

5-1-1989

[Book Review of] *Surviving Death: A Practical Guide to Caring for the Dying and Bereaved*, by Charles Meyer

Philip Boyle

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boyle, Philip (1989) "[Book Review of] *Surviving Death: A Practical Guide to Caring for the Dying and Bereaved*, by Charles Meyer," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 56: No. 4, Article 12.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol56/iss4/12>

part is that it reveals that the opposition to revisionist theology is not ignorant conservatism, but a serious and developed body of scholarly literature.

May finishes with an interesting argument in favor of the truth of moral absolutes. He maintains that in making free choices, we do not simply choose to cause a transient bit of behavior. In choosing to do something, we determine our moral selves — we give a character and shape to our moral personalities which endure until a contrary choice is made. Moral life is not so much a matter of producing good outcomes as constituting selves that are open to all that is really good. Moral absolutes provide essential guidelines for choices which have this openness. For if one violates moral absolutes, one rejects some part of what is good for human beings. Thus, one who chooses to kill an innocent person for whatever reason sets his or her heart against the good of life; one who chooses to do one of the sexual acts which the Church has rejected by one of the moral absolutes taught in the area of sexual morality sets aside the real goods of sexuality in favor of momentary satisfaction or a pale imitation of the real human goods at stake.

This raises a question: why do moral absolutes, as distinct from other moral principles and norms, have a *special* role in preserving openness to all the goods of human beings? It seems that one who violates a moral norm, even one that is nonabsolute, rejects something of what is good for people. One who breaks his word when the circumstances do not justify it, constitutes himself as a promise breaker, as one who cares less than one should about the bonds of trust between persons and about the other goods which trustworthy cooperation makes possible.

May's conviction that moral absolutes are especially important in preserving openness to the human good is surely right, but he needs a fuller account of why. Is it because they are clearer, or because they function differently in the moral reasoning of one who cares about them? For moral absolutes do seem to function differently than other norms: once one sees that an action is excluded by a moral absolute, one knows that further consideration of the action is simply out of the question. Knowing more about the action and its circumstances is not going to change the fact that that action is of a kind which is simply wrong. Or is there perhaps something much more profound here? I hope that May, and others within the Church, will pursue this matter further.

Still, if May's little book has not said everything which might be said on the difficult matter of moral absolutes, it is a real contribution to the discussion, and should prove helpful not only to professional moralists but to all who want to intelligently find their way through the complex arguments of contemporary moral theology. These debates are in many ways unfortunate, but, as May's book makes clear, they have forced us to think more deeply and more clearly than ever before about the most fundamental and enduring issues of Christian moral life.

— Joseph Boyle
St. Michael's College
University of Toronto

Surviving Death: A Practical Guide to Caring for the Dying and Bereaved

by Charles Meyer

Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publication, 1988. 136pp., paper, \$7.95

The subtitle of this small book indicates its purpose and essential content. Its primary audience is caregivers, and among them, clergy and others who might be expected to have a long-term relationship with those who are bereaved. But the book is simply and attractively written, and the author plainly means to be of help to the bereaved themselves as well as to their families and friends. The author is an Anglican priest who has extensive experience as a hospital chaplain. The perspective of the book is determined by this experience: it is

a book of one who has seen and shared the suffering of the dying and the bereaved, who knows first-hand the mistakes of individuals and institutions in dealing with this suffering, and who has very definite and specific ideas about how to remedy these mistakes and help these people.

The book is divided into four parts. The first, "Being with the Dying", is a concrete set of guidelines for helping the dying patient. The fundamental message of this part is conveyed in the title: being present to the dying person and his or her family is the most important service one can perform.

The second part, "Ethics and Death", deals with a number of common misconceptions about death — "death myths" which are expressed in slogans which the author believes to be harmful falsehoods. Some of these myths are: only old people die; life is the highest value; money should not be a consideration; death is evil; suffering is redemptive; and to die of dehydration or starvation in a healthcare setting is inhumane, cruel and immoral. There is also a brief examination of the reasoning which should precede decisions to "pull the plug".

