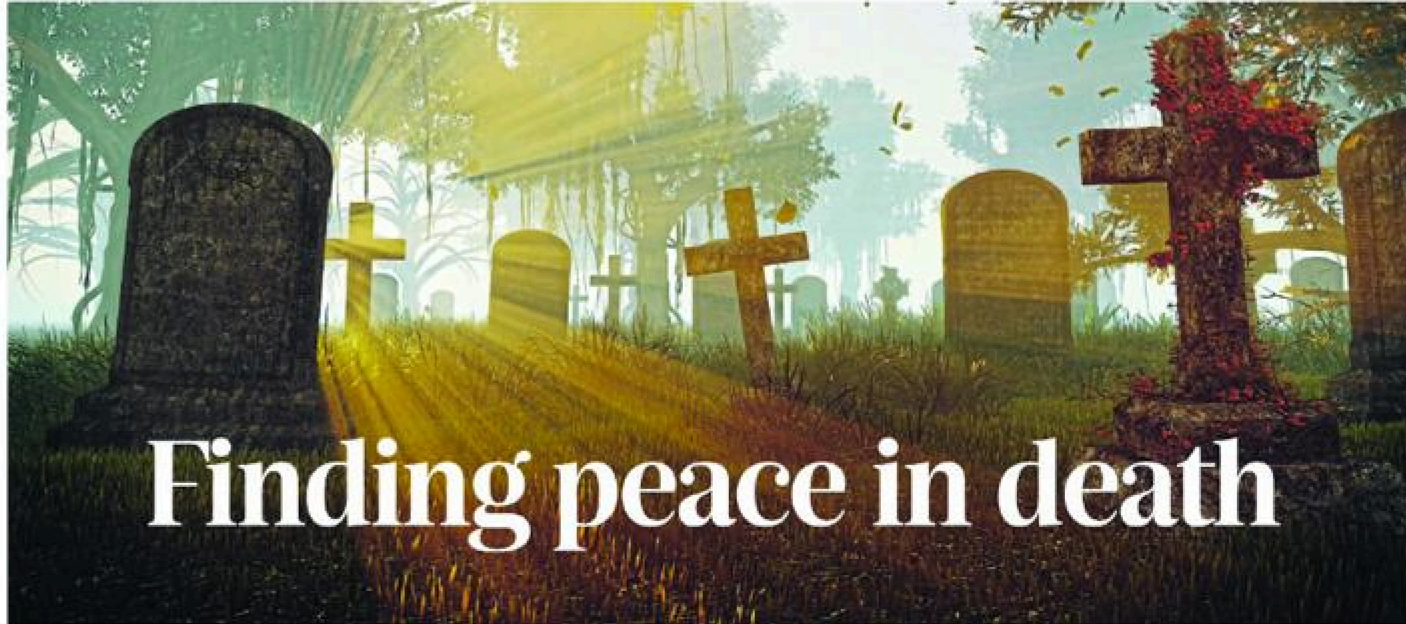
Finding peace in death

We're all going to die. Yes, you too — and this very moment is not too soon to start accepting it, writes **Sean O'Connor**



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For the past few years, I've had the privilege of helping people face their last days and moments here in this earthly realm. It's not an occupation. Not many people can make a living off the dying, and it's usually someone in the family who attends to these essential needs.

But not always. Perhaps the medicalisation of death over the past few generations has robbed us of the value of death, and many have not practised these intuitive skills. Not long ago most people my age would have encountered several dead bodies. Now, not so much.

This isn't something that I chose. A priest I met asked if I might visit the dying people he couldn't attend to. I told him I was flattered but didn't have the skills. You'll be fine, he said. And so, a few weeks later, I found myself driving up the west coast to meet Kathryn, 86. She had late-stage cancer. Visiting Kathryn over the next couple of months, I learnt to show up, and shut up. We had plenty in common, enough to laugh about. But she had been anxious and afraid. That changed. When she died, the family were so grateful to see their mom go out well. It helped them in their grief. And knowing they would be OK helped Kathryn too. The last time I saw her, she said: "Sean, if you hadn't made such a f***ing mess of your life you would have been no use to me whatsoever." It's true. Our dark past is our great treasure.

Since then, I've been helicoptered into many families before someone dies or just after. Sometimes groups of siblings, vying to determine a dying parent's legacy, with different agendas, like a daughter hell-bent on their parent accepting Christ before they die. Whose death is it, anyway? Another sibling is more concerned with death's practicalities over the next few days. I've sat on the beds of people with life-limiting illness, with sons and daughters, all in smiling tears, and helped conversations happen. It has been a blessing to me. I can sit in silence, holding a hand and enjoy having permission, even a responsibility, to ask the kinds of questions that might be useful. Do you think your children will be OK without you? After all, look at them — you've done such a wonderful job. Perhaps your work here is nearly over. What still needs to be done?

