Spiritual Care of Dying and Bereaved People

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Spiritual Care of Dying and Bereaved People

Penelope Wilcock

New edition of a classic book

Preface

My short book *Spiritual Care of Dying and Bereaved People* found its way into the libraries and training materials of many hospices and seminaries, and proved useful to people whose lives had been invaded by the challenges of dying and bereavement.

When I wrote it, the neat and tidy title seemed to be *Spiritual Care of the Dying and Bereaved*, and that's how many refer to it. But I insisted that the word 'people' be kept in the title: dying and bereaved *people*. The book was not about how to manage a care category but about insights gained from the privilege of travelling alongside real flesh-and-blood individuals setting out on the Great Journey, making the difficult transition from this earth to the world of light.

I loved my work in the hospice; I was so grateful to be a voluntary worker on the chaplaincy team of a hospice, acting as Free Church chaplain for several years at the beginning of the 1990s. I wrote about what I saw, heard and felt, the spiritual transition from life to death that amazed, moved, changed me.

Since then, surprisingly few things have changed (the principal issues of life and death remaining the same) apart from the big change in social attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex couples since 1996. This rendered obsolete my material about the special place of funerals in homosexual people's lives, and the chapter 'AIDS, fear and love', addressing the stigma and dread of contagion—a very live issue during the early '90s for people living with AIDS. Though I felt sad to lose that chapter—a close, intimate account of my journey

alongside one man whom I came to regard as a very special friend—the matters it addressed were now thankfully water under the bridge, so it is omitted from this revision.

Another development since the original book is the increase in the numbers of those looking for a farewell ceremony offering different parameters from traditional Christian funeral liturgies. Many wish to express profound spirituality and definite belief in God (so Humanist Society alternatives are not what they are looking for), but prefer to de-emphasise or eliminate the markers of traditional religion from their family funeral.

This presents difficulties to bereaved people searching for an officiant whom they can trust to create and lead a funeral service that is meaningful to them.

With this development in mind, I have included, in the new material added to the book, a section going into the detail of how to prepare a funeral. It is written to give readers confidence in crafting a farewell ceremony that expresses everything on their hearts at such a deeply felt parting of the ways. Into this new section is incorporated what remains of relevance from my original chapter 'Mainly about funerals'.

Further new material is the story of my second husband Bernard's death just 15 months into our marriage, plus a section exploring some of the ways that we experience bereavement without a physical death having occurred.

These two sections reflect upon events from my own life to offer insights which I hope will strike a chord for many, help us understand the challenges of life's journey for those who may be feeling frightened or overwhelmed, and bring encouraging support and companionship to what can otherwise be a very lonely journey.

Contents

Part 1

Holy ground: birth and death

This book is about life, not death. Spending time with hospice patients in the 1980s and early '90s, the atmosphere of expectancy often struck me. When we are with people approaching death, we feel a sense of awe, the solemnity of a great moment approaching—a sacred moment.

I have sensed that atmosphere before, once, in the antenatal ward of a maternity hospital, where again there was a certain electric tension of waiting, a sense of souls looking all one way towards a great approaching moment. Birth, and death: charged with the holy, with mystery, entwined with pain, with the loss of self and a looking up to something beyond self. Birth and death, moments where onlookers may lose their nerve and run away, shaken by the terror and cost and power of the holy. For birth and death, being intense moments flaming with life, are holy ground.

Time and again, patients reflecting on their feelings when anticipating admission to the hospice confided that they had regarded the prospect with dread. They had expected a kind of 'valley of the shadow of death', a place that should have 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here' nailed over the door. Then, arriving, they had been relieved and amazed to find it a place of light, airy and full of flowers; a place of laughter and creativity; a place where people dress nicely and eat well—a glass of wine and a manicure as much as a syringe driver and a catheter. As they relaxed in this warm, life-loving atmosphere, it also came as a relief to have found

a place where the expression of fear and grief and anger was acceptable and understood. The hospice offers a safe place to suffer and a place of peace to die, because it is a place where people really live, sometimes for the first time.

For when we think about dying, which happens to all of us on many levels (not only the physical), we are not turning our backs on life but daring to be led into the very heart of living.

How we approach and respond to dying—our own dying, other people's dying, the agony of bereavement—will tell us much about ourselves. The sacred territory of death asks questions of us. Is it hard for me to be honest? Am I frightened to be in a situation of physical, spiritual and emotional intimacy with someone? How do I feel about deep helplessness—those moments when I can do nothing, say nothing, only be with you? Or would I rather walk away from that? When you confront me with your confusion and your grief, can I look at them steadily? Or do I take refuge in evasions and lies?