The third part, "The Church and Death", begins with a brief diagnosis of why the religious community does so badly in helping people to deal with death, and provides some useful suggestions for improving this unfortunate situation. This discussion is continued by a dissection of a variety of theological slogans which the author thinks contribute to the Church's denial of death. Some of the slogans discussed are: God will cure him; it is God's will; there's a reason for everything; God took him; and time heals all wounds. Finally, the author discusses the relationship between death and Christian spirituality.

The fourth part of the book, "Surviving Death", deals with helping the bereaved deal with their grief and the adjustment to life without the deceased partner. There are two chapters dealing with the problems of sexuality on the part of survivors, a chapter of general guidelines for survivors, and a closing chapter which addresses special problems of surviving children and those who are close to those who die from AIDS.

The text of the book is completed by three beautiful poems written by a mother in response to her son's sudden death, and by an appendix which includes a statement of a Living Will and several other useful documents together with a moving testimony by a hospice volunteer.

This is meant to be a practical book, and for the most part it is. Although it is difficult for one who lacks the author's experience to adequately evaluate his concrete suggestions, they have the authority not only of the author's experience, but also of considerable common sense and insight. But practical, pastoral care involves more than experience and common sense; it presupposes a theological and ethical framework, and here the author is on shakier ground.

Part of the problem arises from the fact that the author has a tendency to indulge in the same sort of "theology by slogan" which he decries. Complex moral and theological questions are dealt with much too quickly. An example of considerable importance is the author's understanding of death itself. He denies that it is evil or that it indicates failure and says that death is an amoral occurrence which he compares to such things as birth, accident, marriage, divorce, and trauma. What he seems to be after is that death is not a sign of personal moral failure. Even this idea needs qualification, but his discussion overlooks the connection between death and original sin which has been affirmed by the Christian Churches since biblical times, and completely ignores the seemingly obvious fact that death is a bad thing — bad in the sense of harmful and undesirable, at least for most people in most situations. Are we to think that the only problem with death is our attitude towards it? The author is much concerned about the denial of death and rightly sees this as a major problem in helping those who are facing death or living through the death of a loved one. But it seems to me part of this denial to fail to recognize how bad death really is. After sin, death is plausibly considered the greatest evil in the world (redeemable evil, but evil nonetheless) and everyone knows that. Pastoral care which fudges on this can hardly be true to reality or the Gospel.

A closely related difficulty is that the author holds a number of moral positions which are simply incompatible with traditional Christian morality. These emerge especially in

his discussion of pulling the plug and of sexuality among survivors. Concerning the latter, the author maintains a nonjudgmental attitude according to which extramarital sexual activity by survivors appears to be sanctioned. The requirements of chastity are swamped by considerations about the survivor's psychological and social development. Concerning the former, the author seems to be much more permissive about the ending of life than Christian ethics warrants; he goes so far as to suggest that the Church "re-examine its beliefs regarding suicide, assisted suicide, active and passive euthanasia, to adjust to modern technological developments, and to enable individuals to exercise options that, heretofore, were unacceptable". (33)

In short, when the author stays close to his experience as a chaplain, what he has to say is very helpful indeed. But his practical advice is filtered through an ethical and theological perspective which is not sufficiently thought through and which, in some cases, leads to evaluations which seem to this reviewer, and, I suspect, to many other traditional Christians as well, to be simply mistaken. On balance, a useful and sensitive book, even for those of us who disagree with the author's ethics and theology.

— Joseph Boyle
St. Michael's College
University of Toronto

Order Your CHRISTMAS GIFT Subscription NOW!

THE LINACRE QUARTERLY will make an excellent gift for doctors, nurses, priests, hospital and medical school administrators, social workers, lawyers, dentists, and all concerned with philosophy and ethics of medical practice.

SPECIAL CHRISTMAS OFFER: 5 issues for the price of 4. We'll mail this issue of the L.Q. to those you designate, plus all four issues in 1990. In addition, we'll send an acknowledgment letter informing the recipient that you have subscribed to the L.Q. for him. Order as many subscriptions as you wish. Be sure to list exact name, address and zip code.

Enclosed is my check to cover gift subscriptions for the following persons: (\$24 for each annual subscription). Make checks payable to LINACRE QUARTERLY and mail to Linacre Quarterly, 850 Elm Grove Road, Elm Grove, Wis. 53122.

SEND SUBSCRIPTION TO:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State/Province _____ Zip _____

Your Name _____

Your Address _____

Your City _____ State _____ Zip _____