

Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life
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Living Well

Christian Practices for Everyday Life

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Dying Well



Yearning



Death is an inevitable part of life; there's no getting around it. This is a frightening prospect, for the specter of death destroys any illusion that we are in full control of our lives, or that we are our own makers and keepers. Most of us will experience the death of someone we love dearly, and all of us must face our own death. How is it, then, that some people are able to die with the assurance that death is not the final word? How is it that some are able to face the death of a loved one trusting that love is stronger than death?

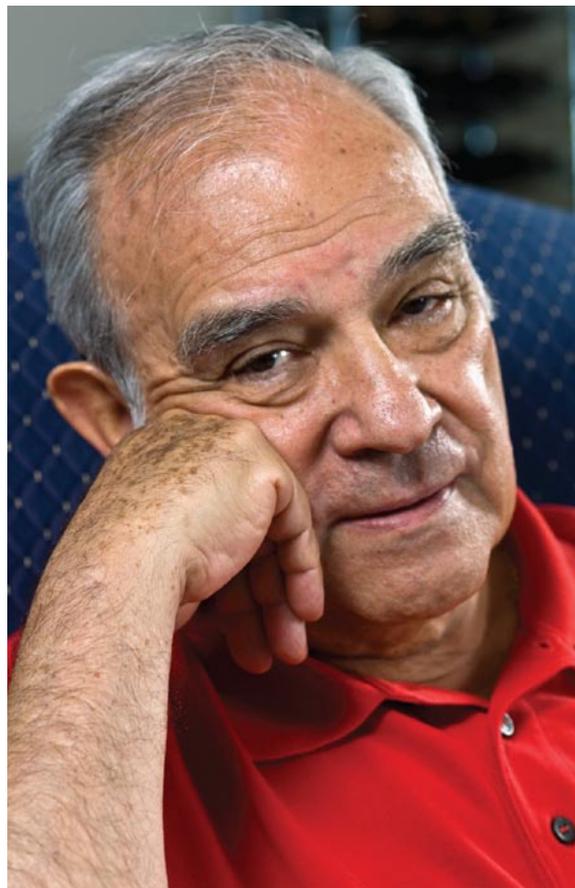
(Amy Plantiga Pauw, *Practicing Our Faith*)

Teaching Farewell

"It's not the dying part that I'm having trouble with," Bob said matter-of-factly. "It's the part where I first get sick, very sick, and only then do I die." We were having lunch, hastily arranged, after he had received a diagnosis of aggressive prostate cancer with a prognosis of less than a year to live. We had had a comfortable friendship over several years, meeting occasionally, usually for lunch, and even those were often difficult to schedule with our busy calendars. But we often exchanged brief phone calls or e-mails when there was something happening in our lives.

Sitting across from him at the table was a somewhat surreal experience, talking about death as an imminent reality for one of us. At the same time I was aware of the fear of losing someone very dear. His demeanor belied the seriousness of the subject. He looked well, with the usual twinkle in his eye. If anything, he seemed awed at his situation. Soon our conversation turned to more familiar items. It was only as we were parting that reality once more sunk in as we stopped ourselves from trying to set a date for another meeting.

A few weeks later I received an invitation to a reception in his honor. It was to be held at the restaurant where we usually had our lunches. I had grimly thought to myself that this was the first "pre-emptive" wake that I had been to. But upon entering the restaurant my mood shifted, as Bob was there to greet each one of us and make introductions all around. He still looked well but was about to start a course of chemotherapy that would greatly weaken him.



Many mutual friends were in attendance, the food was delicious, the wine flowed, and with it the conversations. It was easy to forget why we had gathered. Later in the evening there were several short tributes; everyone seemed to take their cue from Bob's upbeat attitude so the words were positive, full with praise for an exceptional man and his achievements. Then Bob thanked us all for coming, still awed at the number in attendance. He was visibly more tired now after several hours on his feet. He spoke briefly and his words have stayed with me:

More than ever I find myself in the hands of God. This is what I have wanted all my life from my youth. But now there is a difference; the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so totally in God's hands.

I realized then that he was as much preparing us as himself for his imminent death. This was not a time to mourn but rather to celebrate life in its fullness of joys and sorrows. Bob, the consummate teacher, was instructing us in the mystery of death and how to live every day.

