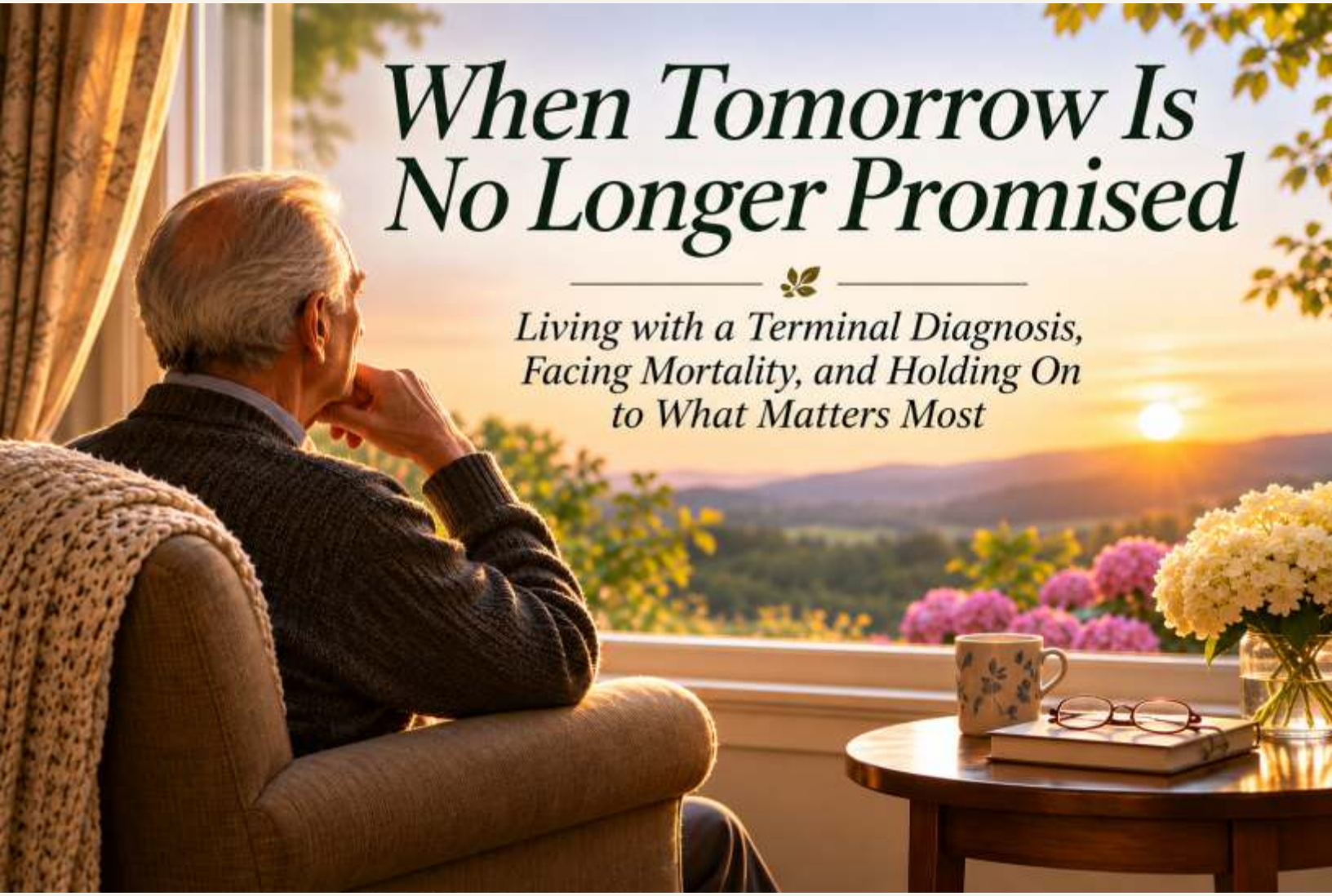

GRIEF & HEALING / FAMILY EDUCATION SERIES

When Tomorrow Is No Longer Promised

Living with a Terminal Diagnosis, Facing Mortality, and Holding On to What Matters Most

By Ron L. Germann

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When Tomorrow Is No Longer Promised



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There is something profoundly unsettling about hearing that your life may be coming to an end while you are still very much alive. The world outside the doctor's office hasn't changed. Cars continue moving through traffic, people hurry to work, children laugh, and somewhere, someone is making dinner reservations for next month or planning a vacation for next year. Yet your world has changed completely.

