

THE LAST LAP OF THE MARATHON OF LIFE

Thank you for inviting me to address this 36th AGM of your organisation. At the outset may I congratulate PCSA on the work of the organisation and your members all conducted under the aegis of your Vision to ensure 'all South Australians facing death and bereavement are supported to live, die and grieve well'.

I thought I would focus my comments tonight on two themes related to the addressing of these admirable values. Firstly, I want to consider how we see the trajectory of life. Then, I want to make some comments upon the 'lens' through which identity is viewed.

In discussion with Mark about the topic for my talk tonight, I suggested 'The Last Lap of the Marathon of Life' as it is a much better perspective upon which we may look at the trajectory of life. In case you might be thinking such a statement is obvious – that old age is indeed the last lap of life – let me suggest to you that society very often takes another view to path of life – namely the parabolic.

Imagine an upside-down parabola which climbs to a peak then descends. My suggestion is that society often has a view that life plays out this way for each of us ... we will reach a peak in life and then go into decline. Have you ever heard such phrases as: 'the twilight years', or 'the declining years' or their euphemistic variants, 'the golden years' or 'the vintage years', the latter with more emphasis on a Model T than a Grange Hermitage.

Such phrases speak clearly of life reaching its apogee well before death; in doing so, it implicitly defines 'life' as being measured by its perceived success or relevance at any point in time to others. Once that success or relevance passes, life then is seen as going into decline.

But, think for a moment, do we consider other aspects of life in such ways? Take for example our working lives, do we say 'my career will reach a peak and then go into decline before I retire' – no, we see our careers as continuing to grow right up to the point of retirement. Take another example, our relationships. Have you ever heard anyone say that they intend their marriages or relationships to peak and then go into decline? Of course, relationships often do go into terminal decline, but that is surely never intended at the "til death do us part" moment of vow-taking. No, in matters such as career and relationships, we wish for a long and continuous upward trajectory, not a journey to climax followed by anti-climax. So why do we choose to view the trajectory of life that way?

The truth, however it may look to others, is that our mortal lives are a trajectory from birth to death. For as long as the breath of God remains within us, we journey on; we pass through stages of ease and disease, dependence, independence and perhaps dependence again. The peaks and troughs may differ at various points in our lives, but they are always there, even if their character changes through the stages of our lives.

We journey on in a marathon of mortal life that ends with the last lap. I am not a marathon runner, but I have seen enough televised Olympic marathons to know that they are gruelling and that the end is often particularly harsh. In the 1992 Barcelona Olympics the marathon runners ran on the flat for the first two thirds of the race before they hit the steep ascent of Montjuic Hill before entering the Olympic Stadium. To the crowds massed to see such competitions they witness a variety of perceived successes and failures on the part of the runners. But the perspective for each of the runners is the same – to finish their own race, to complete the journey they individually embarked

upon. Completing that journey will mean something much more for each of them than what it simplistically means to their observers who are only ever interested in gold, silver and bronze.

Marian van Eyck McCain, psychotherapist, health educator and author of such works as *Elderwoman*, has written:

Until we die, we are all growing, learning, individuating, becoming all that we can be. Not in the striving, goal-oriented way of youth, but in the same slow, natural way that a flower unfolds to its fullest extent and, as the petals fall, the fruit quietly swells and ripens. Even in its last day on the tree, the fruit is still absorbing sunshine. Not reinventing itself, just continuing to deepen its flavour.

To the casual outside observer, the last lap of someone else's marathon of life may not seem to be any of these beautiful thoughts. Rather they may impose their own interpretations and, in consequence, their own presumptions as to the life marathon runner's hopes and needs.

The last lap of a marathon tests every element of the runner's endurance; every sinew and fibre of their being is pushed beyond the normal expectations of ordinary everyday life. So too it is with aging. It has been said that it takes courage to be old. How we walk that journey with them, how we respect or disrespect that marathon will be a gift or a burden that we may give or put upon them.

How then should we respond to this courageous last lap of mortal life, this running of the race as the apostle Paul puts it? This brings me to my second point – the perception or 'lens' through which we see these marathon runners of life.

As Mark has mentioned, I had the privilege of working with Anglicare SA for nearly five years as its CEO. It is a wonderful organisation involved in many spheres of community, including a significant and impressive engagement working with older people. When I first took up the position, I had for the first time in my working life, an opportunity for a closer look at what we refer to as the Aged Care sector. The work I saw was generally admirable and the compassion obvious; but quite early on two things troubled me as being possible real limiters to a deep engagement with older people. They both had to do with words – 'care' and 'beds'.

