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Book Review

Kerry Egan, *On Living* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016), 224 pp., $24.00 (hbk), ISBN: 1594634815.

Spiritual care has been a central feature of the modern hospice movement since Cicely Saunders founded St Christopher's Hospice in London in 1967. Dr. Saunders's deeply held conviction was that care at the end of life should be both scientifically advanced and compassionate, with concern for the whole person—physical, emotional, and spiritual. The necessity of providing spiritual care continues to be recognized by those in palliative and hospice care; guidelines for spiritual care are an essential part of the National Consensus Project's Clinical Guidelines for Quality Palliative Care. Kerry Egan's book, *On Living*, shows us in one story after another what the highest standards for spiritual care at the end of life could (and do) look like.

We read literature to see the world through the eyes of another, to be in places and among peoples we would perhaps never encounter in our own lives. Chaplain Egan takes the reader to places and introduces people in situations that, frankly, most of us would rather avoid. She shares her own difficult story with us as well, and in these pages we get to accompany her into these private places and observe without intruding. This book is full of love—for the patients she has known and whose stories she has been given permission to tell—and for the reader, whom she leads gently through her unfolding narrative.

Egan first tells us what hospice chaplains do not do. They do not, as her little boy tells her, 'make people die so they can go to heaven' (p. 11). They do not proselytize or promote their own religious beliefs. They do not judge patients or their families. And she says, they 'do not preach or teach' (p. 17). On this last point I would disagree. While Egan does not preach to her patients from a faith tradition, she does indeed teach readers valuable lessons in the form of parables. Her stories are parables because they are not only about the lives of others; they are about some common experiences with death. And they are about her life as well. She is a good teacher because she has also suffered and learned from these experiences.

She notes that spiritual care is not only about spirituality, it is about the bodies of dying people as well. No matter how painful, limited in movement, malfunctioning, unattractive, disfigured, or old a body is, it has been the carrier of the person for their entire lifetime. Our entire human experience is an embodied experience. Even if the bodily experiences of tasting favorite foods, feeling the warmth of the sun, swimming in the cool ocean, swinging on a swing, dancing, embracing a lover, or smelling one's baby's neck are no longer possible, they remain in memory, always a part of who one was and is. However limited in capacity their bodies are, the patients speak of them with both affection and sadness and a clear understanding that they are whole

persons. At the end of our lives, Egan opines, we are the sum total of all our human experiences—physical, emotional, spiritual—and joyful, tragic, boring, dramatic, brave, cowardly, generous, selfish, thoughtful, or thoughtless. We carry that accumulation of lived, embodied experiences with us to the end, making the stories in the pages of this book lessons from people on the front lines, carrying all that nearly completed history with them.

Egan also emphasizes the power of listening. This is what hospice chaplains really *do*, as Egan tells us, 'we are the opposite of storytellers. We're story holders' (p. 17). Chaplains bring patience, time, and willing ears to the bedsides of patients, and wait for their stories to come forth. Egan knows that some stories people tell may not be the 'whole story' (and she gives us poignant examples of this), but they are nevertheless stories infused with deep meaning and the urgency of a storyteller who knows that he or she does not have much time left. People figure out the meanings of their lives by telling stories about their past. The chaplain is not there to apply their own interpretation of the stories, but to 'create a space—a sacred time and place—in which people can look at the lives they've led and try to figure out what it all means to them' (p. 17).

A third lesson is that we should not wait to tell our loved ones important things. To ask or give forgiveness, to say you are proud of a child, to tell the truth about a long-held secret, to say 'I love you'. Egan admonishes us to tell our significant others these things now, before we lose the capacity to do it. We are all—right now—in the process of dying as we are living. Patients in hospice care are just more aware of their finitude than the rest of us are. We will not be some other, braver person when we get closer to our end, and it may take time to work out difficult relationships. Start now, Egan says, give yourself the time to enjoy the peace that will follow.

On Living is a beautifully written book overflowing with memorable stories—parables and wise reflections. My copy of the book has so many dog-eared pages that the top is much fatter than the bottom. Parables are like symbols, they hold dense meaning in a form that is easy to remember and understand. These stories will stay with you, perhaps until a time when you need to draw on them.

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