THE ART OF DYING: Can the Ars Moriendi Tradition Speak to Christians Today?
by Susanne VanderLugt

On August 26, 2009, *The Chicago Tribune's* religion reporter published an article entitled "Is Kennedy's Legacy Catholic?" In the article she quotes Cathleen Kaveny, a professor of law and theology at the University of Notre Dame, who suggested Senator Edward Kennedy's courageous struggle to live with cancer modeled the Catholic tradition of Ars Moriendi. Kaveny said, "He pursued some options, he accepted his own mortality and tried to live those moments and die well. That's also a legacy that every one of us whatever our religious traditions faces. We're all mortal."[1]

Two things caught my attention: the mention of the tradition of Ars Moriendi and the bold statement that we are all mortal. Yes, that is a true statement — we are all mortal. But accepting our own mortality can get a mighty interference from denial. For example, cancer patients are often told to embrace their cancer, to view it as a gift or as a growth experience that will inevitably make them stronger. The message seems clear from day one; you will not get better unless you have positive feelings. The result of such emphasis on the power of positive thinking can destroy empathy for the very people who are suffering, upset, or in crisis, and undermine the process of being able to work through important questions, thoughts and feelings they may need to address. It only takes an occasional glance at the obituaries in the newspaper to realize the vast numbers of people who put on the armour of bravery to destroy death. There is never any mention of a person who has had a "good death". Over and over again we read about the courageous battles and the long fights with debilitating diseases. Cathleen Kaveny's words about Senator Edward Kennedy's acceptance of his own mortality are encouraging for those of us who may be disheartened by what

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[1] Newsblogs.chicagotribune.com *The Seeker: Is Kennedy's Legacy Catholic?* August 26, 2009.

we witness in our own ministries. The instinct to stay alive is such a powerful force that there is little opportunity for us to speak or envision what "dying well" might look like. Medical professionals often treat patients whose problems are too far advanced for effective treatment, and patients in the last chapter of their lives readily grasp for new drugs and submit to trials, or any number of toxic treatments, that might rescue them from the brink of death. Others spend enormous sums of money in seeking unusual treatments or practices that promise a cure. Families and friends are too often left standing by the bedside of the one they love terrorized and immobilized in the presence of terrible suffering.

I first learned about the tradition Kaveny cites as Ars Moriendi from Sherwin Nuland's powerful book, *How We Die*. Then, a few years later my interest was piqued when I heard Thomas Long deliver an excellent lecture on this ancient body of Christian literature, the "Art of Dying Well".[2] Motivated to do some research on my own, several questions began to surface. How can we as leaders of Christian congregations help members to think thoughtfully and theologically about death? How can we help people think about death as a way of thinking about life? In what ways might this antique body of Christian literature, the Ars Moriendi or "art of dying", be helpful to us in an age when death is too often swept under the carpet? Sherwin Nuland says, "We live in an era not of the art of dying, but of the art of saving life...."[3] As faith leaders what are we to do with this truth of which Nuland so courageously speaks?

Ars Moriendi: A Brief Overview

This body of literature first appeared in Europe during the early 15th century, a time in history when death was rampant because of endless years of war and the pandemic known as the "Black Death". It was a response to peoples' pre-occupation with death. A

[2] *Festival of Homiletics,* Chicago, 2005.

[3] Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) p. 265.

lengthy manual provided guidance for both clergy and lay people who visited the sick and the dying. It included prayers, actions and attitudes that provided comfort and encouragement to Christians preparing for death. There was also a shorter illustrated version made into "block books". These were printed from carved blocks of wood that illustrated scenes depicting five temptations confronting the dying person, and five corresponding virtues or "inspirations". Such books gave people a framework to look honestly at the fact of death. They offered hope and contemplation to those who feared the unknown. The five temptations included fear, pride, impatience, avarice or attachment to worldly possessions and despair. The corresponding virtues or "remedies" included the development of faith in the midst of fear, humility in the face of pride, patience in the struggle with impatience, the ability to enjoy life without possessing it, and hope versus despair.[4]

