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This evening I went to a Spooky Music concert at my home congregation: a light-hearted annual event which playfully brings our community together in costumes to hear creepy music from the organ. But half-way through the concert’s tone changed; from spookiness to holy remembrances of those who have died before us. We were reminded that Halloween’s beginnings also are connected to All Saints’ Day. That celebration is still on our minds as we release the Concord’s issue on death and dying; recognizing our culture’s hesitance and denial of death we take it on head on with care and concern.

This past year, death has come a lot closer for me than any other year. As an Intern Pastor, I found myself preaching at funerals, counseling those whose loved ones had recently died and even visiting with those who knew their own death was near. But more importantly, people who mattered to me died this year. My pastor, Andrew Rogness, who I credit as one of the influences who brought me to Seminary, died after a long battle with cancer. And a close family friend, Ben Larson, tragically died in the earthquake in Haiti. What was so difficult in grieving these deaths was that I was thousands of miles away from my loved ones who also knew these wonderful men. In a time where words simply are not enough, I craved the chance to ritually say good-bye, or even to fully comprehend that they were dead. So, I still have moments now being home where the creepiness from the organ seeps into my home and turns the reality of death in some way and the articles in this issue further bring our community together in costumes to hear creepy music from the organ. 

Death and dying are a part of life and living. We have all encountered the reality of death in some way and the articles in this issue are witness to those encounters with death and dying. Through them we hear of our ways of ritualizing death, theologizing death, grieving deaths, and coming to terms with our own mortality. Yet through them all runs a stream of hope; that in the midst of the hurt, the confusion and mystery surrounding death we cling to the hope that we are promised eternity in heaven with God.

**Letters from Paul**

**Engaging the World**

By Paul Harrington

Seminary Pastor

America is once again in one of those election cycles that never seems to end. It’s not that it’s so long; it’s just that it’s so contentious and, yes, downright deceptive. WCCO television recently did a “fact check” analysis of one of the attack ads it was running for a particular candidate and found that all three claims made about their opponent in the ad were bogus. Still, they kept running the ad! I could ask why, but I know the answer. Media outlets love campaign seasons. It’s where they make tons of money. Meg Whitman in California has so far spent $141 million on her campaign, and she is not done yet.

I have often wondered how different our election cycles would be if candidates could only tout their own accomplishments and their own credentials without so much as one negative word about their opponents. I know this could never happen because we so highly prize our first amendment right of free speech, as indeed we should. Still, I seriously wonder if the framers of our beloved Constitution ever envisioned a day when political candidates would spend millions upon millions of dollars on ads that do little more than tell lies about their opponents. What possible good does this do for our nation?

But having said all of this, I am still very optimistic about our republic and the election process. Compared to many nations in the world, we look rather virtuous. The Al Franken/Norm Coleman meticulous ballot recount some months ago demonstrated just how much integrity our system really has. And I still have faith in the intelligence of the American people even as I pray that we never fall victim to the voices of extremism, from either the far right or the far left. Some form of centrist government almost always best serves the citizens of this great land.

I do recall a great quote from some wise soul who stated that a dictatorship survives because the people fear, a monarchy survives because the people respect, and a democracy survives because the people are virtuous. I pray we never lose our virtue as a nation.

So go and vote. Render to Ceasar the things that are Ceasar’s. Engage the world that Christ died to redeem. Support candidates that are free of corruption and who seek after the greater good for all our citizens. Encourage those who speak for the poor, the children, the elderly, and the disabled. And in all that you do, do all for the glory of God.”
Looking Back, Looking Forward

By Thomas Jackson
MTh Student

Two perspectives of the Luther Seminary community seem to continually bounce around in our various conversations. First, that we should try, or are beginning to recognize, that not all students fit into the fair-haired Norwegian MDiv cookie-cutter mold. Second, that with our common academic lifestyle, the barrage of reading, writing, and rationalizing, we can occasionally suffer academic burn-out. It is with these two perspectives in mind, that myself and a few other students would like to propose the formation of an artistic sub-community on campus.