Looking at those questions in learning how to accompany people on the spiritual journey of their dying, I realise that these are not issues of a different category from life but concerns I must explore if I want to make dying a time when I truly live. If I never consider these questions, then I will never have lived, no matter how young and healthy my body may be.

Spiritual care of the dying is not the special province of the clergy, not something we hand over to the trained expert. It is the dimension of care for the dying that energises and brings meaning to the days of all those in a group of people who are bound together in their journey towards an eventual farewell. It is the responsibility and privilege of each one of us

to allow ourselves to become a touching place, giving space and permission to people to find a truth that dignifies and heals. It is open to any of us, by the quality of our touch, our gaze, our presence, to communicate the heart of God: 'I am with you.'

To accompany other people, along with their loved ones, up to the gate of death, is to enter holy ground, to stand in an awesome place where the wind of the Spirit blows, to encounter peace and grief, insight, intimacy and pain on a level not found in ordinary living.

'Take off your shoes,' God said to Moses, 'for the place on which you stand is holy ground' (Exodus 3:5, JB).

Shoes desensitise, and they protect. They are practical in the common paths we tread every day. But we take them off on holy ground. Our feet are the site of many nerve endings, susceptible to pain. We protect them—but not on holy ground. This is the place to lay aside that which desensitises, and that which protects. If there is any way to offer spiritual care to bereaved and dying people without oneself becoming emotionally wounded, I do not know it. Medical professionals may find ways to evade involvement, to retain detachment; but what medical care can hold at arm's length, spiritual care must embrace. And it is costly.

Take off your shoes, for you are on holy ground.

Become vulnerable, for you are on holy ground.

Be sensitive, for you are on holy ground.

Lay down your defences. You are on holy ground.

Here, right at the outset, the Christian engaged in spiritual care of people facing death and loss runs up against the problem of 'Almighty God'. I suspect that other religions have their variants on this problem, too, but I write from my own viewpoint, which is the Christian faith.

Whatever else a god is, it is the personification of our ideal, that which we aspire to. We cast our gods in the image of ourselves, but we don't really know ourselves. Thus our unconscious aspirations and ambitions gain a frightening hold over us when we harness them in the name of religion. We piece together a mosaic of ideals received in childhood or adopted since, and we project them forth as a being, and we say, 'This is God.' Then, what kind of god we have understood God to be determines our ethical and moral constructs, our outlook on life.

A vulnerable God

The commonest concept of God that religious tradition has fostered is 'Almighty God'. The God who can do anything and fix everything, who initiates rather than responds. The God, therefore, whose favour is understood in terms of things going well for me. Almighty God, as the Bible says, heals all your diseases, prospers you and blesses you with well-being, fertility and comfort. So, when life goes wrong—when health fails or marriages break down or the money runs out—those who think of God as 'Almighty' may be afraid that he is angry with them, or that they have somehow become cut off from his power and love, or that he was never really there at all. For people who have been brought up on the traditional concept of 'Almighty God', the spiritual reappraisal involved in the journey towards death can be characterised at the beginning by disappointment, anger, bewilderment, disillusionment and fear. It seems as though everything has gone wrong: 'My God, my God; why have you forsaken me?' (see Mark 15:34). And the liturgies and belief structures of the church may rather exacerbate than allay these fears.

The traditional Eucharist of the Church of England opened with the prayer:

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden…

'Almighty God' is one of the key determining concepts of the Christian Church. 'For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,' we pray.

This can shake us badly when we face the journey of dying (whether our own death or someone else's), because, as worshippers of 'Almighty God', we run into trouble when we experience helplessness.

Helplessness is not that which we aspire to; it is that from which we flee. Helplessness is the opposite of almightiness and has no place in the image of God we have developed. Therefore our counsel often instinctively combats helplessness: 'Don't cry'; 'Be brave'; 'Be strong.' Likewise we sometimes respond to the helplessness of others by taking rescuing action, seeing ourselves as the cavalry coming over the hill. And when we cannot make everything better, our own helplessness plunges us into shame.

It requires little reflection to perceive that the 'Almighty' approach to fixing the problem breaks down in the spiritual care of dying people and their loved ones.

- Firstly, because we can no longer act to save them. What is inevitable for all of us has arrived for them. They face their mortality, and we are helpless to prevent it.

- Secondly, because it is they, not we, who are the protagonists in this last act of life. The work of dying is theirs, not ours. We can travel alongside as companions on their journey, but we cannot do it for them.
- Thirdly, because dying is an act not of power but of weakness. It is the work not of building up but of laying down, of achieving not mastery but acceptance.

