

## ***Aging, Death, and Bereavement***

*For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*Romans 8:38–39*

*Are you able to contemplate your death and the death of those closest to you? Accepting the fact of death, we are freed to live more fully.*

*paraphrased from Philadelphia and the Jerseys Yearly Meeting, 1694–1695 by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997*

*There are two different aspects of preparing for death; the first is preparing for one's own death, and the second is preparing for the death of another—whether a beloved friend, or even a stranger—preparing in such a way as to be of greatest comfort and support for those who mourn, including yourself.*

*Preparation for Death, a handbook by Tempe Monthly Meeting*

*Knowing how quickly many are removed by death, it is weightily recommended, that care be taken by each monthly meeting, that Friends who have estates to dispose of, be advised to make their wills in time of health, and strength of judgment, and therein to direct their substance as in justice and wisdom may be to their satisfaction and peace; laying aside all resentment, though occasion may have been given, lest it should go with them to the grave; remembering we all stand in need of mercy and forgiveness. Making such wills in due time can shorten no one's days, but the omission, or delay thereof to a time of sickness, when the mind should not be diverted from a solemn consideration of the approaching awful period of life, has often proved very injurious to many, and been the occasion of creating animosities in families, which the seasonable performance of this necessary duty might have effectually prevented.—1691, 1703.*

*Friends are earnestly recommended to employ persons skilful in the law, and of good repute, to make their wills, as great inconvenience and loss, and sometimes the ruin of families have happened through the unskilfulness of some who have taken upon them to write wills, being unqualified to act in a matter of such importance. And all Friends who may become executors or administrators are advised to make a full, clear and perfect inventory of the estate and effects of the deceased, early after the interment, as many difficulties and disputes have arisen, and sometimes injustice been done for want of it, or by deferring it too long.—1782, 1801*

*from "Wills", The Rules of Discipline of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, from The Old Discipline*

*Approach old age with courage and hope. As far as possible, make arrangements for your care in good time, so that an undue burden does not fall on others. Although old age may bring increasing disability and loneliness, it can also bring serenity, detachment and wisdom.*

*paraphrased from Philadelphia and the Jerseys Yearly Meeting 1694–1695 by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997*

## **Preparation for Death**

The contemplation of our own death requires us to face and accept our mortality, grieve actively all our losses, and, through a review of our life, uncover and complete the unfinished business of forgiveness and reparation.

*Death is no more than a turning of us over from time to eternity.*

*William Penn, 1693*

*I have arrived. I am at home in the here and in the now.*

*I am solid, I am free. In the infinite I dwell.*

*Thich Nhat Hanh, Guide to Walking Meditation, 1985*

The catastrophic and devastating losses we suffer may occur at any time. We try to prepare ourselves in ways both practical and spiritual for what we know may come, yet we recognize that we cannot

always foresee the time of their coming. Death may cut life short at any time. Not every danger can be foreseen. We do not expect accidents; nor the untimely loss of the young; nor even the death of those who knowingly place themselves at risk in war, in care of the diseased, or in other perilous situations. What we can do is foster an ever-present readiness in spirit for whatever may come.

Our Quaker experiences have, ideally, made us sensitive to the varieties of suffering that occur throughout life, and can, again ideally, help us make meaning of death and the diminishment that occur with aging. This sensitivity also allows us to release all that we love. Loss of independence—when we have to stop driving, leave our homes, or accept basic care for ourselves, for instance—strikes hard. Chronic pain or life-threatening illness challenges us utterly. Together Friends may help us deal with many losses—our dreams and hopes, our mobility, our sight or hearing, our memory and mental acuity.

Spiritual preparation for death and loss is ongoing, modeled by wise elders and sometimes by children as well as in literature, music, and art. Much excellent material exists on preparation for death, dying, and bereavement, but the support of caring Friends is most valuable. A loving presence or practical offer of help matters more than eloquent words. Feelings of inadequacy should not keep us away from the dying and the bereaved.

