

Death intrudes

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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My first “official” responsibility in my new position took place a week or so earlier than schedule, as I officiated at a memorial service on a sunny, breezy, southern Alberta Saturday. It was a somewhat strange thing to be leading a service like this before even attending a Sunday morning service!

Throughout the day, a number of people expressed appreciation that I had agreed to do this before I had officially begun. Of course it was no problem, whatsoever, and I was honoured to do it. Death is no respecter of schedules, after all.

Death always intrudes. A few others remarked—tongue in cheek—that this was a bit of an ominous beginning for me! Welcomed by death. Or something like that. I smiled and laughed awkwardly.

As I was silently observing people come and go from the viewing room, my thoughts, unsurprisingly, turned to death. It’s impossible to go to a funeral or walk the paths of a cemetery without pondering the uncomfortable fact that one day this will be you. We modern westerners can be fairly committed and inventive death-deniers, but there are always moments when the intruder barges through the door, and the reality of death is unavoidable.

As I drove home yesterday afternoon, I wondered if an encounter with death was perhaps the most appropriate way to begin a new season in life as a pastor. We, who presume to speak for/about God. we who are given the fearful honour of being present with people during their highest highs and lowest lows, we who are somehow permitted to steward the mysteries of life and death and suffering and salvation—perhaps it is we who most need to be reminded of the shadow that colours all that we do. Part of life is learning how to die.

There are no shortage of expectations out there for what a pastor ought to be and do. Decisive program administrators, witty intellectuals, compassionate shepherds/counselors, skilled social networkers, creative entrepreneurs, indefatigable apologists... the list goes on and on. Some of these expectations have their place... many do not. But experiences like the one I had yesterday add a touch of perspective to things.

Perhaps one of the most important things a pastor can do is to refuse to surrender death to the realm of meaninglessness and chaos and pain. Perhaps one of the most vital things we can ever do is to stubbornly insist that there is meaning, here in the valley of the shadow of death—that words like “redemption” and “resurrection” have not gone extinct, that phrases like “running the race” and “finishing well” make contact with truths about the universe that are real, and solid, good, and hopeful. Perhaps that is our job, in this post-Christian context—to tend to the embers of meaning and hope in this death-denying space and time.

I think it is appropriate for me to begin with death for another reason: I am quite a competent death-denier, too. I am as good as anyone else at pretending that death will not come calling. And if I am going to presume to help wrench meaning out of death on behalf of others—if I am going to stand in front of wooden boxes in front of holes in the ground and presume to locate all of this grief and pain and confusion within a narrative of hope— then I need to pay careful attention when death intrudes.

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