A Jesuit priest came to our hospice one day, an intelligent and scholarly man, well educated in both psychology and theology. He told me that he could never do the work of a hospice chaplain, journeying alongside people who are dying, because in such circumstances he would feel so helpless. Of course, walking the way of the Great Journey is not everyone's calling (though in another sense, of course, one day it will be), yet those who do travel alongside people who are dying are not a unique strain of humanity who confront pain and grief and suffering with calm confidence. We all feel helpless accompanying the dying, and there is a good reason for it too: it is because we *are* helpless. Medicine can help wonderfully with pain, nausea and other physical distress, but there is no bypassing or anaesthetising the grief of the laying down of life.

Painfully, those who do not run away learn that our own helplessness is a gift to those who are helpless; our consenting to live at peace with our own mortality and inadequacy permits them also to be at peace. As we accept helplessness in ourselves and in others, we disarm the shame learned in the shadow of 'Almighty God'. At the side of the dying we learn stillness, waiting, simple being; the arts of quietness and keeping watch, prayer beyond words.

It is not an easy lesson. Lodged in my heart is the memory of a young woman who died of a motor neurone disease. In the hospital where she spent the last weeks of her life, as her condition deteriorated she was moved from the main ward into a side room, and thereafter her consultant never came to her bed. Medically, he reached the point where he could offer nothing more, and the simple gesture of entering the room where her mother kept watch at her bedside, to share for a few short minutes that arena of helplessness, either did not occur to him or seemed too costly. And he was not the only one. Despite her medication, she had phases of acute pain, and I remember her mother's distress one morning, saying, 'She cried all night, in pain, crying! All night! And no one came in at all. They *must* have heard her. She cried all night, *all night*, and no one came!'

Once we have learned that our helplessness is a gift to the helpless, we can stay with them in peace; but it is not an easy lesson to learn. Too often, medical professionals shy away from the presence of the dying, not because they are callous but because they cannot bear their own helplessness, because they live in the shadow of 'Almighty God'. The spiritual care of that dying woman was given by her mother, who, with tears rolling down her own face, tenderly stroked her daughter's hair through the sweating, wrenching pain, saying quietly, over and over again: 'I'm here with you, sweetheart. Mummy's here.' She was not Almighty, but she was Emmanuel: God with us.

This is not to say that our own sense of helplessness should make us passive or inhibit us from actively caring for dying people. Those responsible for spiritual care should join their vigilance to that of all the team of carers around a dying person, ensuring that action is taken to guarantee

them physical care of a high standard and an environment suitable for their needs. We address our own helplessness not as an emotional withdrawal, giving up on a situation that is too much for us, but to stop us running away, to prevent us from taking refuge in false optimism, to make sure we do not withhold from the dying person permission to explore with us their fears and grief.

If it is true, as I believe it is, that the kind of God we have understood God to be determines our ethical and moral constructs and our outlook on life, then clearly we have to review our image of God to undertake the spiritual care of dying people. 'Almighty God' will not do. To undertake this review requires a reopening of the Gospels and the Old Testament to recover the vision of a God who weeps, who hurts, who suffers his heart to break.

We need to look again at the God of the Old Testament, shaking his fist in helpless—yes, helpless—anger at his beloved people who abandon him, who are indifferent to his needs—yes, needs—and then relenting because he loves them, helplessly. There is no love without helplessness, no love without need, no love that does not yearn for an answering love. Helplessness, yearning, need; these belong inescapably to the nature of love—and God is love.

We look also at the Gospels, for Christianity is a revealed religion; we believe in the revelation of the nature of God in Jesus Christ, the ultimate Word, the outbreathing of God. And there in the Gospels, God is found first as a baby, dependent on others to carry him, feed him, clean him, keep him warm, teach him to speak, come to him, talk to him, cuddle him. Almighty God?

The baby grows up into Christ the healer, teacher, miracle-worker. Yes, but also Jesus the homeless man, the one who

was dependent on others for a bed to sleep in, a roof over his head, a meal in his belly. Jesus with a price on his head, with a traitor among his closest friends, and a family who thought he was mad. Jesus who, they said, was possessed by devils, whom they tried to stone, whom they plotted to hand over for execution. A revelation of God that includes struggle, uncertainty, risk.

Then the Gospels recount the story of the passion. Jesus sobbing in Gethsemane, broken in the pain of abandonment, terrified at the prospect of crucifixion. Jesus humiliated and scourged, stretched in anguish on the cross. Jesus laid in the ultimate abandonment to the providence of God, as a corpse, in a borrowed tomb.

