

THE NOT-GOOD DEATH

June 12, 2011

On January 9th, I preached the first of a three-part series on death. At the time I thought I would finish the series in March and April. However, health issues intervened, and I am now returning to the series: *The Traumatic Death*, *The Not-Good Death*, and *The Good Death*. If you missed the first one, it is now posted on our website.

Death is a subject that we Americans in the 21st Century are just learning to talk about. Long ago, when the average person died around the age of 40, death was ever present. People could not ignore it, even if they wished to do so. And there were fewer questions about the afterlife—if it existed, and if so, what it was like. In Western Culture, in which we live and move and have our being, most people were and still are Christian. Although academics and theologians might debate the afterlife, most people just thought that when they died, they would go to be with Jesus if they were good, and would suffer if they were not. Most people spent their lives trying to survive and had little time or energy to worry about the afterlife.

One of the great gifts of living in this early 21st Century is that the development of scientific medicine has extended our lifespan—actually doubling the number of years we might expect to live. Survival became easier in the developed nations of the world, people other than the highest elite have time to acquire an education, and time to explore deep questions.

Often this questioning comes late in life—after the children are grown, after the bulk of one's work has been completed, perhaps after one has lost family members and friends to death. At some point, following such a loss, most of us will say with a sigh, "That was not a good death."

How then, might we define a Not-Good Death? I believe it falls mainly in four categories: dying too young, dying too late, dying in great pain, and dying in natural disasters.

You probably remember that I defined Traumatic Death as being not only violent, but having human causality. I believe there is a special horror that causes extreme trauma when a person deliberately takes the life of a human. Not-Good Deaths are also painful for survivors, but they do not contain that element of horror. Let us look at them in some depth.

I will give you some time later in the sermon to share the names of your loved ones who have endured a Not-Good Death.

We will listen to soft music as you speak the names.

The first is the death of a young person, perhaps a child, even a baby. My brother and his wife had twins, born at Christmas time. They named the girl Kris and the boy Noel. Kris has grown to be a lovely young woman who competed in gymnastic tournaments as a teen, is now married and has a child. Noel, however was the smaller twin. He died at two weeks. His mother's eyes still fill with tears when his name is mentioned.

Perhaps some of you have lost a very young child, as did the author of the poem shared earlier. You know, in your bones, that one never forgets that loss. You bear a special pain. In truth, if a child precedes his parents in death, it is always too soon, be he two weeks or twenty or sixty.

Therefore, the death of any young adult is a Not-Good Death. It often seems that teens and young adults are especially vulnerable. They have not yet learned that driving a car is a dangerous activity. I have a friend who is raising her grandchild because her daughter was killed at 22 in a car wreck. And teens and young adults seek thrills, they like to play dangerously, on snowboards, and jet skis, or challenging the alluring waters of our Great Lakes.

On my side of the state one of our most popular beaches is often a site of rip currents. We lose two or three young swimmers a year who get caught in those currents. This age group really thinks they are immortal; that such accidents could not possibly happen to them. When it does, it is one of the saddest of the Not-Good Deaths.

At the other end of this spectrum is the death of a parent with young children. One morning in Muskegon I received a call from a young man who was not a member of our congregation. In fact he was not a member of any congregation, because he was a believing atheist, as was his wife. He asked me if I would officiate at her memorial service, because she was dying from cancer. I replied that I would.

Patty was under 40, and had two children, the oldest a boy who was 10. She was in hospice care at the hospital, so I called upon her there. Her family was Catholic. I think they never understood her choice of faith, but they loved and supported her. We talked for a few minutes, and I assured her that I could put together a service that honored her beliefs, and provided a safe place for her family of origin as well as of choice to say farewell.

We held the service at our congregation, I used some readings from Robert Ingersoll, who was known as The Great Atheist and was a favorite of Patty's, 2

and her husband. We heard lovely music, we shared stories of Patty's life, we even prayed. Her husband was pleased, and her family also. However, nothing we could do could ease the loss of that 10 year old boy and his sister. It was a satisfactory, maybe even a good memorial service for a woman who died a Not-Good Death.

The second type of Not-Good Death is dying too late. Note that I did not say too old. This era is the first in human history in which people, ordinary people, live not only to old age, but great old age. Our society is just learning the implications of this fact. And we are learning that, just as there are stages of childhood and adulthood, there are stages of old age. There is the newly old, about the time we retire, around 65. Then there is the middle old, maybe from early 70's to mid to late 80's. And there is the old old, those who are 90ish and up. Due to not only our inherited genes, but the things that happen to us during our lifetimes, our health during these stages will vary a great deal .

The second reading this morning seems to illustrate someone who died too late—so late that there was no one to hold his hand, or walk by his casket when he died.

