



Embracing Our Dying

A Project of the California Catholic Conference

A Catholic Perspective on Dr. Ira Byock's recent book *The Four Things That Matter Most*

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I Love You

This applies to both the person who is dying as well as the family. As humans and as Catholics we know the universal need to love and to be loved. Loved ones may wish to or *need* to say “I love you” to a loved one as the end of life draws nearer. Perhaps it has been held back over the years, from years of hardened hearts or painful relationships. This time in our lives may open a lovely window for healing with these simple words. The person who is dying may also have held back, not known how to express love, perhaps even felt undeserving of it themselves. The gift of expressing love to family or loved ones can create a lasting and enduring legacy, a gift that begins healing, brings comfort in the days and years to come when they are gone. This can happen in person- face to face; over the phone if distance is the barrier; shared by letters from children and grandchildren, friends etc.

As St Francis said, “It is in giving that we receive.”

In addition to the love between family and friends, now is the time to remind the person who is dying how dearly loved they are by God, that they are “the beloved” to him. That his love endures forever, through all our trials and mistakes.

Thank You

One of the truly lovely treasures that emerge when someone is dying, or seriously ill, is that we take risks we might not otherwise take. Our small “leaps of faith” can restore the distance that has grown over years; we can bring light to an otherwise dark day for the person who is dying with these two words. We can offer our gratitude to a parent, a spouse, a relative or child for their love, their wisdom, their support...on and on... Why wait until the eulogy to share our gratitude and praise when the person can know *now* and receive a blessing through our words. The sick person may finally be able to *accept* “THANK YOU.” They may have either a need or desire to also say thank you to family and or friends for what they received over their lifetime. These gifts have lasting value and when shared become increased in both value and meaning.

Again as people of faith we might suggest of by example give thanks to God for the lessons from life, for mercy in suffering, for hope of salvation to come, for the gift of life we have shared. The Thank you list to God can be a grateful life review for the joys and sorrows that have enriched our ties to him and to each other.

Forgiveness

Facing the end of one's life brings many past actions to mind, and certainly may be the reason for lingering when the body is truly “fading away”.

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Forgiveness between family members is a powerful means of healing of relationships and creates the space for love to enter. Both the dying and the family members may wish to express forgiveness to each other or may seek relief from a long carried burden of pain of hurting another. Many seek the reconciliation that can only happen through Sacramental attention. Making peace with God is often a final “to do” before one surrenders to the process of dying. The Anointing of the sick is a beautiful sacrament to be shared with family, the private confessing of sins may be true source of peace in preparation for the end of this earthly journey. Many wait until the person has only minutes left of life to call urgently for the priest to come. It is wise to plan for this and make it a time to gather around the dying person and bear witness to this gift of God’s endless mercy for us.

Goodbye

Saying goodbye is very easy for some and painfully difficult for others. We each get there in our own timing and expression. It is once again for both the living and the dying we see the blessings of saying goodbye. For some it will not be so obvious but expressed through planning for “after I am gone” or for the future they will not witness; it comes through in

parting and distributing possessions and wisdom. Our final gift to one another is in taking leave. The language of the dying may be heard as “I want to go home, I have to go, I have to go...” Or an urgency to “go somewhere,” or feel being pulled, drawn even beckoned by someone, something beyond our sight. In the well known book of hospice stories the “Final Gifts” are ways of hearing for the special language of the dying that alerts us if in tune to their message that they are readying for their departure. Even children will experience this. Offering words of love and comfort, of reassurance that you will look after the other, that they will not be forgotten, that they will live on through family, memories, friends and objects, special places. The person who is very sick may wish to or need to be supported in the need to say these goodbyes to loved ones they worry about as well. The person who is dying may have to be given “permission” to let go if it is perceived that they are holding on for someone, something, for a final piece of the mystery to be completed. We find comfort in our belief that we hope to be reunited in the next life, free from pain and suffering and worry.

[Dr. Ira Byock](#), a national leader in palliative medicine and author, is the Director of the Palliative Care Program Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center; Norris Cotton Cancer Center. His work and many initiatives have touched many programs and countless individuals from his commitment, compassion, skill and vision.