

Merrick J, Ventegodt S. What is a good death ? To use death as a mirror and find the quality of life. BMJ 2003 October 31. <http://bmj.com/cgi/eletters/327/7406/66#39303>

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▼ **What is a good death? To use death as a mirror and find the quality in life**  
Joav Merrick, Søren Ventegodt (31 October 2003)

## What is a good death? To use death as a mirror and find the quality in life

31 October  
2003



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journal:

[Re: What is a good death? To use death as a mirror and find the quality in life](#)

[Email](#) Joav Merrick, et al.

EDITOR—Death can be seen as the real enemy (1). Death puts life in perspective as we finally see it as the very fragile, easily lost and infinitely valuable thing that it is. When you do not sense that death is after you, you relax and think yourself out of danger. But you have no guarantee that you are alive in five minutes. It is already later than you think. In a little while we are gone. In a moment we have all turned to dust.

To live with the awareness of death – death is around somewhere, waiting for our final slip in order to sweep us away – is a sinister but also wonderful situation. When we are aware of death and know that we have too little time left and that time is the only thing we do not have, then we really do our best. When we acknowledge the unique opportunity we have to become aware, straighten our lives to get a better life while there is still a chance, then we can live the way that makes each day better than the previous and the next year better than this. We can live in such a way that we are on our way up.

Ask yourself: "Am I on my way up or on my way down?" Do you have to admit that you are on your way down, even though of course it is a slow descent? The only thing that can make most of us change our course, so that we live in a manner that leads us upwards is the distinct awareness of death. When we see death threatening us all the time and coming at us in many various forms like loneliness, illness or hopelessness and when we realize that we constantly feed death with great chunks of our own flesh, because we do not make the right choices and thus unconsciously take one step further towards the grave, then we are motivated to correct these systematic faults.

Only death has the power to really make us want to change our course in life. All lesser problems and crises throughout life may be

unpleasant, but not really unpleasant enough to make us want to succeed in changing ourselves. The reason for this extreme conservatism is that we already have dedicated most of our decisions to survive, i.e. to avoid dying. Therefore, the death that threatens us now is computed in our minds as more important than the death threatening us in the past. But awareness of death does not come to us easily when we are only slowly decaying. We can see people die in front of us without understanding that we, too, consist of fragile flesh and that we have to depart soon. No force in life can change this: In a little while we are gone. We have to live here and now. This moment is all we have got (2).

When you have only 700 days left

When "terminal" cancer patients (the quotation marks are because maybe the patients are not as terminal as we usually think) visit their physician some time after they have received the diagnosis and the verdict, that according to the statistics they only have about two years left to live, they often say strange things like: "I am grateful that I got cancer." The physician thinks that this is strange and asks why. "I have never felt so well," the patient says. Most physicians tend to think that is peculiar, because here we have Mrs Larsen, who lost 35 kilogram, lost all her hair because of chemotherapy and her cancer has metastasized throughout the body. Also she looks like something the cat dragged in and then she insists that...". "But it is true, doctor," she insists. "My life has never had so much meaning, my life is more intense than it has ever been now that I know that I have only 700 days left. Now I have let go on all my worries and idiosyncrasies. I have turned simple. I see the sun rise, I feel the wind on my skin, I talk honestly with my friends and I have stopped arguing with my husband. And best of all I have started to say no in order to only do the things I really like".

However absurd it may seem, people with their back against the wall and knowing their days are numbered often live much more intensely than the rest of us, who imagine that we will live forever. Face to face with death we suddenly appear to remember that this is what life is all about, to feel good within ourselves and with each other and to do something we really like. "What a fool I have been" people often say and think. Time possesses the strange capacity to expand enormously, when we live intensely. A moment can feel like eternity or a year can appear to pass within a minute (have you ever experienced a New Year's Eve, where you feel that the past year has been uneventful, so totally empty of anything essential?). If you know that you only have a short while left before death, then even such a moment may be enough to change the course, that fate had in store for you.