It is in the context of that helplessness that the Christian faith locates its most daring doctrines: salvation and resurrection. Truly those doctrines assert the power and sovereignty of God, but focused on this man we call Emmanuel, the Word of God, the revelation of the divine nature. 'Almighty God'?

The tradition of the Church tags on 'the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours' to the prayer of the man Jesus, which otherwise expresses a simple abandonment to God's provision and grace. To accompany the dying on their journey, we need to peel back the tradition of 'Almighty God' and find the curious, paradoxical reality of strength-in-weakness which is the outworking of grace. On this holy ground, we cease pumping theological iron, to find the vulnerability of God revealed in Jesus.

Before we face the death of those we love, before we have to make the awesome, holy journey of our own death, and in order to care wisely for those who make it now, we need a less narrow image of God. We will live and die better if

we understand the sacred necessity of abandonment to the gospel of grace.

Perhaps sometimes we might alter that opening prayer of the Communion service to 'Vulnerable God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden…'

Our secrets are not hidden from God. The things we are afraid of and cannot bring ourselves to disclose. The thoughts and acts we are ashamed of, that reduce us to whispering, our heads bent, our faces hidden. The memories that hurt, that we cover up, dreading the tears that would flow if we forced such hidden secrets into the open. From our vulnerable God, no secrets are hidden. To the God who suffered helplessness in Jesus, with all that it meant, our hearts are open. To the God who yearns and longs and aches and reaches out, our desires are known.

Maybe, sometimes, we should begin our Communion service with simpler words:

Vulnerable God,
You understand.

The road to Emmaus

The Bible tells many stories of people meeting with God in the course of a journey. Two of the great journey narratives of the New Testament are the accounts of Saul's vision of Christ on the road to Damascus (told in Acts 9:1–9), and the resurrection appearance of Jesus on the road to Emmaus (told in Luke 24:13–32). The Damascus story is dramatic and powerful: flashing light bright enough to blind, dramatic revelation, sudden and instantaneous conversion. This creates an archetype of the way some people meet with God.

The story of the road to Emmaus is different. Two friends are travelling together, on foot, trying to make sense of their bereavement and all that has happened to them. An anonymous third person joins them. Walking along with him, they find that he opens insight where before they knew only confusion. Arriving at their destination, they turn to the stranger with their invitation: 'Stay with us now, for night is falling…'

At the evening meal, their guest steps into the role of host as he takes the bread in his hands and breaks it. Watching the familiar gesture, they know him for the Christ, the holy one. For most people, grace is an unrecognised and unacknowledged presence, bringing to the companions on the journey insight, meaning, peace; brightening mystery with significance.

On the road to Damascus, the prayer is of a visionary, religious nature:

'Who are you, Lord?'
'I am Jesus…'

But the prayer on the road to Emmaus, 'Stay with us now, for night is falling,' is not religious, does not recognise the Christ; it recognises only the ordinary human value of concern for a companion, a shared meal, hospitality at nightfall.

Both the road to Damascus and the road to Emmaus are valid archetypes of religious experience. Sudden or gradual, a thing of mystical vision or of ordinary human relationship, grace may explode or slant gently into our lives. When Christ comes to us, some of us fall down and worship him; others chat along with him unawares and invite him in for supper. And some never tell the story, not realising who it is they have met. In those untold stories of unrecognised grace, I have no doubt that Christ came: he comes to everyone. I don't think it matters if he was not known for himself. The beauty of Jesus is not in the eye of the beholder but in the kindness of God.

When someone has died, there is no need to try to force a Damascus moment, preaching the gospel and imposing the norms of the church whether welcome or not: this is rather the time for the Emmaus journey, walking alongside the ones who have been bereaved, helping them in their own exploration of the questions that arise for them, giving them the space they need to arrive at their own insights.

Deathbed conversion, hellfire and evangelistic zeal

Christianity is a missionary faith, committed to conversion and saving souls—an evangelistic faith.

Yet we can believe this and still be happy to do no proselytising at all.

Traditionally, the saving of a soul has been seen in terms of persuading someone to acquiesce to Christian doctrine. Any means have been seen as valid in the service of this end: torture and force, as in the days of the Spanish Inquisition; guile and deception, as in the techniques of friendship evangelism, where establishing a relationship is a grooming process for conversion; intellectual argument and apologetics; and the time-honoured use of psychological terror, playing upon the fear of death, alienation and abandonment that finds a corner in most human hearts.

