

FACING LIFE AND DEATH

Spirituality in End-of-Life Care

RABBI AMY EILBERG

*Co-Director, Morei Derekh Training Program for Jewish Spiritual Direction,
Emerald Hills, California*

In this article I bring together my perspective as a former hospice chaplain and now spiritual director to help others think about the place of spirituality in the care of the dying. I explore some of the spiritual needs of dying people and consider what supports caregivers need to perform this sacred work. Although much work with the dying is with elders, this article addresses the human experience of the dying process, at whatever age it may come.

In the years that I did hospice work, I was often asked, “How can you do this work? It must be so hard!” I never knew how to respond to this question. My instinctive reaction was to deflect the comment and the idealized image of me that it expressed. What I generally said out loud was that the work was not as hard as one might think. Of course, I saw a great deal of pain and loss in my work, but I also stepped into places of exquisite sanctity and blessing literally every day, seeing the very best of human love, generosity, and courage that were a great source of nourishment and inspiration to me. I loved the work, felt immensely blessed by it, and could not imagine doing anything else.

Yet there was some truth in that “How can you do this?” question. Over a period of years, much as I thought I took good care of myself—and even taught others what I thought I knew about self-care and burnout prevention—the intensity of the work had a cumulative effect on me, so that ultimately it was time for a shift in my own work life.

For the better part of the past ten years, I have worked as a spiritual director. In this role I meet with people—either individually or in groups—as they explore the events and concerns of their everyday lives, not necessarily in the context of loss, seeking to rec-

ognize the presence of the divine within their own unique life experience. I work everyday to help people tell their sacred stories and attend to the underlying truths, teachings, and invitations that life presents.

I came to my work as a spiritual director after years of experience as a hospice chaplain. That work taught me much of what I know about life and about the life of the spirit. There is no better classroom about the bedrock truths of life than the deathbed: that we are fragile beings here but for a short time, that we often lose perspective, and that what is most important in life is love, compassion, and human connection.

Let me first define some essential terms. Spirituality does not necessarily mean relationship with a Supreme Being, connection to religious community, or adherence to a particular dogma or practice. Rather, I use the word “spirituality” to refer to a whole dimension of human life, including needs for meaning, connection, personal integrity, and authenticity. Spiritual life arises—in a plethora of forms—from the individual’s need to understand the workings of the world, to be connected to the mystery of life, and to transcend the self. One descriptive definition of spirituality is “a lived sense of the more.”

By this definition everyone has spiritual needs, whether or not they choose to bring awareness to them, and every dying process includes a spiritual dimension. Although every experience of illness or loss reflects human frailty and finitude, hospice care brings

Adapted from a lecture given at the Fourth International Palliative Care in the 21st Century Conference, Columbia University, September 8, 2005

the confrontation with mortality to center stage, making it among the most sacred of vocations.

THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF THE DYING AND THEIR LOVED ONES

Each encounter with another human being is unique, each person's life story a world of its own. Individuals bring their own life experiences, wisdom, and needs to each encounter. Thus, there can never be a map of the territory of dying: The territory is too complex and mysterious for charting. Yet, it is possible to offer a sketch of what one may find when working in the presence of death.

Every stage of life has its own challenges and opportunities. Babies learn to receive nourishment, to trust, and to love. Toddlers, if unimpeded by serious illness or deprivation, naturally learn to walk and talk. Adolescents instinctively turn to explore their own unique identities. So, too, people who know that death is near have characteristic feelings and needs and a particular set of developmental challenges to face. Sometimes the challenges may present possibilities for learning, growth, and healing, even at the end of life.

Care for the dying requires enormous respect and humility, and there are no "right" feelings to have or appropriate tasks to face. Nor should it be suggested that these tasks are necessarily a professional's agenda of things to work on in relationship with a dying person. One must be alert to the tendency of some experts to think they know the correct way to approach dying. Rather, this article suggests the following as a partial sketch of what dying people tend to experience and long for, psychosocially and spiritually. This is part of the mental database that can be consulted, then left at the door, as the care provider enters each moment of human encounter, open to whatever may unfold.