We may call this very strange power that steps in when you are facing death "the will to live." We really do possess enormous potentials for growth and change, but only rarely do these potentials come into use. Our reason and our total naiveté towards the tough and wonderful conditions that apply to us prevent us

from changing. You can reclaim the meaning of life. You can break through to the experience of being totally and fully alive, to your life having meaning and your existence making a real difference to the world you live in and yourself. Patients who become well again, drug addicts who become clean, prostitutes who succeed in love, all the miracles people talk about, but do not believe in. All this happens during this process. But, of course, up to this day it has been rare. If our culture held more insight into these things they would probably be much more common, the way they appear to have been in other cultures at other times. A holistic physician often has the great fortune to live in a world, where these miracles are almost normal. In our "quality of life as medicine" projects they occur surprisingly often (3,4).

To pull yourself up by the roots of your hair

A force stronger than reason is needed, when the course of your life is to be altered. Let us call it the will to a better life. If this will is present people will possess real humility, making them open and willing to learn and change. The strange thing about this will is that it is an irrational, nonverbal force that pulls up your existence. When the will influences your view of the world it becomes altered in a strange way. This happens because the will to live supplies a fixed point, namely what you have to believe in when you really love life, beyond all reason, beyond everything you have learnt and experienced in life. This fixed point can serve as a new foundation for your personal philosophy of life. From this moment on you will feel that deep down life is good and valuable, the world is full of opportunities, people are trustworthy, you are able to solve the problems in life on your own and through this battle you can make everything cohere. The experience of pulling yourself up by the roots of your hair literally means that you raise or lift your own existence. You correct your faults and close up all the holes that drain your vital energy. You remove all the good reasons for not having any self-respect and start a new life on a totally new foundation. You take responsibility for your own life.

The essential part of the will is that it is able to cut through all the confusion and doubt that normally characterize human life. In reality, there is no rational way of determining the truth value of statements or philosophies of life. You cannot guess the truth about life and the world. Reason cannot distinguish very well between personal philosophies of life, because they all basically rest on principles that are irrational, ethical or even emotional. However, the will to live a good life cuts cleanly through doubt and mental fog and points out clearly and directly what is right and wrong in relation to our love of life.

Some decisions and choices are in harmony with life, others bring ruin and destruction. Some decisions lead towards the top, others towards the bottom. Some views of the world can sustain life, others weigh it down. Only the will to live a good life can make a person rise above the immaterial, the meaningless, doubt and nonsense. You rarely discover that the will is the real resource for

improving life, until you are facing death. When that happens, the will to live is often the only reason why you survive.

The experience of pulling yourself up by the roots of your hair is quite amusing. But really, if we are to live fully and completely for just a moment this is what is needed, the ability to lift ourselves and take wings, despite the thousands of weights that are dragging us down. Taking responsibility for our own lives is really a process during which we elevate our own existence, in spite of all barriers and difficulties. The will to live a good life is the only thing that can create this effect.

To find the quality of life

We are free to choose our values, the things we think are important and good. Some people's lives are centered on collecting stamps, while others collect good friends. Some chose expensive clothes or fast cars as values, while others grow ecological vegetables and wear only clothes made of recycled material. Some people collect dirty videos, while others are into bible studies. In our minds we are free to choose our own personal values, just as we have an enormous freedom to describe the world whatever way we want.

One thing is values, another thing is how we feel or what state we are in. Something makes one person happy, something else makes another person happy. But what about the happiness we feel: is it the same kind of happiness or are there different kinds of happiness? And what about satisfaction with life? Do we all possess the same sense of satisfaction or do we experience satisfaction in different ways? What about the meaning of life itself? When we feel deep within ourselves, in our very souls and hearts (if we are able to find it), do we then feel the same meaningfulness in life, when it is meaningful and the same senselessness, when it is not? Do two people experience the same kind of love, the same feeling of hate or sexual desire?

It is obvious that each experience carries its own qualities and intensity. But is the actual quality of the experience connected to the individual, to our egos and learned descriptions of the world? Or is the actual quality of happiness, satisfaction or the meaning of life something that is given by human nature? As it appears from this paper, we believe very strongly in nature and that life within us never has let go of its habitat in nature, because we possess our common description of the world not just as a possibility, but as a necessity. This is a given, because we are constructed the way we are and have to live together.

The decisive factor for being able to change yourself is that you are able to regain your belief, that fundamentally life is good. When we here use the word 'belief' it is because from a rational point of view, such an attitude will always be a question of belief. Subjectively, of course, it can also be experienced as certain

knowledge. And it is this inner certain conviction that makes the difference.