(Cathy Minkiewicz)

The Miracle of My Mother's Easter Pies

In early spring, my mother would make an announcement from her kitchen in Brooklyn. "I'm making the Easter pies," she would say. "Going to be busy, so nobody bother me." The pie was an Italian specialty known as a pizza rustica. Her mother had once made the same pies from a recipe her family brought to America from a small town near Naples, Italy. My mother had watched her mother prepare the pies for Holy Saturday, slicing the smoked ham and hot sausage into bits, filling the dish with fresh ricotta and Romano cheese, brushing the beaten egg wash onto the crust to give it a glaze.

By the time I came along, my mother and grandmother were making the pies together, so I never got a chance to taste one of my grandmother's original creations. I don't know if my mother followed the recipe exactly, or added



her own touches. I do know that everyone in the family agreed that my mother's pies were the best they'd ever tasted, hands down.

My mother made 15 or 20 pies every April for more than 40 years. She would stand in our kitchen pressing the dough with her mother's 50-year-old rolling pin, her cheek smudged with flour, her hair in disarray. The resulting pies resembled two-inch thick omelets stuffed with cheese and flecked with meat, topped by a heavy, flaky, dimpled crust baked golden brown.

She wrapped the pies in foil and labeled them for their recipients. (The size of the pie you got was a measure of her affection for you.) The doorbell would start ringing at noon: Uncle Nick from Bethpage, Aunt Carmella and cousin Barbara from around the corner, all eager for a pie still warm from the oven. I was an only child, but each spring our house filled with family as relatives came from Long Island, Queens, and Brooklyn to collect the family dividend.

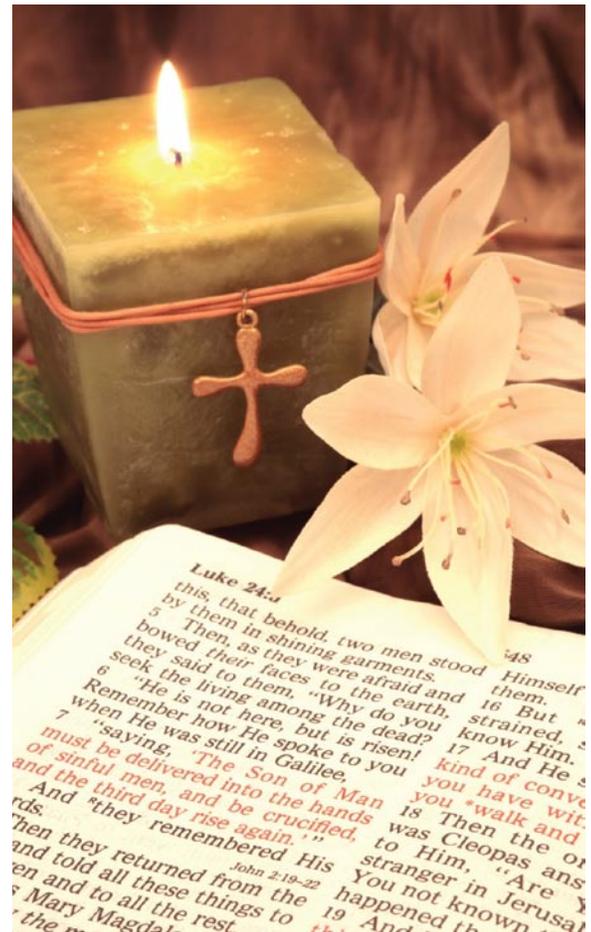
Then, when she was 78, my mother went in for open heart surgery. She suffered complications, and on a sweltering day in late June almost eight years ago, she died. My husband and I drove from the cemetery to her apartment and started the routine of going through her belongings. We emptied her drawers, cabinets, and shelves, deciding what to keep, give away, and throw out. We left behind the furniture, her clothes, and her pots and pans for the building's superintendent to discard or donate to charity. There wasn't much else. She had lived on next to nothing her whole life, so we weren't expecting hidden fortunes.

How mistaken we were. When we opened the freezer and looked in, there they were. My mother's pies. She had saved a few, including one for herself, labeled NETTIE. My husband and I looked at each other in surprise, saying nothing. Then we took out the pies from the icy mist and put each in a plastic bag.

In moments, we left her apartment for the last time and walked out into the hot, still afternoon for the drive home, holding the residue of my mother's life. That Sunday night, gathered with our 15-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter at our dining room table, I brought in one of the pies, now steaming hot and emitting a savory aroma. I sliced a wedge for each of us and we ate, scraping our plates for crumbs.