'Giving your heart to Jesus', or being received into the Church, or undergoing baptism—whatever a particular Christian grouping sees as the decisive step, an emphasis is placed on conscious assent as the activating factor for the salvation of the soul. 'Soul' and 'intellect' and 'conscious mind' and 'will' are entwined concepts in our culture. This is reflected in the church's emphasis on study and intellectual ability in spiritual development and selection for spiritual leadership. For the church, the central authority has tended to be 'The Word' in the sense of 'The Book', and God is 'The Lord', the 'Almighty God' already mentioned, a somewhat inflexible, highly demanding patriarchal figure—'a jealous God'. Watch your p's and q's with *him*!

Coming from that context, especially when such a theological outlook has been swallowed unquestioningly, journeying with dying people can be a challenging thing for Christians. Sometimes Christians come to hospice work expecting to be on the lookout for opportunities for discreet proselytising: waiting for a chance to 'talk about the Lord'.

There can be a dislocation of understanding between

chaplaincy staff and nursing staff in palliative care. An agnostic or atheist nurse may see the adoption of religious faith in a dying patient as pathological, a form of denial, while the chaplaincy staff may see it as an acceptance of reality, an emergence into clearer spiritual light. Certainly red-hot religion in dying patients and their relatives can be bewildering and repellent to those who have to nurse them (especially if they find themselves the object of the patient's last evangelistic efforts!), and is often interpreted as a cover for acute fear of death. It may be; it is a cover for fear of life often enough.

Most hospice and hospital chaplains are very cautious about the spiritual carers they let loose on their patients; evangelistic zeal is usually considered an automatic barrier to working with people who are dying. Coercive persuasion to particular philosophies or outlooks is not regarded as helpful.

But we should examine the theological questions that stir around this issue, because they remain under the surface as a cause of uneasiness; there are many hospice chaplains whose theology is at variance with their pastoral practice, and many whose pastoral experience has reshaped their theology completely.

The questions are about what kind of God is God, heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, conditional or unconditional love, trust and fear.

Something that hampers us enormously in spiritual ministry is when our idea of God is as a commodity rather than as a person. (Some theologians are adamant that God is personal but not a person, but I don't want to split hairs like that here.)

We categorise God as a commodity when we perceive ourselves as a sales force, responsible for the advertisement

and successful marketing of God the product. Ready with tracts and sermons, using fair means and foul to achieve a conversion, we have done our bit if we persuade the punters to try the commodity. Evangelism often takes this approach, diminishing God to a product of religion, unable to speak for himself, incapable of forming relationships without our assistance, unable to respond except when the button with the correct name is pushed; not really a living God at all.

But in truth God is free, untamed, and does not need or wait upon our programmes and structures. Mission is not ours, it is his, and the determining feature of God's mission is unconditional love: all that heals and nurtures, all that is just and speaks truth, all that is brave and good and a source of grace. If we love God and want to nurture our spiritual being, it will be helpful if we let go of our traditional church agendas and simply track God, as we might track a wild deer or a badger in the woods. Look for the signs of God's presence and grace and life in people, and humbly reach out for the privilege of becoming a companion of that journey—that road to Emmaus, the journey on foot of the human soul in the company of the Christ, as a learner, as a friend.

When I approach the bedside of a person who is dying and the loved ones who may also be there, it is with no thought of altering their spiritual agenda to the shape of my own priorities. Sometimes I feel shy to intrude, or apprehensive and doubtful of being able to help, especially if someone has told me that this person has much pain and fear and needs a skilled companion. Sometimes I feel an instinctive flash of joy, that this encounter of the spirit will be something very special. But I always know that Christ is already there, that aware or unaware, the being of this dying man or woman will have met, touched, danced with, the living God.

There is no need at all for me to explain doctrine or nudge anyone towards religious belief. If God is with us, really here, then the actual presence of God is the thing that matters, not the church's labels and procedures or a striving for a monopoly on grace.

Sometimes, as we get to know one another better, the person I am with will ask me about my faith, my insights and beliefs; maybe ask me what will happen to our souls when we die or what God expects of us. And then I say only the truth: what my insights are, whether I know a thing or only believe or guess or hope that thing. But deep inside myself, I trust God. I believe in a God who lives and is with us, who is good and whose love is unconditional. My being rests in the company of that God, like everybody's. The friendship of the holy does not have to be paid for by doctrinal acquiescence. In fact, religious doctrine can sometimes obscure our vision of a God who is good. All we need to do on the Emmaus road that we are travelling is to walk and chat, listen and continue. The insights will come; they cannot be forced, nor do they need to be.

Then there is the question of heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, who's in and who's out. Not a big issue for some people, it's a concern they shrug and dismiss, being focused on life here. But for others it is a terrifying matter. For those gripped by the anxiety that permeates this area of religious belief, there is a variety of possible responses.

