

**Finishing the Business:
Reflections on a Facet of Spiritual care in a Hospice Context**

Tom Gordon

Marjorie was 52 years old, and she was dying of cancer. Her strong faith and assurance of God's love, sustained over many years in a Pentecostal Church setting, did not protect her from the fears and anxieties that haunted her in the face of death. It took some time to work through with her the roots of these fears. It wasn't about fearing that God would suddenly change his mind and send her to hell after all. It wasn't about leaving some sin 'unrepented' which would mean that she would miss her place in heaven. It wasn't even about the process of dying, the lack of control she might face and the pain she might experience. Her fear, deep down, was centred on her relationship with her daughter. This young woman, single mother, with a chequered past and an uncertain present, had had to face with her mother, so many problems over the years, and indeed had caused her mother so much heartache, that their whole relationship was about dealing with the problems, and not dealing with each other. Marjorie had forgotten - if she'd ever known - how to share her feelings with her daughter, how to talk about each other, how to say what needed to be said. And now as time was running out, she did not have the energy to begin a process that she knew needed to be embarked upon. She didn't have the clarity to know what to say. She didn't have the language to put it into words. This woman had business with her daughter she needed to finish. And the longer it lay unfinished, the more fearful she became. When we'd worked on this for a bit, Marjorie decided that she wanted to write a letter to her daughter, to be read before she died or after death had taken her away; she didn't mind which. What she couldn't say in words, she could write down on paper. But she was too weak to write. And she was too tired even to think straight. So she asked me if I would write down the words for her if she dictated them to me. Over a few days, a little at a time, that's what we did together. Slowly, stumblingly, she said what she needed to say. It was gentle and it was kind. She spoke of forgiveness, of love, of hopes for the future. She gave advice about parenthood, about lessons to be passed on to her grandson. She shared some regrets. She offered her insights into faith and God's love. The process was draining for both of us. But it was beautiful to be part of it. And it was of God.

Marjorie died shortly after the letter was written. Her daughter read it after her mother's death. I do not know the effect reading it had on her, but I do know the effect it had on Marjorie to write it. She was finishing business. She was putting to rest that

which had caused her to be frightened. She was sorting the business of a life and a relationship with a daughter, as best she could, and finding an inner peace so that things could be laid down as finished as they could be.

I once heard the role of a hospice chaplain described as "helping people articulate their longings." I would add to that. It is to help them articulate their longings and therefore to have the facility to finish the business before death comes. When an old man turns his head on the pillow and says: "I love you hen," to the wife he had previously told me he'd "forgotten how to talk to because we've been married for 48 years;" and she responds with: "Aye, and I love you to Willie," then they are finishing business. When a craggy old miner, atheist and Marxist tells you his life story and asks you at the end: "Has it been any good?" then in his search for affirmation and worth, he is finishing business. When a dignified, frail Christian lady asks for assurance that God will forgive sin, "even when people can't," but never tells you what has prompted the question, and when her son shares with you in the last week of her life that his mother found a peace of mind because of the assurance that was given - even though *he* didn't know what the issue was either - then another lady is finishing business in the face of death. When a young man discusses his funeral with you, checking out what's possible, identifying the music to be played, the words to be read, the songs to be sung, because he is unable to do so with his parents as they are unwilling in their pain to discuss the issue with him, then he too is finishing business. We would all hope, in the knowledge of faith, and in the awareness of the fundamental issues of life and death, that we would live our lives with the business finished all the time, for "tomorrow we die." But none of us do so all of the time. So for many it is only in the knowledge of impending death that the unfinished business becomes the source of anxiety, fear and panic, as it crowds in upon them, crying out to be "sorted." If then, as chaplains, in all aspects of ministry, or simply out of our human sensitivity and compassion, we can so create a climate of trust and openness, that people can articulate what they need to say, *and* finish business in what they need to do, then we are giving them at the conclusion of their life, a gift beyond measure - allowing their broken and damaged spirits to die healed.

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