

THE FRIENDSHIP OF CHRIST

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This is a talk written for the Theological Faculty of Emilia Romagna and Bologna Libraries Festival. Jenny Sinclair was asked to speak about her mother Grace Sheppard's book, "Living with Dying". The book was selected as a focus for book clubs under the title of "The Border" (the border between life and death). The book gives a glimpse of a possibility of a life of fullness. Grace recounts her experience of living alongside her dying husband David, an Anglican bishop of Liverpool and a leading figure in the Church of England. Jenny here introduces the book and gives a flavour of her parents' story, along with her own perspective and the story of her own vocation.

Thank you very much for asking me to do this. In this article, I will explore some of the themes in my mother's book, *Living With Dying*, and share with you a little of my own observation of her life. I understand that some of you have read the book, but many of you haven't yet, so I hope to be able to convey the spirit of the book to you. I will end by sharing with you a brief summary of my own journey and my work which has some similar themes.

On the surface this is a book about the relationship between my mother Grace and father David during the last period of David's life which included a diagnosis of cancer, his illness and death. For my mother this was not only a story of the loss of her great love, but it also became a journey of discovery about the meaning of life. She discovers the significance of relationship: relationship with God and with each other. She sees relationship with God as a calling into relationship, and sees relationship as the human being's natural state.

She navigates tragedy, distress and loss by discerning and developing a set of practices. These practices emerge through hard experiences, which she shares in candid and grounded terms. Key to this was the practice of gratitude, which releases her from self-pity and opens up endless possibilities of joy in the darkest times. Another is her practices of care: care for David, for herself, for the life in her garden, for family and neighbours, for mind, body and spirit - essentially a story of good stewardship of the gifts she had been given.

She deals head-on with the taboos around death, demystifying it and exploring it as a natural part of life. Recognising the human instinct to 'cling on', she learns that loss is easier to bear not by avoiding the difficult questions but by acknowledging the many 'mini bereavements' that characterise dying.

She learns that 'letting go' and opening up to what she regards as our natural relationship with God, our home, can be a way of living with dying that is truly life-giving for all involved.

The book is a powerful testimony of what we Christians refer to as our 'calling', or which might otherwise be understood as a sense of vocation. She was conscious of this all her life. Her trust in the mystery of our relationship with God is evident throughout the book. Within this frame, she explores who God is - for her, not a distant, abstract concept, but the embodied Christ, a friend. In fact, the working title for this book was originally *The Friendship of Christ*.

So the story starts with trauma.

Immediately after their marriage, their honeymoon was traumatic. She has a nervous breakdown on the London underground and is hospitalised, medicated and diagnosed with agoraphobia from which she suffers for almost the next thirty years. Marrying my father was not straightforward. He was a clergyman in the Church of England but uniquely had previously been a sports star, an England cricket captain. He was very prominent in the public eye and her marriage to him led to an immediate loss of privacy and loss of control. This is the first bereavement, the first 'letting go'.

In fact this innocent young woman, so deeply in love, had been conditioned by a particular strand of Christian culture to believe that the role of women in the church was to serve the man's mission. This is what her mother had done before her. She says, "**I was called to be with him**". But her collapse means for her that she becomes "**a walking disappointment**" and this generates a great fear of abandonment. This fear dogged her life for decades.

But, in the midst of crisis, she learns that angels turn up. She learns the importance of human connection. She says, "**we will meet God face to face in the encounter.**"

Life with David leads them to the East End of London. His ministry is as a local leader in a working class area and this is where I was born. Within the context of the community centre where we lived, still struggling with agoraphobia and unable to go out, she gains a class awareness and values the intimacy that comes in working class communities. Arriving as middle class do-gooders, they had some edges knocked off before realising that they were actually called to this place to find friends. There is a great lesson in humility. As an evangelical, she learns that friendship is more important than proselytising. She finds the down to earth friendship life giving.