Some may violently reject all religion, hating it helplessly while the wound of fear that it made is still not healed inside.

Some become very rigid adherents of religious organisations, employing strict codes of belief, dress, behaviour and ethics to ensure they do not lose their personal salvation or betray the demands of their jealous God. These people can

be difficult spiritual companions, as loud and unequivocal condemnation of everyone whose outlook differs from theirs is sometimes seen as part of their religious duty, and friendship with people of a different spirituality is seen as dangerous.

Others again struggle with clinging shame, especially if they have transgressed against religious codes of sexual ethics, by divorce, or having many sexual relationships, or finding their sexual orientation to be the wrong one for their religion.

The more I consider the traditional teaching on heaven and hell as it is often expressed, the more troubling it seems to me. The basic outline is that God will allow people into heaven or send them into hell, according to whether they believed and acted upon the doctrines of the Church. This is complex at the outset: does one have to believe and act on all of it? What about Jesus' command to love and forgive? If someone forgave 99 out of 100 people, would they go to heaven for the 99 or to hell for the failure (ah, it would be the latter; I know this guilt trip!).

Then, if we managed to confine and suppress and distort our humanity to fit the spiritual requirements and clung to our place in heaven, shutting the door on the tormented screams of the damned thrown into hell by our God of 'love'—would it not be hell itself to be saddled with the presence of that jealous and vengeful God for ever?

Sometimes I have pondered on the personnel of heaven and hell. I have known Christians who were very clear in their expectancy of who would be in which destination. It seemed to be a mixed bag in both camps—but on the whole I found my friends to be among the ones supposedly going to hell.

There are some theologians who refuse to discuss heaven and hell at all, seeing the discussion as theologically naïve;

there are others who say that there is heaven or hell, but that they are states of being, not situations. Hell is the state of being cut off from God, outside God's joy and bliss and love (and note that even those theologians who say hell is not a place still use language like 'outside' and 'cut off'). Heaven is the correspondingly contrasted experience of the presence of God. The cruelty of this view is that it likes to retain a little of God's gift for the damned: emotional sentience, so they can feel miserable and lonely; spiritual sensitivity, so they can feel their emptiness and lostness. No. The one who can feel pain is not lost to God. The lost and the empty and the forlorn are cradled in the healing hands of God, and no exclusive and self-righteous theological attempts to create a spiritual inner ring will dictate to God or limit the love of God, or curtail God's gentle, redeeming mercy, this side of the grave or beyond.

Then what do we mean by salvation? What I mean by it is the liberation of the human spirit from all that frightens and fetters or diminishes and shames it, by the graceful presence of God, to free, unafraid, generous, abundant life. I mean that, and the finding of peace—not only the equilibrium of the soul but the energy to act and work for the extension of God's justice and love; peace that comes from the confidence of knowing oneself loved, from trust in the Creator's hands to be strong and safe, not poised to crush the life out of me or drop me or throw me away. The purposeful peace of Jesus, whose spirit rested in God not for withdrawal from, but for engagement with, real life and real people.

We may sometimes hear people say, 'Get a life! Get real!' I think they have an insight into salvation.

Dignity, humility and respect

When we draw near to death or enter the maelstrom of bereavement, we find ourselves in the presence of great spiritual power. Here faith can be rocked to its roots or found for the first time. To accompany people toward death or through bereavement is to be given a great privilege, a profound trust. In these experiences the soul shines very clear; these are among our moments of sharpest reality.

Such life passages also bring extreme vulnerability. Terminal illness can include pain, nausea, weakness, incontinence, mental confusion, helplessness and loss of privacy and independence—and, both for people who are dying and their loved ones, there is emotional turmoil; anger, tears, fear and uncertainty.

Skilful spiritual care is gentle with the fragile and vulnerable, approaching people with humility and respect in these spiritually charged times, not making assumptions or imposing other agendas but taking time to listen, giving enough space for fear and grief to be allowed into the open, for the new identity of the changing self to be explored. It is attention to the spiritual quality of care, as well as good nursing and provision of necessary equipment and facilities, that will allow the time of death to be met with dignity and allow the strange and unexpected treasures of bereavement to be revealed.

All of us hope to die with dignity. The possibility for that lies partly in our own hands, for dignity will be an attribute of our own soul, but it is also the gift of others. Needing each other is integral to human spirituality: it is in relationship that we make our destiny. It is by working together that a peaceful and dignified death is achieved.