You have just been told that the future you imagined may not be yours to experience. You may have months, perhaps longer, perhaps less. Even the physicians may not know with certainty. You walk out carrying information that feels too enormous to comprehend, wondering how something so extraordinary can happen on such an ordinary day.

Beneath the confusion, fear, and disbelief, a thought begins to take shape: I'm still here. I'm still me. How am I supposed to live knowing that I may soon die?

The Loneliness of Knowing

One of the most difficult parts of receiving a terminal diagnosis is realizing that nobody else can experience it quite the way you do. Your spouse may be devastated, your children frightened, and your friends heartbroken. They are facing the possibility of losing you, while you are facing the possibility of losing everything familiar to you: your home, your routines, your relationships, and the simple reassurance of waking up each morning to another ordinary day.

Even when surrounded by people who love you, there can be a loneliness that is difficult to explain. You may look across the dinner table at your spouse and wonder what life will be like for them when your chair is empty. You may watch your grandchildren playing and realize there are birthdays, graduations, and milestones you may never witness. When family members discuss plans for next summer, you may quietly wonder whether you will still be there to share those experiences.

Sometimes you may want to talk about these feelings, while at other times you may desperately want everyone to stop discussing your illness and simply treat you as the person you have always been. Both reactions are understandable. You are not obligated to spend every remaining conversation discussing death, nor should you feel guilty for wanting moments of normalcy. You are still living, and you deserve to be treated that way.

Please Don't Ask Me to Be Brave All the Time

People often struggle to find the right words when someone they love is dying. They offer encouragement, urging you to stay positive, keep fighting, or never give up. These expressions usually come from genuine love and concern, but they can unintentionally make it more difficult for you to express what you actually feel.

What if you're frightened, angry, or exhausted by treatments, appointments, and the constant expectation that you must demonstrate strength? What if you want to acknowledge that you may not recover without someone immediately contradicting you? Perhaps what you need most isn't another person telling you to be brave, but someone willing to sit beside you and acknowledge the reality of your circumstances.

There is a profound difference between offering hope and refusing to recognize someone's fear. You can be courageous and terrified at the same time. You can appreciate the life you've lived while feeling angry about the years you may lose. You can hope for more time while preparing for the possibility that it won't come. Accepting the reality of a terminal illness does not mean you have stopped wanting to live.

There may be days when you feel remarkably peaceful and others when you are overwhelmed by sadness or frustration. These changing emotions do not represent weakness or a failure to cope. They are part of confronting something for which few people can ever be fully prepared. You should not have to spend your remaining energy making everyone else comfortable with what is happening to you.

When the People I Love Begin Grieving Me

There may come a moment when you notice that the people closest to you have begun looking at you differently. Your spouse watches you more carefully, your children call more frequently, and friends become unusually emotional when saying goodbye. Ordinary conversations take on an uncomfortable significance, and you may begin to feel that everyone is waiting for something terrible to happen.

Some people become overly protective, while others withdraw because they cannot bear the thought of losing you. A few may disappear altogether, leaving you hurt and confused. Their

absence may reflect their own fear and helplessness rather than a lack of affection, but understanding that possibility does not necessarily make the loneliness easier.

Meanwhile, you may find yourself trying to protect your family from the reality of your illness. You minimize your pain, conceal your fears, and reassure your spouse that everything will be fine, even when you are uncertain yourself. You may avoid talking about death because you cannot bear to see the expression on your child's face. Over time, however, this desire to protect everyone can create emotional distance precisely when you most need closeness.