Many don't give themselves permission to die. Even if earlier in life they may have asked you to push them off a cliff if they ever lost their faculties. I suspect that for these people there is unfinished business. For some, a resentment seems to block them. Some guilt, perhaps, or something unresolved. I see it as my duty to gently approach that splinter in the soul and help remove it. Sometimes. Some people do not want to go there, clammed as tight as oysters, especially menfolk. Why would they suddenly open up now? Perhaps because I am a new face, without any vested family interests, people tell me things they don't tell their families. They snap shut when family members re-enter the room, and pipe up again after they've gone.

I am part of a group of women (the only man, bizarrely) who call ourselves soul-carers. We work in hospices, in homes, in retirement villages, in hospitals. Several of my colleagues are saints. I am still a novice. Personally, I prefer the term end-of-life carer, even if it's often the living, those who remain, that I end up spending most time with. But yes, I do believe we all have a soul, an essential spiritual-expressive and creative self, that does need caring for.

Often it is obscured by material things. Often it is submerged under a mortal weight. Sometimes that dear soul has been hidden from its owner for so long that they do not know who they really are. Perhaps this alienation from their inner essence is an obstacle that prevents passage into death. People hold on to life not only because it's precious, but because death means an end of opportunity. No more chances to fix things, including ourselves. They hold on to life because they've been taught to survive, to hold out, no matter what. We have not been taught how to die. Which is strange, because we all have to do it. And we imagine that we might do it well, without much evidence. But it's important to think about these things, not just for us, but for the people who love us.

How would you like to go, and how do you imagine going? In this country, unfortunately, many of us don't die well at all. Perhaps the idea of a good death is fallacious, creating yet more pressure to do things right in this performance-orientated life. What? Now I have to die well too? It is a truism that living well tends to mean dying well. How we live is how we die.

A friend's mother died when all her work was done. She'd tidied the house, ordered the documents, got rid of unwanted things. Before her last breath, she tapped her chest twice. I'm gone, she said, and went. Others have died in their sleep. Well, at least that's what we think. Most people who die in their sleep experience sudden cardiac arrest or a stroke. I think what appeals is the idea that it's painless.

So can you plan your death? Well, certainly, you can plan for it. I was contacted by someone without any family. We communicated and met. After she dies, I will reverently take her ashes and place them in the ocean, at a certain spot, marked on a map, and play some music, something specific, and say what she wants me to say. Just me, no-one else, as she wishes. If I happen to perish before her, I have deputised a trusted friend to do this. Earlier this week I picked up a funerary urn from Postnet, and a memorial shroud. I know this person feels good about knowing where she's going, knowing her final resting place.

And this is the major reason people experience existential dread, I think, this lack of knowing where they might find themselves after they go. I have been stared at by terrified souls, inching or roaring down the home straight and heading for eternity, afraid to close their eyes and rest in case they never wake up again. Where will I go, is the aching refrain. What will happen to me?

I don't have the answer. All I and my colleagues can offer is a gentle soulful presence and a gratitude for the time we share. Would a "comforting delusion" help matters? As in, don't worry, you'll be passing through an astral plane for a while, then you'll see some big gates, they have a purple neon banner on the top. Can't miss 'em! And you'll get a password for the cosmic Wi-Fi. People with religious conviction are adamant, and reassured, about their next destination.

Yet no-one has come back to tell us. It's a mystery, one of the few we have left. One person I visit regularly asked if she would be able to communicate with her children after she goes. Well sure. Are they gifted communicators, I want to ask?

My neighbours have just returned from the Isle of Mull, off Scotland. It's where dad wanted his ashes scattered, says my neighbour. His favourite place. He'd left them some money to get there in his will. He clearly knew where he was headed. For the rest of us, we might do well to think where we'd like to be. Even if it's just for the people you love. Personally, I hope to go via the University of Cape Town medical school, decorated with a few obscene tattoos (still in development) for the students who learn about life from my empty shell, before cremation and eventual deposit high on Table Mountain. There's a spot near the stream where the water cascades over a rock worn smooth by time. It suddenly brings a tear to my eye, knowing I must leave one day. But death is in our design. Birds and dragonflies and geckos will play nearby, with the sound of the river and the wind in the trees. I'll be gone, but you might find me there.

* O'Connor produces the 'How To Die' podcast, supported by AVBOB. Season 4, episode 1 — 'The Dementia Carer' — has just been released. Visit howtodie.co.za