

Contemplative Crafting and Choice in Later Life: A Conversation

Presenter: Vange Thiessen, Certified End-of-Life Care Consultant

Wednesday, January 23, 2019

Introduction

“If we wish to die well, we must live well.” Dalai Lama

Contemplative:

- Contemplative implies a thoughtful, reflective, introspective, even meditative stance; an approach to life that calls forth awareness, reflection, intention and deliberate choices in how we live.

Crafting Life Choices:

- Crafting is accessible to everyone; it involves deliberate action rather than passive acceptance of life's circumstances. It is a creative process that is shaped by stories, meanings, actions and rituals.
- Contemplative crafting then becomes an ethical task, within a relational community, of exercising personal agency in designing a pathway governed by what we value, stand for and hold dear in living well in the present and in preparing for the end of life.

The Process of Becoming:

- Foucault, a French philosopher, argues that the most important task a person faces in life is that of becoming somebody. Living is a process of becoming; it is becoming what we have never been before. Becoming then has no endpoint, but rather a direction we are always evolving toward.”
- Deleuze elaborates further by stating, becoming is about progressive differentiation, of becoming different, not different from OTHERS as is often cited, but becoming other than who we have been before. Becoming implies both being and doing

Crafting our Stories of Becoming; Later Years and End-of-Life

Richard Wagemese in *Embers*:

- p.24 “In the bush, knee deep in snow, laying tobacco down and offering prayers of thankfulness for the life of my mother, I became aware of silence....I smiled then because it becomes so simple when your surrender grief to the ongoing act of living, to being, to becoming. You become aware of the silences that exist between words, between actions, choices and changes. That's where you [become] grow – in those silences.”

Reflection – The Process of “Becoming”

1. **Examine/deconstruct the mythology of aging and death, the cultural norms and conventional practices.**
Question: What are some of the messages regarding the later years, end-of-life, dying and death?
2. **Avoid imposition of expert knowledges and power relations**
Question: What experts influence your life?
3. **Develop an approach of inquiry and curiosity**
4. **Ethical task - clarify your values, what is important to you, what do you hold dear!!**

Question: Identify 2-3 ways of “becoming” in the past 2-3 years? How are you different now than you were at that time?

5. Exercise of personal agency/choices.

Question: Think about your preferences, what does a meaningful dying process and a good death look like?

6. Crafting a grief response

The Role of Death Doulas/End-of-Life Care Consultants

The role of death doulas/end-of-life care consultants is to guide and support, in whatever way is helpful and appropriate for a dying person and all others directly involved. Generally, there are three phases of care:

- 1. The Planning Phase**
- 2. The Final Days and the Vigil**
- 3. The Reprocessing Phase**

Questions for On-going Reflection:

1. What dominant beliefs and conventions might constrain your attitudes and choices to live well in preparation for dying well?
2. In what ways do you wish to become other than who you have been?
3. How might courage help you choose new pathways and possibilities in preparing for the end of life and a good death?
4. Explore new pathways and possibilities in preparing for a good death. What are the colors and brush strokes you want to add to the canvas landscape of your cultural worldviews?
5. What is the significance for you of relationships and a supportive community in this ethical task?

Bibliography

- Bernard, Jan S. & Schneider, Miriam. (1996). *The true work of dying; A practical and compassionate guide to easing the dying process*. New York: Avon Books.
- Ellison, Koshin P. & Weingast, Matt. (2016). *Awake at the bedside; Contemplative teachings on Palliative and end-of-life care*. Somerville: Wisdom Publishers.
- Fersko-Weiss, Henry. (2017). *Caring for the dying*. Newburyport: Conari Press.
- Gawande, Atul. (2014). *Being mortal; Medicine and what matters in the end*.
- Hedtke, Lorraine & Winslade, John. (2017). *The crafting of grief; Constructing aesthetic responses to grief*. New York: Routledge.
- Joseph, Eve. (2014). *In the slender margin: The intimate strangeness of death and dying*. Toronto: HarperCollins.
- Kalanithi, Paul. (2016). *When breath becomes air*. New York: Random House.
- Kuhl, David. (2002). *What dying people want; practical wisdom for end of life*. Toronto: Anchor Books.
- Sawatsky, Jarem. (2017). *Dancing with elephants: Mindfulness training for those living with dementia, chronic illness or aging brain*. Winnipeg: Red Canoe Press.
- Sutherland, Christine. (2012). *Dying in good hands: Palliative massage and the power of touch*. Toronto: Christine Sutherland.
- Wagamese, Richard. (2016). *Embers: One Ojibway's meditations*. Madeira Park: Douglas and McIntyre.