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Living our Dying: A way to the Sacred in Everyday Life, by Joseph Sharp

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From deep within, the author shares his own intimacy, his sorrows and his joys, his fears and his trusting, on a subject we will all have to face but seldom confront before it is unavoidable—our mortality. A long-term AIDS survivor who interned as a hospital chaplain in an infectious disease unit, Sharp often met people dying of the same disease. Through his patients and friends, he learned how to deal with his own fears and inadequacies. One of the strengths of *Living our dying* is that it is written from the perspective of both caregiver and patient with a life-threatening illness.

Sharp tries to inform and educate caregivers and others involved with those who have died or are dying, as well as people with no experience with this situation but willing to become more aware of their own life process. Those close to someone dying from AIDS will find special poignancy and reality in many of Sharp's narratives. But Sharp makes clear how all of us can benefit from "living our dying."

Confronting our mortality, even when we are healthy, can help us become more honest in our everyday living. For Sharp, life threatening conditions include not only terminal illnesses such as cancer and AIDS, but also emotional despair. Thus, we need to examine our own suffering—unofficially or officially diagnosed—so that we may recognize, experientially, that, "though we appear to be in different boats, we are in truth upon the same sea." And, we need a larger sense of "self" to navigate through a world inherently impermanent.

The book is written in simple and direct yet very expressive and engaging language. The author uses repetition very effectively, adding meaning or emphasis by reiterating certain words and phrases. Most notably, about two-thirds through the book, Sharp repeats an entire three-page account with which he began the book, offering a deeper analysis of its importance for his own, now more advanced, development. The incident occurred early in his internship as a chaplain. A hospital patient, dying and in pain, asked Sharp: "Do a visualization for me. I want you to help me go ahead and die. . . . Can you do me a visualization where I just go into God's arms and don't come back?" Deeply moved, he agreed to try. When he finished, the woman—quite lucid at the outset—was unconscious. She died later that night. He spoke of the woman as "blessing me with my own initiation into faith and trust. She *knew*. And it was time for me to taste of that knowledge."

Sharp explains the religious nature of the preceding visualization experience and that other occasions when he had used guided visualizations to facilitate completing a person's dying process. "There is a letting go into the moment by moment by moment . . . an uncertainty of where the visualization is going, of its ending and completion. During these heightened times of awareness, I find that I'm doing this work for the One Self—the commingled souls into a Godself—that is both me and the other person. It's a psalm praising God's love. . . . During a joining of such holy intentions, parts of us both die into the light and don't come back." He relates a variety of other episodes from his own experiences to demonstrate how he was helped or impeded from progressing in his development by his thinking or actions about dying. Any of his accounts may induce flashbacks to the reader's own encounters with death, satisfactory or otherwise.

Sharp promises rich rewards to any person who honestly gives time and attention to the emotional and spiritual work of consciously living his or her dying. To assist one on this journey, he has written this "how-to" book, which includes practical advice and exercises based on insights gathered from a broad variety of religious, artistic, scientific and experiential sources.

The major sections of the book include: waking up to our dying; inviting dying into everyday life; going deeper; and living our dying. Many of the author's pithy suggestions would make good topics for meditation. The most extended one is a "guided meditation and inquiry into the self that doesn't die," and it includes an introduction which offers settings and attitudes which can help to make it more effective.

Most of the proposed exercises in the book involve more mindful ways of speaking and listening, for example, decreasing the use of euphemisms for dying and death (because they dilute the reality of suffering), and making a conscious effort to use the "D" word. Caregivers are also asked to maximize opportunities for patients to share fully their experience of the dying trajectory. Changes in patterns of speech are made slowly, but they can be effected with persistence. Sharp, however, also cautions about overzealous help.

The book is not a comprehensive, structured, academic manual but an enriching, compassionate resource to use in conjunction with more formal texts in medicine and other healing arts, psychology, and theology. In the broadest sense, this volume could well be a doorway for anyone seeking a closer relationship with the Holy in everyday life.

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