You can believe nature as being the essential thing. Not, as is often suggested, in a primitive way, with coarse instincts and pre-programmed behavior parallel to animal behavior, but more refined. The idea is that deep down in our biological matter we possess a nature as humans. This nature is in the shape of an abstract recipe for being a human, and life is about expressing this recipe to the full, unfolding and manifesting its potential for a good life.

In this light, our nature holds the potential for all the dimensions of our lives. It is in our nature to feel good or bad, to be satisfied or dissatisfied, to have sexual feelings, to be happy and feel there is a meaning in life or to work for our innermost visions and longings. Our nature is such, that we have a heart that we need to discern and obey so that we may lead the good life.

To seize the meaning of life

When we finally acknowledge that the world extends beyond our reason or that there are forces at large that matter more than our impulses then we can proceed. When we realize that there are values on Earth that far surpass the value of our small life, then we will be humble enough to accept the gift (and task) that is life. Then we can put our faith in authority and our loyal, but out-of-date and limited description of the world behind us.

To rediscover the meaning of life means finding yourself and the values that you can always, and without faltering, use as foundation for your own life. To regain the meaning of life means that you acknowledge that you are a human being, subject to the conditions and laws applicable to humans. We are not talking about the highway code, but more profound laws that apply to all living beings. To take responsibility, to see yourself as active and not as a victim, to work at correcting your personal faults and repair the bumps in your inner map of the world. To regain the meaning of life does not mean to be forever happy. It means that you find your fundamental challenge as a human being and take up the challenge. You become a person with a mission. There are things to be corrected both on the inside and the outside, things within yourself and things in the world around you. If you are really clever you will see that in reality there is often little difference between the two. The flaws in the world are evident to you, because you also sense and work on similar weaknesses and flaws within yourself. The great struggle for a better world, that all people become involved in, when they acknowledge that the meaning of life is about coherence. They cannot escape this world, however much they want to, because of all its superficiality, materialism, abuse of power and false values, then they realize that this struggle is very much about improving that part of the world that is

you. To clean the place you occupy, to cultivate your own spirit.

Everything starts with yourself. Because all the barriers you see are actually within you, in your own personal view of the world. Becoming free means first and foremost becoming free of the constraints imposed by your own rational description of reality. It does not actually mean that you must get rid of this description or the framework it puts around your self-expression, but you can loosen the constraints so much that they no longer limit life, but support life. You need to get rid of the negativity in the description and the old pains that hold your limiting decisions in their place.

What is the purpose of life ?

Imagine that you really wish to know the meaning of your life. You rent a small cabin in the mountains, where nobody can disturb you for the next three or four weeks. You buy provisions for the whole stay. You go alone and you spend your time on only one thing, namely answering the question: 'What is the meaning of my life?' Of course you have to find a wording that is all your own, which exactly fits you and your life. But it must be deep enough to penetrate all the way into your soul.

What is the purpose of life for you? Why are you on the surface of the Earth for a short while? In what way do you make a difference in the world? What are your dreams in life, love, real friendship, a good job or harmony with nature ?

When you compare the life you lead with your dreams, how do you measure up ? Is your personal relationship the love of your life or is it boring routine in bed and arguments at breakfast and before the evening news? Do you actually have one single friend with whom you can and do talk about everything and who does not begrudge you real progress ? A friend who can meet you right where you are and just wish you all the best and therefore ask you all the questions you should already have asked yourself, but did not dare to out of fear of meeting yourself ? Questions like what is it you want, what are your opportunities and what is needed for you to obtain what you want with the opportunities you have ?

What about your work? Do you really exert yourself and improve anything? Do you gain the expertise necessary to express yourself creatively and spontaneously? Do you solve your tasks to your own personal satisfaction? Do you have enough influence on your own work? Do you actually accept what your company produces or should you be doing something quite different in order to be of use in the world? What about your time off? Do your holidays fulfill your dreams or do you just end up in some bar in Mallorca wasting your time on casual pursuits, before returning home to your boring routine? Do you burn for your life, your work and your love? Does you or your life contain any nerve at all? In the final analysis, how do you feel, if you are really and totally honest? Are you OK? Do you get out of life, what it can give you? Do you exploit all your

opportunities? Have you accepted the challenge that is yours and is your life in balance? Are you at peace with yourself, because you have acknowledged your own personal mission in life?

