

How I learned about beauty in the ethics of palliative care

*“Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
and our desires.”*

Wallace Stevens

By Maaïke Haan

Every now and then the words by the American poet Stevens pop up to me. They had always been impressive, but, specifically, they came alive for me through the advanced course *Suffering, Death and Palliative Care*, of which I was a participant in February 2015.

Together with thirty-five other people from all over the world I was confronted with death and dying in several ways. We attended lectures by different representatives from health care practice, research and ethics; we discussed ethical cases and personal experiences in small group sessions; we watched and discussed a movie and a documentary together; and of course we had our lunches and laughs together, and engaged in personal conversations. Those varied methods were valuable, not in the least because we came from very different backgrounds. Because of our various nationalities (almost every continent was represented) and diverse working disciplines (physicians, nurses, spiritual caregivers, researchers and me, a philosopher) we had different questions and thoughts of which we could learn. To me the field of care for dying patients was relatively new. The lectures and interactions with the diverse group of participants were very informative. But why did the course really *stick* to me?

On the one hand I saw the tragedy of dying, in a movie about a woman with cancer; on the other I saw the peace that death may cause, in a documentary about the procedure of euthanasia. Does a good death exist? – we wondered in lectures and small groups. And if so, what would it be like? Suddenly the people I had been talking to in a fairly businesslike way became *persons* to me. Despite our different viewpoints, for example about euthanasia, basically we were all individual human beings with own thoughts, feelings and wishes regarding such a hard to grasp concept as death. This was even more visible in the final small group sessions to which everyone brought a symbol which represented a personal perspective on death. Through the personal and sometimes emotional exchanges I felt a sense of connection to the other participants. Although I only knew these people for a couple of days I realized that in one way we are all just the same. *Death makes us human.*

Suddenly, Stevens’ poetry made sense to me, more than it did before. Death makes us human; after all, despite the efforts in medical research, death is inevitable. It is our mortality that we all share together. Yet, even more, *death makes us persons*. The awareness of dying, whether it will be sooner or later, is needed to live fully as an individual person. Only in that realization we can really live. That is, in an oversimplified way, what philosopher Heidegger thought: knowing that one day you will die (or, in his words, always ‘being-towards-death’) drives us to *live*. It makes us wanting to choose and hold on to life as we know or want it, and maybe even end it. Thinking about death shows life as vulnerable but beautiful as it is.

So precisely in our thoughts about death the beauty of life can reside. And, for me in the SDPC-course, the notion of death led to something beautiful in practical way: I saw the beauty of sitting together with people from all over the world and respectfully discussing such vulnerable topics as suffering, palliative care and euthanasia. That is the reason why the course kept clinging on to me. And it is even more reason for me to recommend this course to everyone, whether for work or just personally. Dare to think and talk about death. Live.

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