The very thought of death brings to mind fear and the prospect of facing something unknown. The average person is seldom prepared for death. Encountering death is the worst nightmare for most, only this is the last nightmare. We have funny notions about death. We feel it is alright if a person dies at an advanced age, particularly if without any long-term illness. We call this a ‘good’ death. Deaths after prolonged illnesses or at a young age in tragic circumstances like accidents or suicides are considered ‘bad’ deaths. We associate goodness with less suffering. With the knowledge of impending death, the idea of ego gets attenuated. We take less and less interest in possessing or performing. Our sense of worldly attachments weans away. This book first came into being in the form of a paper in a journal on palliative medicine. The original book in German has been translated as the present book. Monika Renz, the author, has a rich experience of attending to terminally ill patients, and giving them counseling and spiritual guidance.

This book analyses the process of dying by dividing it into three stages: pre-transition, transition, and post-transition. I particularly like the use of the word ‘transition’ in the title of the book and inside the book. It is closer to the Vedantic idea of death, where the individual soul, jivatma, is considered to just travel from one stage to another, one body to another. Thus, death is not a complete cessation, but a transition from one stage to another. Renz emphasises on understanding the dying person in all of one’s aspects, by observing all the cues that they give—verbal, nonverbal, metaphorical, and spiritual. An urgency to transcend the baser human limitations and an equal urgency to conquer or get past all possible negative emotions is pronounced in the dying.

Renz calls dying as a change in perception. This change occurs in one’s perception of ego and all ego-based needs. She also analyses the numerous near-death experiences of her patients and how they are vital in understanding the nature of the gate of death. At the outset itself, Renz clarifies that though most of her spiritual therapy was from the Christian point of view, the lessons learnt by her from those patients and presented in this book can be and should be tried on patients from different religious backgrounds, adapting them to the respective traditions. Renz gives much importance to the process of the transformation in perception towards life and death in the dying and argues that this is the singularly vital step in the process of dying and says that all other stages such as reconciliation with death and attaining maturity about death, are secondary.

Renz says that human dignity is the most important aspect of a human life and it is crucial to the care of the dying. Unless a person feels dignity while nearing death, it would become unbearable and agonising to face death. Recounting experiences of different patients, Renz tells us that many patients feel complete serenity before death and transcend pain and fear. Many other patients could experience the arrival of death and verbalised their experiences that are almost similar to mystic experiences.

Sri Ramakrishna tells how a devotee of God matures from harping on the ‘I’ to surrendering
to God and getting established in the conviction of ‘Thou’. Renz shows how dying is a similar transformation where the primordial fear of death eventually changes to a spiritual beginning. She says that the ‘I’ of a dying person metamorphoses into ‘Thou’. At this stage, the dying person has no fear and finds freedom and peace. Renz is a music therapist too and talks in detail about the ability of dying persons to respond to sound and music. Citing recent research and supporting it with her own findings, Renz gives us ample evidence on how music has made the process of dying a redeeming experience. She also explains how the dying lose their sense of time and relates it to the lack of the ability to orient oneself with the various rhythms of daily activities. She also proves that the dying can hear to a great extent, even when they are apparently ill. She also cites research to prove that even coma patients can hear some things that are spoken in their presence.

Renz discusses at length the various metaphors that the dying patients perceive or speak of in the pre-transition, transition, and post-transition stages of death. She also states that fear, struggle, acceptance, family processes, and maturation are the various sites of transition. In the last chapter, Renz talks about how the entire process of death is all about dying with dignity. She tells us that death is not just about becoming physically extinct. When a person knows of the approaching death, then one gradually takes leave of all pleasure-seeking activities, relationships, and other signs of attachments to this world. The biggest obstacle to letting go of life is the ego. And when a person becomes aware of impending death, one tries to consciously become less and less attached to the ego.

Renz says that it is important that palliative care or end-of-life care should be based on an indication-oriented approach, where the dying is cared for not based only on the verbalised needs of the patient, but also based on the needs that become obvious on an empathetic observation of the patient. One of the impressive achievements of Renz in this book is that she has succeeded in bringing home the importance of taking into account the spiritual, eschatological, and mystical elements involved in the process of dying. She shows how the sense of time, space, body, divisions, and gravity become weaker, and how intensity, awareness, and the belonging to a community increase, during the process of dying. She ends the book with a poem, appendix, and notes. The concept of meaning and symbols takes a quite nuanced turn in the process of dying.

This book is filled with practical advice on how to deal with different kinds of minds at the different stages of dying. It gives us various examples of techniques and best practices that help when trying to give counselling or therapy to a terminally ill person. Though brief, this book is quite detailed in its treatment of end-of-life care.

This book is a classic example of how modern scientific care can be given to patients or the dying in conjunction with psychological and spiritual therapies that are designed in keeping with the patient’s background and the life spent hitherto. Oftentimes, trying to force new beliefs on a dying person creates more trauma, thereby increasing the already building psychological pressure for coping with the process of dying. This book also reminds us of the urgent need for having a scientific and sustained research on the various near-death experiences encountered by thousands around the world. Such documentation would help in understanding these experiences in depth and also in knowing the value of such experiences in understanding life itself. Though there is some research on various eschatological models, this area also needs to be strengthened. In her poem, Renz compares death to finding one’s home and pleasantly reminds one of the song that Swami Vivekananda was fond of singing: ‘O mind, go to your home.’

Drawing on established psychotherapeutic models of suffering, pain, and death, Renz studies numerous patients of her own and her colleagues and friends to present us a book that pointedly and poignantlly depicts the ways to provide a peaceful exit from life for the dying. This book is a brief yet detailed manual for the various people engaged in the care of the dying, physicians, nurses, therapists, counsellors, and all others who have anything to do with the dying.

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