This sub-community will exist with the primary intention of allowing students and family members to participate in the creation of artistic-theological works. Realizing that not all are called or given the gifts of painting, sculpture, photography, etc., we seek to invite anyone with a passion for art to join us. There are going to be a few ‘principles’ for this sub-community as we wish to encourage creative and theological possibility. We welcome artistic expression in nearly all of its forms. Sculpture, photography, painting, mixed-media, poetry, fictional writing, or other works are welcome. Pretty much anything that isn’t a term paper. If you’ve ever created artwork, or felt inclined to do so, with scriptural, theological, or pastoral motivation, we’re very interested in working/creating with you.

This group seeks to be one wherein a variety of artistic mediums and theological perspectives are welcome. We also want to be a place where one can feel free to explain the impetus or significance of their artistic work as well as engage in artistic or theological dialogue with other participants. If this group sounds like a community you’d like to be a part of, please send an email to luthersemarts@gmail.com with your name, artistic medium, and subject matter of interest. For the Facebook addicts among us, search for “Luther Seminary Arts” in order to join the group through Facebook. Questions, comments, or suggestions can be raised through those communicative methods as well.
Meet your 2010-11 Student Council

Michael Rusert
At-Large Commuter Rep
I would like to represent my fellow classmates providing a voice that intentionally addresses our hopes and concerns for Luther Seminary. I am particularly interested in the interaction of ecology and theology. Luther works to further equip leaders to participate in God’s on-going work in the world, including care for creation. How is Luther addressing this?

Scott Ruud
At-Large Distance Learner (DL) Rep
I wanted to be on the Student Council because I am so appreciative to Luther Seminary for taking such a huge initiative with the DL program. I wanted to have a chance to support the DL program in conversations with the administration and with the Board of Directors and Board of Trustees. It is important to let these people know how much programs like these are appreciated by the people who utilize them, especially when they were not a sure thing when initiated.

Kelsey Plummer
MDiv Junior Rep
I’m on Student Council because I have a vision for Luther and hopefully I can share it them and put some of my ideas into action. Also, it’s a great way to get involved and serve the students.

Peter McLellan
MA/MSM Senior Rep
Student council just wasn’t on my radar last year, but since given the opportunity to run, and now serve, I have been been inspired by the opportunity to communicate with faculty, administrators, and other important people.

Rachel Ringlaben
MA/MSM Senior Rep
We have a significant number of students on campus that start their academic career at Luther under one degree program and end up switching to another program because of a continual process of discernment. I joined Student Council recognizing that our student body is a community that participates in continual discernment.

Zachary Nelson
MDiv Middler Rep
I have never functioned in this sort of leadership role prior to this year—so I thought I’d give it whirl and (all the while) learn a little more about what it means to serve and be a part of this broader Luther Seminary community.

Denise Fossen
MDiv Middler Rep
Open, honest, and respectful communication builds bridges and not walls. I want to be a liaison, advocate, and a voice between and for students, especially middler MDiv students, and staff, faculty, and Luther Seminary board of directors.

Erika Benson
Secretary and MA/MSM Junior Rep
I want to be a part of Student Council because I desire to be a part of positive change for the campus community and a voice for the students and their concerns.

Ricardo Fonseca
At-Large International Student Rep
My intention is to facilitate communication between those who I represent—international students – and other organizations that are part of Luther. Secondarily, I would like to bring direct attention to the cultural richness of the Luther community.
Play Politics

By Adam Morton
MDiv Intern, Faith-Lilac Way Lutheran Church; Robbinsdale, MN

Another election has come, and with it, a favorite American (if not merely human) sport: hating politics. Politics is easy to hate; nobody will contradict you if you decry the meanness and silliness of political campaigns, and they nod in agreement if you condemn the legislative process: “I don’t understand why the parties can’t just work together and get things done!” As it happens, even most of those who love elections (for some, even election returns in countries never visited fascinate) also hate politics. They hate the endless gnawing grind of it, the way good sense and justice are subverted, and the pure human mess that is politics. Who can blame them?