I'd eaten my mother's pies every spring for my whole life, and they always tasted good. But now, flavored with grief, the pie somehow tasted better than it ever had. With each bite I recalled with fresh clarity everything Nettie had meant to me over the years—had meant to all of us. How she had raised me without a husband around, all the while toiling as a seamstress, and especially how she had lavished love and attention on her adoring grandchildren.

I'd never in my life felt so grateful to anyone. Through the pies she had expressed her love for family and friends, nourishing body and soul. Eating the pie that night felt almost sacramental, as if we could taste her very spirit.



Afterward, I waved our family into the kitchen. I opened the door to our freezer and pointed toward the back. And there it was: one last slice of Nettie's pies. The one labeled Nettie. "This one we're saving," I said.

And so we have. The slice has stayed back there, wrapped in foil, for almost eight years now, untouched, unseen, but never forgotten. Other families leave insurance policies behind, or furniture, or jewelry. But Nettie left us her pie. That's her legacy, her heirloom. We celebrate the holidays to remind ourselves that the past deserves a future. We'll never starve for my mother's memory as long as that single slice is in there. It will feed our hearts all year round.

(Elvira Brody, "My Turn," *Newsweek*)

Reflecting

Many years ago, a middle-aged woman named Margaret told me that she had tried to live her entire life from the perspective of an “old woman sitting on my rocking chair on the porch.” She told me that whenever she had a decision to make she would imagine sitting on her porch as an old woman looking back on her life. She would ask that old woman to advise her on the path she should take. It was a beautiful image.

(John Izzo, *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*)

Thinking about Death and Dying

If we think about the people we know who have died well, we usually find they are also the ones who lived well. How we live our lives in the present moment says much about our attitude toward death. Dying well is all about living well, as if each stage of our life were the last.

- Think of a time when a loved one died? What were the feelings you experienced?
- What were the qualities of the person’s life that showed a life well lived, or not?
- In what ways do you remember this person’s life and death?
- Have you thought about your own death?
- Have you thought of what you want your life to “speak” before you die?
- How would you help those you love prepare for your death if you knew you were dying?



The Bucket List: Do You Have a “Life List”?

You are probably familiar with the movie, *The Bucket List*, starring Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. It’s a film about two older men who are dying and meet as roommates in the hospital. One of them talks about an assignment he received in college to make a list of the things he wanted to do before he died—an assignment he never completed. Together in the hospital, they make a list that they call the Bucket List (as in “before you kick it”). Predictably, the list includes sky diving, racing fast cars, seeing the Great Wall of China, and various wild adventures. They get to live out some of these dreams and forge their way towards fulfilling more important and more difficult ones as the movie presses on.

In his book, *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*, Dr. John Izzo spent one year interviewing almost 250 people between the ages of 60 and 106 about what people actually wish they had done at the end of their lives. Almost all of them said they wished they had risked more, but they specified that the risks were more about the *heart* than the body: being more true to themselves, pursuing their dreams, and loving more deeply. Many of them said they wished they had been more careful about how they used their time, not wasting time on things that did not matter.

They told Izzo that we spend far too much time worrying about what others think of us and not enough time listening to our own inner voices. Many of them wished they had “really been there” for the people they loved. They also told him that their greatest fear at the end of life is not failure or even death;

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it was that they had never lived and that their last words would be, “I wish I had” or “I should have.” Most of all, Izzo discovered that building reflection into one’s life was critical if people are to come to the end of their lives and careers deeply satisfied. Many of those interviewed told Izzo that they had regular times for reflection, often on a daily basis.

Making a “life list” and making sure it stays current is a pretty good tool for keeping life and career on course. Create your life list of the things you want to *do* and *become* while you are alive. Making a list for your career is also a good idea: what do you want to *do* and to *become* during your career? Once you have the list, build in a time to check in with yourself every 2 or 3 months. Does the list still make sense? What must be added? What has been accomplished? What will be your focus for the months ahead?

Your life list: Personal	Your life list: Career
<hr/>	<hr/>

Exploring

For I am certain that nothing can separate us from God's love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below—there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:38–39

Dying Isn't All There Is: Love Is Stronger than Death

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been buried four days before.... When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died! But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask him for." "Your brother will rise to life," Jesus told her. "I know," she replied, "that he will rise to life on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this.?" "Yes, Lord!" she answered. "I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Mary arrived where Jesus was, and as soon as she saw him, she fell at his feet. "Lord," she said, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" Jesus saw her weeping, and he saw how the people with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved. "Where have you buried him?" he asked them. "Come and see, Lord" they answered. Jesus wept. "See how much he loved him!" the people said.

