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Everyone dies! From my experience as a hospital chaplain who spends most of his time with patients who are dying and their loved ones, I have found that most people who are knocking on death’s door are ready to go and are at peace with the idea of physical death. However, there is a caveat that accompanies this statement: the people who are ready and are at peace with the idea of physical death are those who have a support system – people who love them – and hope.

*Resourcing Hope for Ageing and Dying in a Broken World: Wayfaring Through Despair* by Ashley Moyse is a 162-page, four-chapter book that is primarily about helping the ageing and dying find hope in their lives, instead of cheating death through death (suicide), by touching their lives, being available, bearing their burdens and practising hope. In 2020, the suicide rates were higher than average among adults aged 25 to 34 years (18.35 per 100,000) and 75 to 84 years (18.43 per 100,000), with the highest rate among adults aged 85 years or older (20.86 per 100,000) (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2022). It is my belief that most, if not all, of these people visit hospitals, retirement communities and homes with access to chaplains. Chaplains, armed with the proper knowledge and techniques, may be able to prevent someone from choosing suicide. I believe that this book can inform chaplains in this area.

Moyse describes the intention of his book not to be a comprehensive and systematic examination of ageing and dying, nor an extensive examination of despair and hope, but “to bear witness to the broken world, where objective, functionalizing, and dispassionate powers of primary reflection
are overprioritized” (p. 19). This broken world that Moyse discusses in his book is a system simply designed to keep the ageing alive as long as possible, without any thought given to their quality of life, or to what this system does to the person who is trapped inside the flesh and bones.

Chapter 1 provides a diagnostic of despair, experienced while attempting to understand how technological influence, or ontology, has contributed to this through a modern imagination which prioritizes particular ideas or ways of being and doing in the world. This systematic machine, which often prioritizes monetary interests over the interests of the ageing and dying, creates pain and suffering for the patient. When patients evaluate their chronic, or unexplained, pain as an injustice, suffering is enhanced, and so is the risk of experiencing despair, which can lead to ideations of voluntary dying (i.e. suicide) (p. 36). According to Moyse, “Despair antagonizes such a human being, tempting it incessantly. Tempting it towards death, anticipating the very destruction of life itself: man is capable of despair, capable of hugging death, of hugging his own death” (p. 38).

In Chapter 2, Moyse posits how important independence, autonomy and control are for the ageing and dying, as well as how the loss of these assets compromises their sense of identity and leads to despair. Moyse also writes, “the failure to secure the aims of our desires proves such aims are aimless, and the world which persons thought meaningful in relation to such aims proves meaningless – promoting despair” (p. 47).

Another aspect of the frailty of ageing that leads to despair is the burden on others that is felt by the ageing and dying. In many cases, the patient may hide their symptoms and feelings in an attempt to minimize their own needs. According to Moyse, “It is not uncommon for the ageing and dying to conceal the perturbations that make daily life difficult, to protect themselves from feeling like a burden, and to protect others from experiencing care-giver burden” (p. 50).

Despair, caused by the loss of independence, autonomy and control, as well as pain, suffering, the ideations of failure and being a burden, can, and in many cases does, cause the ageing and dying to decide to die on their own terms. Chapter 3 states that there are increasingly prevalent tendencies to think that people ought to be permitted to die as they desire – with the onus on ageing well independently (where one acts and chooses for oneself) extending to dying well too. According to Moyse, “persons are to be given the freedom to die as a practice of choice and progress (or achievement) and moral technique. Such deaths, like the functions of independence, the rhetoric infers, preserve dignity” (p. 63). These persons desire to escape death by death.
Even though death is inevitable, Chapter 4 implies that a person does not have to die (or lose their quality of life) until their physical death. The ageing and dying can be wayfarers through the despair, and finish the race with hope and dignity. The care-giver, or spiritual care-giver, plays a very important role in how the ageing and dying finish their race: “Touching well is living well. Hermeneutics begins there, in the flesh. For it is by such touching that we might learn and be strengthened to bare (to reveal) and bear (to carry) the burdens of human life, together (p. 95). Through touching their lives and practising availability, care-givers can create the hope of living until death comes. Additionally, by bearing their burdens and practising hope, we can be wayfarers together with the ageing and dying.

Only through such participation, immersed in being for our fellows, might we learn to live hopefully through despair, together, even when despair persists. Only through such participation might we act rightly – moment by moment (responding to the particularity and mutability of personal experiences) – with and for each other, discovering ontological strength through our admissions of weakness, need and mutuality. This is the wayfarers’ journey. (p. 108)

Moyse’s Resourcing Hope for Ageing and Dying in a Broken World: Wayfaring Through Despair is a journey through ageing and living until death. This book could be especially helpful for the physical and spiritual care-giver who wants to help make the end of life a life worth living for those who might otherwise sit in despair or choose death by death.

References