

Celebrating life:

Preparing for our final journey



Celebrate life



L'ARCHE
Calgary

With thanks to L'Arche Ottawa

WRITER AND MEMBER OF L'ARCHE, HENRI NOUWEN is quoted throughout this booklet. Before his death in 1996, Henri, a priest and scholar, wrote many books on spirituality. He provides the context for this booklet:

"Is death such an undesirable part of our existence that we are better off acting as if it were not real? Is death such an absolute end of all our thoughts and actions that we simply cannot face it? Or is it possible to befriend our dying gradually and live open to it, trusting that we have nothing to fear? Is it possible to prepare for our death with the same attentiveness that our parents had in preparing for our birth? Can we wait for our death as a friend who wants to welcome us home?"

This booklet may be your opening to preparing for this event each of us will face.



Being Beloved

Thank you to...

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The persons within L'Arche and the friends of L'Arche who have given us all so much in their living and their dying.

The Purpose of this Booklet

WE DO NOT SPEAK OF DEATH OPENLY, YET EACH OF US WILL DIE. We at L'Arche believe that preparing well for your death is an act of love. Good preparation can also help those you leave behind to focus on celebrating your life. L'Arche, as a community inspired by its founder Jean Vanier and members like Henri Nouwen, understands the human experience of dying. In this booklet we share the themes important to us all in the last part of our journey: forgiveness, presence and mutuality, and being together.

The first section of this booklet is designed to assist you in reflecting about this upcoming event. You may want to sit with someone to go through it with you.

The second section has space for information that can help those who gather after your death to prepare for the funeral, liturgy and burial ceremony. Once you have filled it out, please keep this booklet with your other important papers.

In Alberta, there are many resources that contain excellent information on legal and administrative matters concerning death; these are listed on page 12.

*"Do not be afraid,
I will save you.
I have called you
by name – you
are mine."*

ISAIAH 43

SECTION 1: Henri Nouwen

A few years before his death, Henri had an accident early one morning as he tried to make his way over to a L'Arche home. Henri was taken to a hospital nearby for what at first appeared to be a minor matter. He realized as he lay injured in the hospital that the matter was much more serious and that his ruptured and bleeding

spleen required critical surgery. This brush with death inspired Henri to write *Beyond the Mirror* in which he states:

"IN THE FACE OF DEATH, I realized that it was not love that kept me clinging to life but unresolved anger. Love, real love flowing from me or toward me, sets me free to die...

No, the real struggle was not a matter of leaving loved ones. The real struggle had to do with leaving behind me, people whom I had not forgiven or who had not forgiven me.

As I thought of them, I realized that they represented a host of opinions, judgements, and even condemnations that had enslaved me to this world.

As I felt the life weakening in me, I felt a deep desire to forgive and to be forgiven, to let go of all evaluations and opinions, and to be set free from the burden of judgements.

What worried me most during these hours was that my death might make someone feel guilty, ashamed, or left hanging spiritually in mid-air.... I knew my dying could be good or bad for others, depending on the choices I made in the face of it."

Henri envisioned all the persons he needed to forgive along with all of those he wanted to ask for forgiveness. Where can we learn about forgiveness? In *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri reflects on God's forgiveness, freely given without condition. *"It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged, and that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one whom I am asked to forgive."*



Henry Nouwen

Forgiveness: My Personal Plan

What can help me on my journey to forgive? Who do I need to forgive? What do I intend to do?

What can help me on my journey to ask for forgiveness? From whom do I need to ask for forgiveness? What do I intend to do?

What are some of my past experiences with asking for forgiveness? What have I learned from these experiences? What would I have wished for?

What are some of my past experiences with forgiving someone? What have I learned from these experiences? What would I have wished for?

Who can I ask for support on this journey of forgiveness?

"It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb; for all these mysteries I thank you, for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works." PSALM 139

Presence and Mutuality

"REAL PRESENCE IS MORE THAN THE ATTENTION OF A SPECTATOR. It is giving oneself as participant in a relationship. It is presence born out of availability and a spirit of quietness. It requires receiving a presence as well as giving one's own." Marsden, 1990.



"When I reflect on my own life, I realize that the moments of greatest comfort and consolation were moments when someone said: 'I cannot take your pain away. I cannot offer you a solution for your problem, but I can promise you that I won't leave you alone...'"

What are some of my experiences where I have felt truly present to another?

