

On Our Own Terms: Moyers on Dying

Notes for the video series

“It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

– **Woody Allen**

While the subject may make us uncomfortable, there are good reasons for talking about the topic. One important reason is to ensure that we get the proper end-of-life care we want for our family members, community and ourselves.

Bill Bartholome

- Pediatrician who has dealt with dying children.
- Diagnosed with cancer.
- Engaged to Pam.
- Wants to get married to give Pam more rights.
- Cannot believe how patients are treated (even as a professor in a teaching hospital), he is left alone and in severe pain.
- Not told about pain that would accompany the treatment for as long as it has.
- Pam became his voice (proxy) if he could no longer speak
- Wonders why someone would marry a person “condemned” to die.
- “We see what it is to be alive” ~
- Death = sugar (is what gives life its sweetness).
- He realizes the inadequacy of health insurance (Won’t pay for hospice care for more than a month).
- Leaving each other = transformation in the relationship.
- Reminders of Morrie– “Death ends a life not a relationship”
“Don’t hang on too long, don’t let go too soon”
- Pam speaks about Bill’s entrance into the final stage of dying which is acceptance and finding peace

Joyce Kerr

- diagnosed with ovarian cancer
- husband and daughters assist in her care when she goes home with the help of hospice.
- daughter also works at Mt. Sinai.

Palliative Care

- Care for people with life limiting illnesses.
- Purpose is comforting the suffering. Physical comfort is the first priority.
- Can help a patient come to terms with illness.
- Unfortunately insurance determines what treatment will be.
- *Dr. Diane Meier* is the director of palliative care at Mt. Sinai
- She has taken on the mission of making patients more comfortable as they come closer to death (Not cure but comfort).
- Speaks about Alzheimer’s as a terminal disease where most patients die from infection. Modern medicine would instinctively try to cure this.
- Calls *pain* the fifth vital sign that doctors and nurses need to be aware of.
- Matt Wilson ~ even though he is in his final stages of death no one is talking about it.
 - *Death of Ivan Illych*– a book by Leo Tolstoy where no one in the village will acknowledge that this man is dying. He dies alone.

Hospice

- The name for an interdisciplinary program of care that provides palliation as

- well as emotional support to terminally ill people and their family and friends.
- Emphasizes enhancing the quality of life and preserving the patient's self worth and dignity.
 - Helping provide the terminally ill person with an alert, pain free existence when possible.

Thomas Lynch

- Undertaker and poet who prepared his own father's body for burial.
- Speaks of people reluctance to deal with death.

Jim Witcher

- A horse farmer diagnosed with an aggressive form of ALS.
- lived an extremely active life while juggling two careers before stricken with illness.
- Contemplates PAS and questions doctor on his options.
- Wants more control over his situation
- Looking to take the burden off of his wife and caretaker Susie.

Kitty Rail–

- Had hysterectomy to remove cancer but cancer returned. As an Oregon resident she can end her life with PAS.
- Dr. Olson cannot help her with a good conscience. (Comes from a Catholic background). Seeks the help of a doctor who will help her die.

Important terms:

- Grief* – A reaction to loss.
- When such losses are not acknowledged, recognized, or supported by others, that grief can be said to be disenfranchised.

Anticipatory grief – is not only a grief response to an anticipated loss of life, but to all losses that are experienced in the course of an illness, such as the loss of health, functions, jobs and other social roles.

- There is no timetable for grief.
- Grief responses can include feelings of sadness, guilt, anger, or loneliness.
- May even affect individuals physically, manifesting itself in bodily aches and pains.
- It is not unusual that even years following a loss, events or memories will continue to generate moments of grief.

Advocate– a person, often a family member who speaks on behalf of a patient with health care providers.

Caregiver– Someone who is responsible for attending to the needs of an ill person.

Chronic pain– Pain or discomfort which has been present for a long time, possibly months or years.

Prognosis– The probable course that a disease will take.

Respite care– temporary care provided by someone else so that the everyday caregiver can have a break.