

book review

Stop and Smell the Roses...Again?

The recent title 'Life Lessons' tells readers what they've already heard about life and death.

By Thomas Lynch

Early in the 1960s, Jessica Mitford published "The American Way of Death," a book that had little to do with death itself and more to do with the math of caskets, the cost of funerals, and the abuses of the funeral trade.

Mitford wrote charming and cheery prose, and the enduring appeal of her book is that it gave people to believe that if they got the numbers right—the dollars and the cents of it—they'd manage the existential event of a death in the family with the same jaunty good humor and stiff upper lip that the British Mitford did.

In the late '60s, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published "On Death and Dying," and with it changed the conventional wisdom and public discourse on mortality issues. Where Mitford saw a death in the family as a retail event, Kubler-Ross saw it as a psychological one. Where Mitford provided numbers that always added up, Kubler-Ross provided stages through which the dying proceed, the understanding of and proper conduct through which would make the mystery of death more manageable.

Both books sold millions. There was and apparently remains much comfort in the assurance that funerals cost too much and dying has five stages. If we can just avoid the former and get through the latter, all will be right with the world.

In the 30 years since "On Death and Dying" appeared, Kubler-Ross has published 11 more titles, "Questions on Death and Dying," "Death: The Final Stage of Growth," "Living With Death and Dying," "Death is of Vital Importance," etc. Her claim to be an "expert on death and dying" cannot be questioned for lack of publications. A stroke she suffered in 1995, which partially paralyzed her, has left her understandably ambivalent about life and living. David Kessler, her co-author, has among his credits "The Needs of the Dying" and his having helped "hundreds of men and women, including the late Anthony Perkins and Michael Landon," making him "a leader in the field of hospice care." Their collaboration on this text would seem a perfect fit.

What we get from these experts, however, in the way of Life Lessons is a fairly vapid assortment of vignettes, case histories and personal experiences, each arranged to assure the reader that the warm, fuzzy math adds up, if we only read on.

"Not all of these lessons are enjoyable to learn, but everyone finds that they enrich the texture of life. So why wait until the end of life to learn the lessons that could be learned now?"

Why, indeed?

"What are these lessons life asks us to master? In working with the dying and the living, it becomes clear that most of us are challenged by the same lessons: the lesson of fear, the lesson of guilt, the lesson of anger, the lesson of forgiveness, the lesson of surrender, the lesson of time, the lesson of patience, the lesson of love, the lesson of relationships, the lesson of play, the lesson of loss, the lesson of power, the lesson of authenticity, and the lesson of happiness."

After "A Message From Elisabeth," and "A Message From David," the litany of lessons above becomes the chapter titles, and the message is unremarkable.

"The lesson of forgiveness" is that we should forgive ourselves. "The lesson of patience" is that we should be patient. "The lesson of happiness" is that we should try to be happy. Maybe the lesson is we should watch fewer talk shows from whence these pop-psyche remedies seem to come.

On the untidier lessons of fear and guilt and anger we are told "We must get in touch with

the feelings in our bellies." Do tell. After such wisdoms as these, the book ends, with neither a bang nor whimper, but with "A Final Lesson": "Not long ago, we were talking with an old friend. To our astonishment, this successful and beautiful forty-three-year-old physician complained of being unhappy."

This hapless if happily nameless woman wanted a face-lift.

"But the truth is, we are never as unattractive as we feel. It's our inner experiences that are lacking. We have been given all we need to have a fulfilling, meaningful, and happy experience of life. We just don't recognize our own gifts, or goodness."

As if that weren't final lesson enough, there's more: "When was the last time you really looked at the sea? Or smelled the morning? Touched a baby's hair? Really tasted and enjoyed food? Walked barefoot in the grass? Looked in the blue sky?"

Like much of the book, this final lesson seems a run-on sentence taken from a Hallmark card, the message of which is Stop and Smell the Roses. "You don't get another life like this one. You will never again play this role and experience this life as it has been given to you."

If the first rule of good medicine is to do no harm, "Life Lessons" offers a kind of bromide. It is harmless.

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