

Will we ‘Rage against the dying of the light’?

This is the sixth in the series of articles written for the Irish Hospice Foundation in response to the People’s charter which documents what the citizens of Ireland (2600) want to see brought into the open.



Photo by Cesare Burei on Unsplash

When I was a child my mother had a recording of Richard Burton reading Dylan Thomas’s poem “Do not go gentle into that good night”. Poems she said, say more than words ever can.

Even today when I hear the beautiful Welsh tones of Burton I am transported back to my home in Batley, the scratchy vinyl record, and the powerful words of *‘raging against the dying of the light’*.

If you have never had the pleasure of hearing that poem read aloud, I will urge you to listen. You can hear [Burton here](#).

Dylan Thomas wrote this poem as his father was facing death. He reflects that not only his father will die but we all will regardless, of our background, by telling us that all men “wise men, good men, wild men”—all of us will face death.

Now more erudite minds than mine will have found deeper meaning in this poem but I do wonder if Thomas is imploring his father to ‘rage against the dying of the light’ because he knows his father had accepted death and was peace with it and Thomas had not? Or a

rallying call to encourage us to push back against illness, death, and whatever is forcing us back in life?

Perhaps both

Judging by the “Haveyoursay” survey Irish people display some similarities with Thomas. Data from the 2600 people surveyed told us that respondents worried much more about their loved ones dying than themselves. When they did talk about their own death their fear and anxiety centred around dying process. This worries even the hardest of us. The survey highlighted that we worry we will die in pain, lose our dignity, die alone. It may be these things that keep us awake at night and stop us from talking about it.

As we continue to write these articles, we will delve deeper into the topic of pain and dignity and interview experts in palliative care to help us understand our fears better.

Today we will focus on the dying process (hurrah! I hear you cheer).

I know! I know! You want to read about the dying process as much as you want to go and have a root canal treatment at the dentist – you don’t want it but sometimes you have to have it. I will maintain my mantra: it’s better to get these things out and have a good old naval gaze to try to alleviate our fears.

Otherwise, like most fears, they stay lingering and festering, annoying us and stopping us having any fun at all.

And maybe, just maybe, there is a teeny bit of you that is at least a little bit curious?

Coincidentally, I happen to be reading ‘With the End in Mind’ written by Kathryn Mannix. In it, she describes a patient who is in the last stages of cancer. The patient is afraid of the process of dying. Her doctor goes to sit beside her and tells her exactly what the dying process is and how it will feel.

We as individuals only get to die once, but medical professionals see many people die, and they can use their knowledge to help the rest of us.

The way the doctor in Mannix’s book described dying was as follows. He took his patient’s hand and spoke to her about her pain. He explained if she wasn’t in pain now the likelihood would be that she would not have any further pain, but if she did they would be able to manage it for her.

She needed to trust that he would do that. He explained that he had seen death so many times, through a variety of illnesses. Very gently he explained that as time goes by people will become more tired, wearier. They will need to sleep more.

He explained to his patient that she would become progressively more tired and would need longer sleeps and she would spend less time awake. He said she may slip in and out of consciousness into more of a coma instead of sleep. Eventually, breathing will change and then stop. There is “no sudden rush of pain at the end. No feeling of fading away. No panic, just very, very peaceful”...

The doctor goes on and says “The important thing to notice is it's not the same as falling asleep. If you are well enough to be napping, you are well enough to wake up.”

The most important line in the whole book I think is this;

“Few have seen death. Most imagine dying to be agonising and undignified. We (medical staff) can help them to know that we do not see that and that they need not fear that their families will see something terrible.”

This is when there is a recognisable dying process. Not all of us will die peacefully in our beds. And that is a medical professional talking about somebody else dying. How do we face our own death when we don't want to?

Well, maybe we look to the oldest old. What do they think?

For the first time in human history, centenarians are the most significant growing demographic. Worldwide estimates are that there are between 450,000 and half a million centenarians. Japan and the US are the places where you are most likely to reach these kinds of ages. So how do the oldest old, the people most likely to die in the not too distant future, think about death?

In a study carried out by The Legacy Project researchers interviewed the oldest old about life, death and lessons they have picked up along the way. When quizzed on death and their feelings about it the responses were varied and quite lovely. Edwina a 94-year-old said “I'm not one bit afraid. Well, if you stop to think about it, it's a natural thing. Everything dies. Whether we come back or not or what happens there, I don't know. But it's like my husband used to say whenever we did discuss it: “If you go to heaven, how wonderful. But if you go to sleep, what's wrong with that?””

Another person describes panic over death as “a younger person's game.”

“I mean, life is death and death is life. If I die, I die. Dying is what I was thinking about when I was younger. I remember thinking, “How can I die? How can I not be alive?” That panicky feeling. But now I haven't thought about it in years. I know it can't be much longer—I'm eighty-seven. But I just don't worry about it. That's why I want to go out every night, as long as I can afford it. I want to do everything I can do. But I'm not worried about dying — don't even think about it.”

So what is the magic ingredient?

To not rage against the dying of the light?

To have acceptance of our death?

To put all our ducks in a row - write a will, fill in an advance healthcare directive, talk to our family and friends and then get on with the business of living? (hint: this is what we would advise)

As Patricia Weenolsen notes in her book *The Art of Dying*;

“Life often gives us time to rehearse, the benign cyst, the fatty lump, the negative test. At these times we hold our breath, we think the unthinkable, we sigh, we move on, we cheated death, we live!!”

I think so ... What do you think?

Source of the Legacy Project: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/karl-a-pillemer-phd/fear-of-death_b_4075769.html

For more about the Charter on Dying, Death and Bereavement in Ireland link here <https://hospicefoundation.ie/haveyoursay/>

For some short video advice on "Beginning at the end" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2RKLoo3gH4>