Grief

Of course, most people facing death find themselves grieving. The broad umbrella

category of grief can encompass a wide range of emotional issues: sadness about leaving loved ones behind, pain about coming to the end of life, regrets about the life one has lived, fear about what death may bring. It may also include anger about the illness, resentments of caregivers, guilt, and relief. In this territory, one need do nothing more than listen deeply, for sharing grief with another can often bring relief. Sometimes there is no consolation to be found, and caregivers must remember that their compassionate presence nonetheless makes a difference.

Fear

People who face death nearly always live with fear. Some are most afraid of death itself, be it the prospect of facing the end of life, the end of relationships, or the end of their individuality and conscious being. For others, the reality of death is tolerable, but the prospect of dying alone is a source of terror. For still others, what is most frightening is the prospect of pain or the unpredictability of the dying process.

Caregivers almost never "succeed" in making a person less afraid of death. The fear may be too primal to be soothed. Caregivers do well to concentrate on simply being present in the hope that their caring may offer comfort.

I remember a woman in her fifties whom I had the blessing to know shortly before her death. She was a person with a rich array of loving relationships. This was no accident; she had a great gift for loving, and so many friends and family members stood by her, tending to her needs with exquisite care. I was surprised when I encountered her just prior to a Rosh Hashanah service, which we both assumed (correctly) would be her last. She fell into my arms, in tears, crying, "Promise me that I won't be alone when I die." I took the chance and made a promise I was not sure I could keep. Somehow, I felt certain that this woman would not be alone. (Thank God, this turned out to be true.) Yet as surrounded as she was

by a circle of loving people, dying alone was her greatest fear.

Life Review

One of the things that seems to come naturally when death is approaching, at any age, is the desire to look back over the life one has lived. People are moved to review the story of their lives, to savor and celebrate the gratifying parts, and to acknowledge, grieve, and perhaps make peace with areas of pain. Seen from this perspective, the propensity of older people to tell stories is just as basic a developmental need as the toddler's desire to practice walking and talking. When death is near, this work becomes particularly important, as dying people need to sum up and affirm their time on earth, to savor the harvest of contributions they have made, and to identify areas still in need of repair while there is still time.

Meaning

Essential to this process of letting go of life as death approaches is the need to feel that one's life has had meaning. In a wide variety of ways, whether spoken or not, people need to ask the questions, What was my life about? What did I value? What has been meaningful to me? Have I used my time well, leaving a legacy of which I can be proud? To what will I be connected even after I am gone?

Finishing Business

In reflecting on their lives when death is near, many people find that there is "business" to finish, in relationship to the self (making peace with perceived failures, disappointments, resentments, self-criticism), in relationship to others, and in relationship to God. This is not to suggest that people must tie up all of the threads of a long life neatly in order to die a good death, as if we could make dying orderly and controllable. Rather, it is useful for care providers to be aware of the many ways that people can be helped to make peace with some of the painful bag-

gage they carry as they reflect on their lives. Sometimes a person can make peace with an episode of pain simply by telling the story to a compassionate listener. Sometimes telling and hearing one's own story at this awesome time are enough to reframe it as forgivable.

When the painful issue concerns a relationship to another person, the path to healing may lie in a conversation with this person. This takes great courage, and any professional, volunteer, or family member can be called to encourage or even facilitate such a meeting. Such encounters can transform the person's sense of his or her life and of the legacy left behind.

When an encounter with the other person is impossible (because the estranged person is dead or unwilling to communicate), it is still possible to write a letter, whether or not the letter is ever sent. Even encouraging the person to imagine what it might feel like to communicate with his or her estranged loved one can sometimes bring a sense of release.

Many people who know they are dying find that they have unresolved issues with God or with their community. Here, the hospice chaplain or congregational clergy can play a special role for the patient, either explicitly or subconsciously serving as the representative of God and religious community. Sometimes, the chaplain can embody a loving image of God and synagogue, church, or mosque that can help the dying person transform old resentments.