Deeply moved once more, Jesus went to the tomb, which was a cave with a stone placed at the entrance. "Take the stone away!" Jesus ordered.... After he had said this, he called out in loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" He came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave cloths, and with a cloth around his face. "Untie him," Jesus told them, "and let him go."

—John 11:17, 20–27, 32–36, 38–39, 43–44

You can almost feel the pain and grief and loss in the words of Martha and Mary. Their brother has died! Jesus' response is filled with tenderness and emotion. He weeps and mourns with Martha and Mary. In his response we can see the profound way God is with us in our grief and pain. In this tender scene we experience the compassion of God embracing us in the midst of our suffering. Jesus is so moved by the experience that he goes to the tomb of Lazarus and brings him back to life. Jesus' love—for Lazarus and for Martha and Mary—is stronger than death.

But there is more. Jesus promises Martha (and us) that those who live and believe in him will never die. Resurrection is not returning to live more of this life; it is a gift of eternal life from our loving God who raised Jesus from the dead. The amazing fact of our living out the dying and rising of Jesus, the paschal mystery, is that we *already* share in this eternal life. The *already* of eternal life is God's grace at work in our lives. Its fullness will be known only after we die, but by living faithfully we have already begun this journey. This is why dying isn't all there is.

Read the whole story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11:1–44, and then take a few moments to reflect on the following questions:

- How do I embrace Jesus as the resurrection and life?
- Do I believe that he is with us in the many ways we experience dying?
- Will I entrust myself to his life-giving power?



Grieving and Consoling

Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them!

—Matthew 5:4

Be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep.

—Romans 12:15

“We are called to kneel, listen, and to wait patiently with people in their suffering and death. God will use us to help families and friends grieve the loss of their loved ones. God will use us to help people die well.”
(Abigail Rian Evans, “Dying Well”)

For those immediately affected by death there is, first of all, shock. It does not matter if the person who has died is elderly and in frail health. It does not matter if the person is ravaged by disease and already beyond the doctor’s prognosis of survival. But sudden death, death without warning or anticipation, throws family and friends into convulsions of unanticipated grief and loss. The hole in the heart lingers long, and with it a sense of profound loss.

A hospital chaplain tells the story of a father who surprised his daughter with a moped. After teaching her how to use the bike, he watched her take her first ride to the end of the street. There the moped skidded on a greasy patch of road and slide under a passing truck, and his daughter was fatally injured. In the hospital, the doctors put her on life support and the father did not want it removed. Out of his guilt the father angrily demanded that the hospital chaplain produce a miracle from God.

The chaplain joined the father on the floor and embraced him as the father relayed the events leading to his daughter’s accident. Then the chaplain invited the family to gather at the daughter’s bedside for prayer. A few hours later the father agreed to remove the life support. The family asked the chaplain to join them to say goodbye and to pray with them as their daughter died; there was healing that occurred for them because of the chaplain’s compassionate presence.

Paying attention to the experience—really paying attention—to the movements of our own hearts as we grieve the death of another will teach us much about God and faith and about the many ways we are being called, even now, to die for the sake of our own journey into God. Paying attention as we stand before the mystery of death may be one of the clearest invitations we ever receive to live a converted life.

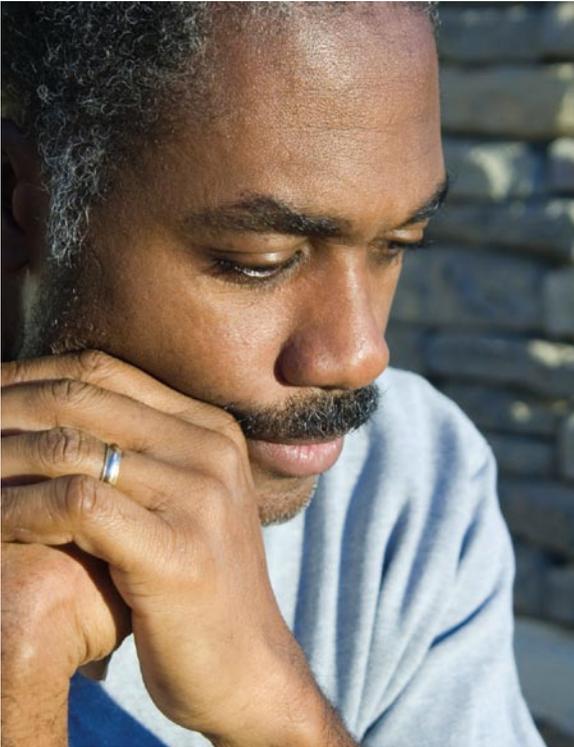
(Kathleen Hughes, *Saying Amen*)

Giving Thanks and Remembering

Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father, the God from whom all help comes! He helps us in all our troubles, so that we are able to help others who have all kinds of troubles, using the same help that we ourselves have received from God. Just as we have a share in Christ’s many sufferings, so also through Christ we share in God’s great help.

