

Facing the Valley: Eight Ways to Confront Your Fear of Death— and, in the Process, Affirm and Enrich Your Life

One of the most difficult issues each person must face is that of our own mortality. Donna Authers offers compassionate and effective advice on facing fears associated with death and explains why doing so can enrich your life.

Charlottesville, VA (January 2010)—“Nothing is certain but death and taxes.”

It’s a common saying, usually delivered with a wry shake of the head. But underlying this flippant observation lurks an uneasy awareness of one of life’s most chilling aspects: the fact that one day, somehow, all of our lives will come to an end. Generally, death and dying are sensitive topics that many people prefer to avoid, while others are nearly paralyzed by them, terrified of the unknown.

Perhaps you listen politely when the death of an acquaintance is mentioned, moving the conversation to lighter fare as soon as possible. Maybe you’re reluctant to attend funerals because of what they represent. Or perhaps you’re plagued by anxiety or night terrors, all brought on by the ever-present specter of death. No matter where you fall on the spectrum, the truth is that the fear of death is a universal one. And all too often, says Donna Authers, it robs us of the joy we should be finding in *living*.

“Death is one of the most frightening unknowns imaginable, and it’s something we all must face,” points out Authers, author of *A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying* (A&A Publishing, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-6152458-5-0, \$15.95). “And for too many people, fear of both the process of dying and what happens afterwards casts long, dark shadows over what should be years of contentment and growth.”

Authers speaks from experience. Well into adulthood, she struggled with a paralyzing fear of death brought on by the premature loss of numerous family members. “For years, my fear of death was so terrifying I could hardly talk about it, let alone think of death as a friend,” she writes.

It was not until Authers accompanied her beloved grandmother, Angelina, on her final walk that she finally began to understand that the subject of dying was not one that should send her running, and that death itself is merely another beginning. “Today,” she says, “it’s difficult to describe the exhilarating feeling of having complete freedom from my fear of death.”

In *A Sacred Walk*, Authers shares her personal experiences as a caregiver and offers honest, compassionate advice on how to face your own fear of death, how to deal with the practical considerations of mortality, and (perhaps the most difficult thing of all) how to help a loved one through the dying process.

“Yes, death is a monumental thing to confront,” she says. “But you must keep in mind that *life* continues, right up to the final step you take on your journey. It’s a tragedy when fear casts its pall over years upon precious years. You’ll find that embracing the reality of death is actually a life-affirming, life-enhancing process. And it can enrich your relationships and quality of life in ways you haven’t even imagined.”

Following are some of Authers’ observations that will help you approach death and dying with a healthy perspective, both psychologically and through your actions.

Find a “living library.” There’s a saying that goes, “When an old person dies, another library burns down”—and it’s the truth. Think of all the wisdom, experiences, observations, stories, and learned lessons that are contained in a frail 85-year-old body. Our elders, Authers points out, have struggled with the same worries and issues that plague us, and many of them now possess a hard-won peace that’s found only on the far side of fear. Seek out those repositories of wisdom and listen to their stories. Chances are, your own fears will be alleviated—and you’ll probably come away from the encounter having learned things you never anticipated.

“My own grandmother, Angelina, was a ‘living library’ whose wisdom and practical advice rivaled the content of many self-help guides in bookstores,” Authers recalls. “She taught me that birth and death are simply the bookends of life. In between we are free to write our own stories as we move and grow. And when we take the time to delve into the stories of another person, we almost invariably save ourselves a lot of time and heartbreak.”

Strive to be “God with skin on.” It seems paradoxical, but sometimes the best way to alleviate our own worries is to help others who are shouldering a similar burden. If you are able, push yourself to serve as a caregiver to someone whom you encounter in the ebb and flow of daily life. All too often, those who are hurting often have to maneuver life’s minefields without the support and companionship they so desperately need. And as a result, many of us are trapped in prisons of fear and pain that could be greatly alleviated by a supportive shoulder or someone willing to simply listen.

“Being a caregiver isn’t something that begins only when a loved one needs your help,” stresses Authers. “The skills you’ll use to walk a friend or relative home are practiced and honed every day—something I call being ‘God with skin on.’ You never know which of your coworkers, friends, or acquaintances might need a pair of helping hands or a nonjudgmental listening ear. By developing patience, kindness, gentleness, and other selfless qualities, you’ll be ready to help when someone you meet has been unpleasantly surprised by life. And you’ll find that your own strength and capacity to face adversity has grown exponentially.”

Take care of practical considerations. Even if you’re not actively plagued by the fear of death on a daily basis, it can still be tempting to put off responsibilities associated with your final walk. After all, it’s *much* more pleasant to spend the afternoon playing a round of golf—or even paying the bills!—than meeting with a lawyer to hammer out your will. Dealing with the practical side of death is enough to infuse all but the most resolute Pollyannas with a sense of foreboding, so it’s easy to push those tasks to the back burner again and again and again.

“Even if you’ve made peace with death—even if you’re young and robust!—getting your affairs in order is no one’s idea of a good time,” Authers admits. “But the worst time to take care of this important responsibility is after you have been diagnosed with cancer or a loved one has had a heart attack. If you shirk this duty, then your loved ones will have to shoulder that burden at a time already filled with darkness and grief. Therefore, I urge everyone, even if they’re the picture of health, to make sure that their wills, insurance policies, burial and funeral wishes, etc. are in order.”

Remember to keep living. “Remember what my Grandma Angelina said about birth and death simply being bookends to life?” Authers asks. “Well, it’s true!” Indeed, right up until your final moment, if you are still breathing and can speak, you still have the opportunity to forge and strengthen relationships. You are still filled with life and love and stories and wisdom and laughter to share with others around you.

