

Six Things To Do When You're Dying

I recently addressed a health care audience in Milwaukee, all of whom worked with aged and dying patients. They were doctors, nurses, social workers, and chaplains all doing the sacred work of healing. Hospice and palliative care work is the last bastion of health care where healers still make time to talk to their patients.

Beforehand, I was interviewed by the media who wanted my philosophy on dying. They wanted some one-liner sound-bytes. The request came at an interesting time, having just faced my own cancer scare. I wrote down some philosophical bullets and checked them out with three old friends.

Two of them have faced imminent death several times over the last decade from the complications of full-blown AIDS. They continue to face their mortality while running a creative arts and community action center. Called the Alwun House, it is the creative soul of Phoenix. One evening, after a sweat lodge ceremony, we exchanged views on life and death. It was not only a heavy-hearted dirge of despair; there was also giggles, frivolity and crack-up laughter. Here's what we agreed were the most important principles:

1. Approach your dying like you live your life-with curiosity, courage and connections.
2. You don't have to be sure about everything; open yourself up to the mysterious.
3. Look beyond your limitations. Find even one thing you can still do, and it will help you find a way to live every day with joy.
4. Never lose your sense of humor-there is nothing you can't laugh about.
5. Make your death mean something; leave good footprints.
6. Say goodbye is saying hello to another awareness perhaps even contentment.

Before leaving for Milwaukee I bounced these bullets off my friend Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, author of the groundbreaking book, *On Death and Dying*. Elisabeth spends most of her time in bed nowadays, the aftermath of several strokes, but her irascible wit is undiminished. After I read them to her, Elisabeth said, "Why do you talk so much?" Its all #4." Then she reached over to the bedside table with her good right hand, picked up a witch's hat, and put it on. She looked like an elfin OZ character, and I couldn't help but giggle. Elisabeth said, "This is the only principle, laugh with God."

This is pretty much what this old Irish Carmelite text says as well, so I will leave you with these final thoughts: "Death is nothing at all, I have only slipped into the next room. Whatever we were to each, that we are still. Call me by my old familiar name; speak to me in that easy way which you always used. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together."