We have all known people who are remarkably active and healthy at age 90 and above. They seem to have the body and energy of a 65 or 70 year old. And we know people whose body starts failing even before the 65 year mark. The ability to continue a life of meaning and joy seems to be less reliant on chronology than endurance and overall health.

When I first came to preach a trial sermon at what later became the Harbor UU Congregation, the second pew back on the left side, directly in front of the pulpit contained four white-haired ladies. I learned they were the Mahjong crew, and their ages were 65, 70, 75 and 80. They had played Mahjong every Tuesday afternoon for many years, and were the matriarchs of the church. The 75-year-old invited me over for lunch one afternoon soon after I arrived. After lunch we took a walk by Lake Michigan, and let me tell you she walked me into the ground, and I was only 54.

It was only a few years before we buried the oldest of the group, and then a few years later the third oldest. The youngest moved to be with a daughter, and is now, I am told, forgetting more than she is remembering. However, that walker, whose son moved her to his city when she was 92, is still around.

Thus, dying too late, not too old, is grounds for the Not-Good Death. I think there are two criteria for that: when the personality or self has departed, and when the body has deteriorated, so that one cannot truly live, rather than merely endure life.

I have always been more concerned about living too long, rather than dying too young. One grandmother lived to age 96, and the other 102. The latter suffered from dementia during her last decade. I remember visiting her when she did not recognize us, and it was almost impossible to communicate with her. She was never a very happy woman, and certainly displayed no signs of it during that last decade. I believe she died too late. Her personality died much earlier.

Another too late death is when the body has deteriorated so that one can no longer participate in living; one must simply endure until the end comes. This is a fairly fuzzy category, because one person's living is another person's endurance. One needs only think of Steven Hawking, still participating in advanced theoretical physics, while living with a major disability.

In Michigan, one cannot ignore Dr. Jack Kevorkian's work in the right to die movement, designed to alleviate Not-Good Deaths. I was reading a book by Dr. of Theology Jack LaRue, when the news of the his death was announced. The book is named *Playing God: 50 Religions Beliefs about Your Right to Die*. It was written in 1993, when the right-to-die movement was introducing initiatives in California and Washington. While not exactly a scintillating read, I found it very interesting. Most mainstream and liberal religions agree that passive euthanasia or withdrawal of extraordinary treatment should be allowed. Most thought that active euthanasia should not be allowed. The question of aid-in-dying deserves greater attention than can be given today. If you want me to address it later, please let me know.

Dying in excessive pain is the next category of Not-Good Deaths. The development of the Hospice movement has greatly lessened the possibility that one will suffer great pain while dying. They do great work, and have effectively removed a major cause for concern about dying.

My friend, Marilyn, who is a hospice chaplain, dedicated the second half of her life to this work. She is very wise and gentle, and works very hard to learn about the practices and theology of the many faiths that may enter the doors of the lovely building that houses her clientele.

However, dying in pain has not disappeared, and when it happens, I call it a Not-Good Death. There are still some faiths, mainly very conservative Christians, who teach that enduring suffering is redemptive; that people should resist dulling the pain because Christ did, and that one should strive to emulate him. I must confess this makes me very angry. I believe this is a damaging faith stance, and I cannot extend it the courtesy of tolerating it without protest.

This sermon was gestating in my mind and heart when the news of the tornado that devastated Joplin, Missouri spread. I have lived most of my life in the Midwest, where almost everyone has seen or been in, certainly has seen the results of, a tornado. Most of the ones I have seen or seen the results of, were, however, concentrated in a fairly small area. When I lived in Columbus, Georgia a tornado struck the street upon which lived an elderly, very religious friend. It was clear to see that the storm had tracked down her side of the street, veered across to the other side as it approached her house, and then veered back after it totaled the house across from her. She was, I fear, rather smug about the whole thing. There were no lives lost in that storm, however Joplin, which was hit by a far larger funnel, lost many.

Perhaps the most damaging natural disaster in recent months is the tsunami that struck Japan, especially its long-range effects. Such disasters often result in massive loss of life which are clearly Not-Good Deaths.

I promised you a time to remember loved ones who died Not -Good Deaths. Let us now pause to name our loved ones. As Nancy plays softly, I invite you to speak the names of friends and family members that you are remembering today.

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Music, Names
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The Not-Good Death—when one dies too young or too late, in pain or due to a natural disaster. One thing we know: death is inevitable. We will all die, and, perhaps even worse, those we love will die.

In truth, death is the final stage of life, and, if we are fortunate, we continue to grow and develop through the dying process.

Next month, on the second Sunday of July, I will talk about The Good Death. Let us pray that no one we love, including ourselves, suffers from a Traumatic Death, or a Not-Good Death. While death is the end of life as we know it, a Good Death is possible. It is the end we all seek.

May it be so.

Shalom and Salaam.
Blessed Be and Amen.