“What a tragedy it is when uncertainty and fear of the unknown rob us of the joy that should be ours simply by living!” Authers continues. “I’m not saying that death and dying aren’t legitimate concerns, because they most certainly are. However, I *am* saying that, as my mother told me, life is the best teacher—but you have to keep coming to class! You can’t hide under the metaphorical covers. Instead, you’ve got to keep facing the hard stuff and meeting challenges head-on if you want to overcome them.”

Harness the power of forgiveness. Mental health professionals tell us that the number one inhibitor to finding peace is our inability to forgive. This is terribly hard to do, but it’s worth the effort. Forgiveness releases the hold the past has on the present, and it acts as a soothing balm to the soul. The human psyche is a complex thing, and even if you’re not consciously relating rifts and grudges to your fear of death, that doesn’t mean they’re not feeding your anxiety. When life and death hang in the balance, some things just don’t matter. Negative outlooks, anger, and resentment can cast a pall over every aspect of your life—at present and in the future.

“It’s bittersweet when people wait until they are on their deathbeds to restore a broken relationship,” observes Authers. “Sweet because a burden is being released, and bitter because it didn’t happen sooner. Ultimately, though, working through disappointing relationships and situations encourages physical, emotional, and spiritual growth. When forgiveness, reconciliation, and love are present, even the fear of death can disappear.”

Don’t treat death as a secret. It’s much easier to fear that with which we’re totally unfamiliar than something we’ve examined and confronted to the best of our abilities. That’s especially true with death and dying, because so many people consciously and unconsciously avoid thinking about it and mentioning it. That’s a dangerous strategy, Authers warns, since death touches us all. Your anxiety and fear need to be given an outlet. And it’s possible that, once you begin to examine your feelings, you’ll find that your fears are actually things you *do* have control over. For example, they might include fear of the process of dying, fear of loss of control, fear of the unknown, and fear that life will have been meaningless.

“In addition to being honest with yourself about what makes you afraid, don’t shield yourself from friends and loved ones who are dying,” Authers urges. “I know it can be extremely difficult, but knowing what to expect can make your own eventual final walk easier. On another note, take special care with young people when they experience the death of a loved one. It’s a terrifying and confusing thing, especially for children—and if it’s not discussed, like me, they may live with unnecessary fear for many years.”

Practice “good grief.” It’s inevitable that you will experience a great deal of grief when someone close to you passes away. Unless that person dies suddenly, chances are, you’ll experience grief even before death occurs. Don’t try to avoid those feelings, even if you want badly to do so. It’s important that you try to behave normally around your dying loved one so as not to unfairly burden him, of course, after the initial shock of a terminal diagnosis has worn off. However, you must not bury your feelings of sorrow, pain, hurt, loss, and confusion that are bound to come. Instead, learn how to grieve well, and make sure you have others help you work through your emotions. “Good grief” does not mean that you won’t feel sorrow and hurt. Good grief means taking the time to work through your feelings so you will be able to embrace life once more with a stronger faith and a renewed sense of purpose. Ignoring your emotions will only deepen your grief and keep you stuck in the valley.

“I learned the hard way that when you try to stifle grief or hurry it along, you only prolong its sting and confuse yourself,” Authers shares. “Grief manifests itself in different ways for different people. Express your emotions when they rise up, and be thankful for your tears—they are a blessing because of the love they represent. And remember something that my mother told me when she was dying: ‘Things will be different from now on, but different doesn’t mean it won’t be better.’ Cherish the memories you have, and have faith that you will see your loved ones again.”

Be open to the possibility that death is not the end. Whatever your spiritual stance, keep in mind that many faith traditions believe in an afterlife. Give yourself permission to explore various religions and belief systems, and ask others to share their faith with you. When people are confronted by death—sudden or not—most want to believe that there is something more than the world in which we now live. Hearing about the convictions of others can be a great source of comfort and reassurance.

“If you spend time at the bedside of a person who is dying,” observes Authers, “you will discover that they want nothing more than to believe they are going to transition into the arms of a loving God who promises eternal life. I truly believe that faith is a gift, and it can make all the difference between being mired in fear and being uplifted by hope. In my own experience as a caregiver, I have observed several incidences that have convinced me that death is not the end. I have every assurance that I will see my departed loved ones again.”

Simply put, the journey toward accepting your mortality will not be an easy one, nor will it happen with a snap of your fingers. It will take courage, time, and perseverance—but it is also extremely worthwhile.

“Don’t allow yourself to be a prisoner of dread and fear,” urges Authers. “It *is* possible to make peace with the fact that we will all make a final journey. Instead, remind yourself every day that your ultimate goal is to live and die with no regrets.”

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About the Author:

Donna Authers lived in fear of death from childhood well into her adult life, the result of an unusual number of tragic losses in her family. That fear was finally broken by her grandmother's faith, which marked the beginning of Donna's calling as a caregiver to others as they, or their loved ones, prepared to leave this world.

Donna has a passion for applying her natural caregiving skills to help bring hope and healing to hurting people. These skills have been honed through use and her leadership in Stephen Ministry and Community Bible Study. She is a gifted teacher and, as such, has trained and mentored many other volunteers to develop their own caregiving skills to serve others. Over the years, Donna has been regularly invited into the homes of many families learning to accept death and has accompanied them throughout the grieving process. She has worked closely with hospice organizations, counselors, social workers, and clergy, and has been an advocate for others dealing with the medical system and government agencies.

Donna graduated from the University of Pittsburgh. After meeting her husband, Roger, on a business trip to Paris in 1991, she retired in order to volunteer full-time, and has never looked back.

For more information, please visit www.asacredwalk.com.

About the Book:

A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying (A&A Publishing, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-6152458-5-0, \$15.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.