In the 16th century, Erasmus made a great contribution to the conversation. He is often cited as having transformed the Ars Moriendi tradition by proposing that the best way to prepare for dying was to live well and pursue virtue. He claimed, "Life is too short to begin preparing for death on one's deathbed. The best preparation for death is a life well-lived, a life in accordance with the philosophy of Christ."[5] Erasmus believed that one could overcome the fear of death by trusting in the promise of Christ's offer of forgiveness for one's inadequacies and failings, and the hope found in his resurrection that there is a future beyond this earthly existence. Erasmus encouraged regular spiritual practices of prayer, reading scripture and partaking of the sacraments as a way of developing faith and also of loosening one's grip on worldly possessions and earthly attachments.

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[4] See Donald F. Duclow "Ars Moriendi" *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*. The Gale Group Inc., 2003. Encyclopedia.com accessed June 15, 2009.

[5] Hilmar M. Pabel, "Humanism and Early Modern Catholicism: Erasmus of Rotterdam's Ars Moriendi" in *Early Modern Catholicism*, Kathleen M. Comfort and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto: U of T Press Inc. 2001) p. 33.

Last August, a wonderful woman in the congregation I serve, who was suffering terribly after being diagnosed with stage-four ovarian cancer, invited me to be present at a meeting in her home with a funeral director. She needed support in this act of pre-arranging her funeral. It involved many decisions and much paper work, and the exercise proved to be an exhausting one. After the meeting, she lay down on the sofa. She did not want me to leave, so I sat beside her. We were quiet together for a while and then, I don't know how it happened, but suddenly I found myself talking to her about this article I had agreed to write for *Touchstone*. I shared some of the research on Ars Moriendi, the art of dying well and described the temptations and the corresponding virtues. She was clearly interested.

When I got to "hope versus despair" her eyes grew wide and she sat up. Our conversation took on a whole new dimension as she expressed sadness over her own death, her separation from loved ones and from life itself. She had exhausted all the possibilities of controlling the cancer and was now facing the end of her life. The hope she expressed in God's healing love and grace seemed to give her strength, even in the midst of great sorrow and physical pain. She had told the man from the funeral home that she was not sure if she would live longer than six months. Two weeks after our discussion of this article, her family called me to come to the hospital. She was asking for blessing. She died before midnight that evening at peace with God, held in the arms of those who loved her. Here was a person of faith who always practised compassion toward others and kept a prayerful connection to God at the best of times and the worst of times. She sought to be reconciled in all of her relationships; she searched and found missing relatives; she lived her life in Christ-like ways that made for healing and wholeness. When the community gathered at her funeral to accompany this sister in Christ on the last leg of her baptismal journey and entrust her into God's keeping, we caught a glimpse of what it looks like to live in the light of one's own mortality.

Acceptance Of Our Own Mortality

We live in a culture that promotes running away from death in favour of trying to achieve immortality by perpetuating one's memory through fame or art or some other means. The recent hunger to immortalize former pop star Michael Jackson provides one of the starkest examples of the desperation of our culture to turn its back on the fact of death. In sharp contrast stands the image of humble courage in the face of sickness, frailties, old age or untimely death that the Apostle Paul provides in his letter to the Corinthian Church. In the fourth chapter of his second letter to the church at Corinth (2 Corinthians 4: 5-12), if we listen carefully, it is possible to catch a fragment of the Ash Wednesday Liturgy, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." You and I are the clay jars that Paul speaks about. He reminds us that we are pieces of pottery, humble earthen vessels that are subject to chipping and cracking and even disintegrating. And yet even with all our vulnerabilities and frailties, we house the image of God, "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies"(2 Cor.4:10). We mortals are limited and imperfect, sharing in the suffering of Christ. Yet raised with Christ, we can and do come to a new place of strength where there is new energy for living, and renewed desire to grow in our love for God and neighbour.

