

Let's talk about – The philosophy of existential pain

This is the twelfth blog by Rebecca Lloyd of the Irish Hospice Foundation (IHF) in the series on The People's Charter on Dying, Death and Bereavement in Ireland. This month, the theme is around this line of the People's Charter: This is the third blog with a focus on pain.

“I can get relief from pain, no matter where I am being cared for or what condition I have.”

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People receiving the diagnosis of a life-limiting illness can find their world changing in an instant. They probably had made plans for their future. Perhaps instead of planning that future they are now facing the reality of their mortality. Death is no longer something far off in the distance. It is on its way. There is a new reality, and it sucks.

Confronting death is shocking. It brings everything into sharp focus. Suddenly our lives take on new meaning. We are at ground zero. We begin to explore the 'Why?' Why us? Why now? Why not someone else? This internalisation of our mortality is called '*existentialism*'.

Some of the great philosophers such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus obsessed on both death and the thought of death. Their view was that being aware of being mortal and facing death is part of the core philosophy of living. To them, death brings focus. It allows separation of the 'wheat from the chaff' and concentration on what is truly important. Heidegger argued by confronting death, we bring about '*the totality of our potentiality-for-Being*'. In one moment we can understand our full potential – a potential that is ours and only ours, and at this moment we can choose to take or not to take advantage. Suddenly we are made aware of self – our whole being – and our ability. With that realisation comes an obligation to fulfil our potential before death.

Unsurprisingly, it is this realisation that causes us so much distress. This is known as existential distress or pain. Being aware of our limited mortality and the obligations of our capacity can be too hard to bear. You know the list - the book we meant to write, the apologies we need to make, the forgiveness we need to grant, the borrowed shoes we should return, (not to mention the library books!) the Everest expedition, the marathon. The missed opportunities seem endless.

Existential distress comes when we realise some of our dreams and desires should have been fulfilled. The regret of putting things off for another time when we have more money, have lost weight, have more time.

But there is no time ...

Morrie Schwartz, the subject of the best-selling book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, managed to talk about his own dying in a way that has helped others. He had such a philosophical view about his own dying and would talk openly about it. He spoke mainly about the lessons he was learning in death. In a radio interview shortly before his death he said he had started to mourn his death and had moments of bitterness and bouts of crying. He spoke about how he reviewed his own life and had to let go of his regrets; he had started to fix some relationships that needed fixing.

He reflected on his relationship with God and a new awareness he felt. He said he felt more than a single person but more that he was part of a core of connected spirituality. He told the listeners on the radio show to talk about their illnesses, to keep on living as much as they could. He had Motor Neurone Disease, a debilitating disease that causes muscle atrophy leading to full paralysis. He believed he would have a good death because he had contemplated on it, and more importantly had got clear answers to his many questions.

Morrie made choices for himself that would relieve and alleviate most of his existential suffering. He made the most of the abilities he had for as long as he had. He surrounded himself with people who loved him, and saw him, and not the disease that ravaged his 'physical' body. Morrie refused to be defined by illness, but he did not hide it from anyone. He was represented by his soul, and by his spirit. He navigated his own death with compassion for himself and compassion for those who loved him. He said:

As long as we can love each other, and remember the feeling of love we had, we can die without ever really going away. All the love you created is still there. All the memories are still there. You live on—in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here

Heavy. Yes, it most definitely is. But we are talking about life and death.

The real question then becomes what can we do to help people who are facing death?

Below are a few suggestions:

1. Provide a place and a time for people to be able to talk honestly and openly. Help them talk about their love and their grief. Give them forgiveness and allow them to forgive others. Let them talk about their regrets and the time and space to be angry and frustrated.
2. Reassure them their life is and was important and worthwhile. Tell them they will not be forgotten. Tell them how you will remember them. Tell them your favourite stories of them, what you love about them, why they matter.
3. Tell them you will be okay when they are gone. They have given you enough gifts in their life that you are prepared to move on without them. They did well.
4. Give them an opportunity to reflect on their spirituality, their religious views.
5. Talk with them about other forms of relief such as touch therapy, massage, mindfulness. There is a tremendous comfort in just being held, in being heard.
6. Ask them what they are worried about. Sometimes to talk about their worries will be a huge help – they are not always looking for an answer they are just looking to be heard.
7. Speak softly to them, stroke their hand gently. Be present. Be kind. Be compassionate. As Morrie reminds us *'love, love always wins.'*

And for those of us who are not dying?

Perhaps it's time to confront death, even if we find it frightening. Only through this confrontation can we focus on what we want to do, see our passion. Explore mindfulness and gratefulness every day that we wake. Reflect on what is right in our lives. Say thank you, I love you and I forgive you more often. Be kinder. Be better. Take care of yourself and your others.

Write the bucket list.

Bryan Nolan of the Irish Hospice Foundation has made a series of shorts called 'Beginning at the end' which can help you or someone you know with these conversations at the end of

life. The goal of these little videos to create opportunities to have conversations and to take these opportunities to reach out to the person who is dying. They are a brilliant resource for all of us. Watch Bryan's videos [here](#).

You can read more about The People's Charter on Dying, Death in Ireland [here](#)

The Irish Hospice Foundation also hosts a number of workshops for people helping those facing death. For more information, click [here](#)

The Irish Hospice Foundation is the only charity dedicated to dying, death and bereavement in Ireland. 80 people die in Ireland every day and the IHF believes everyone has the right to be cared for and to die with dignity and respect in the care setting of their choice. Our mission is to strive for the best end-of-life and bereavement care, for all. The IHF campaigns to make excellence in hospice practices, bereavement and end-of-life care a national priority and to stimulate the conversation about dying, death and bereavement in Ireland. Full details: www.hospicefoundation.ie