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Too Close for Comfort

BY KATHLEEN LONG BOSTROM

I am writing this article at a time when death is all around me. We are grieving the loss of my father-in-law, who died this year after a brief and heart-breaking battle with Lou Gehrig's Disease (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis or ALS). A young mother in our congregation found out this week that she has terminal cancer and only a few months to live. My father was just diagnosed with inoperable liver cancer. Even our 12-year-old dog is dying of cancer.

Death is all around me. It is almost Halloween, and the ghastly and ghoulish decorations haunt me as I drive through the neighborhood. Stuffed effigies hang from trees. Mock graveyards rise from frost-tipped lawns. Bloodied masks grimace in the aisles of the convenience store, where all I want to do is buy a bag of chocolates and a get-well card.

Now that we've had the first "killing frost" (what a violent image for a sudden drop in the temperature), the flowers have wilted and the stems of all the plants have gone limp, with that deathly translucence that indicates inevitable decay.

Everywhere I turn, there is death, death, death. My heart is heavy and my shoulders stooped from the weight of it all.

Some folks are of the opinion that Christians should not be saddened by death. Death is, after all, the golden doorway through which we pass into a glorious life everlasting, a life with Christ, devoid of all mourning, sorrow and pain. Heaven is a wonderful place; in fact, it is the perfect place to spend eternity.

The promise of heaven is a comfort when someone we love dies or when we face death ourselves. Yet there

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are times when the promise of heaven is overshadowed by the sorrow of our earthly life coming to an end. As fragile and temporal as life on earth can be, letting go of it isn't always easy. Life is such a precious and priceless gift. Once it's over, it's over, as far as our mortal bodies are concerned. Heaven may be earth-shatteringly beautiful and amazing beyond comprehension, but with one major exception—once you go there, you can't come back here.

A Fine Balance

How do we live in anticipation of the glory of heaven when it hovers on the brink, when we aren't quite ready to embrace the only way we get there—namely, death? It is this balance that seems most challenging to me right now.

What do I say to the single mother as she prepares to tell her just-turned-12-year-old daughter that mom won't be around to watch her dress for her first dance or stand in front of the congregation to affirm her faith at her confirmation? How do I comfort the heartbroken parents as they struggle to cope with the reality that they may outlive their only daughter? How do I accept the very real possibility that my own father may not live to see my youngest son, his last grandchild, graduate from high school this year? How do I, as pastor, preach the good news of resurrection to my grieving congregation when my own heart is in pieces?

One of the greatest challenges we face in life is being hopeful and realistic at the same time. This is true in many situations: when we are seeking a new job, hoping to have a child, waiting for the results of a medical test. Nowhere is the fine balance between hope and realism more tenuous than when we, or someone we love, faces imminent death.

In truth, we all are in a state of imminent death. Death is a given, and the timing of it not always predictable. We busy ourselves with life and all its details, being more concerned most days with vacuuming the dog hairs from the sofa than with thinking about the layout of our heavenly mansion.

And then there are the times when we know that death is close; when we walk through the valley as the shadow of death grows deeper and darker by the minute. There are times when death is just too close for comfort.

Being sad or frightened in the face of death does not mean that we are unfaithful. It means that we are human. Our reluctance to fling wide our arms and say, "Here I am, Death, come and get me!" is not an indicator that we don't believe in heaven, resurrection and the promises of Jesus. We may believe with every fiber of our being that our name is written in indelible ink on a place card at the heavenly banquet. Still, it's tough to embrace the reality of death when we have so much living yet to do.

A Rite of Passage

The Reformed tradition of Lent emphasizes that we do not take death lightly—not Christ's death and not our own. Death is a very serious matter. Indeed, the season of Lent developed out of the early Christians' desire to thoughtfully and faithfully prepare for celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus. The original 40-hour vigil that preceded Easter lengthened into 40 days. New converts were immersed in discipleship training. They prepared for their baptism, which took place on Easter, by learning the essentials of the Christian faith. Those who already claimed Christ as their Lord and Savior renewed their commitment and dedication during the same 40 days. Thus, the new Christians, as well as the renewed ones, approached Easter fully aware of the sacrifice that Christ made by his awful death on the cross and his awe-full resurrection from the grave.

If death is merely a simple rite of passage, then what's the big deal?

But death is a big deal. It is "The End" of life on earth, the only life we've ever known. It is recognizing death in all its sad, fearsome finality that makes Christ's sacrifice in conquering death all the more powerful, and that allows us to joyfully proclaim, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55).

We cannot celebrate the joy of resurrection if we springboard from Palm Sunday to Easter, if we fast-forward through the scene where Jesus stumbles up a hillside, blood streaming from the thorns pounded into the crown of his very real flesh. We cannot marvel at the very empty tomb if our hearts don't first shatter at the sight of that very full cross.