Considering that the extraordinary medical advances of our time may sometimes extend life beyond our wishes, Friends are advised, as the end of life approaches, to consider ways of making their death their own. Worldly preparation for death includes legal and financial decisions such as wills, ethical wills, bequests, and powers of attorney for financial and health-care decisions. Couples, especially same-gender couples, who are not married in the eyes of the law are at special risk and need to take extra care that their legal papers reflect their wishes about end of life decision making and finances. Single people living alone may consider appointing a concerned Friend to look after and advocate for their interests and should make sure this person is aware of their wishes and knows the location of all relevant documents. Because death may come at any time, care should be taken by all adults, particularly those with children or those who place themselves at risk for conscience's sake, to make and communicate such decisions in a timely fashion. It is important that these decisions not be made under the influence of depression or chronic pain. Housing issues include how and when to move from independent to assisted living, to skilled nursing or home care, and finally to hospice. Friends may want to consider the choice between burial or cremation and may have joined a memorial society to preserve the most simplicity possible at the time of death. We may also wish to donate our bodies to research or our usable organs for reuse.

## **Bereavement**

*Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.*

*Matthew 5:4*

For ourselves, our own death is a transition; for those who love us, it is a deep loss.

In bereavement, give yourself time to grieve, recognizing that in some sense, grief for the loss of a loved one never ends. When others mourn, let your love embrace them.

It is important to realize that grief does not follow any particular pattern and that each person handles grief in his or her own way. The ways and the times grief manifests itself are often surprising. Support to the bereaved from individual Friends and the meeting may need to continue well beyond the initial period of bereavement. Bereaved children may need special attention and opportunities to express their grief—through art, journals, and special storybooks, for example.

## **Responsibility of Meetings to the Aging, the Dying, and the Bereaved**

The monthly meeting Ministry & Oversight Committee or a special committee for Pastoral Care or specifically for Death & Bereavement may take on as appropriate these tasks in support of aging, dying, and bereaved Friends:

- Making the meeting space safe, comfortable, accessible, and with modifications for hearing and low vision.
- Providing for ongoing involvement in the meeting. Types of assistance may include rides to meeting, phone checks, visits, or occasional worship at their site.
- Discerning the need to revise or end the ill or aging person's level of meeting work.
- Coordinating visitation; helping with life tasks, financial aid, or transportation.

- Considering the formation of a Pastoral Care Committee if Ministry & Oversight Committee becomes overburdened.
- Providing support for the dying, the bereaved, or others in need, with referrals to qualified professionals as necessary. Clearness committees could also be provided for adult children of aging parents who may be resisting making the necessary decisions.
- Assisting with the planning and holding of a memorial meeting (see below).
- Holding ongoing or occasional worship sharing sessions or discussions on the topics of awareness of our mortality, the stages of grief, legal and financial matters, memorial societies, organ or body donation, and the many eventualities of end-of-life planning.<sup>[1]</sup>
- Adding to the meeting library any locally relevant legal materials and community resource lists as well as appropriate books on end of life and bereavement, including materials for children.
- Storing records of wills, last wishes, contacts, and other relevant information. Records clerks are often appointed by monthly meetings to annually update such records.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Memorials

Friends usually hold a memorial meeting—a meeting for worship on the occasion of death—at a suitable time and place.<sup>[3]</sup> In planning this event, the responsible committee consults the wishes of the family and those of the deceased Friend if these are on record. The memorial meeting is for those left behind and is encouraged.

A committee appointed by the meeting traditionally prepares, often in consultation with the bereaved, a memorial minute, separate from an obituary, which will be read at the memorial meeting. A Friend, usually from the Ministry & Oversight Committee, notifies the local newspapers and distant friends and relatives of the time and place of the event. The meeting provides the venue and adequate seating. It is usual for the clerk or other Friend to give a brief introduction explaining Quaker memorial customs, especially if the gathering includes many non-Friends. After all who wish to have spoken out of the silence and the memorial minute has been read, the meeting comes to a close and refreshments are served by the Hospitality Committee or volunteers.

The memorial minute is sent promptly to the clerk of Intermountain Yearly Meeting for distribution and reading in the meeting for worship for memorials held during the yearly meeting session. It should also be forwarded to *Friends Bulletin* and other such publications as seem appropriate.

Monthly meetings may also hold occasional memorial meetings in which Friends speak about and honor all those for whom they grieve, and for all they have lost, both within and outside of their own circle of Friends.

---

<sup>[1]</sup> Some meetings have a handbook (see References section).

<sup>[2]</sup> See form, Appendix 5.

<sup>[3]</sup> Meetings may be well advised to locate suitable potential locations for memorial meetings in advance of any particular member's death.