Honest conversations can be difficult, but they can also be deeply comforting. Allowing loved ones to express their sadness, ask difficult questions, and acknowledge their fears may give you permission to do the same. You do not have to protect one another from every painful emotion. Sometimes the greatest expression of love is simply being willing to face an uncomfortable truth together.

When a Marriage Faces the Unthinkable

A terminal diagnosis can change a marriage in ways neither person anticipated. A relationship that once centered on shared responsibilities, companionship, affection, and plans for the future may gradually become dominated by medications, medical appointments, caregiving, and uncertainty. The person who has always been independent may suddenly need assistance, while the spouse who once relied upon them becomes the primary caregiver.

These changes can be emotionally difficult for both partners. You may resent losing your independence and then feel guilty for becoming impatient with the person who is trying to help. You may withdraw physically or emotionally because you no longer feel like yourself. Your spouse, meanwhile, may be struggling with exhaustion, anticipatory grief, and the fear of making mistakes while caring for you.

There may also be questions you hesitate to express. Will your spouse be financially secure? Will they be lonely? Will someone else eventually share the life you once shared together? Will they remember the happiness of your marriage, or will the difficulties of your final illness overshadow those memories?

The possibility that someone you love may eventually build a life without you can be both comforting and heartbreaking. You want them to be happy, yet imagining that happiness without your presence may hurt more than you expected. These feelings are not necessarily selfish or contradictory; they reflect the complicated emotions of loving someone deeply

while recognizing that your time together may be limited.

Perhaps one of the most meaningful conversations a couple can have is also one of the hardest. Telling your spouse that you want them to continue living, laughing, finding companionship, and experiencing happiness after your death can be an extraordinary expression of love. Those words may be difficult to speak, but they may become a lasting source of reassurance.

The Relationships That Remain Unfinished

Few people reach the later chapters of life without regrets. There may be a child from whom you've become estranged, a sibling you haven't spoken to in years, or a friendship that ended over something that now seems insignificant. Perhaps there is an apology you've rehearsed countless times but never spoken, or someone whose betrayal still causes pain.

A terminal diagnosis can make these unfinished relationships feel urgent. You may wonder whether you should reach out, forgive, apologize, or attempt to repair what has been broken. Sometimes reconciliation brings understanding and relief that neither person thought possible. An honest conversation may provide an opportunity to acknowledge past mistakes, express affection, or simply recognize that a relationship once mattered deeply.

Not every relationship, however, can or should be repaired. You cannot control another person's willingness to forgive, listen, or accept responsibility for their actions. Nor does approaching death obligate you to welcome someone back into your life who has repeatedly caused harm.

What matters is considering whether there is something you genuinely need to say or do for your own peace of mind. Sometimes that means offering an apology or extending forgiveness. At other times, it means accepting that you have done what you can and allowing an unresolved relationship to remain in the past. A peaceful ending to life does not require a perfect resolution to every chapter that came before it.

I Don't Want to Become a Burden

For someone who has spent a lifetime providing for others, accepting help can be especially difficult. Perhaps you've always been the person who fixed things, paid the bills, made decisions, or took care of everyone else. Now you may need assistance with tasks you once performed without a second thought, and the resulting loss of independence can feel deeply personal.

You may worry about the emotional, physical, and financial toll your illness places on your family. You may feel embarrassed by changes in your body or frustrated when others begin making decisions without consulting you. At times, you may even question whether your illness has taken away the identity you spent a lifetime building.

Yet your worth was never measured solely by what you could accomplish, earn, or provide. You remain the person who built those relationships, shared those experiences, and contributed to the lives of others. Allowing someone to care for you does not erase the years you spent caring for them.