In the early church, Lenten preparations for Easter revolved around the body of Christ as represented in the whole Christian community. The spirituality pendulum seems to have swung too far in the other direction. Nowadays, we are more often challenged during Lent to fine-tune our spiritual walk through a rededication of personal piety.

This is all well and good. But reclaiming our heritage of preparing as a community for the death and resurrection of Christ may help us as individuals when we are anticipating our own death or the death of someone we love.

It is true that we must each cross the threshold of death alone. Seven years ago I watched my own mother draw her last breath. I sat by her bedside, along with my father and sister and brother. We kept vigil together for five hours, talking to Mom, praying with her, comforting her and each other, reluctant to leave her even for a second while we waited for the moment of death to come. But when it did, we were left behind in the hospital room. Mom had to take the final step by herself.

When the community of faith draws a loving circle around those who are dying, we represent a larger truth—we are alone in death, and yet we are not. No human being can take our hand and lead us through the gates of



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heaven. But Christ can. And Christ does. And as the body of Christ on earth, we who call ourselves Christians are called to embrace dying and death, even as the tears stream down our faces and our bodies shake with sobs.

A Show of Respect

During worship on All Saints' Day, we read aloud the names of those who have died during the past year. As each name is called, family and friends rise briefly while a candle is lit, then sit again as the next name is called.

Last year, I noticed that about halfway back in the sanctuary, one man stood at the beginning of the "roll call" and remained standing as name after name was read

aloud. I assumed that he didn't realize he was supposed to sit back down, but would figure it out when he saw other people stand and then take their seats.

But he didn't seem to get it. He kept standing, sometimes the only person in the sanctuary who stood as the name of one of the saints was called. I felt slightly embarrassed for the poor fellow, for not understanding the All Saints' protocol. Then it dawned on me. The man hadn't missed the instructions, not one bit. He knew exactly what he was doing. He chose to stand for each person whose name was read, so that everyone on the list had at least one person in the church remembering them, standing up for them, affirming that life has worth, all life

has worth, and death will never, ever extinguish that truth.

What this one person did was represent all the people of God, not just our congregation but all people in all times and places who strive to be the body of Christ on earth. By standing to remember the life of every single person, this one individual made an incredibly beautiful statement of faith—no one's life is lived in vain, no one is forgotten by the One who gives us life in the first place, and who will give us life in the end. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? . . . But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:55, 57). Christ—who was the very first Word—also gets the last word.

Yes, we believe in heaven. Yes, we believe in life everlasting. Yes, we believe in Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, the eternal Light

of the World that not even the darkness of death will overcome. Our sorrow in the face of death does not diminish our faith, but causes us to cling all the more to that faith, even if it is with our fingernails, holding on for dear life. For life is dear, life is precious, and that is what our sorrow in the face of death affirms.

We grieve at what death takes from us—our loved ones, our lives. But we do not grieve as those who have no hope. We grieve because we believe that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For [we are] convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:37–39).

Tell me, what do I say to the dying mother and the grieving

parents; what do I say to my own broken heart and the congregation who looks to me for words of hope?

I say, listen to what Jesus had to say. "I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:32–33).

I say, "Christ is risen!"

You say, "Christ is risen indeed!"

We all say, "Amen." 🌸

Kathleen Long Bostrom is the author of the 2005–2006 *Horizons* Bible study, *For Everything, A Season: A Study of the Liturgical Calendar*, and copastor of Wildwood Presbyterian Church in Wildwood, Illinois. She is the author of numerous books. Her most recent is *Waiting for Christmas: A Story About the Advent Calendar* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zonderkidz, 2006).



Here's What One PW Is Doing



Children who are brought into the care of Presbyterian Children's Services often arrive with nothing but the clothes they have on. A young boy brought into Farmington Children's Home in Farmington, Missouri, asked for a plastic cup that he saw. When asked why he wanted the cup, he simply said, "Because I don't have anything of my own."

That story nagged Betty Phillips as she sat at a Missouri State Quilter's Guild retreat last fall. Quilters there were promoting Benjamin Smiles, a program to make small pillowcases for children with cancer. Betty envisioned a similar program for the Farmington Children's Home, and shared her thoughts with her friends and members of First Presbyterian Church of Perryville, Missouri, and Brazeau Presbyterian Church in Brazeau, Missouri. The idea took off.

Betty and her group enlarged the pattern of the Benjamin Smiles pillowcases to fit a standard pillow. They received donations of pillows, fabric, pillowcases and money. They embroidered "Sweet Dreams" on each pillow.

"It has absolutely snowballed since we started," says Betty. "We've delivered more than 40 of these already. We anticipate needing around 15 per month."

Each child who gets a new pillow (on his or her birthday) is free to take it when they leave. For so many of the children who have been living the lives of nightmares, Sweet Dreams is a blessing of hope and joy.

Judy Schmelzle
Moderator of PW in the Presbytery, Giddings-Lovejoy

Article contributed by Rob Lamb, Presbyterian Children's Services, St. Louis, Missouri