What people really want is politics’ end. The desire for an end penetrates into the political process itself, regardless of political sympathies. Each side holds up an ideal, a vision of the politically settled (or of endless, forward-rolling revolution), and says, “If only, then politics could cease.” All we need is to uphold the constitution, restore free markets and solid moral values, and from there it’s just tinkering. Or to make sure that the poor are taken care of, that nothing inhibits our movement into the future, and from there it’s just details.

This vision of the end is so powerful that it compromises both elections and “normal” politics. Each election is viewed as a gateway into that final state, the one that could establish the new, non-political era—and therefore, each election is also a betrayal, the tragic overturning of an otherwise inevitable march toward politics’ end. In this way, elections become all-consuming. The wrong importance is attached to them. Each one is “historic,” “the most important election of our lifetime.” The time after an election is one fleeting opportunity to invite the end before the next election betrays again. We cycle between hope and despair, never perceiving our own lies, our own escapism.

But politics will not cease in this world. The end cannot come on our electoral schedule, and it never could. So in this compromised politics, in our anti-politics that really seeks politics’ end, we lose both Christ and the world he has made. Christ because we commit ourselves to an end that comes apart from him. This world because we hate it and its wretched politics, and just want it to stop.

A word of encouragement then: In this world you will have trouble—political trouble. Do not fear, because our Lord has overcome the world. So play politics, fearlessly, even learn to love it—not seeking the end, because we know in whom it rests—but in order to preserve and defend life in this world while we still must.

Daniel Foster
President and At-Large Ecumenical Rep

I am on student council because I have been called to affect change in the life of the student body at Luther Seminary.

John Biggs
Treasurer and At-Large Second Career Rep

I wanted to join student council in order to voice the concerns and perspectives of second-career students on campus. As well as to give back to the Luther community from which I have already received so many blessings.

Micah Pearson
Vice-President and MDiv Junior Rep

To see where and theology and politics meet at Luther seminary.

Grant Applehans
MDiv Senior Rep

I am hopeful that we will be able to open space for ideas to be raised and incubated for the benefit of the student body. I also hope to open channels for student engagement and innovation in campus issues which they are passionate about.

Rachel Wrenn
MDiv Senior Rep

I am on student council because you elected me... Foolish seniors!
Death and Dying among the Ameru tradition of Kenya

By Beatrice Kanake
PhD Student

For most Africans, death is viewed with a cultural and religious perspective. A person’s ontology is defined by belonging to the community, in beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and feasts. Individualism is dismissed, for to be human is to be a community. The individual’s achievement is encouraged and celebrated and misdeeds mourned. Death is a rite of passage to the world of the departed. As a result, the community celebrates both life and death of members who continue to be remembered through family.

Please note, for most Africans, marriage is for procreation intended for building a community of care and relationship. So, when a person is ill and in the final days of life, the family acts as primary caregiver, taking shifts beside the dying, at home or in the hospital. The Ameru community must also keep watch over each other through their greetings: “Good morning/evening”, “How are you, and your children, and your clan?” as check-in for the community’s well-being. If children are well, parents are well, too. If a person is ill and dying, members of the clan will pass word around for social support and grief work for relatives.

If the family cannot afford the medical bills, the community will pull resources together—Harambee—to pay medical and burial costs to honor the departed’s transition into the next life. One does not prepare for death but wait for it. The dying gives instructions to the family before death so they can face the loss. Upon death, the church leads the burial of its member but will only participate as neighbors for non-members. In this regard, community takes the lead in the burial ceremony, which is usually at the family homestead where the body is laid to rest. Sometimes Africans write their wills, but the family then challenges them. In this way, Christianity is changing the concept of death and dying in Africa.