Reconciliation/Forgiveness

It is rare to meet a person who has no regrets at the end of a life. Imperfect creatures invariably have memories of personal failures and regret, hurt, and estrangement. For some people the burdens are too great to address and are carried painfully to the grave. Some lucky people, who have the good fortune to recognize the reality of death while they still have strength, can actively seek forgiveness—from within, from another, from God—for mistakes made, for wounds inflicted, for things left undone. Those who are able to seek forgiveness may

find that the path toward death becomes a little more bearable. Final confessional prayers, especially when recited while the dying person can still participate, can serve as a powerful vehicle for acknowledging and releasing areas of regret.

I remember a 27-year-old man named Sam who lived with cystic fibrosis. In the middle of the night, he called me, the hospital's rabbi, to his bedside, to recite the *Vidui*, the final confessional prayer. The staff people were confused; medically speaking, there was no reason to believe that death was imminent. But Sam insisted on saying the *Vidui*. With remarkable clarity and courage, he then picked up the phone and called several estranged loved ones around the country to say goodbye. Still, his doctors didn't understand, until it became clear that death, in fact, was coming. The doctors wanted to try one more procedure. Sam calmly explained that he was dying, but he agreed to give the doctors three days to try their treatment. After that, he insisted that they promise to let him go. He told them he was ready, that it was OK.

Saying Goodbye

It is particularly moving to work with people who feel that nothing has been left unsaid, even when death approaches. "I said 'I love you' every day." "I've said everything I need to say." These are lucky families.

By contrast, many people leave important things, especially loving words, unsaid until endings are near. The ability to speak words of love and appreciation at the end of life can bring comfort and blessing to both the dying person and the loved ones. It is an opportunity to acknowledge the strength of relationship, to share tears and love together as death approaches. The final days of life are enriched, and the precious words exchanged at this time become part of a legacy of love that survivors can carry with them through their lifetimes.

Sometimes people feel that saying goodbye will hasten the moment of death. This is

almost never the case. If more time remains after goodbyes have been said, that time is likely to be richer and more loving. Time lived in this way, even in the shadow of death, can be a great blessing.

As a younger chaplain, I was rather dogmatic on this point, certain that saying goodbye could not hasten the moment of death. Yet once I worked with a woman with advanced metastatic cancer, who would not discuss her illness and often talked with me about elaborate plans for travel in her future. The woman had some psychiatric history, and so I heard some of these musings as pathological denial. One day, the woman began to talk about her cancer. It was a wonderful session. When I said goodbye, the woman said to me, "So I won't see you again, right?" At that time, there was no medical reason to believe that death was imminent. I thought this was her pathology talking. As one might reassure a child, I told her that, although life and death were in God's hands, I would see her again on my regular visit, two weeks later. The woman knew something that I didn't know. She died two days after this visit.

Did she die, after all, because she finally spoke the dreaded word "cancer?" Or was she able, at last, to speak of her illness because on some level she knew that death was near? Did saying goodbye somehow hasten her death?

Perhaps some people know that they dare not speak the word "cancer" or say goodbye because doing so will rob them of their ability to fight for life. But in the vast majority of situations, encouraging people to say goodbye brings more richness, blessing, and love to the final days of life.

Plans

Not everyone wants to have anything to do with planning his or her own funeral. Yet for those who wish to be involved, the process can become a way to exert control while they still can, as well as relieving those left behind of the full burden of decision making when death comes. Funerals that were

planned by the dying person have an extraordinary richness, a palpable sense of the person's presence with the mourners. This can be a remarkable gift to all.

Leaving a Legacy

In addition to material preparations (to distribute personal property and to ensure care for children through financial arrangements), people long to know that their legacy will continue after their death. For some people, writing an ethical will or a letter to children (or friends or community members) or making a videotape of reflections on their life and commitments can satisfy a profound need to bequeath their beliefs, values, and memories to loved ones in tangible form. The process of creating such a document is always an enormous aid to the dying person in summing up the essence of his or her life. It is a wonderful trigger for loving conversations about values and relationships, and it remains as a treasured gift in the lives of loved ones after death has come.

Connection

I have often been called to the bedside of a dying person who confessed that he or she had long been estranged from Jewish ritual, as a preface to the request that I facilitate the recitation of final confessional prayers. I have often observed that, as the time of death approaches, there is a palpable need to "do things right," to do in these moments what their forbears had done for generations, even millennia, before them. However estranged and disaffected a family may have been from Jewish life, at this time, the need for connection is powerful.

