

# What a gift: Accepting mortality, living fully

Rev. Candace McKibben, TLH blogger 9:04 p.m. EDT April 17, 2015



What a remarkable gift people in communities across the nation received as we recognized the eighth National Health Care Decision Day. Scheduled annually on April 16, the day's purpose is to inspire, educate and empower the public and providers about the importance of advance care planning.

In respect for Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, which fell on April 16 this year, Big Bend Hospice along with Florida State University College of Medicine and College of Law elected to hold our community event on April 14. Seventy-five people took advantage of the free offering in the lovely auditorium at the FSU College of Medicine. Rev. James Brooks, Office of Volunteerism and Service at the National AARP office in Washington, D.C., and former Tallahasseean, facilitated the evening which was centered on three vignettes from the remarkable "Frontline" documentary, "Being Mortal."

Based on Dr. Atul Gwande's best-selling book by the same title, the documentary explores the difficulty that medical personnel and those who receive their care have with the unfixable conditions of aging and death. Rev. Brooks did an excellent job in creating openings for those gathered to share their observations and feelings about the poignant stories told in the documentary. You can hear this discussion at <http://lectures.med.fsu.edu/tcs/?id=5E46FE7C-1103-478B-8080-B620CA122899> You can watch the documentary "Being Mortal" at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/>

For the past few years now, Big Bend Hospice in cooperation with FSU has offered a community event on National Health Care Decision Day that has portrayed the problem of so few adults having their advance care directives in place and the need to take seriously having important conversations and completing our directives. We have had excellent panelists who have responded with expertise to direct audience questions about specific situations.

This year, it seems to me, we moved to a deeper level and had a heart-to-heart talk about what it means to be mortal. We recognized that physicians and medical staff are mortal and have the same issues with talking about death and dying that we all have, and we honored their pain. We witnessed in the documentary cases of death that come to the young or the resistant and how that can obscure our vision of how best to spend the time that is given. We heard a grandfather share his heart with his grandson after his grandson asked the poignant question, "Aren't you sad about what you will miss?" We acknowledged that as hard as it may be to realize that life here is finite, it is better to live in that awareness, not only in terms of planning for the best outcomes for our death, but in living our lives more fully.

The documentary ends with Dr. Gwande on the banks of the Ganges River where he has just spread his own father's ashes asking, "How is death ever at all acceptable? How is it ever anything except this awful, terrible thing?" Answering his own questions he continues, "The only way it is is because we as human beings live for something bigger than ourselves." I am reminded of the words of the wisest among us through the centuries who have said that recognizing our own mortality gives us a greater appreciation for the beauty and fragility of life.

In some ways it was extremely difficult for me to recognize National Health Care Decision Day on the heels of my own sweet daddy's death on April 1. But in other ways, it was yet another opportunity to honor him for making those difficult end-of-life decisions for himself so that we did not have to wonder what he would want when he could no longer speak. What a gift! It is one we all can give.

The Rev. Candace McKibben is an ordained minister who serves as the director of faith outreach at Big Bend Hospice and as pastor of Tallahassee Fellowship.

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