Think about a time when someone has been truly present to you... How did I know that the other person was present to me? How would I describe the experience?

What helps me and allows me to move to being present with another?

What type of reassurance would I want when I am dying? What type of reassurance could I give to someone who is dying?

Being Together

In his book *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* Henri tells the story of Connie Ellis, the woman who worked as his secretary for six years. He became good friends with Connie and her family. Her life as an active person ended abruptly when she suffered a stroke caused by a brain tumour.

Henri explains: "To help each other die well is to help each other claim the fruitfulness in our weakness."

To illustrate this, Henri goes on to share Connie's conversation with him:

" 'I AM NOT AFRAID TO DIE. I feel safe in God's love...But I worry about the kids.' As she said this, she began to cry...

I asked her, 'What are you thinking?'

She said, 'I don't want the kids to suffer because of me. I don't want them to become sad and sorrowful as they see me dying. They always knew me as the strong grandmother they could count on. They don't know me as a paralysed woman whose hair is falling out because of radiation therapy. I worry when I look into their faces and see them so anxious and sad. I want them to be happy children now and after I am gone.'

I wanted Connie to move beyond her worries and to trust that her love for her family and friends would be fruitful. I wanted her to believe that what was important was not only what she did or still could do for others, but also – and ever-more-so – what she lives in her illness and how she lives it. I wanted her to come to see that, in her growing dependence, she is giving more to her grandchildren than during the times when she could bring them in her car to school, to shops and to sports fields. I wanted her to discover that the times when she needs them are as important as the times when they need her.

In fact, in her illness, she has become their real teacher. She speaks to them about her gratitude for life, her trust in God, and her hope for a life beyond death. She shows them real thankfulness for the little things they do for her. She doesn't keep her tears or fears hidden when they suddenly well up, but she always returns to a smile ...

Now, in her growing weakness, she who lived such a long and productive life gives what she couldn't give in her strength: a glimpse of the truth that love is stronger than death. Her grandchildren will reap the full fruits of that truth."

Thinking of Connie's story, take a few moments to write down some of your personal experiences of accompanying a person who was dying.

What have I learned from these experiences?

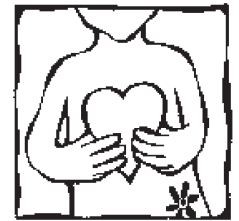
Based on my experiences and thinking about my own death, what are some wishes/hopes/desires that I have? Who would I want to be with me?

SECTION 2: Things I Like

In this section of Celebrating Life is a list of personal reflections and questions that you can fill out. It is meant as a record for you to keep (please let others know that it exists).

This personal information will hopefully serve as a guide to help make key decisions in regards to the ritual of your death, funeral and remembrance ceremony. It will help those you are leaving to 'Celebrate your Life'.

If my life were:



If my life were a song, it would be:

A list of my favourite songs:

My favourite songs or hymns that I would like played at the funeral:

If my life were a scripture passage, it would be:

Celebrating life:

My favourite scripture passages are:



Some scripture passages that I would like read at the funeral are:

Other readings I would like to include:

When I think about my life, what image comes to mind?

Personal Instructions

Are there any instructions or reflections you would like to record for your family members when they gather after your death?

What personal mementos, pictures, would you like to see included at the funeral?

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Are there any other instructions for others that you would like to record for the funeral?

Special funeral arrangements:

I would prefer:

- A funeral service followed by burial
Type of service (Mass, church service, non-religious) _____
- A funeral service followed by cremation
- Burial followed by a memorial service
- Cremation followed by a memorial service
- Other option _____

Service to be led by: _____

Pallbearers: _____

Readers: _____

In lieu of flowers, donations may be given to: _____

Important Resources for Albertans

In closing, here are some websites and resources that could help you to prepare and to record your personal wishes.

Saying Farewell: This 36-page booklet published by the Government of Alberta, Alberta Seniors and Community Supports deals with the practical and legal aspects of dying and provides helpful information plus references and checklists. It is an important resource, because the laws covering wills, estates and other issues like personal directives are specific to each province. The booklet is available by calling toll-free 1-800-642-3853 or Edmonton area 780-427-7876.

