

## Living Ready

By Chaplain Joy Le Page Smith

At age 18, early one spring, a blood clot formed in my leg and travelled from my heart into my lungs. The doctor told me, “It will be like living on a stick of dynamite. You will never know when it will blow.”

After that, blot clots, called pulmonary emboli, came on a regular basis. My lungs became so damaged that by age 35 my doctor said, “Your lungs cannot take another assault.” He explained a new surgery that held potential for giving me more time. It was a surgery with serious consequences since few people had yet to experience it. I had to be prepared to die. A mother of three young children, I had to take the risk as no other option held hope for raising them.

I said, “Go ahead with the surgery,” and then spent three days in depression as we waited for my thinned blood to reach a safe level for surgery. (Blood thinners such as Heparin had been onboard to reduce the risk of further clots.) Many people were praying for my life to be saved and the nuns of the hospital’s Pastoral Care Department were with me often.

I did well with the surgery. Amazingly well. Today, statistics show this very surgery has saved and continues to save many lives on a regular basis.

So, I learned to “live ready.” Ready to die. It was often on my mind, yet I was not anxious. Somewhat afraid, yes, as it was “the unknown” and I wanted to be with my husband Gary and my children.

Many years later, as I write, I am amazed to have been given decades more of life. My children are adults and I have grandchildren. My husband and I have celebrated many anniversaries—and once our “nest” was empty, I finished my education, gained a master’s degree, and attended Clinical Pastoral Education in a teaching hospital. This allowed my credentialing as a Board Certified chaplain. That was 22 years ago and my plan is to live the remaining years of my life helping people who are facing grave uncertainties.

Looking back, Gary and I realize that because of my many hospital stays, both of our career paths changed to health care. He went back to Boise State University majoring in radiology, and does MRIs today. I, too, became a mid-life student, setting my sail for Chaplaincy.

Currently, my work as a volunteer chaplain covers the ICU department of our local hospital where it is possible to have “Thoughtful Conversations” with individuals as they deal with matters surrounding possible death. I help them understand what comprises end of life paperwork, such as a Living Will, and Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care. In certain instances an order for Do Not Resuscitate (DNR), and Do Not Intubate (DNI) can be seen as making good sense.

I also help people look at what else they want in life. What actor Gary Sinise wrote in his book *Grateful American: A Journey from Self to Service* is a premise to which I adhere, “Each person on this planet is here for a purpose . . . That purpose is to care for other people and to help this world become a better place through service to others.”

In the past within work as a hospice chaplain, all patients seen were given very little time to finish their life’s journey. Part of that work included looking at their relationships, and when possible, making peace with some in which there was still pain. We worked on forgiveness and releasing the toxicity of resentment and bitterness. In many cases, we prayed together, making the path to healing through forgiveness much easier. Another way of getting ready came through thinking about “What one thing feels unfinished?” This took time for most people to reflect on and identify. In a number of instances the person lived long enough to complete that *one thing*. Otherwise, he or she dies within the joy of working toward something worthy of their time . . . the last of their time. And, they die in peace.

Another aspect of living ready comes while identifying what a person believes about, “What happens after death?” As a chaplain, I believe most “people need love and acceptance more than they need advice.” (A quote from Mark Batterson, author of *Whisper: How to Hear the Voice of God*.) Listening is one of my best tools. Sometimes people, when at death’s door,

will ask questions like, ‘How can I be ready to die? Or, “I’ve not been religious. Help me, in case I meet up with God.”

My response is to “Just talk to God. Tell our heavenly father that you are struggling, wondering. ‘Is God real, or not?’ Tell God you want to see Him and talk with Him in person. Ask, ‘What do I need to do in order for that to happen?’ Then listen.”

I offer to help people make that prayer, if this assistance is wanted. On certain occasions, when the patient wants a more in depth interaction, I might ask, “Would you like to hear my story of discovering the great love found through Jesus Christ, during my own personal quest?” If they say “yes,” the door is open to do so.

Life is a mystery. Not one of us knows how long we will have on earth. My life experience revealed the fact that a huge advantage comes through “Living Ready” for the time that inevitably comes for every one of us.

This calls for further probing of the topic, “How can I be “ready to go?” So, please hang in there, as I get ready . . . to write it.