

SPIRITUALITY, AGEING & HEALTH:  
A SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE ON  
DYING

OR

*WHY DOESN'T GOD TAKE ME?*

AUCKLAND 2009

Rev Prof Elizabeth MacKinlay AM PhD RN

Director, Centre for Ageing and Pastoral Studies. St  
Mark's National Theological Centre and Charles  
Sturt University

[www.centreforageing.org.au](http://www.centreforageing.org.au)

# Dying and culture

Have humans always held similar attitudes towards dying?

How does culture influence attitudes towards dying?

A view from Scripture

# The search for meaning and dying.

From birth to death:

*change is a constant feature of being alive, at some level we continue to ask: Why? What does this mean?*

*The search for meaning lies at the centre of what it means to be human*

**The search for meaning is essentially a spiritual search. Meaning is something that can only be found by the individual (Frankl, 1984). Although others can help and support, it is the individual experiencing the challenge of impending death who must come to their own sense of meaning.**

## Spirituality: inner being

- ▣ **spirituality - core meaning, deepest life meaning and relationship, for many people this is worked out in relationship with God and others, for others, there is no relationship with God: relationship with others becomes primary.**
- ▣ **What lies at the centre, the heart of our being is from where we respond to all of life. Anger, hate, love, forgiveness, hope comes from the heart.**

## An outcome of the life journey

Deena Metzger reflecting on her anticipated death wrote

What I ask from my death, is that at the last minute I will be able to look back over my life and know, without any doubt, the entire story I have been living ... Then I will know, despite pain, disappointment, and limitation, that this life of mine has been a good and meaningful work”

*Writing for Your Life, 1993*

# The final life career

The journey toward death.

What is most needed by those making  
this journey?

A midwife to be on this journey with  
them

# The final life career

The topic of death is avoided

Staff responses

Listening to elderly residents

The unspoken fears: Alone in God's  
waiting room

# The studies

- ▣ Aged 62-96 years
- ▣ First group: 20 frail elderly nursing home residents, cognitively competent
  - In-depth interviews
- ▣ Second group: 113 elderly residential aged care people with dementia (Ave MMSE at entry 18.12 and 16.09 at exit)
  - In-depth interviews followed by weekly small group sessions of spiritual reminiscence for 24 weeks.
- ▣ Analysis of qualitative data by NVivo7



# Grief in frail older cognitively competent people

## *Main themes of grief*

- ▣ Grief is part of life (Attitudes to grief)
- ▣ Grief and coping – a faith perspective
- ▣ Grief is hard to talk about (Attitudes to grief)
- ▣ Grief for untimely deaths - Death of parent/s in childhood, death of child
  
- ▣ *On death & dying:*
- ▣ Fear of dying
- ▣ “Why doesn’t God take me?”

## Grief in frail older cognitively competent people

- Grief is part of life (Attitudes to grief)  
“Apart from losing my mother and sister and my hubby, I don't think I've had much grief.”
- Grief and coping – a faith perspective  
(comfort- God seen as loving Father)
- Grief is hard to talk about (Attitudes to grief)
- Grief of parents who had lost a child through death

# Grief in frail older cognitively competent people

*On death & dying:*

- Fear of dying

“Life’s one big fear for me”

“grief as part of life” and “fear of dying”  
not found in the same participants

# “Why doesn't God take me?”

I'm not looking forward to getting well,  
I'm striving to get well, I do everything they tell  
me, but I'm looking forward to be taken.

Firstly it's my faith that keeps me going and  
secondly it's the help I'm getting here with  
physio and the help with the nurses and thirdly,  
I wonder why God doesn't take me when I pray  
every night that he will

# Grief in older people with dementia

## Confusion of relationships

Asked where they found meaning in life, most said they found meaning through family.

Relationship, or *connectedness*, which seems to express this better for those with dementia, is almost synonymous with meaning

# Grief in older people with dementia

**Grief** - Is part of life (most participants)

- Loss of relationships
- Grief and faith
- Grief for lost opportunities (only one person)
- Loss over leaving parents in country while young

# On death and dying: people with dementia

## ▣ *Fear of dying*

- The only fear expressed was fear of dying alone - by one person - described herself as a "lapsed Anglican"

Betty said: "To seek first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things will be over unto you"

Stand there beside you all the time, even though you can't see it, you can put your hand on it."

# Grief in older people with dementia

- ▣ *Where do these people find meaning?*

MMSE 12 GG05:

“Relationship with the Lord, holding onto that firm. That’s another point of mine.

I look to seeing the, my Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art my, feel the presence of sin I resign.”



## A sense of peace and acceptance?

- ▣ Are these people at a stage of peace and acceptance?

Or –

Do they just not know what is going on having lost cognitive competencies?

Can it be harder to enter into the process of dying for those who are cognitively competent?

Could this be a time of emotional and spiritual connection into the process of dying.

# Dying and dementia

- ▣ Differences between frail elderly but cognitively competent group and those with dementia. *Fear an important factor in facing process of dying.*
  - Fear of dying important among cognitively competent older group
  - Almost no expressed fear of dying among those with dementia
  - Grief as part of life – more agreement on this with those with dementia
  - Coping and faith present in both groups

# Spirituality & dying

- ▣ To die is not only a biological process, but for each person, death is also a unique and a spiritual journey.
- ▣ Medicalisation of the dying process has largely removed death from the intimacy of family and friends; there is a need to re-claim the spiritual dimension so that people are not isolated in their dying.
- ▣ Humans are by nature meaning makers and core meaning is a spiritual concept.
- ▣ Finding meaning becomes more important in later life, and especially in the last career of life
- ▣ Walking this final journey in life with the one dying is a special position for those privileged to be a part of this journey.

# conclusion

Is there the possibility of resilience and health in older people who are facing death and dying?

Fear of death and reluctance to speak of death and dying hinder better support of those who are dying.

New programs of palliative care in ageing are being implemented, spiritual and pastoral care being developed.

*([www.nhmrc.gov.au/PUBLICATIONS/synopses/\\_files/pc29.pdf](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/PUBLICATIONS/synopses/_files/pc29.pdf))*

Spiritual care in dementia needs to be available as a part of holistic care for these people

Spiritual growth remains a possibility while life continues