

Finding Your Way to the Next Place (The Afterlife)

A lecture by Chaplain Carol Barwick of Hospice Calgary

Like you, I have an interest in what lies just beyond the limits of our sight and understanding. Because I'm addressing an audience of Spiritualists, I think we can all agree that there is certainly more to life and death than meets the eye.

In my 16 years as a chaplain, I have had the privilege of companionship the dying and their families as they move through the transition of illness and the physical act of dying toward that mystery we call death.

A chaplain's role can best be described as being a trained, respectful "soul friend" who travels alongside others to encourage them as they journey through their own experience, in this case, of terminal illness and dying and supporting them - as they understand it - through their own belief system.

- A goal for all of us is to nurture that which speaks the most truth to us so it will flourish and be strong when called upon in adversity. As a Chaplain, I support each person's truth.
- Like Star Trek personnel, chaplains follow a PRIME DIRECTIVE- NEVER compromise an existing belief system and ALWAYS work in the belief system that exists. Sick people suffer from loss of energy and so they distill their beliefs to their essence. The end of life is not the time to switch star ships.
- Hospice chaplains have the exquisite opportunity to learn from the sick and to interact with all kinds of beliefs from formal traditional beliefs to unique individual beliefs.

Who Really Understands Death?

Although most religions concern themselves address death and provide mechanisms for managing fear of death, our modern medical care has distanced most of us from all practical experience with death. Many patients and families these days don't know what to expect.

Just as we have had traditional helpers in birth, we may also have helpers in death. Birthing midwives, for example, are familiar with the physical and spiritual phases of birth, while end-of-life-care chaplains are familiar with the physical and spiritual phases of illness, dying and death.

Chaplains' knowledge about end-of-life care comes from a variety of sources, both medical and theological with a historical component. Death was

commonplace in the Dark Ages. For example, Europe was ravaged by plagues for centuries and most civilizations had writings that advised people about the dying. At the beginning of the Enlightenment, a monk called Erasmus wrote a manual for death called *Ars Moriendi* the first European version of “Death for Dummies”. Martin Luther and the Spanish King Philip followed up shortly with their own versions. This developed into a Mediterranean tradition for approaching one’s own death called “Spanish Death”.

By way of background, the Hebrew Talmud defines a good death as taking less than three days and occurring without pain. In Spanish Death, when the person senses that they are three days from departure, he or she says farewell to their immediate family, calls for the priest to give last rites and invites three close (devout Catholic) friends of the same gender to sit silently with them. The person then turns his or her back to the friends and they all wait in peace and resignation for the end to come.

I have found some truth to both of these approaches. “Active dying” which is similar to labour and delivery often takes from 24 to 72 hours.

Different Understandings about the Nature of Death:

Your culture and religion and experiences form your expectations about what your transition and destination will be like.

- Some believe that when the heart stops there is an abrupt change in venue from earth to heaven
- Traditional Christians believe the dead sleep until second coming. Most believe that those who believe in Jesus will be resurrected as he was. Depending on the denomination, some believe in physical resurrection and some believe in spiritual resurrection.
- Roman Catholics believe in a transition state called purgatory which allows for personal healing and purification,
- Aboriginal people believe after the heart stops there is a journey to the Happy Hunting Ground.
- Pagans (and some Aboriginals) believe a white pony will take the deceased to Summerland.
- Buddhists also believe there is a journey, however; it is a mental journey through our own illusions and delusions toward dissolution of the personal self and re-birth.
- Hindus believe there is a journey through the “in between world”. This is the temporary cessation of physical activity while the eternal part reviews its progress in life and plans for its reincarnation.
- Some beliefs expect the transition to be spiritual, some mental and some physical.
- Some expect a gentle, peaceful transition while others expect struggle and suffering. In parts of the world such as Soviet Union and Africa death is

expected to be exactly like birth. It must be painful to reflect magnitude of separation from the previous state.