She does not mention it in this particular book, but during this time in the East End, she has ovarian cancer and nearly dies. She has all her reproductive organs removed which is why I am an only child. This loss is her second great bereavement and only adds to her sense of monumental disappointment and failure.

Then the story turns, as we move to South London and David becomes a bishop. Here he becomes even more prominent engaged politically in the anti-apartheid movement, unemployment and other social issues in London. But Grace is still suffering severe agoraphobia and is terribly isolated. No longer living in community, we live in an isolated house. David is out all day, I am at school. She cannot even walk to the shops. She struggles to meet the demands expected of a bishop's wife.

However she reaches out for human connection as best she can. She says, **"friends became my lifeline when I was very lonely and too proud to admit it."**

This level of struggle continued when we moved to Liverpool in 1975. David's pace of work increased dramatically and was unrelenting for the 22 years in his role as Bishop of Liverpool as he grew in stature in the church and in national politics. In the early years her loneliness was intense. But she set her mind to live up to the expectations of a bishop's wife as well as to make a home for us in what was functionally a public building. She was still getting panic attacks and had a range of strategies to handle the fear she experienced in public events.

Early on, Grace agreed to disclose her vulnerability in a documentary. She was persuaded that **"it would help viewers if I was willing to share my vulnerability. ... We had over a thousand letters from viewers expressing relief and gratitude saying they did not feel alone... I began to come out of hiding and did not have to live a double life anymore. ..."**

The response was immense, with over a thousand letters thanking her for her honesty. It started a process in her which bore fruit a few years later. In 1981, shortly after I had left home, she said she realised **"I could not cure myself and would need outside help."** And so began years of professional therapy. Within this process of truth telling, she recognised the passage in the gospel of John **"the truth shall make you free."**

This journey of recovery culminated in a moment of freedom in Soweto in South Africa in 1989. She got lost in the township and realised she needed help. She marks a particular moment when she was released from the tyranny of her illness and experienced the gift of joy in friendship. She says, **"It was a moment of truth. I could either panic and struggle on alone and embarrassed, feeling alienated, or treat the people as my friends, as I needed their help. At that moment my agoraphobia withered and died."**

She says this was a pivotal moment in which she learned **"lessons about values of belonging, interdependence and community"** and she reflects there is a **"need to review our culture and notice those who have no family or friends, and who are being pushed to the edges of society by the affluence and greed of others."**

From this point she is free of her illness and so she is able to participate more fully with David in his mission. These years, between 1989 and 1997 were characterised by a very busy working couple with a highly disciplined lifestyle ruled by the diary. She was able to fulfil the role of bishop's wife in public engagements and enjoy the life of the city of Liverpool. Her role in the famous ecumenical partnership between David and Archbishop Derek Worlock was significant. She was a humanising influence that enabled them to connect beyond their official clerical roles.

So then Grace gets to their retirement in 1997. Given how much privacy she had sacrificed for so long, she longed for a more private life - and she delights that **"we had our own private front door"** and they have **"at last the chance to design our own lives ...with the freedom to choose"** - they quickly embrace all the things they had not had time for in David's working life: gardening, painting, singing, time for neighbours, reading, hobbies. She says it was being **"like being a newly married**

couple for the first time" and the garden "became part of us" and the beach near their house was "as near to Paradise as you could get."

These were days of joy. And yet within their retirement life she learns many lessons, smaller bereavements that train her to understand the border between life and death.

In the death of her father, as the eldest daughter, she sets the tone for the mourning - **"tears were not to be hidden or despised"**. She embraces his **"legacy of laughter"** and his attitude to death - as an evangelical Anglican pastor himself he would describe a Christian dying as someone who had 'gone home to glory'. Facing her loss, Grace finds that **"friends prevented the feeling that we were alone. There was life after a death."**

Then in reviewing her own childhood, she realises the gifts her mother gave her: **"She had taught me to pray to a God whom we could call a friend."** She begins to see that death and life are close companions - that moving on and letting go is in the rhythm of life.

