

Inevitability of death travels through our lives

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From the moment of birth, we begin to age. And with ageing comes an inevitable progression towards death. For those who think about it, although many don't, awareness of death becomes a part of our lives. The reality of death reminds us of the limits of our activities, our hopes and dreams. Death circumscribes our lives, and thoughtful people include the reality of death in their outlook on life.

There are many ways of dealing with death. When we are young, death seems so distant that we don't give it much thought. For most young people, death seems so far into the future it is difficult to contemplate, even if one tries to do so. Unless a classmate or a friend dies, death doesn't touch our lives very much. For children, the death of a grandparent or a favourite relative may force them into an abrupt encounter with death. They might wonder, how could it be that their loved one, who was so very much alive yesterday, is no longer with them today. Thus a limited number of young people are forced into recognizing the death of others. However, even this recognition falls short of thinking about one's own death. If I am a teenager and my friend is killed in a traffic accident, I could be shocked and saddened, but I am still unlikely to think much about my own death. I will leave that thought for the future.

When we are middle-aged we will have had more time to encounter the deaths of friends, colleagues, parents or relatives. These experiences may have given us reason to think about the finality of death. But we are likely to be busy in the ongoing matters of developing careers, paying house mortgages, raising children, establishing good family relationships and other daily demands on our lives. If we are adherents of a traditional religion, we may be comforted by the hopes and promises of an eternal afterlife. These religious promises can help alert us to the inevitability of death, but everyday demands on time and energy might convince us that thinking about death is something we choose to defer until later.

For seniors, the matter of one's death emerges more eminently. By this time, more friends, relatives, former colleagues and acquaintances will have died. Physical and health problems will be more prominent. We will take longer to

think through fairly simple problems as clearly as we once did. Our energy levels will decrease, and installing a new digital video disc player, or a new computer program may turn a half hour job into a half day project. If retired, we will have more time to contemplate our achievements and our disappointments.

As seniors, many will have a traditional religious faith. But once again, we may not be comforted by the thoughts and promises of an afterlife, especially if these hopes are balanced against the possibility of eternal damnation. Increasing age could cause us to have more hope that such religious promises are well founded. Yet the urgency of questions about death might demand more certainty than our reasoned scepticism will permit. It is possible that, even after adhering to such traditional religious answers for many years, we can not bring ourselves to hope and believe in such ethereal promises. If we are questioning people, we will find too many mental gymnastics are required to convince us of an eternal afterlife. Our tradition of using reasoning will not permit us to be comforted by religious faith that promises so much on so little concrete evidence.

So what can we do, or more importantly, what can we think that will help fit the reality of death into our individual lives? Given that everyone will die, what will provide our lives with fullness and meaning? What will permit us to say, "I know I am getting older, and I know that I and everyone else I know, and don't know, will die, but that's okay."

These are hard questions to answer, but in my next column I will try to do so.