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**Coping with the Anxiety of Death through the  
Assurance of Future Hope**

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Why are so many individuals and their families afraid to talk about death and dying? Perhaps it is because humans love their lives and loved ones so much that though they understand the finality that death marks in human existence, self-perseverance just won't allow them to willingly accept the inevitable end, that there really is one, or any of the details surrounding the event. While scriptures in sacred texts, cultural folklore and philosophical thought, even science, elicit imagination of life beyond human comprehension, dangling the assurance of a future hope before humanity, no one has documented sufficient evidence to prove conclusively whether there is truly life after physical death or what happens to the soul of the person who dies. Thus, death remains fearfully mysterious, uncertain, and even taboo, and consequently becomes the ultimate conqueror of life. Even so, to appropriately cope with the anxiety of death, authors Herl and Berman, in their book *Building Bridges over Troubled Waters*, say that pastoral caregivers must help dying persons and their families “find real options and genuine choices that help the dying and their

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families connect with hope.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the road to the assurance of hope may be laden with fears of loss even for faithful believers who accept the gospel message. Inviting death into human thought or conversation can arouse anxiety even for this author.

One night nearly twenty years ago I had a dream about my mother's death. I remember it like it happened yesterday. I stood in the kitchen in shock from the news. My face was flushed and my mouth dry. I was numb all over and at a loss for words. My stepfather had entered the house before me and was headed down the hall to where he was out of my view, so I was alone. I opened the first cabinet drawer with the intent to clear it out when suddenly my knees collapsed beneath me, and I burst out into wailing as I slithered to the cold tiled floor. I had lost my mother, my rock, and I had never felt such grievous pain. I wanted to die too, and in some way, a part of me had died.

When I awoke from this traumatic nightmare, I was sobbing uncontrollably and my bed and night gown were wet from the cold sweats. After a few minutes of prayer, a few calming deep breaths and brief reflection, I was able to collect myself long enough to conclude that it was only a dream. Still, I wasn't fully convinced that the dream wasn't a premonition, foreshadowing my mother's fatal end.

I managed to calm myself long enough to go back to sleep, but first thing the next morning I called my mother to make sure everything with her was okay. While she gave me no evidence to believe her end was near, I couldn't take a chance of her sudden death. So, I prayed intensely for days for her longevity and began to slowly but surely detach myself from my otherwise healthy relationship with my mother to safeguard my feelings in the event she would pass away. I went as far as to hide these things in my heart for fear of speaking death into existence with my words. The mere thought of possibly causing my mother's death exacerbated my anxiety and led me to experience unnecessary guilt and untimely grief.

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<sup>2</sup> *Building Bridges over Troubled Waters: Enhancing Pastoral Care Guidance*. Ed. By David Herl, EdD and Mark L. Berman, PhD, 181.

The pain of death and its mysterious nature can be excruciating whether imagined or it actually happens. Death can occur suddenly, may be prolonged by slow, declining health, or result by tilting the scales of one caught between life and death. Because of the uncertainty involved in this end-of-life human experience, fear and anxiety are expected and anticipated emotional responses. Nonetheless, “even though you know it’s going to happen,” describes one family member who recently lost a loved one, “it doesn’t make it any less painful when it finally does.” This loved one’s truth and my imagined one reveal even deeper truths explored by researcher and clinician Dr. Theresa A. Rando in her book *Grief, Dying and Death*.

Rando defines anxiety as “apprehension in the absence of a specific danger.”<sup>3</sup> The challenge with addressing anxiety is that it is too ambiguous and “difficult to specify what is really causing the feeling,”<sup>4</sup> thus Rando suggests “breaking down the anxiety into its component parts in order to help a dying person, and perhaps also the loved ones, manage (and make sense of) his or her anxiety.”<sup>5</sup> For example, reflecting on my anxiety induced by the loss experienced in my dream, I might learn that subconsciously, I was really afraid of being alone, losing the person I felt closest to at that time in my life, and thus afraid of facing the loss of my identity. This revelation in context nearly twenty years ago could easily be seen as a coming-of-age narrative, and the realization that I was actually becoming an adult and would begin to differentiate myself from my parent-child relationship stirred up anticipated sorrow that expressed itself through a dream with real, intense emotional response. In many ways, that process of becoming an adult and forging an adult-adult relationship with parents is a grievous process for many individuals, as it was for me. Still, the grief of anticipated loss can be as real as the images of the perceived loss in death that I dreamed.