Who I am and how I am made: images of personhood

Spirituality is deeply concerned with who a person really is, and that is discovered only in relationship with other people, with our own inner reality and with God, whatever we conceive God to be. Therefore, one of the first tasks of a spiritual carer is to affirm personhood and identity. So any intentional companion of people facing death or bereavement must give thought to what it means to be a person, because there is no universal agreement about the nature of personality.

In the Hebrew scriptures, God is sometimes called YHWH (the vowels are not given, so that the most holy name of God is never written or spoken), and the consonants are derived from the verb 'to be', so that this name of God could be translated 'I am that I am' or 'I will be what I will be'. This lack of exact definition suggests an ontological flux and fluidity, which is also present in humanity, made in the image of God. We call ourselves human beings, but we could also perhaps think of ourselves as human becomings—a 'will be' as much as an 'is'.

It may be helpful to consider personhood in four different modes, some much more static and inflexible than others.

The stone

Some see personhood as very static, and this might be represented by the model of the stone—durable and essentially

unchanging, the same tomorrow as today. It can be modulated (as stone is made into sand by the action of other stones and the movement of the sea) by long processes, but its selfhood is essentially established and consistent.

Meeting a close friend for the first time after some months, I said to him, 'I feel shy with you, as if you were a stranger. I don't know who you are now.' He looked at me, puzzled, replying, 'I'm just the same as I ever was. I haven't changed.' His view of personhood is the stone one. He expects to be in October what he was in July, unless something unforeseen and unlikely occurs.

On the spectrum between 'ephemeral' and 'permanent', we might show the 'stone' view of personhood in this way:

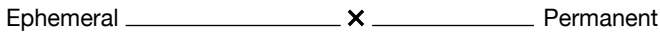
The building

Other people see personhood as less fixed but still fairly consistent. For them, we might use the model of the building —basically unchanging but accommodating different functions (as a house may be sometimes a family home or the venue for a political meeting or a party), which may introduce variety into self-definition. Buildings can be extended, demolished, renovated, repaired or altered, sometimes radically; but, on the spectrum of possibilities, a building is still more permanent than ephemeral.

Women often think of themselves in the terms of this model: 'I am John's wife. I am Sue and Kevin's mother. I am a school secretary. I am a local preacher.' Their sense of personhood, though essentially solid and established, accommodates a variety of modifying functions.

Women are also more likely than men to think of their body image in terms of this model of personhood—extended by pregnancy, renovated by cosmetic surgery, partly demolished by hysterectomy or mastectomy, redecorated daily with moisturisers and make-up, extended and demolished by growing fatter and dieting; but still retaining an essential, unchanging self. A person with this concept of self, especially near to death, may want help to explore and discover the core self, if there is a sense of the true self having been lost or displaced by many changes and the roles that have moved in and taken over.

On our spectrum, the 'building' might be shown like this:



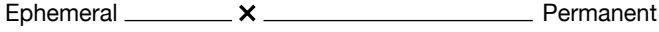
The flame

But it may be that personality is not, after all, so static. Some might prefer to imagine personality as a flame, constantly changing in its fierce, subtle energy. This form of being is not easily encapsulated or pinned down, its nature lying more in warmth and light and movement than in the more concrete, reliable manifestations of stones and buildings.

A stone is isolated, and a building retains its shape and form while those passing through it come and go, but a flame is always interdependent. It cannot live alone; it must be fed or it dies. Sometimes, in the swimming pool, I have looked at the dancing, shimmering pattern of light reflecting from the surface of the water against the wall, and that could be another picture of this understanding of personality—changing, shimmering, constantly modulating, created out of environment and nourishment. Artists and actors might

identify easily with this model, for they are truly alive only when they are actively engaged in creation; their medium of creativity is the mode through which they know and become themselves. These people find out who they are in relationship and in vocation. So in times of chronic illness and, to a lesser extent, when approaching death, they may suffer a sense of loss of self, of uselessness, unless the right environment can be provided for them to burn again in relationship and the exchange of ideas.

The 'flame' view might be shown in this way:



The colour

The last of our four models is colour. Some people see themselves as coming into being with others, created by a combination of circumstances and other personalities. Today is rainy and I have dreary chores to do, and I feel blue. But you come along, my mellow yellow friend, and together we merge into a peaceful green. Or today feels cheerful and I am warm orange. I may encounter someone I just can't find a way to relate well with; our colours don't blend, and beside them my orange fades to a muddy or insipid yellow. Or I may meet a friend with whom I always end up laughing—a warm rosy friend—and together we are vermilion, witty and warm. Touched by the calm, receptive pink of a gentle, comforting friend, we may become peach. Depending on the dynamic, the possibilities range from rainbows to mud!

