

Coming to Terms with Mortality

Notes from June 8 VAN Forum, Fairview Community Center

Introductions

The participants were asked to introduce themselves and to respond to the following question about coming to terms with mortality:

At what age were you when you first felt the reality (impact) of mortality?

The ages mentioned ranged from 7 or 8, when a friend and classmate had died, to 55, when the death of a friend and former classmate “caused me to understand that I and my friends are now vulnerable to mortality.” Most of the participants spoke about having been cushioned or protected from death in their early years. “Then and now, no one ever talked about it.”

William Cox, Leader, Spiritual Eldering Institute (and much more)

Introduction. The meeting facilitator, Jan Hively, introduced the presenter, William Cox, as a former United Methodist minister, Metro State faculty member, and Life Coach. “His passion in his elder years is to shift the image of aging in our culture from one of inevitable decline, to one of possibility, vitality and contribution.” For the Spiritual Eldering Institute, based in Boulder, William presents workshops on “From Age-ing to Sage-ing” and “Spirituality for the Skeptics.”

William told the group about how he had sought meaningful focus for his retirement ministry. He read “From Age-ing to Sage-ing” and then attended a seminar with the book’s author, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Reb Zalman). There, he found his sense of purpose, prepared for certification as a Spiritual Leader in Reb Zalman’s organization, the Spiritual Eldering Institute.

Talking about it. Culture hasn’t developed models for aging as our lifespan has expanded. There is an art to life completion – thus this topic, “Coming to Terms with Your Mortality”. One of the shortest verses in the Bible says it all (Psalm 90, Verse 12):

Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

Teach us to meditate on death that we might be wise.

It’s important that we talk with others about this subject. Spiritual Eldering is done in community. Reb Zalman says, “The only way we get it together is together.” The real work has to be done as we share it. Spiritual intimacy comes quickly through sharing.

In the *Caine Mutiny*, Willie’s buddy shares a smoke with him at the rail of their battleship, and then goes off to his battle station – where he is killed minutes later by a

kamikaze plane. Willie commented about his coming to terms with mortality in that moment: “The reality of death broke through the crust of daily realities and crushed the soul.” Death and sex were both taboo topics. Now sex is everywhere, but death is still on the back burner. Actually, as Morrie says in *Tuesdays with Morrie*:

Everyone knows they are going to die. But no one believes it. To know you are going to die and prepare is the right way, because then you can focus on living.

Ram Dass has written a wonderful book on death and dying, called, “Still Here.” He says that death is inevitable, safe, and an adventure. It’s safe, because you know that it will happen. Peter Pan was wise when he said, “To die will be a big adventure.”

First exercise: Lifeline. William asked each of us to draw a line from birth to death on a card, and mark an X at the point on the line where we think that we are now.

Example:

Birth _____ X _____ Death

Pairs of participants discussed their results, and then shared comments with the group. For example:

- ...It bothered me to put this mark down.
- ...It’s time to clean up the clutter (both in my home and in my life).
- ...The exercise reinforces my appreciation for the quality of life.
- ...We need to live every day to the max.
- ...I made the mark with assumptions based on my parents’ longevity.

This type of exercise teaches us to treasure each day. Our attitude about what’s to come creates space for new things. It’s the elder’s mission to be, not just to do.

The box of unlived life. We tend to dwell on negative events in the past – painful failures, resentments, etc. A big chunk of Age-ing to Sage-ing time is devoted to dealing with forgiveness and reconciliation – which has emotional and physical impact. We also spend a chunk of time looking at mortality, and thus opening up space to live fully each day.

There is philosophical homework to do, addressing issues surrounding our mortality by addressing the meaning and purpose of our lives. When we’re ready, we need to consider how we will plan and/or adapt to our death within the context of life’s meaning for us, as individuals. There are three things to think about: 1) the process of dying, 2) what happens when we die, and 3) what happens after we die. “We can learn to affirm life in death and death in life,” says Reb Zalman.