Anxiety of death is real, and people express their anxieties differently, whether through frantic activity or running away through detachment.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, if the first step is deconstructive, that is,

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<sup>3</sup> Rando, Therese A. *Grief, Dying and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregiving*. (Champaign, IL: Research Press Company, 1984), 232.

<sup>4</sup> Rando, *Grief, Dying and Death*, 232.

<sup>5</sup> Rando, *Grief, Dying and Death*, 232.

<sup>6</sup> Herl and Berman, *Building Bridges over Troubled Waters*, 177.

unmasking the specific fears of loss that threaten either the person dying or his or her loved ones through awareness, the next step is reconstructive, that is, “helping the individual and his or her loved ones find renewed meaning and hope in their current situation that will enable the individual to live the rest of life despite the adjustment need and fears arising from illness.”<sup>7</sup>

It took me years to make sense of my dream and perceived loss. I kept limited contact with my mother for years before I realized that my distancing and anticipatory grief was both unwarranted and borderline detrimental to my own emotional state of being. While those years were a season of maturation and differentiation, my motivation at the time was anxiety and not faith, which led to some unnecessary sorrow and loneliness. However, as I matured in my faith and character, I began to see how being vulnerable and isolated from emotional and spiritual support systems can make people easy prey for all types of encounters, which may lead to more pain and despair rather than hope and triumph. As a result of this new revelation, I decided to cherish the relationship I had with my mother, however long we had, rather than create regret living years in fear and giving in to anxiety. The result has been at least twelve years of supportive companionship and a collection of fond memories that have helped us both live longer and better.

Now that my mother’s health is waning and her life span is again called into question, only this time with physical evidence, my soul is at peace with an assurance of a future hope for my mother and for me. Time and maturity is preparing us for closure, to talk about the meaning of death and dying well, and discuss our faith in a future hope with God in heavenly places. We both agree with Herl and Berman that death is a part of life and that in many ways her life will live on in my memories.<sup>8</sup> For example, she shares her hopes with me of my having a fruitful life filled with love and happiness, and I etch her stories of joy and sorrow, her classy style, her warm embrace and loving strength into my heart. Each time we see each other, we make sure that we let the other know how much we love each other and the things that make us so proud. We laugh, talk and eat together often. I

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<sup>7</sup> Herl and Berman, *Building Bridges over Troubled Waters*, 178.

<sup>8</sup> Herl and Berman, *Building Bridges over Troubled Waters*, 194.

believe that these kinds of encounters are what Herl and Berman instruct pastoral caregivers to encourage among persons who are dying and their families to serve as “bridges of hope and solace.”<sup>9</sup> Some create this bridge with time and mental pictures while others leave memoirs or journals like the Apostle Paul, who contributed several epistles to the New Testament in the Holy Bible.

After turning his life around and establishing church communities throughout Asia Minor, the Apostle Paul struggled with giving up his life and chose to stay a little while longer to strengthen the community of faith entrusted to him. As humans, dying is no easy feat. In fact, it can cause many different fears and anxiety even for believers of eternal life. For Paul, it seemed to be a fear of a loss of family and friends, not being with them anymore. Nonetheless, Paul made the best of the end of his life by pouring his life into the Gentiles as much as he could. He also poured his life into his partners, Timothy, Silas and others so that they could lead and carry on the mission of the church successfully. Paul died well and with closure, saying that he fought a “good fight of faith” and left an assurance of future hope for future believers through his epistles.

In closing, I want to assure you readers that coping well with the anxiety of death can give you an assurance of a future hope, whether your hope is in eternal life with Jesus Christ or simply living through the memories of your loved ones or both. The reality is that physical death is inevitable for living beings and arouses in humans different fears and levels of anxiety. However, breaking down the anxiety into manageable fears of loss can help individuals and their families better cope with the end-of-life questions and concerns in meaningful ways. Thus, dying persons can remain alive in the memories of loved ones, which restores hope for some in eternal life and gives others the assurance of future hope that sustains them and gives them peace. My story revealed the fear of a loss of identity and fear of anticipated sorrow. While my initial response to the anxiety was detachment, I matured in my faith and made the decision to reconcile an important relationship that created new memories that would help build a bridge of hope and solace. My mother is scribing her hopes and memories onto the tablet of my heart so that when the day of her death does

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<sup>9</sup> Herl and Berman, *Building Bridges over Troubled Waters*, 181.

arrive, she, too, will have closure and the memory of her will live on in me. Plus, we both hold on to our faith in the second coming of Christ, in which we believe that at that time, we will be reunited with Christ and one another in heaven. We are assured of this hope by the seal of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and the confession of our faith. I pray that this assurance of a future hope in Christ Jesus is or becomes your testimony as well.

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