

Death and Taxes.

Benjamin Franklin was right when he wrote, "... in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." But while the daily news headlines are laden with references to one, we are virtually silent about the other. Why do we not talk about death?

To be no longer numbered among the living haunts us like no other demon. The knowledge that one day we will all cease to be has turned some of us into philosophers and others into priests. Mostly, though, death has made cowards of us all. We pop vitamins, eat fiber, run three times a week — all the while looking warily over our shoulder to be sure death's long shadow isn't gaining on us. Our vigilance and all the advances in medical science make no difference. The statistics on death are still 100 percent, just as they used to be 10,000 years ago.

Whoever is born, dies. A birth and a death, in fact, are the two only requirements for a life. Once we accept our demise as a certainty and part of the cosmic deal, death becomes a friend who sits on our shoulder to remind us that, as we are only here for a short visit, shouldn't we be smelling the flowers along the way?

At Hospice by the Bay, we believe it is neither morbid nor fatalistic to contemplate our own deaths. As Morrie so wisely puts it in *Tuesdays With Morrie*, "Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live." So to help all of us mull over our mortality, we have assembled some useful information and advice on the subject that's worth sharing.

The best place to die. Given a choice, most of us would rather spend our final moments in the comfort of our own home, rather than the anonymity of the hospital. While we want to die at home, only one-quarter of us will end up doing so. With the assistance of a hospice team of doctors, nurses, social workers, counselors, chaplains, and volunteers, however, our wish of dying at home becomes a distinct possibility.

Quick exits. When asked how we'd like to go, most of us would hide behind dark humor: "I want to live to be 110, and skid sideways into my grave." Or, "I want my last words to be, 'A truck!'"

While sudden deaths might seem appealing, in reality they leave a great many things undone, and they are very often the hardest deaths for families to accept. In contrast to an abrupt, "easy" death, dying of a progressive illness offers time and opportunities to put our house in order. That includes the healing of strained or severed relationships,

perhaps between previous spouses, or a parent and an estranged adult child.

When two people end well, the story of their lives will be fondly remembered. "So long." "I forgive you." "Forgive me." "Thank you." "I love you." "Goodbye." Those are the six steps of relationship closure. While in hospice care, we are encouraged to mend relationships with the most important people in our lives. After we've resolved feelings of hatred or love with others, there is nothing left but peace. We may never be happy to move on, but at least we'll be prepared.

Never walk alone. We all pass away alone. Unless we die in an accident with others, we are the only one dying at that moment. Death is, by its very nature, the loneliest experience humans were ordained to endure. It is a loneliness that's amplified by the fact that we isolate the dying. We isolate the dying by no longer talking to them. We isolate them by no longer listening to them. Sometimes we're not with them physically, but more often, we're no longer with them emotionally. It's a myth that the dying do not want to talk about death. Of course, they want to talk about it — they are about to enter the Great Unknown, and talking can be therapeutic and even comforting.

Caring for the dying. Death need not be painful, nor a lonely experience. The nonprofit Hospice by the Bay provides medical, nursing, emotional and spiritual care to the terminally ill and their families. Our chief priority is the relief of pain and suffering at the end of life.

Since hospice is a philosophy of end-of-life care more than a specific place, we can support you in your home, in a nursing or residential facility or a hospital. In fact, most of Hospice by the Bay's patients are cared for at home. And care is covered by Medicare, Medi-Cal or most private insurance plans.

For more about having this important conversation, visit www.hospicebythebay.org. Or call us at 415.927.2273 if you need some more helpful advice.