This may well be why the prayer that Jews are to recite when the moment of death draws near is the Shema (*Shema Yisra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*; Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One). Experientially, as the best known of Jewish prayers, reciting the Shema is an affirmation of connection to community. On a deeper level, too, the Shema affirms that all is one,

that everything is interconnected. This means that the dying person is a part of all that is. Thus, to recite the Shema at the end of life is to affirm the everlasting connection with all that we leave behind.

So, too, the Jewish funeral liturgy offers the prayer, "*Tehei nishmato tserura bits'ror hachayim*" (May the soul [of the deceased] be bound up in the bond of eternal life). This prayer, also traditionally engraved into every Jewish tombstone, expresses the yearning of the dying person and surviving loved ones to be connected to one another, even after the body is gone.

Cultivating Moments of Acceptance

As we all know, dying is rarely beautiful. Most people struggle against death's approach and find this time unspeakably painful. Although miraculous moments of transformation do occasionally unfold, people generally die the way they lived. It is unrealistic, and profoundly disrespectful, to expect people to face the challenges of death in the way that we judge to be healthy, enlightened, or wise.

Yet sometimes, there are moments of awesome beauty, times when it seems that everything will be OK. The dying person may seem to feel cared for, that life is just as it should be, that loved ones are precious. It takes a person unafraid of death to share such moments with a dying person, to listen quietly and reverently as a person speaks the truth of his or her experience at this sacred time.

SPIRITUALITY FOR HOSPICE PROVIDERS

What about those who provide care to dying people and their loved ones every day? What of *their* spiritual needs?

When caring for the dying, caregivers find themselves at the mysterious nexus between life and death. No matter how familiar these encounters become, they are still cause for deep reflection on living and dying. These moments touch personal losses and remind

caregivers of their own mortality and vulnerability. They can bring them into painful confrontation with the raw face of injustice when a death is untimely or, in their judgment, preventable. Perhaps most of all, they are reminders of their own powerlessness in the face of life and death.

Attitudes toward Death

Standing again and again at the bedsides of dying people cannot help but touch one's deepest beliefs about life and loss, about one's sense of meaning, the need to serve, and one's place in the scheme of life. Most especially, hospice providers and caregivers, whether consciously or not, bring to the bedside their own attitudes toward death and dying. Surely, hospice care providers self-select as people who are willing—even drawn—to regularly enter the territory of death. Yet, their familial and religious backgrounds, as well as their temperaments and experiences, have invariably imprinted on them particular attitudes about death and dying. To the extent that they are conscious of these beliefs and attitudes, they can be mindful when they encounter a situation that challenges their beliefs, so they do not impose their personal attitudes on the people they serve.

There are at least three distinct views of death that are common among Jews working as hospice providers or caregivers. Although this is but a schematic of the complex range of possibilities, it may be useful to name these three basic attitudes as a tool to help end-of-life care providers consider what attitudes shape their own work with the dying.

Death as the Enemy

For many Americans and a large percentage of medical professionals, death is an adversary to be defeated at all costs. According to this view, to fight valiantly to the end, regardless of circumstances, is a mark of strength and courage. Death, when it finally comes, is viewed as a kind of defeat or capitulation.

The work of hospice providers and care-

givers is generally a refutation of this predominant view. Yet it is still important to ask oneself: Deep inside, is there a place where the consciously rejected feeling resides? Are there certain patients or family situations that activate that corner of one's being where death is intolerable, igniting a desperate need to somehow make everything all right?

Death as a Part of Life

Arguably, the view of death best represented in classical Jewish and Christian sources is that death is a part of life, a part of God's creation. The Bible is rich with texts that cultivate the awareness of mortality as a part of the divine plan for all of creation. Death is as predictable a part of living as being born and growing, a necessary end to a life well lived. Sources that cultivate this perspective emphasize God's role as Creator and the immenseness of God and the universe in contrast to the short span of human life. There is some comfort in this perspective: This is the way life is supposed to be: full, rich, and finite.