After only four years' retirement together, David gets his first cancer diagnosis in 2001. Facing the prospect of his death, Grace discovers that sharing their sorrow with friends helped to diffuse their fears. **"Friends were the perfect shock absorbers. This took a friendship to a deeper level."**

She admires his stoicism **"Let's get on with it. I've got to die of something!..."** Hearing him say the 'die' word, she says **"was a bit of a jolt, but naming it neutralised the deadening effect of keeping it in the imagination. His positive reaction would set the tone for all of us in the days ahead."**

She sees that these friends would be there with her after David died, and recalls **"Christ's own words, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'. Being there for one another is part of God's spirit in action."** She says **"God is friendship."** She recognises that hiding one's fears is counterproductive. She says **"a hiding place is not the place to be if you want to experience the love that people are waiting to offer. Love is the best shock absorber of all."**

As they go through the initial bad news, surgeries, treatments and hospital visits, neighbours, friends and family step up, and David and Grace have the grace to receive. **"We found ourselves woven into a tapestry of kindness."**

Grace learns to see their journey as an adventure, and that God is there in the unknown. Each new adventure then becomes **"a new territory of grace"**. They gain the courage to see that airing difficult questions is helpful: **'What if you died?'** and **'How will you cope when I am gone?'**

She recognises the need to prepare. She consciously puts things in place that will strengthen her.

She finds a spiritual director and asks him to help her **"let David go."** She says: **"There is a place for putting on a brave face in public, but not at the expense of facing reality in private. I asked this priest to help me look for God in every situation however tough. The hour I spent with him each week became a place where I could confess things I was ashamed of, and where I could weep without fear of being overwhelmed with a suffocating sympathy or religiosity, or told to pull myself together. Here I could laugh at myself and we could laugh together." ...a safe place, a place**

in which God's pure love and mercy are being channelled. It is a hallowed friendship that has helped me take each new step in the adventure of life."

She discovers the blessing of what she calls **"the shock absorbers: people and things that helped to steady us over the months and years that followed. Friends and family, the garden, the bird life, music and hobbies; keeping a diary, prayer and worship, homemade food: all ways to value the positive side of the life we still had together. There was still so much to enjoy."**

She views her garden as a conversation with creation, a relationship - with the soil, the plants, colour, texture, sound, fresh air, insects, scents. Her journal was an unjudging friend who absorbed all - and she saw that problems would unravel. **"It was a kind of prayer to an ever present, ever listening, ever loving God."** The angels on her doorstep - this is what she calls her friends and neighbours who offer support as angels - and through whom she begins to see the border between heaven and earth becoming blurred - **"I began to be aware of the strength to be gained by belonging to the community of saints not just in heaven, but on earth"**. The answerphone, ice cream, cricket, morning walks on the beach, morning prayer and bible readings each day and regular siestas - all these things are deployed to build strength.

Then David's cancer spreads to his lungs. The emotions become more intense. They find it helps to express their anger and frustration: **"damn, damn, damn!"** But they also become more joyful about life and their precious time left together: **"We found ourselves giving thanks for so many little things - fruit on the trees, sunsets, the dragonfly.."**

Then the prognosis, and this changed everything. My father's first thought was to ask Grace what she would do after he had gone. He knew her great fear of abandonment and was afraid. I reassured him we would look after each other. And Grace made a list of what she would miss about him, and also of her interests and of the people closest to her. This was cathartic. She said that **"Talking helps when facing fears. It is tempting to put this off, till for some it is too late."** The dynamic changed. She said **"instead of concentrating on living with cancer, we now had to prepare to let each other go."**

They each had a spiritual director **"who provided us with a safe place in which to explore our attitudes to death and dying and to letting a loved one go. There was more life to be lived yet. Joy can arise out of grief. "**

With this new posture, they found new insights were revealed. As David's illness progressed, **"every minute was heightened: we discovered a world of kindness in action beneath the world of violence and conflict that was portrayed daily on the news."**