The “God Forbid” Book. Reb Zalman keeps a “God Forbid” book (God Forbid that I will die....but if I die, then....). It’s part of the process of life completion. It includes such things as his living will, ideas about a memorial service, wishes for the treatment of his

body after death, and the story of his life and teachings. He suggests that it's important to take time for each transition – time for closing one door and opening the next.

Second exercise: Scripting Our Last Minutes on Earth. Although much is and will be out of our control, it's important to make the choices that we can make. William handed out a sheet adapted from “Age-ing to Sage-ing” that includes questions about how you would like to fully experience, visualize, taste, smell, touch, and hear the last moments of your life. He suggested that each of the participants sit, take some deep breaths, let your life relax, and imagine the final moments on earth in the most ideal manner possible.

- What music would you like to hear?
- What poems, prayers or sacred texts would you like recited?
- What would you like to taste?
- What scents would you like to smell?
- What objects would you like to have near you to touch and appreciate?
- What would you like your surroundings to look like?
- Who would you like to be present
- Whom would you definitely not invite to celebrate your departure from Earth?
- What would you like to say to those who have assembled around your deathbed?
- What would you like them to say to you?
- How do you imagine the moment of your actual death?
- What would you like to have done with your body?

Again, pairs of participants spoke about their answers to this question, and then some shared with the audience.

...It makes me think about how I go to bed, because that is where I wish to die. I'm going to fix up my bedroom to be more like the environment that I want.

...It's OK to make a choice about who I want to be there.

Living Wills. In Minnesota, the state recognizes Health Care Directives that have been filled out and placed in the patient's file as “living wills”. You can obtain a Health Care Directive from the Minnesota Department of Human Services through the Senior Linkage line, 1-800-444-2433. The Health Care Directive is comprehensive and explicit.

There is another process that is similar but avoids “legalese.” It is published by Jim Towey, the founder of Aging with Dignity, and is both gentle and comprehensive in its approach. The five wishes ask about: 1) the person I want to be, 2) what kind of medical treatment I want, 3) how comfortable I want to be, 4) how I want other people to treat me, and 5) what I want my loved ones to know. You can obtain *Five Wishes* through the website, www.agingwithdignity.org.

Ethical wills provide a way to share your values, blessings, life's lessons, hopes and dreams for the future, love, and forgiveness with your family, friends, and community. It means putting your values on paper. You can obtain the “Ethical Will Resource Kit” through the Ethical Wills website, www.ethicalwill.com.

Resources. William directed the participants to a table where he made available all of the relevant books and newsletters. The website for the Spiritual Eldering Journal is www.spiritualeldering.org

William closed the session by telling a story about a pair of twins being born in a hospital. One of the twins looks at the bright side – seeing the upcoming entry into a new world as an exciting activity. The other looks at the dark and scary side – seeing the end of a “free ride.” William commented that the exit from the body is the entrance to the next continuum.

William praised both VAN’s website, from which you can connect to a number of spiritual resources in the Seeing All the Options pathway), and his own website, www.allaboutaging.com.

Announcements

- **Advocacy Leadership Education for Vital Aging Program.** Applications due on Friday, July 16, for the September through May 2004 – 2005 non-credit certificate program. Seven sessions on one Friday September, October, November, February, March, April and May. Learn about yourself, aging, the system of aging services, and advocacy with presenters, discussion, and field assignments. E-mail Julia Classen, julia@auroraconsult.com or dlindblom@voamn.edu for a brochure and application.
- **Vital Aging in Vital Communities.** VAN’s new half-hour video shows what’s needed in communities to promote vital aging. Shown at the Vital Aging Summit in May, the free video is available by calling the VAN phone line, 612-626-5555 or e-mailing van@umn.edu.
- **Spirituality and Resilience.** Two credit summer course taught by Kathy Marshall, director of the National Resilience Resource Center, College of Continuing Education. Dates June 22, 23, 25, 28, 30, and July 1 from 8 to 12 and one Saturday. Contact the Center for Spirituality at 612-624-9459 for registration details.
- **The Science of Aging.** 40th Nobel Conference being held October 5 & 6 at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter. Outstanding national presenters. For information and reserved seats go to www.gustavus.edu/nobel or call 507-933-7520.

