

## Death is an uncomfortable fact of life, one we should face head-on

Bill Tammeus | Dec. 11, 2013 A small c catholic

[My Presbyterian congregation](#) [1] is taking death more seriously these days, in some ways almost as seriously as I've long thought Catholics take death.

We've restarted a grief and loss ministry. This month, we'll hold our second annual "Longest Night of the Year" service in which we'll acknowledge the darkness that death has brought to some of our families this year. And in the upcoming Lenten season, we'll offer a third annual "End-of-Life" series of programs that my wife coordinates.

The question to ask in light of all this is why we are becoming so radically out of tune with our death-denying American culture, which is filled with people who think death is optional.

As [the editor of a Gerontological Society of America publication has written](#) [2], "The possibility for technological rescue from death supports denial and creates a defiant attitude about death and dying."

This attitude is seen almost everywhere: TV commercials showing happy elderly folks thrilled to be active in a retirement center, a glut of plastic surgeons helping people as they desperately try to keep their youth and beauty, a widespread refusal to share our wishes about how we want our exit to take place, and a similar refusal to designate a durable power of attorney for health care decisions, or living will, as it has been called.

My own parents, both now gone since the 1990s, were within a year or two of the end of their rather long lives before my sisters and I could convince them to create living wills just so we'd know their wishes.

Recently, I was on a panel at the University of Kansas Medical Center discussing all these issues with medical students. I was pleased at the interest these young people showed in the subject and their willingness to imagine how they might handle patients who were unwilling to acknowledge the terminal nature of their own medical condition.

That unwillingness often means that people enter hospice care much too late despite the fact that the sooner people get into hospice care the longer they tend to live, as I've learned as a member of the board of Kansas City Hospice & Palliative Care.

The fear of death may be understandable, given that people don't return from it to describe the fabulous afterlife Christians believe awaits them. We have to take it on faith, and sometimes our faith is pathetically weak.

But the whole Christian religion is rooted in the conviction that Jesus conquered death. As Paul, quoting the Hebrew prophet Hosea, writes in 1 Corinthians 15: "Death has been swallowed up by a victory. Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting, Death?"

We Protestants have been especially guilty of backing away from the reality of death. We have moved many of our funerals from churches with the body present to the sterile chapels of funeral homes for disembodied

memorial services. (The book to read is [Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral](#) [3], by Thomas G. Long.)

Catholic funerals I have attended in recent years have done much better at acknowledging the harsh finality of death and the countervailing Christian hope of resurrection, mostly because of the presence of the body and the connection to having already died and been raised to new life in baptism.

That attention to the awe that death inevitably brings coupled with a proclamation of the Gospel is a gift to people of faith that some of us Protestants are trying to restore to our communities. I hope you Catholics will guard that treasure and not allow it to be diluted.

People of faith often get dismissed as pie-in-the-sky folks who can't face life's harsh realities. When it comes to death, our task is to be the ones who acknowledge how terrible death is but also how glorious are the promises of God to redeem not just us individually, but the whole creation.

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[1] <http://www.secondpres.org/>

[2] <http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/content/51/4/571.extract>

[3] [http://www.amazon.com/Accompany-Them-Singing---Christian-Funeral/dp/0664239706/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1385578308&sr=1-1&keywords=Accompany+Them+With+Singing%3A+The+Christian+Funeral](http://www.amazon.com/Accompany-Them-Singing---Christian-Funeral/dp/0664239706/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1385578308&sr=1-1&keywords=Accompany+Them+With+Singing%3A+The+Christian+Funeral)

[4] <http://billtammeus.typepad.com/>

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