Consider, for example, the classic statement from Psalm 90 (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, Rabbinical Assembly):

"Your sleep [O God] engulfs all mortals.
They flourish for a day, like grass.
In the morning it sprouts afresh;
by nightfall it fades and withers . . .
Three score and ten our years may number,
four score years if granted the vigor. . . .
Teach us to use all of our days,
that we may attain a heart of wisdom. . . ."

Or consider the midrash from *Kohelet Rabbah* (7:4). It reflects on the puzzling verse, Ecclesiastes 7:1: "A good name is better than fine oil; the day of death is better than the day of birth." What might this mean? Birth is a time of joy, promise, and awareness of miracles. Death is a time of grief, confusion, and bitterness. The midrashic author reverses our usual understanding, using the metaphor of a ship's journey. Most people, he says, celebrate when a boat

sets off to sea and offer no acknowledgment when the boat returns home safely. "When a ship sets out from harbor," says the midrashist, "one never knows what storms it may encounter, what obstacles may impede its journey. It is when the ship returns safely and successfully at the end of the journey that one does well to celebrate. So, too, it is at the end of life's journey, when one knows that life has been well lived, that is the time for satisfaction, for peace, even for celebration."

This midrash embodies the countercultural wisdom that the essence of life can be known most fully at its end rather than at its start; in fact, life's finiteness is a part of its beauty.

I remember David, a man who was 45 when I first met him, as it turned out, just months before the end of his life. David was a physically beautiful man who had known much professional success, traveled around the world, had a large circle of loving friends and family, and had deep connections in two religious communities. He had lost a life partner and many, many friends to AIDS, and now he was dying. "I have done everything I wanted to do," he told me, having moved past a time of anger at the disease. Neither was he afraid of death, having seen death's face so many times and having a profound spiritual life that he trusted would help him face his own. What he was afraid of was the "dying part," he said, feeling that the hardest part would be the unpredictable, uncontrollable ups and downs of the disease process.

There were, in fact, many twists and turns, times of horror, and times of beauty as his body grew weaker and as his loved ones wrapped David in love. Even in hard times, he loved the fact that he could stay in his own home, in his own room; for moments at a time, he could savor the fire crackling in his fireplace, listen to the sound of the rain, treasure the stillness of this place that was his home.

One day, shortly before he died, David was moving in and out of consciousness as we visited. He opened his eyes for a moment, got

very clear, and said, "You know, people have been doing this for a long time." Even as he came close to death, he was able for a moment to see himself as part of the whole circle of humanity, indeed, the whole circle of creation.

Death as a Teacher

It seems that there are lessons that are best learned when one is in close contact with the reality of death. When there is no choice but to recognize that life is finite, that everyone will eventually die, people are often catapulted into an intense experience of the preciousness of life. Thus, death can be viewed as a teacher about the fragility of life and its beauty, about the deep importance of loved ones and of treasured values, and that loss sometimes brings blessing in its wake. Death is a teacher about God's presence in the world, about human goodness and compassion and love. Death is a teacher about courage and hope and faith, about believing in that which is unseen, about moving through the valley of the shadow until light is visible again.

At a weekend workshop on death and dying, participants were given the stunning assignment to pay attention to whether their bodies slipped into sleep on the in-breath or the out-breath and then to notice again in the morning whether they awakened on the in-breath or the out-breath. This was a breath-taking practice of the mindfulness of the breath of life and of the delicate boundary that separates life from death.

Jewish tradition has its own daily death awareness practices, rituals that specifically direct attention to the finite nature of life. For example, traditional Jews recite the *Shema* every night before going to sleep. This is the same prayer that Jews recite just before death, and this is surely no coincidence. In instituting this practice, the Rabbis almost certainly intended to have Jews treat the process of going to bed each night as a daily rehearsal for the final moments of life. Each night, one relinquishes conscious control over his or her life, placing one's life in the

hands of God, as all will someday do in life's final moments.

Then, upon first awakening in the morning, traditional Jews recite the *Modeh Ani* prayer, helping them begin each morning with the awareness that the soul that was placed in God's care the previous night has been returned once again in the morning. These prayers, recited daily over a lifetime, offer the chance to cultivate the capacity to tolerate the reality of death and to embrace death's teachings about the preciousness and fragility of life every day of our lives.

