

The Rev. Dr. Christy Thomas

An Ordinary Death
Companion

A Guide to End-of-Life Planning



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*“All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers, and the flower falls.”
1 Peter 1:24 (NRSV)¹*

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An Ordinary Death Companion: A Guide to End-of-Life Planning by Christy Thomas

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Introduction

In the grand scheme of things, our life spans are brief. We who have the privilege of being alive also have the privilege of recognizing that our mortality is a good thing, something to receive with gratefulness when the time comes.

This guide is a way to shape group conversation about our deaths. It is intended to help people move into that time with more intentionality and care for those who often need to make complex decisions about our own end-of-life issues.

What follows is a basic outline for a six-week group study, although it could go longer or shorter depending on the needs of the group. All that is needed is a comfortable place to meet and someone to act as a group facilitator to keep the conversation focused and to ensure everyone has time to speak and listen.

Questions are intentionally open ended. None have clear or easy answers, so group size should be limited to five to seven people. That size ensures everyone has a chance to speak and explore the questions unhurriedly.

There are no wrong answers to any question. Some people want every single thing possible done to preserve any possibility of life. Others would prefer a different path and less intervention.

These are not moral decisions, but questions of personal preference. For example, while some find the concept of assisted death helpful, others find it abhorrent. Do not judge one another or try to change another person's mind, but use the time to clarify your own wishes and desires so they can be effectively communicated to others.

Each week opens with a prayer or psalm to be spoken together or a passage from different religious traditions to read and meditate briefly upon. As the time of each meeting draws to a close, there is a short sending prayer or quote which all may recite together if desired.

Week One

Opening Meditation

Psalm 139: 1-18 (NRSV)²

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Discussion Questions

- How do you think God views human death, particularly the death of those who have already lived a full life?
- How do you want your loved ones to remember you?

Ending Meditation

From Buddhist Reflections on Death by V.F. Gunaratna³

According to the Buddhist way of thinking, death, far from being a subject to be shunned and avoided, is the key that unlocks the seeming mystery of life. It is by understanding death that we understand life; for death is part of the process of life in the larger sense. In another sense, life and death are two ends of the same process and if you understand one end of the process, you also understand the other end. Hence, by understanding the purpose of death we also understand the purpose of life. It is the contemplation of death, the intensive thought that it will some day come upon us, that softens the hardest of hearts, binds one to another with cords of love and compassion, and destroys the barriers of caste, creed and race among the peoples of this earth all of whom are subject to the common destiny of death. Death is a great leveler. Pride of birth, pride of position, pride of wealth, pride of power must give way to the all-consuming thought of inevitable death. It is this leveling aspect of death that made the poet say:

“Scepter and crown
Must tumble down
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.”

Week Two

Opening Meditation

Psalm 121:1-8 (NRSV)⁴

I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Discussion Questions

- Keeping in mind that, as you die, your whole family will be affected in some way, what is your comfort level in talking about your own death?
- Have you spoken with family members about your death? If so, how have you approached the subject?
- If not, what might make you resistant to talking about it?
- In what ways do your family members resist talking about it with you?
- How can you help open conversations with them?

Ending Meditation

from The Book of Common Prayer
Evening Prayer, A Collect for Fridays⁵

Lord Jesus Christ, by your death you took away the sting of death: Grant to us your servants so to follow in faith where you have led the way, that we may at length fall asleep peacefully in you and wake up in your likeness; for your tender mercies' sake. Amen.

Week Three

Opening Meditation

from the Book of Common Prayer
Burial II, Additional Prayers⁶

O God, whose days are without end, and whose mercies cannot be numbered: Make us, we pray, deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life; and let your Holy Spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days; that, when we shall have served you in our generation, we may be gathered to our ancestors, having the testimony of a good conscience, in the communion of the Catholic Church, in the confidence of a certain faith, in the comfort of a religious and holy hope, in favor with you, our God, and in perfect charity with the world. All this we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- Describe your ideal way to die.
- Assuming you don't get your ideal death, what scares you the most about your own dying process?
- How actively do you want to delay your death? Be very specific here. Do keep in mind that CPR rarely—probably never—works on the elderly and only results in far greater pain (generally ribs are broken and much bruising takes place).

