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Being prepared: David Sunderland wants Friends to confront their own mortality

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We are all participants in the journey of living and dying. As Quakers, we bring an important perspective on how to travel this road in a thoughtful, engaged, and spiritual way – in our own and in other communities.

Quakers have had a lot to say on the issue of death, including on assisted dying, which is almost always raised after starting this kind of conversation. One example would be Assisted Dying: A Quaker exploration, published by Leeds Area Meeting in 2016. This work contains diverse reflections, including this final paragraph written by Jan Arriens: 'Where death can be assimilated into life as a natural process with potentially deep spiritual meaning, we should, I feel, do all we can to allow the end to come along those lines. But there are also instances – and, based on the Dutch experience, I think these are rare – where people can go to their deaths seeking help when the prospect of further suffering has become too much and they are denied the means of ending their lives unaided. That too we should respect, and they too can do so in a state of spiritual grace.'

Is there much to add? We may lean one way or another in our views, but I think as a movement our spiritual fence-sitting, based on individual choice, is the right approach, even though the issue is spicy and has been debated in various parliamentary formats (most recently, of course, in the UK, where the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill was passed last month). In the Netherlands, where assisted dying has been legally possible since 2002, the percentage of people choosing to die in this way is around four per cent, so we should not overly emphasise, or catastrophise around, the issue.

How do Quakers position themselves more generally? Beyond Memorial Meetings and occasional musings, there seems to be a relative dearth of deeper reflection about the topic of death and dying in our faith and witness. There are notable exceptions – Diana Lampen's Facing Death, or Patricia M Nesbitt and Kristin Camitta Zimet's A Tender Time: Quaker voices on the end of life – but beyond such ruminations and guidance, I think Quakers have a prophetic, universal and SPICEy vision which has much to contribute to broader thinking.

It was this spirit that led me to establish, with the current committee, the (secular) Geneva association Plenna (www.plenna.org) in 2023. The organisation seeks to inform and help equip individuals to accept, consider, and proactively plan for, dying and death, whether for themselves or their loved ones, and whatever their situation or age. I have been working on, and thinking a lot about, this issue in the two years since. One publication that stands out is the 2022 report from the Lancet Commission on the Value of Death, which, as well as being visionary, is authoritative, wide-ranging and well-referenced.

All Quaker testimonies strongly address death. Starting with equality, the only condition with a 100 per cent mortality rate is life, and death is something that all of us (and all other living beings) will experience. Thus it is both a great leveller and guide. Nevertheless, taboo and denial around death are considerable, with many people under the illusion that it only happens to other people. This is therefore why Quakers, through seeking integrity, are strongly placed to speak directly about the subject. And, drawing on our search for truth, and our spiritual roots, we can approach this in a sensitive and nuanced way.

How we prepare for the end of life, and our legacy, can be among the most significant decisions that we make for those close to us, as well as for society more broadly. Our simplicity testimony speaks not only to writing wills, and perhaps informing a trusted person about our other end-of-life wishes, but also (with sustainability and our testimony to the Earth) to potentially downsizing, with a view to the impact and legacy our lives have on future generations.

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For these and other reasons, the ‘end of life’ (admittedly itself a rather imperfect description, particularly in the context of cyclicity and renewal) is more of a contested area than might immediately meet the eye. Conventional medical approaches which aim at ‘saving’ (rather, ‘prolonging’) life at all costs have been increasingly criticised. It is possible to link questions of a ‘good’ or (un)‘natural’ death with our peace testimony. Communities and families, whether they have religious grounding or not, provide an important foundation for building and sustaining good relationships. These help us deal with death and bereavement. But they may, however, also encourage views that are unhelpful, for example stigma and guilt.

As human life expectancy at birth has effectively doubled in the last 100-200 years, new patterns of migration, wealth and demographic distribution have developed so fast that society is still catching up with the changes. Just a couple of generations ago, death was experienced very differently from how it is today. Understanding death and its role in the cycle of life matters, and has consequences. Children experiencing bereavement of a close family member without support have been shown to have poorer school grades, and a disproportionate number of young offenders have experienced bereavement as a child. While sex education has developed considerably over the last few decades, death education is fragmented, often overlooked, and merits investment and attention.

There is much good practice already existing. We can, for example, learn from the approaches and initiation rituals of many indigenous populations. These can help adolescents know rather than fear death, in contrast to most conventional western media, which banish and exaggerate realities around death while over-emphasizing youth – the ‘pornography of death’.

Finally, the centrality of our silent waiting, and our experience of operating without words, may resonate and fit with the support provided to people very close to death. For them, silence may be one of their last experiences. Quakers’ emphasis on questions rather than answers can also provide a more constructive framework to address end-of-life issues in a wide variety of contexts.

The basic and necessary characteristics of life and death merit more attention. A limited

investment of time preparing for the end of life can make a massive difference towards lightening the burden faced by loved ones, and to enhancing one’s own peace of mind. Above all, planning to die well and wisely helps us to live better.

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