Losing David had been her greatest fear. There was no getting away from it: death - the taboo subject **"was following me around."** **"We had to give in graciously to accept that death was on its way."**

She found lessons in many different scenarios. A care assistant feeding her mother with a teaspoon was a holy moment: **"an opportunity for love to transform the situation"** and an experience with a little drowned frog **"taught me to realise that it pays to look what frightens us full in the face."**

She learns that the bereavement process begins well before death. She weeps privately as the mini bereavements come - as David loses his hair, his ability to speak, as he can no longer climb the stairs. She says **"I felt myself moving into a new way of looking at life. Death was now part of it and it was natural. I was no longer afraid and was learning to live with a little more mystery. "**

She became aware that the fact of the journey was about the patient's quality of life not about her loss. She found it inspiring to spot what he wanted; his motivation and his will to live drove her on - his appetite for walks, visitors, good food, grandchildren, music, cricket.

Although they had become very close in their retirement, she needed to express her most raw emotions privately - and did so with close friends and with her journal. **"Letting go little by little was good preparation for the final moment of parting."**

At the same time she knew the dangers, that **"staying too long with the pain...can be the springboard to self-pity."** She recognises how Christ's disciples could so easily have sunk into self-pity. She looks at how he equips them before he died, inviting them into a relationship of friendship with each other and with God, If they had remained thinking of themselves as servants they would have been lost without him after he had gone. He says to them **'I call you servants no longer. I call you friends.'**

Christianity is often interpreted as a master-slave relationship, but Grace is keen to explain that Christ frames it as **"a mutual way of living and working."** She says **"First they were exhorted to love one another, as he had loved them." "They were to become friends with God, friends with others and friends with themselves." "The mission was to grow up and find friends in the world in which there was hurt, disease and need of all kinds."**

She reflects that in the cultural context we live in **"how easy it is to cling to our independence...how easy it is to push our friends away..."** and she observes that true friendship is to be there for each other. She observes that this is our natural state, and so death is more difficult when there is **"a break in the chain of belonging"**.

In his last few months David was helped by a hospice for short stays to control his pain. Grace and I had visited before he went. Our fears disappeared when we saw it wasn't a place of death but of gentleness, good humour and healing. Grace recalls it was a place **"for all the family.. to learn together how to live with dying."** Hospice staff told us that in the end, the dying person needs people there to **'Watch with me', 'Just be there,' this is the key to a person's peace of mind as we face the greatest letting go of all. We were not designed to be alone."**

Back home, David moved into a hospital bed downstairs. He was now bedbound. More mini bereavements followed as Grace found it heart breaking to see the weakening of this strong man so greatly diminished. They experienced the wrench of being pulled apart. He cried out **"Don't leave me. Don't leave me alone. Stay with me. I don't want to be alone'.**

Her 70th birthday party was to be a milestone. He had been determined it should go ahead and wanted to be there. We knew he was close to the end but he insisted we go ahead. We had 40

guests coming. Grace said she experienced **"a new kind of hope: that he would die peacefully and be able to reach his goal of being with us at the party."**

The day arrived. Knowing how sensitive people are about death, we wanted to ensure that our guests would not be embarrassed or fearful, but would somehow be given a gift - of being able to say goodbye in a party atmosphere. I will read you Grace's message which each guest read when they arrived:

'Thank you for coming today. Having this party is quite barmy on one level. On another it is utterly appropriate. What is important is that David wanted me to go ahead with it. So did Jenny. The doctor and nurses have supported the idea all along.

This occasion has been an important target in David's long journey and we are thrilled that he has been enabled to reach it. David's phrase 'Let's do it' is one among many that has inspired and strengthened me. So together we've done it! Thank God with us. Thank you for being with me to celebrate becoming really elderly with style. Let's celebrate God's gift of life however flickering it sometimes is.

