The Forbidden Conversation

If I asked you to close your eyes and visualize about what you see happening in your final days of this life, many people will open their eyes and walk away. Who wants to contemplate their own demise? The unfortunate reality is that our society does not accept death, which is essentially like leaving your house to go somewhere with no destination. We certainly treasure birth as a glorious event, as well as all of the milestones that happen along our life’s path, but no one wants to talk about or identify the destination.

I was asked to provide some educational information that would be of benefit to our community. As the director of one of the larger hospices in northern Arizona, one of the biggest issues we encounter is individuals not prepared for the end. Part of the dilemma extends from the fact that the end is unknown, how will it happen and when will it happen? What if I told you the answer is tomorrow, next week, next month - would you make plans? I cannot begin to express the overwhelming grief I have seen from the most horrible types of cancer, illnesses, chronic diseases, sudden strokes, and even catastrophic accidents. Let me be clear about my next point. You will never know when the end is, but you can absolutely have a say in how it takes place.

I have met a lot of older individuals who tell their kids that they do not care what the final arrangements are, “just do whatever you think is best.” Please let me tell you how unfair that is and what an incredible burden you have now placed on those you love. When there are multiple siblings, everyone will have their own idea on what is best. If you love your family, please be strong enough to give them guidance and don’t make them choose for you. There was a millionaire who told his wife “when I die, I want to be buried with all my money.” His wife, now distraught, asked “what will happen to me, who will take care of me?” The millionaire relied, “I have provided for you all of our married life, you will find a way.” When the millionaire died, his wife wrote a check for a million dollars and buried it with him.

I often think to myself, over the many years I have worked in hospice, I have seen more people pass away than most doctors have. In fact, the only people who have probably seen more death than myself are those brave military personnel who were unfortunate enough to have been involved in awful battles. I can tell you that death does not have to be bad. I have experienced very loving, caring situations where the dying individual was at peace, comfortable and with those they love the most. However, in order for that to happen, you have to plan.

Planning for death does not have to be a morbid experience. It is really no more difficult than any other task you perform, other than it has a bad reputation. Envision it, plan it, set up all the details and then take comfort in the knowledge that you have just made your loved ones secure. The act of death is complete with the last breath of the individual; however, the surviving family and friends are the ones who are left behind to feel the grief. The loss of one person changes the lives of the people remaining.

So what decisions are needed? Certainly, there are the basic decisions: do you want to be buried and if so, where? Do you want to be cremated? If you are bedbound (which people don’t think about, and it happens to most at the end), are there people who can take care of you? If your heart stops, what do you want to happen? Do you want to pass in peace, or have a fireman perform CPR on you, if you take the latter, are you comfortable with ending up in the hospital on a ventilator until the very end. Who do you want to make the decision for you if you cannot make the decisions (and let’s not pull punches here, this could be you tomorrow if you were hit by a car). Where do you want to spend your final days? If you are a parent, these decisions should be mandatory!!!

I do not have answers for you, all I want you to do is think about it and have that forbidden conversation with those you love. It is part of life’s path, make it the path you choose.