your comments and suggestions.