

What happens when we die?

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A few years ago a student was referred to me, the college chaplain, because he was getting in a bit of trouble. He was drinking and partying too much and making some poor decisions. This behavior was out of character for this student and his professors thought it had something to do with the fact that his mother was dying of cancer.

When we sat down together in my office, the first thing this young man wanted to tell me was that he was not very “religious.” He wasn’t raised in the church. He didn’t know what he believed about God, and then, he quietly confessed, “I like to go out and have fun, I like to have a good time.”

“That’s okay with me,” I responded. “I’m just here to help.”

So we chatted for a while, broke the ice a bit, and then I asked about his mother. I had my counselor hat on at this point as I checked in with him about how he was dealing with things emotionally. All this was fine, but in the back of my mind I kept wondering why this student wanted to see me. If he’s not “religious,” why didn’t he make an appointment with our college’s counselor? He could have been having the same conversation with her.

Then it hit me. Right in the middle of our conversation, I interrupted him, and I said out loud: “Oh. You need to talk about death, don’t you?”

Hearing this, his eyes immediately swelled with tears. He lost control of his emotions and in between gasping sobs he nodded, yes, that’s what he needed to talk to me about. He’d never experienced death before, not like this. He didn’t know what to think or believe about what clearly was going to happen to his mother.

Then, this young man’s red, swollen eyes searched my own and he asked, “What do you think’s going to happen? What do you believe?”

And I paused for a breath—because in these kinds of conversations with students I don’t often share what I believe. I want to encourage them in their own journey. I

want them to ask themselves the hard questions and come to their own answers. But this kid, he just needed some help.

So I told him that what I know about death comes from my own experience of it—from my experience as a pastor sitting beside the bed of Abbie, Flossie, Frank, Rock, Dot, Mirium, Blannie as they slipped from life into death. I told him about those moments. How sitting there, in the presence of death—every time—I felt this profound sense of love. To me, I told this young man, it was a sense of love that felt **eternal**. So, this, I said is what I believe is waiting for your mother and what I believe is waiting for us all.

I didn't see that student again after our conversation. I don't know how he's doing now. I touched based with him a few times afterwards by phone and e-mail. But in that moment, when I wanted so badly to offer him some help and some hope, it seemed that my answer was good enough.

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