In illness or adversity we may need support to find the brave red of courage, hope and humour, rather than becoming the grey personification of withdrawal and despair. Looking

at this model of personhood seen as colour, it becomes clear that the way you are with me is a gift of selfhood to me: I am (or become) a person who is ashamed or ignored; a person who feels loved or beautiful; an empowered person, affirmed and worthwhile; or a wretched, embarrassed person, according to what I see in your eyes, the colour you reflect back to me.

On the spectrum, the 'colour' view looks like this:

This sense of self as a colour, a constantly modulating, newly discovered, intangible mode of being, is the one I have myself—hence my conversation with my 'stone' friend; my uncertainty about who he was now, and who we would be together. Every day and every relationship feels like an artist's palette loaded with possibility. The level of responsiveness and changeability heightens for me the importance of the loving nature of God, my creator and redeemer. For loving is that which, ultimately, is most likely to create loveliness and to redeem a self from the development of cynicism and destruction to integrated wholeness.

The unity of personality

Even as we remain flexible and open, seeing that there are different ways of being a person, it is important to bear in mind the unity of personality, and its integrity. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity offers us wise insight into the holistic integration of aspects of personhood: God (in whose image we are made) is multiple while being essentially one. In the same way, the inner being of a healthy person is held

in unity—whole—but this oneness is not simple. It is the integration of a whole repertoire of modes of personality, which, under stress and fear and illness, can break down into conflicting splinterings and fragments, selflets living in a confused and threatening world where nothing makes the sense it did and the inner balance and harmony are lost. Even when that happens, and a person descends into mental illness and becomes impossible to reach and connect with in any satisfactory and meaningful way, there is a further, deeper unity—as it were, a 'flavour', the unique aroma or taste of that particular person. This (even though it may only be glimpsed) returns, survives and cannot be lost. One of the tasks in our spiritual care of those suffering confusion and dementia is to try to reach through the presenting muddle to touch the essential being that is hidden and lost under all the disarray.

Further to this, each person will have developed a chosen image or 'front', and, depending on how authentic this image is in expressing the reality of the person, this 'front' may become very brittle and insecure in serious illness. Although taking refuge in an image is so normal a thing to do that we may not be used to questioning it, we are impeded in coming to terms with the big questions about living and dying if we feel that we cannot really be ourselves. Much gentleness will be needed to help a person lay aside an image that is a defence, a hide that must be dismantled for real peace of spirit to be enjoyed.

There is an old-fashioned phrase—'making a good death'. Devout Christians used to believe that confession of sins and absolution by the priest was necessary to dying peacefully and well—the 'shriving of the soul'. But this task of dying well can be expressed as making one's peace with God or as

finding one's own inner peace, depending on the spiritual frame of reference through which the dying person views the world. We do not have to employ the technicalities of theological language.

For Christians, the teaching about human being is that God's being entwines with ours at our very roots. The Genesis story expresses this mystery in the creation of Adam, moulded of the stuff of earth until God breathed into him and he became a living being. The Hebrew word for 'breath' can also be translated as 'spirit' or 'wind', so the creation story explores how that which makes God divine—Holy Spirit—is the same as that which makes humanity human. God breathed into Adam God's spirit, God's breath, God's essential self—and Adam became a human being, came to life.

Therefore, from the Christian point of view, to find one's true self and to find God is the same journey. That is why Jesus spoke of healing as salvation, saying not 'Be cured of your disease' but 'Go in peace, your faith has saved you/made you whole' (Luke 7:50).

For this reason, 'making a good death' and integrating healthily the experience of bereavement both start with the exploration of the question, 'Who am I?'—to myself, to my carers, to those I love. Spiritual care also begins with finding and affirming the human being or human becoming, and saying 'yes' to that reality.

There is a story told of Jesus at the dinner party of a man called 'Simon the leper', who was a Pharisee. A woman 'with a bad reputation' (a prostitute, tradition surmises) gatecrashes the party and begins to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and wipe them dry with her long loose hair. (Respectable ladies bound up their hair.) The Pharisee watching with some

disapproval thinks to himself that if Jesus were really a prophet, he would *know* what kind of woman this person is and not permit her to make him ritually unclean by personal contact.

Jesus turns to the Pharisee. Going beyond both the man's status as religious leader and his social impediment as a leper, he simply speaks his name: 'Simon' (Luke 7:40). Then he asks, 'Do you *see* this woman?' (v. 44).

The task of spiritual care begins with that question of Jesus, 'Do you see…?' Do you see this woman? Do you see this man? Neither the role nor the reputation, but the person?

The beginning of spiritual care of dying and bereaved people is in learning to see.