

What we understand to be Spiritual Pain and how we might help ...

*This is the thirteenth 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:*

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

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*This is the fourth blog with a focus on pain, in particular spiritual pain.*



Photo by [Daniel H. Tong](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* tells us that following death a person's soul would enter the Hall of Truth with a judgement overseen by Osiris. Each soul's heart would be weighed on golden scales. The soul would tell its confessions to the many gods sitting in judgement beginning with a prayer that would relate that in life it had been dedicated to important and valuable activities. The soul would reassure Osiris of its purity. The confession ended with the statement, "I am pure" repeated a number of times. However the real test of the soul's purity was the weight of its heart.

The 'heart' of the soul was placed on golden scales balanced against the white feather of Ma'at - aptly named the feather of truth. If the soul's heart was lighter than the feather then the gods would, after some consideration, agree the soul could pass on to the Field of Reeds - a peaceful place with water and trees - where the soul would experience everlasting life. If the soul was heavier than the feather the heart was eaten and the chance of everlasting life was lost.

Although familiar with the elaborate funerary rites of the Egyptians I had never heard of this story about weighing the heart against a feather. What makes this story interesting for me is the pragmatism the Egyptians brought to death. The Egyptians accepted the finality of life when the majority of them actually had short lives many dying before their 40<sup>th</sup> year. They believed that they could live in a way to win for their soul admittance to the Field of Reeds and everlasting life.

What is interesting is that really not much has changed. Many of us still crave the continuity from physical to everlasting life either through religious beliefs or spiritual leanings.

Still at the end of life many of us look for a meaning. Some of us turn to faith as a source of solace and strength when there seems nowhere else to turn. Others increasingly are turning towards a sense of spirituality and mindfulness.

We know when faced with the loss of a loved one, unimaginable natural disaster or illness we turn to spiritual or religious beliefs as a way of coping, a way of making sense of the *sense – less*. These coping mechanisms are very useful to us; they can include the religious support we get from belief in God, the ability to atone for our worldly sins- or like the Egyptians - the ability to accept that the transitory difficulties of dying are more than made up by the benevolent magnificence of the afterlife.

Unfortunately life events can also shatter our long held spiritual or religious beliefs. Illness can strain a relationship with God, and these struggles can lead to higher distress, a decline in physical health and a further risk to our mortality. It is this spiritual distress or pain that we can attempt to address to help ourselves and our loved ones. Many people now describe themselves as “not religious but spiritual.”

But spirituality is a difficult subject to navigate and has until fairly recently been avoided by many of us as perhaps just being too tricky to take on. However we are beginning to realise that helping people with their spiritual difficulties can be as beneficial to their overall health as any other medical intervention.

Spiritual support is part of comprehensive palliative care. Spirituality is difficult to define and even the palliative care community are finding it hard to pin down. They have a working definition which talks about spirituality as a “dynamic dimension of human life” that relates to the way we as individuals and as a community seek and experience meaning

and purpose and how we connect to ourselves, to others, to time, to nature and the significant or sacred<sup>1</sup>. I told you it's not easy!

Like the Egyptians we may use religion and spirituality to focus on the soul – however we define that - and its transcendence to another place. Our spirituality may help us focus on our own truth, atonement, the finality of our physical existence and our connections.

Connectedness, time, significance, relationships, emotion, reconciliation, identity, meaning – all parts of our spiritual selves – woven into the core of our human “being” - must come into sharp focus when we, or someone we know is facing death.

So how could we help someone with spiritual distress at end of life?

Firstly, recognise that everyone is different. Not everyone will want to talk. Dying is such a personal and private experience. But, here are some prompts that may help:

- Perhaps use old photographs or other memorabilia to encourage the person who is dying to talk to you about their life, the good, the bad, what helped, what didn't, what they learned...
- Try not to display negative emotions such as anger. Even if you feel angry that a person is dying, try not to show it. Explain that you are sad that they are dying because you love them so much, but it's ok and you will still love them.
- Listen. People who are dying may want to tell you something that they feel is really important – pay attention to everything they say. Perhaps keep a notebook by the bed and jot down everything. Even gestures and hand movements may help you decipher their last message. Tell them you are trying to understand. If they become distressed, encourage them to rest and try again later.
- Respond with gentleness at all times. Ask open questions: can you tell me what is happening? Do you want to talk about anything..?
- Help them with conveying what is important; love, gratitude, forgiveness and farewell
- If the person conveys that they feel someone is waiting for them, respond positively; ‘I am so glad they are there for you’ - try not to argue or challenge
- Being with somebody at the end of life is a sacred gift. It can be transformative, life changing, even life enhancing. Try not to let your own fear of death ruin this.
- If you are a carer please, please practice self-care. You are also very important. Talk with your good friends. Eat good food. Take regular exercise. Get a good night's sleep.

Bryan Nolan of the IHF has a number of short films “*Beginning at the End*” which are such a valuable resource. You can find them [here](#). If you are a medical professional or want to skill up your communication skills check out our educational initiatives, [here](#).

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<sup>1</sup> European Association for Palliative Care

<http://www.eapcnet.eu/Themes/ProjectsTaskForces/EAPCTaskForces/SpiritualCareinPalliativeCare.aspx>

Finally, this passage may bring us all some comfort:

“Whether I will live a long time or a short time, I’m alive now, at this moment.

What I want to know is that there are other things to hope for besides length of life.

What I want to know is that it isn’t necessary to turn away from thoughts of suffering or death

but neither is it necessary to give these thoughts too much time and space.

What I want is to be intimate with the knowledge that life is temporary.

And then, in the light (or shadow) of that knowledge, to know how to live.

How to live now.” (Irvin Yalom)

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

The IHF 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](http://www.hospicefoundation.ie)*