

Resources for Theological and Pastoral Perspectives on Death and Dying  
First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina  
Nancy J. Duff, Oct. 30 and Nov. 7, 2021

### Theological Reflections on Death

Nancy J. Duff, "Christian Beliefs About Death," Chapter 2 of *Making Faithful Decisions at the End of Life*, Westminster John Knox, 2018, 30-49.

This chapter presents two biblical affirmations about death: (1) death is the enemy to be resisted and (2) death must be accepted as part of what it means to be mortal human beings. It also includes reflections on the contextual character of Christian ethics, the significance of bodily life, vocation, and praying for miracles.

Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, 394 pp.

Allen Verhey was a highly respected Christian ethicist and theologian. He had faced a life-threatening illness before writing this book and died at 68 three years after it was published. Verhey challenges the medicalization of death, draws on the positive and negative views of death in 15<sup>th</sup> century illustrated, spiritual "self-help" books about death, called *Ars Moriendi*, and provides theological insight into such issues as suffering and prayer.

### Physicians Reflecting on Medicine and Death

Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, New York: Metropolitan Books Henry Hold and Company, 2014, 282 pp.

In *Being Mortal*, which was on the New York Times best seller list for over a year, Gawande describes his experience as a doctor and his own family's experiences with death. He also focuses on growing older, senior living, and physician-patient relations. Gawande wonders if better approaches to end-of-life care are so obvious, we simply need to do a better job looking for them. This is a highly readable, well written, and insightful book.

Jessica Nuttik Zitter, M.D., *Extreme Measures: Finding a Better Path to the End of Life*, New York: Avery, an imprint of Random House, 2017, 337 pp.

In this extremely well-written, accessible book, Zitter, as an ICU and palliative care specialist, gives accounts of her experience with patients who are dying, starting with her encounters with dying patients in medical school. She says that she hopes her book will help patients, families, and health-care providers find a more humane approach to end of life care.

## Physician-Patient Relationship

Nancy J. Duff, "Physician-Patient Relations and Advance Directives," Chapter 4 of *Making Faithful Decisions at the End of Life*, 74-97.

This chapter describes three patterns of the physician-patient relationship: (1) hierarchical and paternalistic, (2) egalitarianism, and (3) one of reciprocal responsibility. The third pattern is the one that is promoted. These three patterns of relationship coincide with Atul Gawande's descriptions of paternalistic, informative, and interpretive relationships in *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, New York: Metropolitan Books Henry Hold and Company, 2014, 199-202ff.

"Wit." Video, directed by Mike Nichols. 1 hour and 39 minutes, 2001.

Emma Thompson plays an English teacher with life-threatening cancer. As a difficult patient receiving experimental treatment, her doctor focuses on research rather than his patient's humanity. The final scene, where punctuation informs the interpretation of John Donne's poem, "Death be Not Proud," is very powerful. Available on Prime Video and Amazon.

## Withdrawing or Refusing Life Support

Nancy J. Duff, "Resisting and Accepting Death," Chapter 1 of *Making Faithful Decisions at the End of Life*, Westminster John Knox, 2018, 6-29.

This chapter describes significant court cases regarding the patient or family's right to demand the withdrawal of life support and the family's right to demand that treatment continue against the wishes of the physician.

"The Death of Nancy Cruzan," Frontline, 1992. 1 hr. 30 min.

This documentary gives a first-hand account of the decisions made by Nancy Cruzan's family when she was left in a permanent vegetative state after a car accident in 1983. In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the removal of her feeding tube. Very powerful, moving documentary.

Available for free: <https://archive.org/details/TheDeathofNancyCruzan>

Martin Welsh, 100 things, leading to a single choice, *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2009:  
<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-jul-26-oe-welsh26-story.html>

### **Medical Aid in Dying (MAID, or Physician-Assisted Death)**

Nancy J. Duff, "Assisted Death and Death-with-Dignity Laws." Chapter 3 of *Making Faithful Decisions at the End of Life*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2018, 50-73.

This chapter supports medical aid in dying by describing and then responding to arguments against physician assisted death from the perspective of some Christians, some disability rights organizations, and some physicians.

Humphry, Derek. *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. A Delta Trade Paperback, 2002.

Humphry Derek co-founded the Hemlock Society in 1980 and then the Final Exit Network in 2004. His book *Final Exit*, was first published in 1991 and has sold over a million copies in 12 languages. In the book he describes various ways that people with terminal illness can end their lives before the disease does (and how those efforts can fail). He is not advocating suicide in general; he is addressing people with terminal illness. Even if you disagree with Humphry you may want to be aware of a book that has remained popular for over three decades.

"How to Die in Oregon." 1 hr. 50 min. documentary, directed by Peter Richardson, 2011.

This documentary follows several terminally ill patients in Oregon who eventually take advantage of Oregon's 1994 "Death with Dignity Act." It also focuses on the 2008 campaign to make such a law legal in Washington State. Although it includes critics of medical aid in dying, the documentary supports this practice. It is a powerful first-hand account of what it can be like when someone takes advantage of MAID. Available on Amazon Prime and Amazon.

Zitter, Jessica Nutik. "Should I Help My Patients Die?" *The New York Times* Opinion, August 5, 2017. (Available online.)

Zitter is a physician with a specialty in both pulmonary/critical care and palliative care. She supports medical aid in dying, but in this *New York Times* essay, she describes her discomfort in complying with a patient's request to take advantage of the End of Life Option Act in California. She argues for clearer "policies and protocols to account for the nuanced social, legal and ethical questions that will continue to arise" when patients request medical aid in dying and that such assistance be understood as a measure of last resort.

Thomas Long, *Accompany them with Singing – The Christian Funeral*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009, 213 pp

A well-known professor of homiletics, Tom Long focuses on theological aspects of the Christian funeral. He challenges “disembodied funerals,” encouraging the presence of the body, which is less and less common these days. He also criticizes popular, but theologically weak, poems commonly read at funerals today that seem to deny the reality of death. He speaks of “big-D” death as our enemy, and “little-d death,” which we have to accept as mortal human beings. One chapter focuses on “the future of the dead in Christ” (probably the most technical chapter). Another addresses the marks of a good funeral and preaching at a funeral. This is an excellent book.

Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, W. W. Norton and Co., 2017. 248 pp.

Caitlin Doughty, a mortician, criticizes many practices in the funeral industry. She describes ways people bury the dead in different cultures around the world and subcultures in the U.S. This is a fascinating book that helps the reader focus on preferred practices for burial.

### Lament and Grief

Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, eds., *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, Westminster John Knox, 2005. 188 pp.

This book includes essays by scholars who were on faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2005: Charles L. Bartow; C. Clifton Black; Brian K. Blount; Sally A. Brown; Donald Capps; Ellen T. Charry; Nancy J. Duff; Robert C. Dykstra; Richard K. Fenn; Nancy Lammers Gross; William Stacy Johnson; Patrick D. Miller; Peter J. Paris; Luis N. Rivera-Pagan.

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *A Long Letting Go: Meditations on Losing Someone You Love*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015, 122 pp.

Chandler is a writer and professor of medical humanities at UC Berkeley and a former professor of English at Westmont College. She has also been a hospice volunteer. When I asked my students if they would recommend that I require this book of meditations again for the course on dying, the vast majority said yes; they could imagine using this book in their churches.