We suspect that after a couple of days you are having no more fun at the cabin. After all, to study the meaning of life is rather unpleasant. The really sad truth is that we have no wish to know the truth about ourselves or the deeper meaning of life, because it is painful to learn something decidedly new and we only do this if it is absolutely necessary.

Actually, what began as a straightaway philosophical experiment now appears to be a dramatic process, where you have to confront and process the pains of a lifetime! All the bad things you have done since early childhood will come to you and ask you for a clean-up! This is not our favorite perspective, but the only perspective that will make us change into better, more innocent and more loving persons.

The pain of knowing the meaning of your life

Our problem is that deep down we do not really want to know the meaning of our lives, because if we do we have to acknowledge that the life we actually live is a pale shadow of the opportunities we hold, no matter how good life is, when compared to that of other people.

We are not at all interested in realizing that we almost live in an existential gutter, when we compare our life with what we were actually created for. Our life is not first-class and maybe it is not even second-class, which we thought, but actually third-class, because our life is more or less without love to life, to other people or even to ourselves.

We are also not the decent folks we thought we were, but rather harbor fairly violent and destructive tendencies. Not a fun perspective at all. Let us assure you that one of us was surprised when, one sunny day some years ago, he finally came to the realization that his basic intentions toward other people were basically mean, while he himself thought he was such a well-meaning fellow. A close examination showed otherwise. There is a reason why we do not want to know ourselves: It hurts. This realization that our life does not have the meaning it could have or that our life is far poorer than it needs to be does not give us a nice feeling. That we are actually at fault for wasting our life and perhaps about to lose something precious, our actual existence, this realization is actually very unpleasant.

The unpleasantness lies in the realization of the magnitude of the problem, because it obliges us to do something about it for our own sake. We must take responsibility and see ourselves as the cause of our own personal mess. We must learn to associate with others and change our attitudes towards all kinds of things. We need to let

go of all out-dated points of view for which we have fought and battled forever, ever since we learned them from our parents. It is important that you can face yourself in the mirror every morning. One reason this may be difficult is the painful feeling that you are not faithful to yourself. When you know deep down what life is about and what your real purpose and meaning of life are, it hurts inside if you just continue living as always and not true to your own intuitions.

When you are conscious of your big dream, but shy away from working to make it come true, you suppress yourself. This works fine only as long as you are not too aware of it, but with the growing awareness the suppression of your own life becomes still harder to bear. The more you understand the game of life, the more you are obliged to engage in it. Knowing what you like, makes it much more difficult not to be good to yourself. When you face yourself in the mirror, you will know how much work you have to do to bring your life in better accord with the innermost wishes of your soul.

Everybody, who engages totally in the challenge of improving his or her relationship with the self will find that this game can be won. It takes a real effort, though. For most of us it is hard work every day for many years. Frankly, because our state of being is so lousy, when we start out. We are rather far from being happy, cheerful and easygoing.

One of us with the experience of this process felt a strong and almost unbearable sensation of unworthiness. When you develop an excellent inner standard of existence, you are likely to feel less proud of yourself. When you realize the brilliant standard that all mankind inhabits deep down in his soul(5) – all that we are meant to be, our real potential – then our present existence often seems pretty pale, insignificant, sometimes close to a total failure. As long as you compare yourself with your next-door neighbor you can always claim success. But when you start comparing your present state of being with that of a person at his full peek – like Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Leonardo da Vinci or and maybe spiritual masters like the Dalai Lama, Sai Baba or Baal Shem Tov– it is difficult not to feel gray. Now, humility and humor will always be helpful. It is quite funny to be an action hero, when you compare yourself to your friends and be an existential midget, when you compare yourself to your own potentials. You might find that what nature or God intended you to be is amazingly different from whatever you thought at first. The gift of knowing the meaning of life is energy. When we see our true potential it is tempting to reach for the power and glory, the creativity and the divinity that lie within. When we do this we will immediately get all kinds of problems with the outer world and we will get an immense amount of energy. An unsurpassed energy kick.

People who know their hidden potentials and dig into them without hesitation or second thoughts will always blossom. They will soon be transformed into original beings, colorful, intelligent,



troublesome, creative, lovely and often annoying like hell. These people will normally get everything they want. If they are sick they will get healed, if they are artists they will get fame, if they are scientists they will get a unique understanding of their field of research. Eventually, as their personal growth continues they might be recognized as the geniuses of this world.

