dessert first
Preparing for Death while Savoring Life

J. Dana Trent

BONUS CONTENT
Ten Lessons from an End-of-Life Chaplain & Three Steps for Coping with Grief
10 Lessons I Learned as an End-of-Life-Chaplain
and Three Steps for Coping with Grief

By J. Dana Trent, author Dessert First

When I was 25, I spent a year gathering information about death without really meaning to. I was a freshly-minted Duke Divinity School graduate and ordained Baptist minister beginning a hospital chaplaincy program. By chance (or perhaps not), I was assigned to serve patients at the end of their lives.

I became known as “The Death Chaplain.” It was an unexpected call to an alternative universe—one in which, just inside the hospital doors, nearly all my patients were living the worst—and sometimes last—days of their lives.

In that space, I learned what “terminal” truly meant. I saw it stamped vividly on cancer diagnoses, chronic disease, accidents, assaults, suicide—and even on births. As the “death chaplain” to these patients and their families, I immediately stepped into a world of endings I knew nothing about. All year I learned essential lessons about facing the most challenging aspect of our lives: our dying.

Lesson 1: We are all terminal. No matter how many degrees I held or how many books I read, hospital chaplaincy taught me the single most important truth of life: we will die. It’s not a matter of if but when.

Lesson 2: Knowing we will one day die offers us many gifts. In chaplaincy, I learned to unwrap the gifts our finite bodies and their deaths offer us: a reality check, courage, gratitude, and making use of the time we have.

Lesson 3: Become a friend of being terminal. Facing the fact—and fear—of death helps us begin with the end in mind. Death is not the enemy; rather, it is humbling. We have limits: bodies and time. What will we do with both of them?

Lesson 4: Death teaches us how to live. When we realize our lives are finite, we learn to appreciate them all the more. This gratitude helps us find meaning in the seemingly mundane or everyday stuff: our relationships, our work, and the world around us.

Lesson 5: We don’t have all the answers about death and the afterlife, and that’s OK. In my work as a hospital chaplain, I learned the psychological and physiological processes of the dying, but what still squeezes the air from my chest is the obscurity of what comes after. We are not God. We do not have a detailed memo on the next steps following death. Leaning into this uncertainty is the foundation of faith: humility, surrender, and trust.

Lesson 6: Learn to befriend the mystery and grief. Before I was a chaplain, I hadn’t yet learned to befriend that normal, paralyzing fear of the afterlife’s mystery or the deep, visceral grief we feel when loved ones die, leaving the door firmly shut for us to sort out the ending. I learned that
investing time in accepting the mystery and walking through grief made my life richer and more meaningful.

Lesson 7: Explore your fears about death. What is death, why do we avoid death, and how can we shift death from a dreaded landmark to a meaningful destination? We cannot sit with others in death and grief until we explore our own pain and anxiety around being terminal.

Lesson 8: Lean into various religious and spiritual perspectives on death. Many traditions illuminate the path for us. Chaplaincy taught me that practitioners of various faiths may fervently cling to, reject, bend, or adjust their tradition’s doctrine and dogma when they are faced with death. Everyone interprets the “company line” in different ways—particularly at the end of life. Respect your own theological journey and that of others too.

Lesson 9: Plan for a “good death.” Investing time in preparing for a “good death” means living with the end in mind. Think about both the practical and meaning-making: What conversations do we need to start? What legal work needs to be done? What spiritual and religious considerations should be included? The more time we invest in a “good death” for ourselves and others, the more time we have to simply be present when the time comes.

Lesson 10: You are not alone. Everyone struggles with death, grief, and suffering at some (or many!) points in their lives. To be human is to have limits, and those limits hurt. But they also humble. They help us all prepare for death while savoring life— together.

Three Ways to Acknowledge and Grieve Your Loss

Grief is a natural part of being in deep relationship and connection with others. Grief honors the threads of intimacy that weave us together as humans. Here are some steps in processing any grief.

**Step 1: Acknowledge the loss.** It took me years to acknowledge— aloud—that I had experienced a lot of loss. I hadn’t realized the impact being “The Death Chaplain” had had on me, as well as the deaths of so many relatives, followed by Mom’s. My work as a chaplain informed the ways in which I grieved all significant losses—including my parents. I had the tendency to go into “chaplain mode,” which meant helping, doing, caregiving, and providing crisis management rather than seeing myself as the one who needed the help. Because I was busy acting on others’ behalf or holding their loss, I didn’t do much with my own. It wasn’t until after Mom died that I acknowledged that I had, indeed, suffered a significant, life-changing loss.

**Step 2: Acknowledge that grief comes in waves.** Grieving is not linear, though it can be cumulative. It’s often triggered in unexpected ways—ordinary objects, memories, traffic intersections, songs, photos. When it arrives, grief can feel like an enormous wave crashing over us. It often feels as if it might swallow us whole amid a sea that feels fiercer than our ability to cope. Acknowledge these waves when they arrive, but know that they are not riptides. They will not pull us into an ocean from which we cannot escape. We will not drown;
we will not be lost at sea. We merely have to ride them out as they make their journey to shore.

**Step 3: Stay in the grief; don’t minimize the loss; seek support.** Since grief is overwhelming, it can feel as if we are going to drown. Seek support—both professional and in close friends or family—to learn how to breathe, tread water, float, and even paddle through the waves.

Chaplains, clergy, and hospice staff are all excellent resources to help you in navigating grief and adopting meaningful rituals on your journey. Do what works best for you. There are no rules. This is your grief.

*J. Dana Trent* is a graduate of Duke Divinity School and professor of World Religions and Critical Thinking at Wake Tech Community College. An ordained Baptist minister and former hospital chaplain, her work has been featured on Time.com, Religion News Service, Religion Dispatches, as well as in Sojourners and The Christian Century. Dana is also the award-winning author of books on wholistic wellness and multifaith spiritual practices: *One Breath at a Time: A Skeptic’s Guide to Christian Meditation*, *For Sabbath’s Sake: Embracing Your Need for Rest, Worship, and Community*, and *Saffron Cross: The Unlikely Story of How a Christian Minister Married a Hindu Monk.*

*Her newest book, Dessert First: Preparing for Death while Savoring Life* will be published *September 10, 2019, by Chalice Press.*