It can also be downloaded from the Alberta Seniors website
www.seniors.gov.ab.ca

http://www.seniors.gov.ab.ca/services_resources/saying_farewell/sayingfarewell.pdf

Understanding Personal Directives: A comprehensive guide for legally deciding who is going to take care of you and make decisions if you can't do this for yourself. It uses an easy to follow, question and answer format. This booklet on personal directives in Alberta is available from the Office of the Public Guardian and on the Government of Alberta, Alberta Seniors website.

http://www.seniors.gov.ab.ca/services_resources/opg/persdir/

Leave a Legacy website: This organization deals with planned giving and holds seminars on a regular basis on 'Wills and Estates', 'Personal Directives' and other related topics. Information supplied by Leave A Legacy reflects the current legislation in Alberta and from the federal government. The Calgary Foundation is the founding sponsor of the organization.

www.leavealegacycalgary.com

Palliative Care: There are a number of links that share information on privately and publicly funded hospices in Alberta.

<http://www.hospicecalgary.com>

<http://www.palliative.org>

L'Arche Calgary Website: The website has resources dealing with aging and dying issues faced by persons with developmental disabilities.

<http://www.larchecalgary.org>

Henri Nouwen Website: <http://www.henrinouwen.org/>

In Gratitude... to these members of L'Arche who in their dying gave so much and whose lives continue to bear fruit.

Cecile...A woman who embodied **faith** and **forgiveness**. She was able to express her feelings clearly and directly. She maintained contact with friends and prayed for them constantly. She spoke directly to God in her prayers. Her deepest desire was to see Jesus, a desire that nourished her as she journeyed in her final days.



Cecile left her family as a young girl to live in an institution most of her life, yet she fostered love and asked to be buried with her parents at the end of her journey.

Mike...a man of **gentleness, laughter and friendship**. He liked listening to music, bowling with his friends, and of course, flirting with beautiful women. Mike loved to watch wrestling



and would gladly share this joy with anyone willing to sit with him. His unique way of looking at you when he held your hand captured the attention of everyone.

Mike wanted to choose to die at home. There is always discussion about where you will receive the best care, especially when you have a disability.

Monique...a woman **full of life, humour, determination and friendship**. She valued her independence but she was grateful for the help she received. She was a woman of great dignity. She loved being in community; it was home for her. She was always in a good mood to welcome visitors and friends.

Monique's family gathered in her final days and everyone wanted to be heard and have input. Planning with family and with close friends can be a divisive or a healing moment.

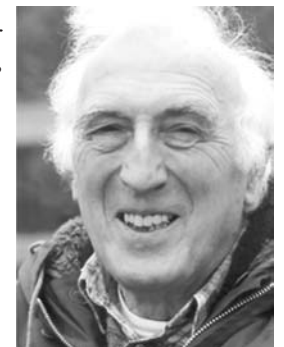


Love is Stronger than Death

"The real question before our death, then, is not, 'How much can I still accomplish?' or 'How much influence can I still exert?' but, 'How can I live so that I can continue to be fruitful when I am no longer here among my family and friends?' That question shifts our attention from doing to being. Our doing brings success, but our being bears fruit. The great paradox of our lives is that we are often concerned about what we do or still can do, but we are most likely to be remembered for who we are."

p.42, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring*

*Jean Vanier
Founder of L'Arche*



There are three L'Arche communities in Alberta: L'Arche Edmonton, L'Arche Lethbridge and L'Arche Calgary. There are twenty-nine communities across Canada. Visit www.larchecananda.org to learn more.

SOURCES:

Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring
by Henri J.M. Nouwen, 1994

The Return of The Prodigal Son by Henri J.M. Nouwen, 1992

In Memoriam by Henri J. M. Nouwen, 1980

"It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb; for all these mysteries I thank you, for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works." PSALM 139 15

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Dying is the most general human event, something we all have to do.

But do we do it well?

Can it somehow become an act of fulfillment, perhaps more human than any other human act?



“Are we preparing for our death, or are we ignoring death by keeping busy? Are we helping each other to die, or do we simply assume we are going to always be here for each other? Will our death give new life, new hope, and new faith to our friends, or will it be no more than another cause for sadness? The main question is not, ‘How much will we still be able to do during the few years we have left to live?’ but rather, ‘How can we prepare ourselves for our death in such a way that our dying will be a new way for us to send our spirit and God’s spirit to those whom we loved and who have loved us?’ ”

HENRI NOUWEN

Our Greatest Gift:

A Meditation on Dying and Caring

We gratefully acknowledge the donation for this booklet received from



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