—2 Corinthians 1:3–5

Perhaps the overarching experience in the face of death is the desire that this person be remembered for who he or she was and what he or she did, that his or her death and new life be celebrated in a way that is fitting and appropriate. The approach of death can be a time of thanksgiving for all of God’s good gifts during our earthly life. We gather at a Christian funeral to remember Christ, dead and risen; to celebrate the promise of eternal life, and to keep the memory of the one who died in Christ. Christian funerals are



a time to remember the accomplishment and good efforts of the dead, and to thank God for who they were and what they meant to those around them. Funerals provide a time to celebrate the gifts and legacy of those who have died. The following story illustrates how we can give thanks and remember.

The family had gathered from many parts of the world to share his father's final days. David noticed that during those last few days his father did not talk about the possessions he owned. He made no mention of cars, houses, or any other possessions he had acquired during his lifetime. Rather, he surrounded himself with photos of special times from his life—weddings, birthdays, family trips, and times with friends. Watching his father die, David concluded: "At the end of our lives, when we only have a short time to live, love is really the only thing we will care about." For many years, David has carried this image with him, an image that has guided how he has lived his life. Leo Buscaglia once said, "life is love, and if you miss love, you miss life."

(John Izzo, *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*)

Being Supported in the Christian Community

How are we able to face the death, our own or of a loved one, trusting that love is stronger than death?

The Christian answer is that we belong in life and in death to God, whose love is stronger than death. This answer is not merely a matter of interior, personal conviction. It takes concrete form through the patterned life of the Christian community, molding the way we live as well as the way we die. In the weekly rhythm of the Christian life, the community gathers to celebrate the resurrection, God's final victory over death. Every year, during the season of Lent, it focuses on Christ's death on the cross. And in the other rhythms, too, the church surrounds those enduring the pain, fear, and grief of death with visible, tangible signs of assurance and hope. Through impromptu conversations and well-planned funerals, through singing, prayer, and anointing with oil, through gifts and flowers and food, the Christian community acts out its beliefs."

(Amy Plantiga Pauw, *Practicing Our Faith*)

The church provides a supportive community and a ministry of consolation by caring for the dying, praying for dead, and comforting those who mourn. The church's ministry of care, for the dying and for those who journey with them in their final illness, eases the transition. That comprehensive care is illustrated in this man's experience: "I think in both my parents' cases I was able to see how closely the church cared for them during the different points of their illness. It just had so much of a sense of transition. It was a gentle transition between their life on earth and the afterlife. The prayers, the rituals, the sense of community are all just a marvelous part of our faith."



Dying to Self

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it.

—Matthew 16:24–25

We do not live for ourselves only, and we do not die for ourselves only. If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die, it is for the Lord that we die. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For Christ died and rose to life in order to be the Lord of the living and the dead.

—Romans 14:7–9

There are two great tasks of a human life: to find ourselves and to lose ourselves. We find ourselves by discovering our destiny and being

true to ourselves. Yet it is not enough simply to find ourselves: we also must lose ourselves. It is one of the great paradoxes of following Jesus, that we lose our life for Jesus’ sake so that we may gain it. “Will you gain anything if you win the whole world but lose your life? Of course not!” (Matthew 16:26). Hold on to our life and we’ll lose it; give everything we’ve got to following Jesus, including life itself, and we’ll win it.

Dying well means dying each day to all the things that stop us from embracing the way of Jesus, and dedicating ourselves to living the Christian life everyday. By living well—living in Christ—we prepare for dying well. We are learning how to let go so we can embrace the one true thing: life in Christ, a life that will never end. “For since we have become one with him in dying as he did, in the same way we shall be one with him by being raised to life as he was” (Romans 6:5).

Living

“Everyone knows they’re going to die,” he said again, “but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently.” So we kid ourselves about death, I said. “Yes. But there’s a better approach. To know you’re going to die, and to be prepared for it at any time. That’s better. That way you can actually be more involved in your life while you’re living.”