The secret of these success stories is lots and lots of energy drawn from the source of existence combined with other amazing qualities like intuitive competence and emotional intelligence. These qualities pour from one single source: life. More precisely, the abundant source of energy and motivation is "the joy of life". Joyfulness seems to be the most basic and most mysterious quality of all living beings. The nature of joy is by the way still completely unexplained by science.

The no man's land between your old and new life

Knowing what life is about does not necessarily mean that life becomes any easier. It is often quite the opposite: life turns even more difficult, when you wake up. But a conscious life has a peculiar quality. A person who experiences the deepest meaning in his or her life discovers that life now has touch of bliss and fragrance (6). No matter how chaotic, no matter how painful, deep down the new life is sweet.

This fine sweetness makes it possible for a human being to endure almost incredible pain and sorrow. When you strive to realize yourself and your utopian dreams many people will react as if you have the plaque. You will often turn into an incomprehensible and disturbing element of other people's worlds. To be sure, after some years of hard work you will come back as a beautiful, peaceful and happy person, but often the first thing that happens is that you turn annoying, selfish, difficult or even angry.

The fine, inner sweetness gives these people an unstoppable quality. They turn into fighters. They have seen the light and they follow it. New jobs, divorces, new friends, new habits and values, new sexual and professional interests... we are talking about major transformations here. People are not the same and will never be the same again. They are forever lost for you, if you do not follow them by developing yourself.

If you get a metastasized cancer and you heal yourself by letting go of the negative beliefs and self-suppressing decisions of a lifetime, you will be changed. You now have dramatically improved your quality of life and inner coherence. But you might also be in the situation, where you find yourself as reborn to the degree that not even your old clothing fits you any more. The price to be paid for personal growth is, unfortunately, chaos. As most people are very conservative they will try to oppose your growth the best they can. So, people who supported you, when you were down suddenly do their best to suppress you. It is sometimes difficult to believe

that your relatives can jump on your back trying to hold you back. It is sometimes grotesque that you will have to escape from your whole family.

Between your new blossoming life and the old normal, boring life of habits and routines is a no man's land of very difficult nature. You discover that nothing is as your thought is was – it might be that your beloved does not really love you or that what you thought was the essence of your life is simply a substitution for a sound and healthy interest. Often people going through this transformation will at some point in time feel that they are going crazy. But relax: you are not going crazy. You have been crazy for half a lifetime living with values that did not make you happy. And now you are waking up. You are in the middle of a speedy, but unpleasant recovery. Loneliness of the most painful kind is normal at this stage. You are alone with your thoughts, and you are confused, unhappy, not seen, not loved and not understood. You cannot continue to live your old life, but you have not yet found your new ways. The fine order of your life has been broken and now chaos prevails both on the surface and in the debts of our soul.

We are healing, but first we must acknowledge that we really are sick. The pain of a whole lifetime is often overwhelming us and survival becomes dependent on our ability to be good to ourselves. Nobody but yourself is there now to show you love and concern. The miracle is that it is enough: when we love ourselves we do not really depend on other people's concern for us. But before we can enjoy the luxury of relying fully on ourselves, living in perfect inner balance, we must heal a lot of old painful wounds. This is why loneliness bites us at this stage. Most people live lives that are not truly a life. They sense this intuitively, but they do not want to look at it at all. There are plenty of symptoms telling you that everything is not as it is supposed to be. The terrible headache or low back pain that returns still more often, problems sleeping at night, the growing sexual problems that are taking the fun out of this part of life, problems with your skin, the slips of memory, maybe the arthritis making every step you take even more painful. Enough is enough. Some day you realize that this is not how you want to live. Enough of lies and politeness and pretension. Air! You need fresh air, renewal, new inspiration. The way you live brings you slow death and this is not how life was meant to be. It takes a lot of courage to break the well-known order of daily life.

Sometimes we are lucky enough to be forced to make the move and wake up: the physician gives you the malignant diagnosis, the boss says he is sorry he has to let you go, because of your still poorer performance. This is the end. You have reached the end of the road. You only have one chance now: renewal from within. Your whole life needs repair. It is time to clean up the mess. Now a hard time usually follows. It is difficult not to feel that a lot of time is wasted living your old life. Realizing the distance to the existence you have been living, you are often overwhelmed with sorrow and bitter regrets. But eventually you will find mercy and realize that life is never wasted, you have learned your lesson, you suffered for

as long as you had to. As time goes by you will appreciate a still deeper pattern of order and inherent logic in the universe.