One of the most visually beautiful meditations on death can be found in the Japanese film *Departures*. The film tells the story of a young man, Daigo, who is left penniless in Tokyo after the symphony in which he plays the cello dissolves. He and his wife have little choice but to return to his childhood home in northern Japan. Daigo finds work with a casketing company that prepares bodies in public ceremonies of "encoffinment", part of Japan's funeral ritual. The ceremony of preparing the body for cremation is performed in front of the whole family, not hidden away. Daigo, however, refuses to disclose the nature of his work. When his wife Mika discovers that he is a mortician she becomes very upset. She shuns Daigo and calls him "unclean". Mika begs him to get a normal job to which he replies, "Death is normal." As Daigo confronts

mortality daily, he learns to develop a deeper appreciation and greater appetite for life.

This movie reminds me how, once upon a time, part of the Christian ritual included washing the body, anointing the body and wrapping the deceased in a shroud before processing the beloved to the place of burial. It reminds me of the importance of accepting death as a natural part of life and of helping others to hear the quiet voice of death in a noisy culture. Today, death occurs mostly in the sterile seclusion of the hospital. Body bags arrive quickly. Family members are not encouraged to linger. Far too often, many of us preside at funerals where the body of the deceased, or even their ashes, is not even present.

Ash Wednesday To Easter

I would like to suggest some ways in which we might use the five temptations and their corresponding virtues depicted in the antique woodcut books of the Ars Moriendi as a way of contemplating our own dying and developing spiritual practices that might help us to find deepened self-understanding and to live more fully in the confidence of Christ's resurrection. Imagine as our starting point an Ash Wednesday service, one hour of beauty, rich in liturgy, music and ritual. Here is an opportunity to confront our own mortality and confess our sin before God and within the community of faith. Together we do this in the light of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. The imposition of the ashes is a sign that we ourselves are "ashes to ashes and dust to dust" as well as a powerful invitation to engage in a Lenten spiritual practice.

Out of the Ash Wednesday experience could come a program for the remaining Wednesdays in Lent. Each Wednesday would feature the original "woodcut" temptation and virtue. You might even have some copies of the woodcuts available for people to examine.

Faith In The Midst Of Fear

Addressing the fears and anxieties about dying could prompt a conversation about Jesus' sojourn in the desert. In Mark's gospel,

the desert is a place of death, and yet Jesus finds solace and comfort there. A group might begin by identifying all the little deaths to which we are called in our lifetime: the learning to die to the world's values, to our dreams and expectations, to oneself, to one's neighbour and what they might think about us. Participants could consider how the power of Christ's resurrection addresses our fear of death and share stories of people who have shown great faith in the face of fear.

Humility In The Face Of Pride

Spiritual pride is no stranger to any of us, and yet it is difficult to admit that we harbour self-conceit and the need to be in control. Measuring oneself by accomplishments or comparing oneself to others as a way of determining one's grade on having lived a good life can inhibit the growth of understanding and intimacy in relationships. The issue of forgiveness is an important part of dying and living. Asking for forgiveness helps complete our relationships. Knowing that we need forgiveness can help us to overcome the temptation of spiritual pride. Introducing the practice of contemplative prayer might encourage people to become more attentive to the goodness of each moment and to the possibilities of opening and relating to others in healthy ways.

Patience In The Struggle With Impatience

In his book *Patience, Compassion, Hope and the Christian Art of Dying Well,* Christopher Vogt argues that we find a good model for a contemporary development of the art of dying well in the example of Jesus' dying. He suggests that the most important virtue to practice today is patience.[6] Pastoral ministers are no strangers to the devastation faced by those who experience years of declining health, loss of control and the inability to care for themselves. For many, it is a pointless, meaningless journey toward

[6] Christopher P. Vogt, Patience, *Compassion, Hope and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2004) see chapters 4,5.