How can you ever be prepared to die? “Do what the Buddhists do. Every day, have a little bird on your shoulder that asks, ‘Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I want to be?’ The truth is, Mitch,” he said, “once you learn how to die, you learn how to live.”

Why is it so hard to think about dying? “Because,” Morrie continued, “most of us walk around as if we’re sleepwalking. We really don’t experience the world fully, because we’re half-asleep, doing things we automatically think we have to do.”

And facing death changes all that? “Oh, yes. You strip away all that stuff and you focus on the essentials. When you realize you are going to die, you see everything much differently. He sighed, “Learn how to die, and you learn how to live.”

(Mitch Albom, Tuesdays with Morrie)

Living Well

Earlier in this chapter, we mentioned Dr. John Izzo, who interviewed 235 people ranging in age from 60 to 106 (who had over 18,000 years of life experience combined), asking them to reflect back on their lives: What brought happiness? What gave meaning? What did they regret? What did they wish they had learned sooner? What did not matter in the end? The “wise elders” were an incredibly diverse group, from a town barber to CEOs, from poets to native chiefs, Holocaust survivors to war veterans, representing all the major religions and cultures of our society. The following reflections on his interviews are summarized from his book, *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*.

1. Be true to yourself and live with intention (reflect more).

Each one of us is on a unique human journey, and the path to happiness is to be true to ourselves. This means knowing what makes us happy, and focusing our life on what matters to us. It means reflecting on a regular basis as to whether our life fits our soul. In our daily lives it means knowing what brings us joy and ensuring that we fill our life with the right

elements. It also means following our unique destiny. One of those interviewed was a Latino woman, who talked about the importance of following our “destina.” The idea is that each of us has a path that is most true to us, which is not so much a destination as a way we are meant to be in the world.

Being true to self often means drowning out other voices that would ask us to live *their* dreams instead of ours. Ron, a gifted chiropractor, told the story of how he planned to become a medical doctor, but when he visited a chiropractor shortly before starting medical school he discovered a profession that connected to his true self. “Others told me I was crazy but I knew it was my path.” He said that to follow your heart you must have the “discipline to listen and the courage to follow.” This means asking if the life we are living is true to our deepest sense of self, and it sometimes requires a step of courage to follow our soul. Are you being true to yourself right now?

- Am I following my heart and being true to my self?
- Is my life focused on the things that really matter to me?
- Am I being the person I want to be in the world?

2. Leave no regrets (risk more).

What we fear most as we age is not death, but rather, to come to the end of our life feeling that we never truly lived. The saddest words ever spoken at the end of life are “I wish I had.” One of the most interesting things among the 235 people in Izzo’s book is that almost no one regretted risks they took that did not work out; in fact, most said they wished they had risked more. When asked about major crossroads in their lives, many of them talked about taking risks—sometimes large and sometimes small—that wound up bringing great happiness. One of the keys to moving toward what we want instead of what we fear is to focus on the best possible result and not the worst. Are you going for what you truly want in your life, or acting with fear?

- Do I act on my convictions? How do I want to act on them more deeply?
- What step would I take in my life right now if I were acting with courage, not fear?
- How am I responding to the setbacks in my life? Am I stepping forward or retreating?
- What might I do differently right now if I were living from the perspective of an old person on the porch looking back at my life?

3. Become love (love more).

Not surprisingly, the greatest source of happiness for people and the largest place of regret had to do with people. Those who made people a priority in their lives and who developed deep personal relationships found true happiness. Many of them said that “things” rarely brought true joy, whereas family and friends brought lasting happiness. One way to focus on relationships is to set intentional goals for our personal relationships, just as we do in our careers. Yet the most interesting thing is that being a loving person, the choice to give love, is even more important in determining happiness than getting it. These people talked about the importance of choosing love and kindness as your way in the world. When we choose to be a loving person we find a deep sense of meaning in life.

- Do I make room and time for friends, family, and relationships?
- Am I kind and loving to the people closest to me? How can I be more loving toward them?
- Do I spread love and kindness in the world today? Am I making a difference in the world, even if only in my little corner of it?

4. Live in the moment (enjoy more).

One of the most common things people said was how fast life goes by, and how important it is to enjoy each moment. One woman said “when you are young you think sixty years is an incredibly long time, but when you get there you realize it was only a moment.” Among the secrets they shared were how important it is to live in the present, to fully enjoy whatever experience you are having (and not to wish you were somewhere else), and to live with gratitude, focusing on what you are grateful for rather than what you don’t have.