- Some families perceive pain when no pain is medically evident. In parts of Africa a newborn must cry as an indication that it was hard coming into life so it will also be hard to leave (crying is especially comforting in countries with high infant mortality to show the strength of the life and the will to live).
- Timely death: Once “active dying” begins, families almost always want to know “how long”? This is a mystery as is the time of birth. Just as the uterus ripens for delivery, we can view the soul as ripening for its transition.
- Some view death with long awaited anticipation, the reunion with ancestors, the Aboriginal Happy Hunting Ground or Summerland
- Others view death as ambivalent oblivion – usually atheists.
- Many agnostics view death as a benevolent unknown.
- Humanists view death as an opportunity for the next generation to strive to reach their potential.
- Ecologists see the transition as a renewal cycle for earth’s resources for new people.

“In-between people”

There are several categories I call ‘in-between’ and they are:

1. People who have rejected their parents’ beliefs, but haven’t found anything to replace them with. They usually define themselves as “lapsed” when it comes to last minute last rites.
2. Newcomers/immigrants who have been so busy surviving they have failed to pass their beliefs about death to children.
3. People who have changed beliefs so many times nothing has stuck – often patients who want you to tell them what to believe.
4. Angry/Undecided/Tentative people -more concerned about reacting against what doesn’t fit (becomes an identity) unable to recognize and commit to what does.

Pronouncement of Death

Western and Eastern religions have very different views about death.

- Western religions say that death occurs suddenly when the heart and brain cease functioning.
- For Eastern Religions, death is a transition process which takes time and has stages. Example, the Tibetan Book of the Dead lists four stages.

I will read you the Buddhist Prayer said at the point of cessation of breath and before cremation.

TRANSCRIBED FROM VIDEO :TIBET : A BUDDHIST TRILOGY

This is the liturgy of the repeating tape

www.tibetantrilogy.org

Ritual Master – attending the deceased person

“Ah So Be It”

You who we call by name, you who have died

And returned to the other side of this world

Listen to me now

You are dead

Your old body has been left behind

But a new one has not been found

This is the state of existence

Called the bardo of becoming

The intermediate dream state

Between death and birth

You must understand that this is the mental realm

Into which you have passed

(a bell sounds)

Listen to me now

Now you will experience

The radiance of clear light

Of pure reality

Recognize it

This is your own pure awareness

Manifest as a great Buddha-nature

The ultimate reality of your own mind

Recognize it and be not afraid

Later, because the energies of the elements of your body

are reversed

Many strange and fearful sensations will occur

This is a sign that you are in the bardo

Previously, mountains, houses and physical objects

would obstruct you

Now nothing does

You can go anywhere you wish

Merely by thinking about it

Everything is effortless

Yet when you see and speak to relatives and friends

They cannot see you or hear you

No light comes from the sun and the moon and the stars

All is as twilight
And the body that you have
Is entirely the dream like mental body
A projection of your past habitual tendencies
It has no substance and casts no shadow
These are all signs that you are in the bards
Recognize whatever appears
As a reflection of your own consciousness
All horrors are the reflection
Of your impurity of perception
Therefore be not afraid or angry
But exercise your compassion and your love
You will appear to be moving
Through many beautiful and ugly places
Known and unknown
There is little continuity and lack of security
There is uncertainty of food
One moment good, the next putrid
Buddhist monks carry the person's body to the cremation place accompanied by music & drums. They turn the person so their head is facing north.

As I have indicated, there are many beliefs and understandings about what the next place is and how to get there. Whatever your destination and whatever your path, may your journey be blessed. I'll close with the ancient Anam Cara - A Blessing for Death

Ancient Irish : Aman Cara Prayer

A Blessing for Death

I pray that you will have the blessings of being consoled and sure about your own death.

May you know in your soul that there is no need to be afraid.

When your time comes, may you be given every blessing and shelter that you need.

May there be a beautiful welcome for you in the home that you are going to. You are not going somewhere strange.

You are going back to the home that you never left.

May you have a wonderful urgency to live your life to the full.

May you live compassionately and creatively and transfigure everything that is negative within you and about you.

When you come to die may it be after a long life.

May you be peaceful and happy and in the presence of those who really care for you.

May your going be sheltered and your welcome assured.

May your soul smile in the embrace of your anam cara (soul friend)

And finally, I want to leave you with a a prayer by Antione de Saint-Exupery

In one of the stars, I shall be living

In one of them, I shall be laughing,

and so it will be as if all the stars

were laughing when you look

at the sky at night.