Ending Meditation

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NRSV)⁷

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Week Four

Opening Meditation

from The Book of Common Prayer⁸

Intimate God, you are able to accept in us what we cannot even acknowledge; you have named in us what we cannot bear to speak of; you hold in your memory what we have tried to forget; you will hold out to us a glory we cannot imagine.

Reconcile us through your cross to all that we have rejected in ourselves, that we may find no part of your creation to be alien or strange to us, and that we ourselves may be made whole, through Jesus Christ, our lover and our friend.

Discussion Questions

- Consider the four main causes of death in the US:
 1. cardiovascular diseases (this includes strokes and heart attacks)
 2. cancers
 3. diabetes
 4. chronic lung diseases
- List some specific preferences for medical care in the case of each eventuality. Which of these preferences are non-negotiable?
- What do you *most* not want to happen to you as you approach the end of your life?

Ending Meditation

from An Ordinary Death⁹

All of us must eventually walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Some will be thrust into it suddenly, as though pushed or having fallen off the cliff; others enter by the more usual road gradually winding down the mountainside into that low and shadowy place.

Some will walk through that valley with wonderment and confidence. Others will find themselves too terrified to step onto the well-worn path and will try to hide in the crevices and foliage.

Some will see the angels hovering around, encouraging them on. Others will find themselves vulnerable to the demons taunting them, reminding them it is only a moment, only one more breath away before it is too late.

We may not be able to choose when we enter that valley, or what route we take. But we can always choose dignity.

Opening Meditation

Psalm 63:1-8 (NRSV)¹⁰

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Discussion Questions

- What kinds of preparations might be most helpful in ensuring the type of death you would prefer?
- What steps can you take to help prepare your family members for your death?

Ending Meditation

from a sermon Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached while pastoring a church in London, England¹¹

No one has yet believed in God and the kingdom of God, no one has yet heard about the realm of the resurrected, and not been homesick from that hour, waiting and looking forward to being released from bodily existence.

Whether we are young or old makes no difference. What are twenty or thirty or fifty years in the sight of God? And which of us knows how near he or she may already be to the goal? That life only really begins when it ends here on earth, that all that is here is only the prologue before the curtain goes up - that is for young and old alike to think about. Why are we so afraid when we think about death? ... Death is only dreadful for those who live in dread and fear of it. Death is not wild and terrible, if only we can be still and hold fast to God's Word. Death is not bitter, if we have not become bitter ourselves. Death is grace, the greatest gift of grace that God gives to people who believe in him. Death is mild, death is sweet and gentle; it beckons to us with heavenly power, if only we realize that it is the gateway to our homeland, the tabernacle of joy, the everlasting kingdom of peace.

Opening Meditation

Psalm 23 (NRSV)¹²

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Discussion Questions

- Think about your own resistance to taking care of the plans and decisions you need to make. What holds you back? How can you overcome these roadblocks?
- Knowing that every moment you have now to live is precious and limited, what would help you to savor those moments to the fullest?
- Who do you need to forgive?
- What do you need to release?

Ending Meditation

Prayer, Christy Thomas

Dear God,

I'm getting old. Thank you for giving me the privilege of living this long and for the sense of youth that is still alive and kicking within my mind and soul, even if my body disagrees.

I still have much I want to do before I die. People to love and grandchildren to hold, places to go and books to read. I still want to be an active contributor to the healing of the world and serve where I am helpful.

But time is short. I sense it. Teach me how to let go of my plans and to be more willing to let this life unfold--and end--as You see fit. Even now instill in me new habits of turning to You and trusting in Your goodness and providence. Remind me to begin each day by greeting You and offering thanks for life in this dimension even as I prepare to transition to life in another dimension.

I worry that my death will be an unnecessary burden for my loved ones, that I will leave too big a mess for them to clean up after I am gone. Guide me in sorting my life and possessions so that I can protect my loved ones, so that they can grieve without financial concerns. Help me remember that you could call me back at any moment.

If the end of my life must be painful, give me courage to embrace that pain as a necessary passage to the fullness of Your joy. But if I can escape it--I do so want this cup to pass from me.

Nonetheless, may Your will be done, for in Your will is my eternal hope.

Endnotes

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³ Gunaratna, V. F. "Buddhist Reflections on Death." Buddhist Publication Society. <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma/death.html>.

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⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

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⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁹ Thomas, Christy. *An Ordinary Death: Where Grief and Relief Hold Hands*. 2nd ed. Denton, TX: Family Manor, LLC, 2015.

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