We have no power over the past and little power over the future. Many said that whenever you find yourself saying “I will be happy when...” or “I will be happy if...” it is important to remember that happiness is a choice we make. One woman said: “You have to stop judging your life and start living your life. Stop keeping score trying to decide if you are winning. Instead, live each day fully and stay in the moment.” Are you living with gratitude right now, focusing on enjoying your life rather than judging it?

Living the moment means to be fully alive in every moment of our lives, not to judge our lives but to live fully. It means that we must not focus on the past or the future, but experience each moment with gratitude and purpose.

- Do I fully enjoy whatever I am doing? Am I really “here” or just showing up?
- What I am grateful for each day? Do I wake up each day with thanks for another day?

5. Give more than you take (return more).

When asked what gave their life the greatest meaning, people said again and again that being of service and knowing you made things better because you were here was by far the greatest source of meaning. Whether in career or personal life, it is what we give, not what we take, that gives life meaning. Many said we have little control over what we get from the world every day (whether people will love us, whether we will win the lottery, etc.) but we have complete control over what we give to the world (whether we choose to be kind, charitable, or give to others).

Everything we take from the world dies with us, but everything we give to the world gets recycled. A wise woman said, “when we are young we cry for ourselves but as we age we learn to cry for the world.” Indeed, all the spiritual traditions remind us that true happiness comes from focusing on being of service, and in the process joy finds us. Are you focused on giving or getting each day?

- Am I making the world a better place? How?
- Do I remind myself that I am making a difference even if I don't see it?
- Am I kind, generous, and giving? How can I live more fully this way?

Ten-Hour Funerals

Ken told me he attended many funerals. He was even called on occasionally to visit the funeral home to give one final haircut. “When you are the town barber in a small town, you pretty much know everyone, so I have attended a great many funerals. What I have noticed is that there are ten-minute funerals, and there are ten-hour funerals. Some people live a life that touches so many people in a positive way that people just want to hang around and talk about that person's life. Other people live a more self-focused life and this does not happen. It seems to me you should live your life as if you want a ten-hour funeral.”

(John Izzo, *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*)



Dying Well

How can we prepare for dying well? The following suggestions are offered as guidance for how to live in a way that prepares us and our loved ones for dying well. (The ideas are adapted from “Dying Well,” by Abigail Rian Evans.)

- *Develop deep wellsprings of spiritual strength and insight.* Make practices such as reading the Bible, memorizing inspirational Scripture verses, and developing a strong prayer life a regular part of your life. These practices will help you live well now and prepare for dying well. For example:
 - Pray regularly, surrendering your will to God. Reflect on what you hold dearest and let it go in prayer.
 - Review your day before going to bed—what have you done well, what do you wish had done differently, what you forgot to do—and thank God for being present to each of these things.
 - In times of distress turn to Scripture for consolation. Both the Old and New Testament have great wisdom for times of tribulation. Consider the Book of Lamentation or the Psalms for reflection. It's all right to be angry with God, but remember that God suffers with us.



- *Be part of a supportive community.* Whether it is one intimate friend or a larger group whom we can relate to on a deeper level, community becomes a safety net. As a member of a supportive community, such as a close group of friends, a small faith-sharing group, or support group, you can provide those who are suffering or nearing death with the opportunity to share their burden, pain, and secrets. When your own times of difficulty or suffering occur, you will have a community to share your experience.
- *Trust in God's power.* Having absolute confidence in the power of God over the world and our lives means that we need not fear what sickness, suffering, and death can bring us. As we acknowledge the reality of despair felt in the face of death, the answer is that God is with us. God does not remove our suffering, but there is nowhere that we can go where God is not present—loving us, consoling us, and lifting us up. When illness or other stressful situations arise, reflect on where God is in this and allow the divine presence to come into your pain.
- *Listen to what others need and how they feel during times of pain and suffering; communicate what you need and how you feel during times of pain and suffering.* It is important that we both listen to and share with others words, gestures, touch, acts, and sometimes, silence. We need to let others know what would be helpful, and we need to ask others what would be helpful. Surveys have shown that dying people want to talk about death, but those around them avoid the subject. It is also important that we allow people to share their anger and grief, and when we are suffering, that we share our anger and grief.
- *Write a spiritual journal.* Keeping a journal or writing poetry can become a kind of prayer as we face our own mortality. Many people who undergo cancer treatment or who know they are dying will keep a journal of their experiences, a living witness of their journey. Consider keeping a spiritual journal, including your reflections on the many “small deaths” in your life. What lies unfinished in your life?
- *Prayerfully read the Bible during times of pain and suffering.* The Bible is full of stories of the sufferings of God's people, and these can be a source of encouragement, insight, and comfort to us. The Book of Psalms is filled with lamentations; the Gospels proclaim Christ's death and resurrection; the Book of Acts tells of the suffering and victory of the early Christians; and the Pauline letters reflect a Christian theology of suffering, dying, and life eternal. These Scriptures become our source of inspiration in the face of overwhelming odds.
- *Join a church community for worship, study, fellowship, support, and service.* During times of pain and suffering, the Christian community can be a welcome home for us, providing the spiritual nourishment and support we need.

