

Taiwan 2006- The integration of living and dying (1)

Paradoxes

Human existence is full of paradoxes, that is, things that seem contradictory but convey important truths. One of my favorite prayers is that of St Francis of Assisi, from the 13th century, contains some dramatic paradoxes.

Prayer of St Francis of Assisi (1182 - 1226)

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life*

It is like a beautiful poem. The first verse contains six pairs of opposites. The second verse starts with three requests to God, expressed again as pairs of opposites. It is the last three statements that fascinate me: they are expressed as paradoxes. St Francis is saying that the way to receive is to do the opposite: give; the way to be pardoned (forgiven) is to do the opposite: pardon; and the way to gain eternal life is to do the opposite: die.

Receiving by giving is a difficult concept to grasp. Being forgiven by forgiving others is also a difficult concept, but psychologists agree that these paradoxes contain deep truths. But what about the third paradox: gaining eternal life by dying? This concept goes beyond psychology and science; it is matter of faith and belief – a spiritual matter.

What is death? Is it the absolute end to all human existence, or is it a doorway into some new form of existence. If the second answer is correct, then what kind of existence will we experience after death?

Climbing Mt Everest is one of the most exciting and dangerous journeys that a person can undertake. For many climbers their lives are in the hands of their guides. Dying is the only journey we ever take where it is impossible to find a guide who has traveled all the way to the destination.

Blondin: a story about trust. Blondin :

Jean Francois Gravelet, who used the name Blondin, was the first tightrope walker to cross Niagara Falls. He was a professional artist and showman trained in the great tradition of the European circus. At age 31 he came to America and made the announcement that he would cross the gorge of the Niagara River on a tightrope. The rope was 50 metres above the water, nearly half a kilometre long and just 7.5cm in diameter.

On June 30, 1859 at five o'clock in the afternoon Blondin started the trip that was to make history. Incredulous watchers saw him lower a rope to the boat in the river, pull up a bottle and sit down while he refreshed himself. He began his ascent toward the Canadian shore, paused, steadied the balancing pole and suddenly executed a back somersault. Never content merely to repeat his last performance, Blondin crossed his rope on a bicycle, walked blindfolded, and pushed a wheelbarrow. The crowds cheered him. He then asked "Do you believe I could walk across the falls carrying a person in the wheelbarrow? Yes, they all declared. Then who will volunteer to ride in the wheelbarrow? No one would agree!

All declared that they believed that he could do it, but no-one was willing to risk their life. Facing death may be as frightening as crossing the Niagara falls. But we do not have the option of declining to make the journey.

Does it help to know that we are dying?

Does it make the dying journey any easier if we know that we are dying? Or is it easier if we do not know? Perhaps the answer varies in different countries and cultures. Would you prefer to know, or be kept ignorant by your doctor and your family?

Drs Leung, Chiu and Chen published a paper in the Journal of Pain and Symptom Management in May this year (Vol 31: 449-456). They studied 37 patients who died of cancer in three hospices in Taipeh. They found that patients who were aware that they were dying had greater spiritual well-being.

Lack of integration causes terminal restlessness

Dr Robert Twycross is a world leader in Palliative Care. He was Dame Cicely Saunders' registrar at St Christopher's Hospice many years ago. He is one of the authors of the Palliative Care Formulary. He wrote the chapter about "terminal restlessness" in the Oxford Textbook of Palliative Medicine.

Dr Twycross says that in times of health we keep our private conflicts and fears hidden. When we are dying, we lose our normal psychological and intellectual defences, and our underlying fears burst forth into consciousness. One way of preventing "terminal restlessness" is to deal with emotional fears and conflicts before we lose the capacity to process them. I would like to suggest that we call this process the integration of our personality into a harmonious wholeness.

Being integrated into the patient's suffering

Dr Sheila Cassidy is an English palliative care physician who wrote a book "Sharing the Darkness – The Spirituality of Caring". She talks about the time in a patient's care when a doctor or nurse has no more treatment to offer. At this time we must confront our powerlessness; at this time our natural desire may be to run away. Dr Cassidy encourages us to continue to provide care, simply by being there.

She has a wonderful series of four cartoons to illustrate what she means. The first cartoon shows a doctor sitting with a patient. He has medical instruments in his hand and a nurse is helping him. The second picture shows a priest in religious robes, performing a special ritual. The third shows a doctor or priest when he has used up his physical resources. He now has only his counseling skills. In her final dramatic picture, the carer and the patient are both naked. At this point the carer has nothing to offer except being there, helpless.

Biblical references

Psalm 139 verses 1-14 and 23-24.

- ¹ O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.
- ² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- ³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
- ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.
- ⁵ You hem me in--behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.
- ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
- ⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
- ⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
- ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
- ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
- ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"

¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

John 12: 24-25

²⁴ I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.