We want to thank you for all your imaginative, unstinting, loving support during this four year sojourn. You have helped us stay afloat in the most extraordinary way during the last few months: together we have made the most beautiful patchwork out of love and friendship.

Close to journey's end, David is still with us and in the heart of the party. He is in bed, sleeping mostly, in the sun room. Perhaps you would like to see him, if so, please do come in and sit with him for a minute or two. Otherwise, please be assured that he knows you are here.

We appreciate the varied emotions you may have, but hope you will enjoy yourself, perhaps in a new and surprising way. All along we have viewed each day as a new adventure. Each day has had its palavers. Thank you for being part of this one!' David, Grace and Jenny

We decided to have three parties in one in the three rooms on the ground floor: a Noisy Party, a Quiet Party and a Very Quiet Party. Our guests were able to spend a few moments to say goodbye to David in the hospital bed in the very quiet room. With eyes closed and barely able to speak, he was fully conscious, with Grace sitting close by.

Throughout the party, my little sons, then aged 4 and 6, were playing in the garden and coming in and out. Having them there, carefree and involved seemed to put everyone at their ease. As Grace said, they **"brought the gift of innocence to us all. They were not afraid and asked questions when they arose."** She added **"It is difficult to describe the atmosphere - emotions were high yet restrained. It was prayerful and natural and without fear. There was an air of watchful waiting in the house, mixed with laughter and joy. Because we were together, nothing was hidden and no one was excluded. Joy and sorrow combined. Love and loss travelled side by side. We were journeying together and still able to celebrate. Dying and living seemed to belong in the same space."**

The guests left mid-afternoon. At about six o'clock his breathing had changed and we realised the end was close. The nurse reassured us the sounds were natural. She was like a midwife, gracefully helping us manage the transition from life to death. The border.

Grace sat one side of David's bed and I on the other. **"We held his hands. The curtains dividing the two rooms were drawn across. The boys came and went quietly, taking everything in."**

Grace was so deeply in love with David she had found it hard to let him go. I knew it was important to let my father know she would be alright, so I said to him **"we will look after each other."** I moved to be next to her, and she told him she was **"ready to let him go - go back to God."**

"The nurse said that we had said the two things that would have comforted and released him more than any others."

The nurse confirmed that he had breathed his last. A few minutes later Grace, I and her sisters all **"felt an awareness that his spirit was now free."** We noticed our posture had changed: no longer were we facing him, but facing each other. His spirit had left his body.

"The nurse laid out his body with great reverence." We asked the boys if they wanted to come and see him, and **"they came quite naturally and were not afraid."**

Following the death, Grace says she did suffer **"a brief encounter with self-pity"** but quickly moved on. She makes a distinction between self-pity and sadness. She was **"in the bosom of her family."** All the preparation and honest conversations had left her in a good place.

"Letting go" and not clinging to David had been a theme throughout Grace's married life. The great terror of abandonment had stalked her. His mission had meant she had had to learn to let him go many times - to allow him to follow **"his calling to the wider world beyond the family."** The calling to the priesthood can be very hard for a clergyman's wife and family.

But the many mini bereavements during the four years of his illness had allowed Grace and me to let go gradually. As his body lay before us, we took time to talk and come to terms with what had happened. We made the arrangements with no rush. Grace slept peacefully next to the empty hospital bed.

In the days afterwards Grace and I planned the funeral, which took place on my birthday 12 days after David's death. Again the children were involved and we held a big party afterwards for family and friends. Two weeks later, all the family had gone home, leaving Grace alone.