Talking with Children about Death

There are many ways to talk with children about death and incorporate it into your family's life. Here are several ideas to get you started.

- When you talk to children about the beginning of life, don't hesitate to speak of the entire life cycle, including death, in terms appropriate to their age.
- Stress that our lives here are a gift from God to live out the best that we can, and when our time on earth is done, we return to God.
- Avoid blaming God for untimely death, such as, “God loved Suzie so much that he wanted her in heaven with him.”



- Remember to assure them that nothing can separate us from God's love.
- Visit a cemetery with the children and help them read some of the inscriptions. Talk about what that person's life may have been like. Together, pray for that person's soul. If you don't have any family gravesites nearby, adopt an older gravesite. Visit it a few times each year, plant flowers if permitted, and pray for that person.
- Research a family tree, and tell the children what you know about each individual on the tree.
- Put together an album that includes photos and stories. Bring it out on the Feast of All Souls, Christmas, or Easter and set it in a prominent place.
- Include intentions for the dead at your mealtime prayer.
- When a loved one dies, take time to speak with your children about what has happened, using clear language. Talk about the good memories the family has of that person. Suggest that maybe your children might want to draw a picture of how they feel about that person. Lead them in prayer for the deceased.
- When a loved one dies, explain to the children what a wake and funeral are. Ask them if they would like to go with you to the wake and/or funeral, and explain to them what is happening during the service. Remember to take time with them afterwards to reflect on what they experienced.

“The Last Lecture”

The life of Randy Pausch and his “Last Lecture” capture the essence of dying well. On September 18, 2007, computer science professor Randy Pausch stepped in front of an audience of 400 people at Carnegie Mellon University to deliver a last lecture, called “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.” With slides of his CT scans beaming out to the audience, Randy told his audience about the cancer that was devouring his pancreas and that would claim his life in a matter of months. On the stage that day, Randy was youthful, energetic, handsome, often cheerfully, darkly funny. He seemed invincible. But this was a brief moment, as he himself acknowledged. Randy's lecture has become a phenomenon, as has the book he wrote based on the same principles, celebrating the dreams we all strive to make realities. Randy lost his battle to pancreatic cancer on July 25, 2008, but his legacy will continue to inspire us all, for generations to come. Go to www.lastlecture.com to watch the video of Randy Pausch's last lecture and view testimonies to his wisdom.

Resources for Living the Christian Practice of Dying Well

Go to our project web site
www.lifelongfaith.com
 for exciting ideas, practical resources,
 and recommended books and web
 sites to help you live the Christian
 practice of dying well.

Praying

A Final Prayer

I leave you now with this prayer: that the Lord Jesus will reveal Himself to each one of you, that He will give you the strength to go out and profess that you are Christian, that He will show you that He alone can fill your hearts. Accept His freedom and embrace His truth, and be messengers of the certainty that you have been truly liberated through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. This will be the new experience, the powerful experience, that will generate, through you, a more just society and a better world. God bless you and may the joy of Jesus be always with you!

(Pope John Paul II)



You Are the One Who Shepherds Me

(Adapted from Psalm 23)

You are the one who shepherds me,
in you I want nothing.

The pastures are fresh and green,
you give me rest.
You take me by the hand to peaceful waters,
and you give new life to my soul.

You guide me,
and you are true to your wonderful name.
If I stumble in dark places,
I am not afraid;
for you are always with me
with your staff that strengthens me.

You have prepared for me a feast
in the midst of those who would harm me.
You anoint and heal me;
my cup of joy is overflowing.

I believe that your goodness and kindness
will always be with me
for the rest of my life.
With you I will make a home forever.

You are the one who shepherds me,
in you I want nothing.

(David Haas, *Prayer Psalms*)