AN EXIT STRATEGY

Adopting Honesty As the Best Policy During One's Own Terminal Journey

When the time comes for the final pages of the last chapter in your "book of life" to be turned, it's quite possible you may know that your story is about to end. That is, if a disease process is underway, as opposed to the abruptness of an accident or sudden physical event, and if you are still relatively clearheaded, you are apt to have a chance to cogitate about the anticipated evolution of your life toward its cessation.

The process of dying has been a fascinating subject for researchers to explore. If you apprise yourself of literature that is based on observations of individuals who have experienced it, you'll learn that many people invariably are instinctively or cognitively aware that the end is near. And probably their loved ones, likewise, are attuned to this reality.

But often during this critical time, communication disintegrates. Voices of the hearts may be bluntly stifled. Well-meaning family members and friends search for words to fill the remaining time they spend with the person who is ill. Guarded emotions breed the introduction of inconsequential topics, often prompting petty elaborations about the weather or meager minutia, while

meaningful dialogue is suppressed. Denial reigns. No one wants the person to die. By avoiding this inexorable fact of life, people flounder in hopes of shielding their fading loved one from the truth while ostensibly armoring themselves from the immutable pain of the inevitable outcome.

Consider how you might help your family healthfully initiate their grieving before death transpires, assuming that circumstances would allow for interaction. Don't rely on them to acknowledge to you the irrefutability of your impending death. In fact, they may valiantly attempt to confer hope in an effort to pacify anxieties with words.

Let's imagine an aspirational scenario that, if possible within the confines of reality, could serve everyone well. While lucid and able to communicate, be frank. Be direct. In spite of physical weakness it may take only a few of your own words to convey emotional strength. Let them know that you know.

As the terminal phase of your life winds down, perhaps your recorded agenda of post-death directives would afford you a comfortable means of making such an overture, as you could remark that soon they'll need to use it. If they respond by saying, "Oh, don't be silly," persevere with impassioned resolve. Don't let them talk you out of your perspective or dilute your efforts. Open the door to your soul and invite them to share in salient dialogue and poignant sensory exchanges. A wise child expressing thoughts about death noted, "saying good-bye is hard, but not saying good-bye is even harder."

As chronicled in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, John E. Welshons at first resisted bedside contact with his dying mother, not knowing what to say and wishing to avoid the "trivial, contrived small talk" and "meaningless chatter" typical of deathbed interactions. Although his mom could no longer talk, eventually he overcame his inertia and sat on the edge of the bed where he locked eyes with those of his beloved parent and for thirty minutes stared into the depths of her soul. As he reviewed features of their past together and recalled her goodness, he recognized "the brilliance of the light within her" while sensing that "as her body withered, her soul had gained strength." The squeeze of her hand in his was a signal to him that everything was okay and that they had shared "a glimpse of eternity." He said, "I felt tears, but they were tears of awe more than sadness. And I knew that because I had been willing to go past my horror and fear, to look past her physical deformities and look deeply into her soul, that I had seen her more clearly and contacted her more intimately than ever before."

Of course, in situations such as this one, overt acknowledgment of impending death will likely lead to tears and perhaps expressions of anguish. A natural river of emotions may flow. But the man-made walls of containment and isolation are apt to come down, allowing for authentic communion, tenderness, and eventual tranquility.

Perhaps even regrets and resentments might be exposed and put to rest. Dr. Ira Byock, Director of Palliative Medicine at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire,

pinpointed four things that matter most as death draws near. Succinctly encapsulating his message, he noted, “It’s just eleven words. Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.”

Through this type of honest confrontation, you can lay the groundwork for penetrating moments that won’t be forgotten. You can make it possible for your loved ones’ lives to be unspeakably enriched. In the midst of the perceived barrenness of death, such a gripping experience could prompt an opportunity for acceptance and resolution to take root, possibly engendering a transformative metaphysical awareness. Indeed, the sun *can* be most glorious just before it sets.

So in spite of the mutual recognition of loss, perhaps much is to be gained from emotional and spiritual candor. In the process, your beloved companions in life may even offer permission and encouragement for you to “let go” and follow the light to peace. What a gift of compassion and caring! What a serene way for life to end.

Excerpt from the pre-planning book,
Pondering Leaves: Composing and Conveying Your Life Story's Epilogue
(no longer available)

*****

Mary Ellen Markant

Signature Sunsets

ponderingleaves@gmail.com