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Death a testament to how one lived life

By HELEN T. GRAY
Knight Ridder Newspapers

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A missionary, held captive more than a year by terrorists, was killed during a rescue attempt. "He died well," said his wife, who was wounded.

Two monks were killed while serving God in their monastery. One had written, "To accept death lovingly, trusting in God -- this is our final obedience." They, too, died well.

What does it mean to "die well" or to have a "good" death?

In the secular world, a good death may mean someone dies while doing something one loves to do or when someone dies peacefully, perhaps surrounded by family and friends.

From a spiritual aspect, another dimension to the definition emerges, as shown by responses from people of various faith traditions. One common element is that dying well is connected to living well.

"This is an important notion, that how we live will form how we die," said Keith Meador, director of the Duke Institute on Care at the End of Life. "It is naive to think that we will die well if we have not lived well."

To die well in a faith like Judaism means a person has placed great importance on living "with holiness and love and dedication to high ethical ideals," said Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, Oppenstein assistant professor of Judaic studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

A life that has been lived following the ritual and ethical

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commandments of God and trying to make the world a better place would lead to dying well, he said.

"So a good death means someone died doing the right thing," he said.

Islam connects living well to the chance of an afterlife. It teaches that those who believe in God and have done good things in their life would be entitled to go to heaven, said Iftekhar Ahmed, a Kansas City area neurologist.

"However, the final judgment rests in the hands of God, depending upon the good and bad things that we have done in our lifetime, but taking into consideration that God is more merciful and gives you more rewards for things that you do good than punishment for the things you do bad."

Similarly, Buddhists who live "mindfully" -- aware of what is going on in their minds and bodies and the present -- and who try to spread joy and ease pain, will die well, said Bethany Klug, co-founder of the Community of Mindful Living-Heartland Sangha Buddhist Group in Kansas City, Mo.

John van Keppel of Leawood, Kan., an atheist who does not believe in an afterlife, said, "Hopefully, I would feel I've done what I can do in this lifetime, and I'll be ready."

"I'd like to die peacefully," he said, "and, hopefully, with my bad coronary arteries, I'll just slip out. Some people leave this life fearful. They are afraid of judgment day or something like that. Or it may be just plain animal instincts that they don't want to go; they have this desire to be immortal."

In some faith traditions, how well someone dies depends on how close they are to God and how they got along with others.

"Historically, in the notion of dying well in the Christian tradition, we have the thought of time to prepare for death by making peace with God and one's neighbor," Meador said.

"In our contemporary culture, if you ask people how would you want to die, many would say, 'In my sleep.' Whereas historically in Christianity, especially during medieval days, that would not be seen as a good death because it did not give you time to make peace with your family and God."

In Christianity people do not want to go to their graves harboring grudges, said Judi Schwanz, associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. They also want to have been open and honest with others, and their relationship with God is such that they are at peace, she said.

Steve Jeffers, director of the Institute for Spirituality in Health at the Shawnee Mission Medical Center in Merriam, Kan., said that in Christianity, "dying well would have to do with having that

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positive relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Also, it would have to do with family as well."

"From the Christian perspective, we have the responsibility as parents or the breadwinner in the family to be certain our loved ones are taken care of. So if the person did not plan ahead and make preparations for their family, that would not be a good death."

In the Roman Catholic tradition, part of making peace with God is being thankful for the life one has lived and coming to see death as a natural course, said William F. McNerny, chairman of the theology department of Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo.

"In the Roman Catholic tradition, dying is as natural as being born," he said. "There is a continuum. There is this extraordinarily strong belief that this is not the end. So there is also hope that this is one stage of your life, and now you are entering into another one."

Many people agree that dying for a just cause makes for a good death, even when the death is violent, as with missionary Martin Burnham and the Conception Abbey monks.

"Based on what I know about Mr. Burnham, I understand why his wife said he died well," said Myra Christopher, president of the Midwest Bioethics Center. "Burnham grew up in those islands and dedicated his life to missionary life and to the ideals that were anchored in his religious beliefs. He died for a cause that he lived his life for."

Klug, the Buddhist, also believes a person can die well even if the death is violent. This is especially true, she said, if the victim has compassion for and understanding of the perpetrator.

"The monks embodied this," she said. "They didn't demonize Mr. (Lloyd) Jeffress (who killed two monks and wounded two). They recognized that he was a person suffering and acting out of his suffering."

Whether a violent death is a good death depends on the cause and whether the person is doing the right thing, Ahmed, the Muslim, said.

"The way a person dies does not have a bearing on the way the person lived," he said. "There are many instances in which people have died violently but lived a good life, and the Prophet Muhammad prayed for them."

Mahatma Gandhi is an example of such a person, said Kris Krishna, retired Leawood, Kan., engineer and a Hindu.

"Although Mahatma Gandhi died a violent death, he died chanting the name of God," he said. "He was also a person of virtue and did so much good for the masses. So he died well."

"In the cases of Martin Burnham and the Benedictine monks, all three died violent deaths. Martin Burnham was in a far-off land preaching his religion and spreading the word of God that he believed. So I would say that he died well.

"Similarly, the Benedictine monks who were murdered in Conception, Mo., were in the house of God, and I am sure God must have been in their thoughts when they died. So I would also consider them as having died well."



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