People expected her to crash after David's death but she didn't. Instead she was overwhelmed with gratitude. She had practised gratitude every day during David's illness and it had become a habit. This practice became part of who she was. She deeply understood this quotation: **'Gratitude never faileth: for gratitude is the herald of faith, and faith, the harbinger of hope.'**

She started her new life with cleaning and gardening. Their home and garden and neighbours were a source of joy and she wanted to stay there and live her life. She said **"To my surprise I did not feel desperately alone or even deserted... it felt like a gift. More than four years later I can testify that I have not felt lonely once. Alone, yes: but not isolated or deserted. I have felt among friends."**

She was aware of the potential of the fear of abandonment to return, so she made an effort to maintain the friendships that mattered to her and she was flooded with messages of goodwill. She

saw this friendship as evidence of the presence of God: **"My faith in God was strengthened. His presence was reflected in the people around me."**

That statement by Christ to his disciples at the last supper gained a deeper meaning for her at this time. He said to them **"I call you servants no longer. I call you friends."** Grace comments that **"Friendship was to be the conduit for them: friendship with God, with each other and with themselves. This friendship was to stretch into the world for centuries to come, wherever there was loss and loneliness, disease and poverty."**

Grace did not want to be 'cheered up'. Her tears were natural tears of grief and these would pass. She had friends who understood this and simply kept her company. She said the tears she shed after David's death **"were different from any she had experienced before"** She thought they were **"tears of love overcoming fear"**. She was not ashamed of them. She said **"they felt like a gift."**

When we were planning the memorial service, a public event with a congregation of over 3,000 in Liverpool Cathedral, my view was that such services for a great figure can easily become occasions for self-pity. People can feel powerless after losing someone so inspiring. I felt this would be a waste of an opportunity, that there was a chance to encourage and inspire that large group of people. For me, my father's life was characterised by his commitment to his calling. So I suggested the theme of vocation. And so we designed a service with music and speakers who reflected on his life not to look back in loss but to encourage people in their own calling going forward.

Grace asked me if I would speak for the family. Prior to that day, I had never spoken in public and I was living a very private life. But strangely I felt I had been given the words: I knew exactly what to say. I wanted to thank the people of Liverpool. I said David could not have achieved what he did without them. Gratitude was two-way. We should not be lauding a man for his achievements as an individual. This was not a top-down story of a patrician church leader. This was a story of a relationship. A privileged southerner, he had listened to this poor, working class city with its unique history and character, and instead of imposing a top down approach, he had learned and worked alongside the people of the city. He had grown personally through this experience. His inspiration had come from God through relationships of trust, through reciprocity, and through the wisdom of ordinary people in local communities.

In the months following David's death, Grace begins to navigate life alone. She reflects on what is and isn't helpful for people recently bereaved and gives advice. She emphasises **"the importance of acts of friendship."** She had learned to ring **"someone who has been on my mind just in case they were feeling alone."** She advises what is unhelpful too. When people say **"Keeping busy then?"** this is not helpful, because **"being comfortable with stillness"** can be important. She says one of the most helpful remarks in the early days was **"There's no hurry"**, as was **"how's it going?"** or **"how are you?"**

Over time she felt she was **"developing a new identity."** She identifies with Mary Magdalene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Christ as the gardener sees her grieving. He **"calls her by name"** and says **"don't cling to me - and go"** - he is encouraging her to follow her vocation and to find her friends.

Grace observes that Mary **"had not been abandoned after all."** Like Mary, she develops **"a new kind of interdependence"** knowing she had to keep in touch with those who she trusted and who knew her best. She consciously tries to **"create a new pattern that did not send out messages of being too busy for other people."**

She acknowledges her limits and values the practices that support this new rhythm - food, fresh air and exercise, duty and discipline, pleasure and creativity, family and friends, outreach and care, rest, spiritual direction and worship and devotion.

When she finds she has breast cancer, she immediately calls me and Fr John her spiritual director. We are both there for her. Her response to this and the diagnoses that followed was never self-pity. She had acquired a deep gratitude for the gift of life and had enormous energy for living life to the full. At the same time I would also say there was an excitement about the prospect of dying, because for her, crossing the border meant going home and to be reunited with David. She lived the mystery of the "now and not yet."