Your desire for dignity, privacy, and independence still deserves respect. Tell your caregivers what matters to you, participate in decisions whenever possible, and explain which activities you would prefer to continue doing for yourself. Accepting assistance does not mean surrendering your identity. Sometimes love means allowing others the opportunity to give back a small portion of what they have received.

What Frightens Me Most May Not Be Death

For some people, the greatest fear is not what happens after death, but what may happen before it. The possibility of pain, the loss of mobility, the inability to communicate, or the fear of struggling for breath can be more frightening than death itself. Others worry about becoming confused, losing recognition of loved ones, or spending their final moments alone.

These fears deserve honest conversations rather than vague reassurances. You have the right to ask your medical team what symptoms your illness may cause, what treatments are available, and how discomfort can be managed. Palliative care can help relieve symptoms and improve quality of life alongside other medical treatments. When appropriate, hospice care can provide comfort-focused medical, emotional, and spiritual support during the final stage of life.

You may also want to consider which medical interventions you would or would not accept if your condition worsens. Discussing these preferences with your healthcare professionals and documenting them through appropriate advance directives can help ensure that your wishes are understood, particularly if you become unable to communicate.

Beyond the physical concerns, there may be deeper questions about mortality itself. What does it mean that one day you will no longer be here? Is there an afterlife? Will you see loved ones who died before you? Have you lived the life you were meant to live, and will anything of you remain?

For some, religious faith provides profound comfort. For others, approaching death may challenge long-held beliefs or awaken spiritual questions they have never seriously considered. You may experience peace one day and uncertainty the next. There is no single correct way to confront mortality, and you do not need to pretend that you have found every answer.

There Are Things I Need You to Know

When time becomes uncertain, words left unspoken can take on extraordinary importance. Perhaps you have never told your children how proud you are of them, or your spouse how much you appreciated the sacrifices made throughout your marriage. Perhaps you've spent a lifetime assuming that the people closest to you already understood how deeply you loved them.

Now may be the time to make certain they know. Tell your children what they have meant to you, share memories of falling in love with your spouse, and tell your grandchildren stories about their parents when they were young. Explain the experiences that shaped you, the mistakes that taught you, and the values you hope will continue through future generations.

Some conversations may involve apologies, forgiveness, or reassurance. Others may simply be opportunities to express gratitude for a lifetime of shared experiences. You do not need perfectly chosen words or elaborate declarations. Often, the most meaningful things you can say are also the simplest: “I love you,” “I'm proud of you,” “I'm sorry,” or “You made my life better.”

If speaking becomes difficult, consider writing letters, recording messages, or creating short videos. You might leave something for important occasions you may not be present to celebrate, such as a wedding, graduation, anniversary, or the birth of a grandchild. A familiar voice, a handwritten note, or a personal story can become a treasured connection to someone who is no longer physically present.

These messages are not intended to replace your presence, nor should creating them become another exhausting obligation. They are simply opportunities to leave expressions of love that may bring comfort in the years ahead.

Preparing for Death Without Surrendering Life

There may be practical matters you want to address while you are still able to make decisions. Estate documents, financial information, personal belongings, medical preferences, and funeral arrangements can all become sources of uncertainty or disagreement when families are left without guidance.

Discussing these matters may be uncomfortable, especially when loved ones are reluctant to acknowledge that death may be approaching. Nevertheless, making your wishes known can be an expression of care and an opportunity to maintain some control over circumstances that increasingly feel beyond your influence.

You may have strong preferences about burial or cremation, religious traditions, music, readings, or the way you would like family and friends to gather in remembrance. Perhaps you want a traditional funeral that brings generations together, or a quiet gathering focused on the people closest to you. You may also wish to address how those arrangements will be funded so your family is not left facing unexpected expenses or difficult financial decisions.

Thoughtful advance planning can reduce uncertainty, prevent misunderstandings, and allow loved ones to focus more fully on supporting one another. It can also provide reassurance that your personal wishes have been heard and respected.