First, the sector was called the 'Aged Care' sector – my concern here was that it could be taken to imply that the last and only task for engagement with older people was simply to care for them. Yet surely care should only be a part of process of engagement with people as they age. Then the word 'beds' – when I asked colleagues in the sector about the size of their engagement with the Aged, the answer often involved the word 'beds' – 'we have x nursing beds' for example. In other words, the people with whom they were engaged were no longer defined as people but as the beds in which they would spend various portions of their lives. Even hotels refer to the number of rooms they have, and real estate developers the number of homes they have in an estate. But the aged have too often been reduced to the beds in which they may sometimes lie.

To summarise, I am warning against the dangers of reducing people on their last lap of life's marathon to just being needers of care and beds and little else. Now the care must be good and the beds must be comfortable, but where is the enabling of older people to complete their lives and transition to their dying with a dignity inherent to their precious identity? I say precious identity as opposed to a dependent identity – the latter places the value of an individual upon their worth to others, the former acknowledges the sacredness of each individual life regardless of their worth to anyone else.

When I worked in Anglicare SA, I was privileged to be invited by the Aged Cares Standards and Accreditation Agency to MC a series of conferences on the theme of Better Practice which they hosted in state capitals around Australia. I enjoyed MC-ing these events but even more enjoyed meeting a number of wonderful people from around the world who spoke on important themes related to Better Practice with older people. One of these people was Rev Professor Dr John Swinton, a minister of the Church of Scotland, a theologian, a professor of nursing and an acknowledged international expert in the field of dementia. I have since read with much interest things that he has said and written. Pertinent to tonight's address, John Swinton has said this about 'personhood' or identity:¹

... at heart, philosophical models of personhood tend to be used as ethical devices designed to enable the separation of one group of human beings from the rest of humanity ... in working how best to resolve dilemmas (the method used is often based on) what they are capable of doing, or what they don't or can't do. If someone fails to meet the criteria, their full personhood is questioned.

Returning to your mission statement, namely 'all South Australians facing death and bereavement are supported to live, die and grieve well' (my underlining), I believe those who crafted it intended a full understanding of personhood, one that is not dependent upon perceptions of 'what they are capable of doing, or what they don't or can't do'; for by definition, at the point of dying, each of us is focussed on that one act and not able to do much more. And we are so focussed no matter what our perceived condition at that point of departure.

In preparing for tonight and considering your Mission statement, I have reflected upon your organisational values which are stated as:

- Acceptance of death as a natural part of life;
- Courage to discuss death, dying and bereavement in our community;
- Respect – offer and encourage understanding and respect for the diversity of beliefs and practices of those who are facing death and bereavement;
- Equity – enhancing the equal distribution of services to those greatest in need; and
- Inclusion – engagement with diverse organisations and communities to achieve our vision and mission.

Your statement about the 'acceptance of death as a natural part of life' is foundational but also inspirational and counter-intuitive to much modern thinking. By making this statement that death is a natural part of life, you are contesting the views of people such as Yuval Noah Harari who, in *Homo Deus*, contends that death is a crime against humanity. He writes:²

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights ... categorically states that 'the right to life' is humanity's most fundamental value. Since death clearly violates this right, death is a crime against humanity and we ought to wage total war against it.

Grandiloquently, he goes on to say:

¹ Cited in [Palliative care, personhood, the Image of God - Ethos](#)

² Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus*, Harvill Secker, London, 2015, p21.

... for modern people death is a technical problem that we can and should solve ... nothing metaphysical about it. It is all technical problems.³

I don't suppose 'palliative care' comes into his thinking. But the truth is that nor does it for much of modern society either. Contemporary thinking may not be as technologically optimistic as Harari, but it does find death uncomfortable to consider. In fact, if I may play on words, much modern thinking about death 'palliates' it in the old Latin sense of the word – 'to cloak', to mask it behind euphemism or simple silence. So, your second Value is of equal importance to the first, namely, to have the 'courage to discuss death, dying and bereavement in our community'.

This then opens up the topic about not only living well but also dying 'well'. The act of dying is both intensely personal, that moment when an individual has run life's race and is about to enter eternity, a moment which is metaphysically private. But it is also relational, an existential moment when a loved one departs the room of this time and space leaving behind those who have loved them. Both of these are sacramental moments and the way in which they are engaged by those carers in attendance is of the utmost importance.

Your other values outline the importance of respect for diversity, traditions, inclusion and equity. All of these are vital and my encouragement to you all is that you continuously examine all of these values through the lens of how palliative care may help inevitable dying and inevitable grieving be encountered as a precious and transcendent moment for both the person dying and those left behind. Additionally, that you continue to so advocate to the wider community.

In her poem *Because I could not stop for Death*, Emily Dickinson wrote:

Because I could not stop for Death-
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

Death doesn't always kindly stop for us, but we can kindly be there when the moment has come. God bless you for being there for so many when it has.

³ Op.cit., pp22-3