

Last week was a time of thinking about death in various ways. All Hallows' Eve conjures up images of the macabre. All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day remember the departed faithful of all the ages. A professor friend from my faculty days in Louisville lost his wife last week and buried her body on All Souls' Day.

And I just learned this morning that my friend, Ruth Hustad, was resurrected just a month after her husband, Don, last summer. Don was Billy Graham's crusade organist for many years, taught organ at Southern Seminary, was a member of our church in Louisville, and gave two organ concerts at our church in Bristol. I was really not surprised that Ruth followed Don so quickly to the Heavenly City, since the two were inseparable here on earth.

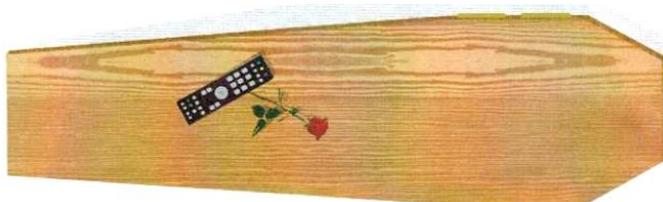
The truth of the matter is that death is always at the edges of our awareness, though we manage to be inattentive to its presence most of the time. The inevitable boundary that lies at the end of our finite lives can be a real blessing, though, in its ability to teach us to savor every day that we're given. So it is that the Scripture admonishes us to *Remember [God] before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it* (Ecclesiastes 12:6-7).

And so it is that the psalmist prayed, "Show me, LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is" (Psalm 39:4). "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

While pondering these things, I was somewhat amused to see these two pictures on facing pages of last week's *TIME* magazine. One of the ways we deal with approaching death is to make light of it, which is at least a small part of the dynamics underlying such silliness as pet costumes for Halloween, on which we apparently spent \$330 million last week (!!!!!).



The facing page reflected on a new "reality" show, *Time of Death*, which apparently chronicles the true story of Maria Lencioni's last months in her battle with cancer. According to the article, this is a "wrenching, six-part documentary [that] captures a universal experience that TV rarely shows: mundane, non-violent death."



**The Last Reality Show. *Time of Death* boldly goes where, someday, we all will**  
By James Poniewozik

IT IS NOT A SPOILER TO SAY THAT MARIA Lencioni dies at the end of Showtime's *Time of Death*. It's the first thing we learn about her. A strong-willed, sarcastic ...

Death on TV is not exactly rare. AMC's guts-spattered zombie series *The Walking Dead* drew over 20 million viewers for its Season 4 premiere. Shootings

come together or fracture. People make peace or get angry. They say goodbye or make it to the bedside too late. They offer words of comfort that go wrong. And at the end, there's a body to remove, a house to clean. As one hospice worker says, "There is no manual for how to do this." I'm guessing you don't want to watch this. Why would you? The show is quiet and dignified, but it can still feel inva-

Maria notes that death "is the big elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about," and the essay ends like this: "What do you consider a good death? What will you value at the end? How will you want to be remembered? It's not important that this show reminds you that you're going to die. You knew that. What matters is that it reminds you to live." And there, once more, is the gift we're given by the boundaries of finitude.

And all of that reminded me of a short piece in a wonderful little book to which Ben Davis introduced me, *The Way of the Wolf: The Gospel in New Images*, by Martin Bell. From time to time, I may use this space to introduce you to some of these lovely stories and images. What follows is neither parable nor tale, but Bell's reflections at the death of a friend:

## **On the Death of Colin Stuart** <sup>1</sup>

Jesus said to his disciples, *“Ye now, therefore, have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”*

He said: *“Go now—have sorrow.”*

1. **Human beings do not belong to one another.** We are God's children. We belong to Him. It is by sheer grace that we are together for a time—for a little while. We receive God's gift of another person in our lives with thanksgiving. But we must realize that this person is a gift—we cannot hang on, or refuse to let go of one of God's children when He calls.
2. **Colin Stuart was a gift. One of God's own children.** And, for a time, God gave Colin to the world. In order that two human beings might have a child. And, later, in order that a woman might have a husband. And some children might have a father. And some other children might have a grandfather. For those children Colin defined what it means to have a father, or a grandfather. And a woman came to know what it means to have a husband. And because of Colin, the world understood more fully the greatness of the love of God. God loved the world so much that He gave it Colin. And that was nice of God.
3. **But now Colin Stuart is dead. And the world won't see him again. God took him back.** That's painful. And there is no way under heaven to minimize that pain. Jesus said, *“Go now, therefore, and have sorrow.”* We do not sorrow because God is cruel or unjust. The world did nothing to deserve Colin. God gave him to us freely. Not because we deserved it, but because He loved us. We are not sorrowing because God is unjust. We are sorrowing because Colin is gone. And that's right. That's just right. Jesus said, *“Go and have sorrow.”* A part of us is dead. That part of us that we called our father, or our grandfather, or our friend. That part of us we called Colin is gone. And we know the pain, and the emptiness, and the bitterness and the guilt, and the heartbreak all too well. We will never be the same. And that's right, too. We can't be “the same” ever again.
4. **We are here to say good-bye to one of God's tiny children.** Jesus said, *“Ye now, therefore, have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”* He said, *“When you pray, say ‘Father.’”* God loves Colin. And he belongs to Him. He always has. For a time He gave him to the world. And now He has called him. And now we know emptiness. That's the way it is with human beings. We are here today, reluctantly, to offer Colin back to God. In so doing we are offering ourselves. We are here boldly—to dare to say *“Our Father”* and to pray *“Thy will be done.”* We are here to trust God, and to love Him, and to realize how much He loves us. We are here to say good-bye to Colin, one of God's tiny children. And today we must let go of his hand. But in so doing we give it over to that of his heavenly Father. We cannot hang on. We must let go. But God has hold of his hand. And He will never let go. Amen.

And so we go forward, eager and unafraid, toward a future known only to God . . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Bell, *The Way of the Wolf: The Gospel in New Images* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968, 1983), pp. 75-77.