

The Omega Course

37 years ago I cared for a vicar's wife dying young, from a complication of radiotherapy. I left her room elated and confused. Her certainty and excitement of meeting God very soon was palpable and left me irritable and jealous. I walked back to the doctor's mess trying to realign my reality. She had taken me to a realm beyond, and I did not want to return. As I write I realise the threads of heaven have never drawn me in so tantalisingly since.

Teaching has it that the spirituality of dying is what the person holds dear. It may be a religious commitment but it may equally be a football team or devotion to a Ferrari. For many the focus is family and legacy, in terms of their lives having had lasting meaning. This existential end of life processing is respected by chaplains, many of whom are asked to celebrate the funerals of those who professed no religious faith. The Christian professional is, perhaps necessarily, drawn towards the liberal and humanistic to cope with a secular spirituality.

In my work as a palliative physician I draw on Jesus' understanding of bereavement demonstrated by his tears over Lazarus; and, for patients facing medical treatments with hope, yet fearing death, his prayer for deliverance in Gethsemane, accompanied by the acceptance of God's will.

In our instant society mortality is denied such that the diagnosis of a life threatening disease is described as a 'shock'. We do not live understanding we will die and preparing for it. Few in society examine death and dying, yet when asked, many would wish to do so, and to record their end of life wishes. They don't because no one asked or gave them the opportunity....until now.

The Omega Course is just such an opportunity. In a series of friendly café based evenings attendees discuss death and dying in a safe environment. Over four evenings and a Saturday the course covers deaths experienced so far; hopes and expectations of life yet to live; planning for the future, choices in end of life healthcare; talking to people who are sick or bereaved; as well as topics raised by participants. Omega was devised by people of Christian faith but is run for adults of all faiths, or none, because everybody dies.

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