

COMMENTARY

Spence: Contemplating death puts life in perspective

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Thoughts of death and dying have never been far away for me. When I was a kid, I'd stretch out in bed and practice dying. I'd get really still and imagine my heart and pulse slowing way down . . . and then stopping. After waiting a few minutes to see if death had come, I'd whoop and holler with joy when I found out it hadn't. Even though I don't practice dying any more, thoughts of death are readily available.

When I walked around Town Lake on Sunday, I saw only one person I knew. This made me wonder if hoards of people had died, and I didn't know about it. I'm sure I thought of this because I had accidentally watched "Meet Joe Black" the night before. Since I missed the first part, I'm not sure I got the movie. I know for certain that Anthony Hopkins (Bill Parrish) and Brad Pitt (Joe Black AKA DEATH) walked over a hill together and Brad Pitt was the only one who came back.

After my walk, I drank coffee and read the American-Statesman at Swedish Hill Bakery, and when I turned to the obituary page, well my mind started pondering death and dying again.

This is what I have figured out: Dying is sometimes a philosophical issue; at times, it's a political issue; and it's always a health and a quality of life issue. We're all going to die. I only wish it could be simple and painless for everyone. (I also wish our government wasn't helping this process along for thousands of Americans and Middle Easterners. Whoa — that's another commentary altogether.)

I recently took a class on obituary writing at Seton Cove. Ginny Agnew, an obituary connoisseur and smart woman, led the class. It wasn't morbid at all — we laughed and cried as we read obituaries, and then wrote one for ourselves. This class reminded me of unanswered questions about death, life and obituaries.

- Why do more people die in time for the Sunday obituaries than other days of the week? Sunday's Statesman obituaries ran almost three pages. (Compare that with the previous Tuesday when the obits filled less than one page.) Is it better to die when you'll get written about on a weekday or on a Sunday?

- Who decides which ads will run in the obituary section? Most of Sunday's ads were self-explanatory — a florist, a cremation garden and a mortuary service; and I can even see why the ad for weight loss was on the obit page. I'm most confused, however, by the ad titled "memory loss," and the one for granite counters and a locksmith. Could the locksmith provide keys to unlocking the secrets of the universe; will the granite counters ad prompt us to think about granite headstones?

- Why are people hell-bent on telling their loved ones to "let go," or "go ahead and die" when they think they're near death? I'm serving notice right now that I do not want my family whispering those words in my ear. I knew some people who seemed just a little too eager for their stepfather to die. His "loving family" started telling him to "go ahead and die" months and months before his death. He wasn't able to talk back, but if he could have, I bet he would have told them to

hush and get off his back about dying.

- Why are people surprised or shocked when 90-year-olds die? Recently I read, "We don't know why you had to leave us," in an obituary for a very old woman that was filled with references to her death being a tragedy. From my point of view, she was one lucky woman to have lived a good life for so long.

- Why do we use battlefield terms to talk about the end of life? "He fought the brave fight" or "she was valiant in her battle until the end." It seems like dying might be one of the easier things to do. I want somebody to describe my life as valiant in referring to learning to program my VCR or teaching my kids to drive.

Last week, I woke up to flashes of white light and some trash in my right eye. I immediately saw a retina specialist who said my eye issue was caused by birthdays, and that the same thing could happen to my other eye because it is the same age. I contradicted him and explained that my right eye is my old-soul eye, and my left one is a young pup. That's when I remembered that I had not only practiced dying, but I had also practiced being blind. So, I came home and kept my eyes closed for a long time — just in case my eyes don't hold out as long as the rest of me does.

What does all this mean? Maybe that the most important thing is how we live and not how we die. I think it means, too, that we should observe the Scout motto, "Be prepared." So, after you've walked around with your eyes shut, then go lie down and get very, very still.

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