Despite the breast cancer, her own calling begins to take shape, as she is asked to share her wisdom more widely, to give talks and retreats. There was an excitement about this as well as fear that she couldn't do it. But she trusts that this is God's call and leans on the relationships that sustain her. She says **"Friends are our lifeblood. She values her neighbourhood more than ever "A feeling of family grows in a neighbourhood. We get to know each other's names and cease to become strangers."**

She learns about Ubuntu from Desmond Tutu, an old friend - Ubuntu translates as "I am because you are". Tutu says **"Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself."**

Grace continues to be uncompromising in her recognition of the importance of human connection. Her years of suffering with agoraphobia, illness and loss have taught her lessons about the importance of being real. She says **"our authenticity will depend on how willing we are to meet Christ face to face and eye to eye every day in each person we meet."**

Again and again, she emphasises the importance of being together in order to prepare for the death part of life. **"To know that we are not alone in our struggles makes all the difference in the world. This source of strength and companionship is a great gift and one that I hope I never take for granted as I move towards my own death and final homecoming to God."**

At the end of the book she reflects on her home as a place where she can be herself, where there is love, given and received. She thinks of home like heaven, a place where the border gets blurred - **"Home is where God is, and that coming home to God will be like coming home to someone who loves us."**

In this sense the veil between heaven and earth, as understood in the Christian sense, the border, is very thin for Grace.

Throughout the book she reflects on who God is - a faithful friend, close and proximate, not remote and abstract. She believes there is evidence of the kingdom around us if only we would look, and

that in doing this we find more gratitude: **"The more we look for beauty and goodness in one another and in creation, the more we shall see. We will find that we are overwhelmed with joy day by day. Then it becomes natural to be thankful, and to say so to the Creator himself, in worship."**

As many of us know, the paradox of Christianity is that it is through suffering that we get to know our need for God. It is "how the light gets in." Grace grew in her understanding of her own need for God through the brokenness she experienced in her life, and especially through facing the reality of death.

She says **"If we have learnt to feel at home with God, he will not feel such a stranger when the time comes to meet him in death."** She says she is **"comfortable in this mystery."**

She was determined to prepare well for her own death: to be practical and to treasure her friends and family. I can testify that she did do this, and so her dying was in many ways similar to my father's, a blessing to me and to her friends and family - it was a collaborative experience full of love.

So you will be thinking how proud of my mother I must be. Yes, I am. Life was very hard for her. She suffered a great deal and over time she gained a great wisdom. It was not easy being the consort to my father. In fact it nearly broke her. She started as the evangelical wife denying herself to support her husband's mission, and through tragedy and faith, eventually uncovered the great truth about what it means to be human, the centrality of relationship, and she flourished.

Her agoraphobia illness and my father's mission meant there was little you could call a normal family life. The truth is it wasn't easy being their daughter. As a child I was unhappy and in many respects neglected. I became disaffected, with them, and with the Anglican church, and sought meaning and family elsewhere. I was a difficult teenager and became estranged.

In my mid-twenties I had a conversion experience and against everyone's expectations including my own, I felt called into the Catholic Church. This was not easy for my parents either, but I felt compelled to follow my own path which they had no choice but to accept. I had a wise spiritual director and over the years I found a way to be. The relationship with my parents was at times strained but we all tried to make it work. The births of my sons, my father's illness and my mother's final illness all brought us closer. The mystery is still unfolding. I am still exploring the meaning of these paths that God has called us to walk.

It was only when I was in my late forties, the year after my mother's death, that the work I am now doing first occurred to me. It came as a nudging, a calling, if you like.

In 2011, I was seeing signs of a cultural and political malaise beginning, with mission drift in the Church and Christian leaders struggling to respond in a highly secularised culture, and in the context of anti-Christian ideologies gaining traction.

I had a prompting of the Holy Spirit and set up the charity *Together for the Common Good* to discern a way forward.

Initially I felt God was asking me to look at the twenty year partnership between my father and Derek Worlock in Liverpool, which was so resonant with the people. Others joined me and in our research we identified two complementary gifts in that partnership which were important - a church that prioritises relationships with its neighbours, in particular solidarity with the poor, and the body of thinking known as Catholic Social Thought.

