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MORAL MATTERS

In letting go of the baubles, we stand to gain everything

JUST as there are many ways to live, so there are many ways to die. It is true that we don't always have a say in how we live or perish. There are, however, simple ways of living that can prepare us for death irrespective of when or how it comes.

It can be said that all life is a preparation for death. From the moment of conception, we are edging towards the end. Facing that fact and realising that death is integral to living is perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn.

Our actual extinction is, of course, only the final stage in a long process. Throughout the average life, a person dies many times. We die to childish things, to a self squandered in the mayhem of youth and to those obsessions and preoccupations that once held us captive.

Detachment is a form of death that renders us less reliant on the material things of this world. Contemplative people stand at a distance from their cares, knowing that 'life is more than food and the body more than clothes'. Like the grain of wheat that falls to the earth, they die in order to truly live.

A truth shared by all the great spiritual traditions is that reality can only be discovered by letting go. We must die to the 'baubles of life', those things that momentarily sparkle and then fade. By clinging to what cannot be extinguished, we root ourselves to what is permanent and enduring.

It is enormously difficult to let go. Our natural instinct is to cling to what we have for fear that it might fade forever. It is, however, much easier to let go than to spend your life desperately seeking to maintain control.

All this was vividly brought home to me when, recently, I stumbled across an article by Englishwoman Anne McDonnell. In 2012, Anne was diagnosed with bone cancer and told she had between two and five years to live. Since then, she has written about her journey in a manner that is both moving and inspiring.

Describing the moment she received her diagnosis, Ms McDonnell writes: 'There was a physical reaction as I was filled with dread, felt paralysed, hot, cold and locked in this moment of time... Further words of explanation made no sense since shock blurred my mind and tears my vision so I could no longer see or understand anything at all... Returning back to "normal" life from the small confines of that room was daunting, frightening, as I was no longer the same, everything had changed'.

Out of that terrible moment there appeared something powerful and beautiful. Ms McDonnell is not in denial about death, yet she has cho-

sen to embrace life. 'Over the past two and a half years, I have learned to accompany my disease, get to know it and accept that it is there. This is very hard work indeed. However, to my great amazement, I find that new life emerges.'

Anne was struck by a list of things that, as she read in the newspaper, make people happy. Those surveyed did not speak of cash, cars or vacations, but of 'sleeping in a freshly made bed', 'feeling the sun on your face' and 'the smell of newly mown grass'. These are simple things but, as Anne rightly remarks, 'smell, touch, sight, sound all bring enhancement and a sense of wellbeing which cannot be bought'.

No matter what our stage in life, such things are always there to be savoured. In themselves they have no material value yet they are a priceless benediction. Through them, we discover the reason why life is truly more than food and the body more than clothes.

Ms McDonnell writes that she 'finds a mysterious energy breathed into my life that gives me profound appreciation of the beauty of this world and the people within it. Illness brings vulnerability, a certain shedding of old roles, but alongside that, genuine and close relationships emerge.'

The fact that she now spends a good deal of time at home means she is more available to those who phone or visit. The result is 'a new quality of communication' that 'offers renewal and healing since an honest, open sharing of life brings strength, comfort and inspiration - a new way of looking at things'.

EACH day affords a new opportunity to look at things anew. Each day offers a fresh chance to die to those aspects of life that prevent us from seeing the true beauty of our world. In letting go of the baubles, we gain nothing short of everything.

Ms McDonnell knows that she is going to die. And in that realisation, she has chosen to dwell on beauty and happiness, 'on the formidable mix of unpredictable joys and sorrows that form the gift of our wonderful life'.

By courageously confronting her own death, Ms McDonnell is celebrating life. However, she is also demonstrating that in order to truly live, we must be prepared to die. We must be prepared to let go of all those things that stop us from 'shedding old roles', from being a person defined by joy and compassion instead of one defined by social status.

In all this, Ms McDonnell is teaching us how to die. In doing so, she is giving us a beautiful lesson in how to live.

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