## Conclusions

We have a nature as human beings. It is this nature that makes it possible for us to be happy, cheerful, wise and lovely. When we turn natural and innocent, the extraordinary freedom that characterizes life at its fullest will return to us. All the life we hold as living organisms will now blossom and grow. Our love and passion will come back, a burning interest for our work will unexpectedly catch us, deep friendships will form and this divine creativity and humor will mark our new personality. All of us have the possibility to make a difference. The quality of our own life can be drastically improved and so can our use to people around us. We can be of real value to ourselves and to the world around us. Instead of being one more of these human beings tearing down the global ecosystem you will understand the web of life in all its forms and shadows and do what is needed to make mankind and our beautiful culture survive.

As we see it, mankind is a highly endangered species, and only by transforming our old materialistic culture into a new spiritual culture with honesty, truthfulness and contributing people can humanity survive. The right place for all of us to begin is by saving ourselves. All it takes is that we decide to seize the meaning of life. But this must be one whole-hearted move: you must give it everything you have got if you want to succeed. You can change a poor life to an excellent life (5,6-11), but you must risk your life to win. One day you will find the courage. Maybe the day is today. The wise Jewish Rabbis have a few good sayings: "Live today as if tomorrow is your last day" or "in order to perfect yourself, one must renew oneself day by day".

Let us conclude by telling the story of Sol Gordon, professor emeritus of Child and Family Studies at Syracuse University: "Growing up as an idealistic youth, I was determined to save the world and even the more I tried, the world became worse and worse. Then I decided I had taken on too much. I thought I would just try to save the United States. The more I tried -- conditions in the US got worse and worse. So again I thought I had taken on too much. So I decided I would just try to save my neighborhood. My neighbors told me to mind my own business. But just as I was about to give up in despair, I read in the Talmud (Jewish teachings) that if you can save one life, it is as though you have saved the world. That is now my mission -- one person at a time (12). What you start there, then you will have a good death.

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Competing interests: None declared.

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Competing interests: None declared

## What is a good death? Memories of a mother's passing.

31 October  
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EDITOR - My mother died many years ago, on Hogmanay 1985, aged 72. Having lung cancer, she had been admitted on several occasions to our local hospice, Roxburghe House. She was an ordinary woman, but extremely brave, thinking only of those around her, even in her latter days. I still remember her death as a traumatic but positive experience.

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I was determined that she would not die alone. She was moved to a single room and was surrounded by her family. There was an adjoining room if an overnight stay became necessary. Being a committed Christian and sure of an afterlife, she wished to have some private time with her minister (Church of Scotland). He later told us that she said to him "Well, I'll ken mair [know more] than you'll ken when you're preaching on Sunday." And maybe she did. He clearly found the experience a positive one too as he later spoke about her in a television broadcast.

She was alert except for the final couple of hours. We were able to say goodbye. She told us to look after each other. My father wanted to put on her oxygen mask but she said "No, it is time to go." She was given her final injection of morphine and slipped into a coma.

We will never know how she experienced her death but from her family's perspective I am sure it was as good as death can be. That I am sure helped us in our grieving. I have often contrasted it with death on a busy hospital ward with only the curtains affording some privacy.

My father has now reached the grand old age of 91 and I can only hope that when the time comes his family will be fortunate enough to have such a positive experience again.

Competing interests: None declared

## A Christian death

31 October 2003



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My father died about 24 years ago. He was a devout Christian and had been living with my family since my mother's death eighteen months earlier. He was in reasonable health for a man of 72 with congestive cardiac failure. On the day of his death he said to me "I'm going home today" We had recently moved house so I thought he was confused and said, "No, Dad, you live with us now". He replied with characteristic acerbity "Don't be silly, I'm going to be with your mother and the Lord". He then went to have a shower,

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put on clean pyjamas, lay down in bed, blessed my baby daughter and said "I'm tired". he shut his eyes and died peacefully.

[Email](#) Barbara M Phillips

Competing interests: None declared

## What was good life is now a good death

31 October 2003



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nil

Every good beginning has a good end.....what was a good birth is what transformed into good meaningful life and as good things have a good beginning and a good end.....ends as a good death. But its hard for anybody to see good things ending so to say Death

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Competing interests: None declared

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