JEWISH PRINCIPLES OF CARE FOR THE DYING

What kind of spiritual wisdom can inform and animate the work of caregivers and hospice providers, helping them address the pain and longings of the dying? What spiritual teachings can be drawn upon to sustain them as they encounter loss again and again, in their work and their lives? The following are principles of care for the dying within the Jewish tradition to which hospice providers may turn.

Affirmation of Tselem Elohim (Image of God)

Entering the room of a dying person, one encounters a person who was created in the image of the divine. This is true no matter how long one has left to live, no matter how righteous or full of regret one's life has been. No matter how the body is working, no matter how much time remains until the moment of death, this person embodies the spark of the divine. The care provider's primary task is to see beyond illness, prognosis, desperation, and denial to the essence of this human being.

Refu'at Hanefesh/Healing of Spirit

The healing of spirit—that is to say, the healing of a person's essence—is possible until the last breath is drawn and released. Not infrequently, the final stage of life offers the possibility of healing of relationships, of

guilt and regret, of isolation, of lifelong emotional or spiritual pain, precisely when healing of the body is no longer a possibility.

Jewish communities continue to offer the *Mi Shebeirach* prayer for healing even when it appears that a healing of body is not possible. Many kinds of healing can still unfold. The prayer asks God to bring the most perfect healing possible to this person.

Refa'ela was 53 when we met, as ovarian cancer ravaged her body. She told me that she had been a classic "type A" before cancer came into her life, a high-powered lawyer with little time for her family and friends, much less her spiritual life. It was hard to imagine this exquisite, gentle, open-hearted woman that way. But it was clear that sometime during her valiant battle with a terrible cancer, she had developed an extraordinary gift for gratitude. She found herself taking pleasure in the small blessings of her life. She loved the sunshine and the rain; she loved working in her garden. She savored the taste and smell of food, knowing that someday her bowel would become blocked and she would be unable to eat. Later, when she was only able to take nutrition through her IV line, she asked me what would be the *bracha* (blessing) to recite over the nutrients delivered through it, this strange and terrible new food that, she knew, sustained her life.

In her last two years of life, Refa'ela set out to heal her relationship with Judaism, after many years of anger and distance. Shortly before her death, she celebrated an adult Bat Mitzvah, together with her 20-year-old daughter. It was an extraordinary Shabbat morning, full of love and joy and pain.

Teshuvah — Repentance/Turning/Atonement

Rabbi Eliezer, a talmudic scholar, taught his students, "Repent (do *teshuvah*) the day before you die" (*Shabbat* 153a). This teaching, of course, is directed to those who believe that they have years to live, as it encourages all to live their lives in such a way that they will be ready when death comes.

This teaching is also a poignant promise to those for whom death is imminent. The stories of a lifetime cannot be rewritten; not all mistakes can be remedied. But the heartfelt intention to repent can cast a person's past wrongdoings in a different light; brief words of apology from the heart can transform memories.

Hopefulness

An attitude of hopefulness is possible even in the darkest times. Even when death is fast approaching, hospice workers can remind themselves that they do not know what will happen next and that perhaps some relief may yet come. They can silently offer a prayer or a hope for a day free of pain, for a beautiful visit with a loved one, or for the peace and relief that death will bring. While caregivers witness the pain that people feel at the end of life, they may also embody the conviction that as long as there is life, there is hope.

Tommy was 12 years old when we met, but he seemed more like 9. Many years of cancer treatment and hospitalization had affected his growth, and he seemed like a sweet little boy, though he brought remarkable maturity and grace to his dying process. Tommy's mother had always wanted nothing more than a loving family with lots of children. She had lost two other children, and her marriage had ended in a terrible way. The pain of watching Tommy's decline was unbearable, and yet she often knew just what to do.

