HOSPICE CHAPLAIN REFLECTS ON LIFE AND DEATH IN INTERVIEW WITH NPR

Hospice chaplain Kerry Egan says her job is to help dying people come to terms with their own mortality. That means sitting with them as they express regrets and fears. It also means listening to their stories, and hearing their joy at life. “There’s no time to preach or teach,” Egan tells Terry Gross, of NPR’s Fresh Air. “You have to use whatever tools that person already has in their spiritual toolbox to help them come to meaning in their lives.”

Every person is unique, with his or her own sense of what is meaningful and what is most important. For some, that sense of meaning comes from religious faith. For others it is based more in family relationships, or even arts and literature. “If you think about how different every single person who’s living ... is, well, people are just as different in the dying process,” says Egan, who lives in Columbia, South Carolina.

Egan recently published a memoir entitled, “On Living,” which explores her work as a hospice chaplain, and shares the impact the work has had on her own life. While many assume that working in hospice must be a sad job, she reveals that working in end-of-life care brings her great joy. “I’m constantly reminded of the strength of the human soul,” she says. “I’m constantly reminded of ... how much love people have for each other, and the love that’s all around us that we just don’t necessarily take a moment to see.”

In her interview with NPR, Egan discusses the practical work of a hospice chaplain, and shares what her work looks like on a practical level. She describes her role as that of helping the dying and loved ones grapple with issues of purpose and meaning. Ultimately, she says, her job is to be a pastoral presence with those who need it most.

Egan speaks about how many hospice patients feel about death. It’s not what you’d expect. “I think people would be really surprised to know that a lot of hospice patients aren’t nearly as afraid of dying as you think they are,” says Egan. “I think some of us who are healthy in the middle of life have a real fear and horror of death, and I think a lot of hospice patients don’t. They don’t anymore. Some of them are downright curious.”

Egan speaks about the common phenomenon experienced by end-of-life patients of seeing visions of their mothers. “It’s not a necessary step, everybody doesn’t experience it, but it happens a lot. ... They come to them, they wave at them, sometimes they talk to them, and it’s really, really comforting to people.”

She shares about her experience as a hospice chaplain of needing to “remain soft” while also cultivating inward strength. “If you’re not willing to be soft on the outside, you’re not going to get any work done. And if you have to be soft on the outside to be an effective chaplain, well then something’s got to hold you up, and the only thing that can hold you up is sort of an interior strength. That’s it.”

For Egan, it all comes back to how much joy she finds in her work as a hospice chaplain. “Death is really sad. When someone dies, it’s really sad, but there’s also
enormous joy to be had and funny times and happy times and everything. It’s life, right? Dying is part of living, so everything you have in the course of a life you have in the course of dying.” (NPR)