We learned a lot from their partnership but we do not inherit their legacy wholesale.

This new era warrants new approaches. Pope Francis correctly said some years ago that this is not just an era of change but a change of era. We must not underestimate this period of seismic socio-economic change. Christians of all traditions need help to navigate the unravelling that is happening in the West, and in the churches.

A key aspect to my work was the discovery that the Catholic Social Thought tradition is the most coherent and sophisticated Christian framework for understanding human, social, cultural and economic relations, and therefore for renewal.

Within this frame, relationship is central. Concepts like family, fraternity, solidarity, subsidiarity and common good are at the heart of this body of thinking.

But I saw that the Church was not communicating its own tradition in an effective way. I felt my calling was to make it better understood.

And so from this recognition, *Together for the Common Good* emerged. We are a very small British Christian charity, independent and nonpartisan. We are dedicated to spiritual and civic renewal in a deeply confused society in urgent need of healing and hope.

Although by a different route, it is not surprising that we have come to a similar conclusion to Grace. We are all guided by God for whom the importance of relationship is paramount - relationship with Him and with each other. It is a matter of getting the correct anthropology: made in God's image, we are relational beings, we are not designed to be alone.

Like Grace we see the importance of relationship in personal terms, but *Together for the Common Good* goes further, situating this recognition within a broader, cultural, social and political context.

Catholic Social Thought helps us recognise *why* Western culture is now in so much trouble. It helps us to see the current situation as the inevitable consequence of the philosophy of liberalism. It helps us understand the failure of the socio-economic model in the West. This model - expressed both on the right in terms of neoliberal economics, and on the left in hyper liberal social norms, is increasingly characterised by pathologies, nihilism, mental health crisis, vast inequality, economic instability, rising loneliness, separation and polarisation.

The Catholic Social Thought tradition helps us to call out dehumanising systems wherever they occur. It helps us see what is happening to the human being, to relationships. And so we recognise that the

common good is the antidote to the twin, malign ideologies of individualism and collectivism, both of which stem from the philosophy of liberalism which subordinates God to man. We are called to promote an alternative story.

We do this in a range of ways. We promote talks by leading thinkers who understand common good in terms of economy, work, social peace and human freedom; we produce a podcast and give talks and sessions for Christian leaders and organisations to discern their role in the local; and through our schools programme, we train teachers to equip young people to understand the importance of relationship and of taking responsibility where they live.

We intentionally work ecumenically, with churches and leaders across different Christian denominations and traditions, and with many partner organisations. We bring common good, as understood within the Judeo-Christian, and especially the Catholic Social Thought, traditions, to a wider audience. You can find out more at togetherforthecommongood.co.uk

The concept of common good needs to be understood in the sense of rebuilding relationships between those who have become estranged. In personal terms that means a commitment to human connection and friendship, about which Grace was so passionate. In civic and political terms this means negotiating relationships - for example, between business and unions, capital and labour, young and old, urban and rural, men and women, faith and secular - in the interests of human flourishing. For the Church, it requires rebuilding local relationships, creating a sense of family, and acting in solidarity with poor communities.

Fundamentally, the key estrangement that needs attention is our relationship with God. This is the border we must bridge. The great deception of "modernity's wager" - which claims we don't need God to thrive - has been around since the Enlightenment but especially over the last seventy years. Reconciling our relationship to God is central for the flourishing of humanity and the natural world.

As Grace discovered on her adventure, God is our natural home. God is not abstract but personal. Christ called us friends not servants. And the closer we get to God, the less we fear death, the better our relationships, the more freedom we have and the more fulfilling life gets. The more we discover God through relationship with our neighbours, the thinner the veil between heaven and earth becomes.

Thank you very much for listening.

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Living With Dying by Grace Sheppard can be found [here](#)