When Hanukkah approached, Tommy asked for a new bike. Tommy's mother knew that it was unlikely that her son would live to see the spring when he could ride it, but she bought that bike for her little boy, supporting him in living with hope. Later, the Make-A-Wish Foundation made it possible for Tommy and his mother to travel to Disneyland. When death was near, Tommy's mom made a big party for her son. Faced with the possibility that she would see all her loved ones together only at her son's funeral, she decided instead

to create a huge, joyous celebration of Tommy's life while there was still time.

Community

Inevitably, people die alone, in their bodies, on their own solitary journeys. The presence of care providers at the bedside of the dying communicates that they are not alone in their suffering, that there are people who care about their pain and their fear. Human presence is the very best gift that can be offered at such times, giving the dying person a taste of human caring that is stronger than death.

Appreciation of Everyday Miracles

Quite often, the reality of the nearness of death naturally awakens a powerful appreciation of the wonder of being alive. It seems that humans are built in such a way that they most value that which they know is finite. Perhaps this is why dying people and their loved ones frequently grow dramatically in their level of awareness of the "miracles that are with us, morning, noon and night, as one beloved Jewish prayer, the Amidah, puts it. Caregivers can serve as witnesses to this newfound wonder, helping a dying person claim his or her gratitude more fully.

I remember a woman named Michelle, who suffered from several degenerative chronic illnesses, including a serious lung disease that had repeatedly threatened to take her life. Michelle told me that she had lived most of her life primarily concerned with externals—with beauty, wealth, and social status. With her illness, new awareness had been birthed in her. She would awaken each morning grateful to find herself alive and breathing, for the feel of the sunshine coming through her window, for a day when she had the strength to shower. Knowing that she could die any night in her sleep, she began to live each day as if it were her last, seeking to resolve any conflicts with loved ones on the day they occurred, lest this be her last opportunity to do so. Michelle began to notice that she was no longer alone.

People wanted to be near her, blessed by the grateful awareness that now filled her life.

Afterlife

As has often been observed, the contemporary Jewish community is impoverished by a weak belief in the afterlife. This is emphatically *not* because Jewish tradition has little to say on the matter. In fact, Jewish civilization has produced a wide array of evocative images of what we may experience after we die. The atrophy of these beliefs among non-Orthodox Jews is particularly tragic because a strong belief in the afterlife is a tremendous source of hope and comfort for those facing death and their loved ones. Simply assuring Jewish families that Jewish tradition emphatically affirms the continuity of life after death can be a great service.

The dying person can be encouraged to share what he or she believes about what happens to us after we die or whether he or she has ever had an experience of contact with someone who had died. Because several different versions of Jewish afterlife belief have been offered through the ages, almost any image that a person believes in can be located in Jewish teaching. Learning that one's own tradition affirms the ongoing life of the spirit can be a great source of comfort.

ENCOUNTERS WITH DEATH

Care of the dying is profoundly demanding work. It draws heavily on one's capacity for compassion. It requires courage and wisdom, generosity and clarity. It involves a complex dance of giving and limit-setting, opening the heart and clearing boundaries. Most of all, those who care for the dying regularly come face to face with their own mortality.

Yet, this work also offers great gifts. Hospice providers and caregivers witness much holiness and beauty, participating in the most sacred and intimate moments of others' lives. In this work, one regularly observes extraordinary acts of love and devotion, trust, and courage. One's days are filled with awe.

Encounters with death sometimes teach things that could not be learned in any other way. Death can be a lesson about how fragile and precious life is, about how important it is to make the most of every day. Sitting in the presence of death, one may paradoxically find beauty in the process of living and dying, discovering some measure of trust and acceptance in the way in which life unfolds.

A close friend of mine once had the terrifying experience of facing a terminal diagnosis. During a long period of time when multiple tests were being conducted and interpreted, she sat with the possibility that her life would be cut short. Then miraculously, the dire diagnosis was ruled out. She still had many health challenges ahead of her, but she knew that she would live. She told me that she had been given the double blessing of receiving the clarity and wisdom that encounters with death often provide and the time to weave these lessons into her life.

Hospice providers and caregivers have the extraordinary privilege of stepping into the territory of dying with their own health still intact. They can learn what death has to teach and take these lessons forward for many years of healthy living. They can continue to serve others in times of great need, and can weave the blessings of awe and wisdom that death bequeaths into their own lives.