Once these important matters have been addressed, however, give yourself permission to return your attention to living. Preparing for death should not require you to surrender the life you still have. There is a time for making arrangements, and there is a time for putting those concerns aside to enjoy the people and experiences that remain meaningful to you.

I Still Want Ordinary Days

Not everyone facing a terminal diagnosis wants to travel the world, complete an ambitious bucket list, or accomplish something extraordinary. Sometimes the greatest desire is simply to experience another ordinary day without the illness becoming the center of every conversation.

You may want to sit at the dinner table and talk about something other than medical appointments. Perhaps you want to watch a favorite movie without someone asking whether you're comfortable every few minutes, or hear your family laughing without the conversation becoming quiet when you enter the room. You may want to enjoy a beautiful afternoon without immediately wondering how many more you will experience.

More than anything, you may want to be seen as yourself rather than as a patient or someone who is dying. You are still the person who has spent a lifetime loving, laughing, working, making mistakes, and creating memories. Your illness is now part of your story, but it is not the entirety of who you are.

There is no requirement that every remaining day be profound or productive. Some days may be difficult, others uneventful, and some filled with unexpected joy. You are allowed to laugh, make plans, enjoy familiar routines, and occasionally forget about your diagnosis. A

life approaching its end is still a life worth living.

What Will Remain of Me?

As you begin to contemplate your own mortality, you may wonder what will remain when you are gone. Will people remember your voice, your laughter, or the stories you told? Will your grandchildren remember the lessons you tried to teach them? Will the home you worked so hard to create still feel connected to you?

These questions touch something deeply human: the desire to know that our lives mattered. Yet the influence of a life is not limited to how long someone remembers our name or preserves our possessions. It exists in the lessons we teach, the traditions we establish, the kindness we extend, and the ways we influence the people around us.

A child may repeat something you taught them without remembering when they first heard it. A grandchild may inherit your sense of humor, a spouse may continue a tradition you began together, or a friend may offer kindness to someone else because of kindness you once showed them. Your influence may continue in ways you will never see or fully understand.

A meaningful legacy does not require extraordinary wealth, public recognition, or a perfect life. It may be found in the quiet, lasting effects of having loved and been loved. The most important things we leave behind are not always the things that can be placed in a box, passed down through an estate, or preserved in a photograph.

When the Time Comes, I Hope They Remember My Life

There may eventually come a point when you recognize that the future is becoming smaller. Plans once made for years ahead may become plans for weeks, days, or simply tomorrow. That realization can bring profound sadness, but it may also create an unexpected clarity about what matters most.

Old disagreements may lose their urgency, possessions may become less significant, and ordinary gestures of affection may take on extraordinary meaning. A hand resting on yours, a familiar voice in the next room, or someone remembering how you take your coffee can become a reminder of the love and companionship that have shaped your life.

You may not be able to choose how much time remains, and you may not always be able to control what happens to your body. But within the limits of your circumstances, you can still express love, offer forgiveness, share your stories, and allow others to care for you. You can still find moments of meaning and connection, even while living with uncertainty.

Perhaps the greatest peace is not found in becoming completely unafraid of death. Perhaps it comes from recognizing that you have loved, that you have been loved, and that your presence has made a difference in the lives of others.

When the time comes, you may hope that your family remembers more than the illness, the hospital rooms, and the difficult final days. You may hope they remember the laughter, the celebrations, the ordinary afternoons, and the years of shared experiences that came before. Above all, you may hope they remember you as you truly were, rather than allowing the circumstances of your death to overshadow the richness of your life.

And perhaps, if you could leave them with one final thought, it would be this:

“Don't let the sadness of losing me become greater than the happiness of having known me. I was here. I loved you. And even though I cannot stay, the life we shared will always have mattered.”

At MyPrePlanning.com, we believe that facing the end of life deserves the same compassion, dignity, and thoughtful attention as every other important chapter. Preparing for death is not simply about making arrangements. It is about honoring the person who is still living, protecting the people they love, and helping meaningful wishes become lasting expressions of care.