death. The inability to care for oneself and the judgment on the quality of one's life as very poor are often used in the argument for physician-assisted suicide. Here we witness the temptation of impatience. For example, it is impossible to see any consolations in the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. It's tortuous for loved ones to walk through the Alzheimer "valley of the shadow of death". Nuland's comment on this kind of slow death is worth contemplating. "If there is wisdom to be found, it must be in the knowledge that human beings are capable of the kind of love and loyalty that transcends not only the physical debasement but even the spiritual weariness of the years of sorrow."[7] Perhaps a group might examine its congregation's ministry of pastoral care. Is it possible to practise the virtue of patience by choosing to never lose sight of those who are totally dependent on others to care for them during long periods of declining health? The congregation who desires to grow in love and compassion needs to create opportunities to comfort the anguished and to attend to the spiritually weary.

The Ability To Enjoy Life Without Possessing It

Here the discussion focusses on our attachments to worldly things such as family, possessions and property. How do we detach? The early desert Christians practised a spiritual discipline of detachment or "apatheia". It requires the individual to develop an attitude of indifference in order to discern what does and does not deserve attention, what does and does not matter in the light of Jesus and the inbreaking of God's realm. I think the practice of Christian apatheia can teach us how to embrace another in love or bask in the beauty of a wonderful work of art without clinging in fear of losing someone or something. A group might choose to look at Jesus' life and his relationships. How did he practise apatheia?

[7] Ibid. p. 117.

Hope Versus Despair

As Jesus faced his own death, he experienced spiritual anguish. "Why have you forsaken me?", he cries out to God. In our own times of anguish, it can seem as though God is absent. Conversation partners might consider what temptation to despair looks like in their own lives and in the life of their congregation. Recently, our whole congregation experienced the reality of the temptation to despair. Within one month this past fall, four leaders in our congregation, all members of the Church Council, died suddenly. As one member blurted out in her prayers, "we are all rocked by the losses of our brothers and sisters". This community of faith is learning to accept that death can come at any moment and to acknowledge openly before God and one another our temptation to despair. It helps that every Sunday worshippers have a picture before them. They face the Good News of the Gospel light shining through the coloured glass of a large chancel window. The lower section is rather dark and gloomy. Roman soldiers, associated with Jesus' death, depict the warring madness of the world. As eyes move upward they connect with the central figure of the Risen Christ, the light of victory and hope breaking over the world. The central theme of the entire chancel window is summed up in the verse from John's Gospel: Take courage, says Jesus, I have conquered the world. (John 16:33) This window continually shouts out words of hope. Death does not have the last word. Take courage. In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ there is new life.

The Art Of Dying Is The Art Of Living

At the end of his reflections on life's final chapter, Dr. Nuland, a surgeon and teacher of surgery, sounds like a modern day Erasmus. He concludes:

> The honesty and grace of the years of life that are ending is the real measure of how we die. It is not in the last weeks or days that we compose the message that will be remembered, but in all the decades that preceded them. Who has lived in dignity, dies in dignity.[8]

[8] Ibid. p.268.

As I walked down the corridor of the care facility toward the room where my father now lives, I was filled with sadness. He no longer knows my name or recognizes me as his daughter. Nor does he speak much anymore. He was not in his room. I could hear singing coming from the chapel. I thought I heard my dad's voice, still with a touch of that rich tenor sound he once produced. Turning the corner I saw him, sitting in the front row as he always did every Sunday at his home church. They were singing an old gospel hymn that would never make my play list, but there was my dad singing his heart out, "When the Roll is called up Yonder". The song ended and I cringed when the worship leader asked, "Are you on that roll?" There was not much response from the crowd so he tried a second time. "Raise your hand if you're on that roll." I saw my dad raise his hand. A smile broke upon my face. I had caught a glimpse of the promise of Resurrection. There is hope. Even when we can find no dignity in the process of dying, there is hope of a new transformed life in God, in the company of Jesus and that great cloud of witnesses, in a new heaven and a new earth.