The Day of the Dead in Peru

By Jesus Purisaca
MDiv Junior

The Day of the Dead is celebrated in Peru as influenced by the Spanish people and the native Peruvians. The Catholic tradition in Peru, celebrates each November 1 and November 2 as the day of all the saints, and on that day in the different regions in Peru - coast, mountain, and jungle - the people celebrate this special day.

In the Andean areas, people go to different houses and pray for the dead and the members of the families, while giving food to these people. They say this kind of work is very hard, because in the highlands it is cold going house to house in the evenings. I think the traditions from the highlands have shaped this day in the whole of Peru.

Another way the day is celebrated is by going to the cemetery. The members of the family go together to the cemetery, and they bring food and beverages that the dead liked most in life. They eat, and leave a special portion for the dead. Since ancient times in the old Peru, the people, before the Incan Empire, believed that one day of the year the dead people came to eat with their families.

Something very special for this day are the WAWAS. This is a Quechua word meaning “baby” and they are loaves of bread the size of a baby. This is why they say: Tanta Wawa (Tanta: bread). For the day of the dead, the bakeries are very busy because the people, mostly from the highlands that now are living in Lima or other important cities in Peru, bring their traditions to the cities.

Also in Peru, in interior areas, the people go to the cemeteries on the 1st of November and they carry candles to place on the graves and light them for the dead relatives. This is important because the people spend the whole night in the cemetery. The next day they are still there eating and dancing to the favorite music of the dead relative. These are some of my memories from Peru and the celebration of the Day of the Dead.
Grieving in Ministry

By Elizabeth Damico
MDiv Senior

Lately, I’ve heard voices in my head. Don’t worry, these voices are primarily from wise and experienced pastors and professors. The voices have spoken to me as I stood at a painful, confusing and somehow enlightening intersection: the intersection where faith and theology meet, or to put it in vocational terms, the intersection where being a minister and a human being meet. The first voice echoed in my head this past summer when a dear friend of mine died—suddenly and tragically died. The days following this death I existed in a fog of tears, sleepless nights, funeral planning and travels. I heard all sorts of comments that others were using to cope or, I suppose, to comfort me. You know, those things people say when someone dies, “She’s in a better place,” or “God needed another angel,” and the voice in my head was screaming in response. This voice was a wisecracking Luther Seminary professor who said in a class last spring, “Grandma isn’t waiting at the end of the bright, white tunnel!” In light of losing my young, vibrant and beloved friend, I was left in a sea of questions. Where is she? Is she really at peace? Is she eternally planning and traveling? I heard all sorts of comments that others were using to cope with the hope that faith can be seeded in the midst of our wounds and experiences will challenge the work set before us.

Are We Quick to Judge?

By Beau Nelson
MDiv Senior

I know a woman whose 80+ year old mother died several years ago. Over and over again this woman received platitudes such as, “She had a good, long life,” or “It was her time,” suggesting that because of her mother’s age the death was not that bad. But each time this woman heard these things, she wondered, “Why does everyone say that an elderly person’s death is good, or at least, better than a young person’s death? That isn’t fair to me or my mother!”

This woman’s experience is just one example of how many of us are quick to judge the goodness or the badness of death, based on age or other circumstances. On the other side of that coin, why is a young person’s death often labeled a tragedy? When an older person dies, we say, “It was his time,” but how often is that said at the death of a child? Instead, we say, “He died before his time,” or “It’s not fair, or “It shouldn’t have been this way”; responses that sound all too much like Mary and Martha, “Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died!” (see John 11). As Christians, we use words like “resurrection,” “eternal life,” or “everlasting life” to try to describe the Promise that we have from Scripture about death. We believe and we proclaim that death is not the end of life. We quote Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:54 saying that “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” In funeral sermons preachers attempt to unpack what this means with the hope that faith can be seeded in the midst of grief.

My question is, does calling a death good or bad make it any easier to believe in the promise of life that never ends? If we truly believe and trust in this promise, why do we call any death bad? Yes, the future as we may have conceived of it is now different. Yes, how we live and act in the world may be altered because of a death. But are those things bad, or are they just different and new? What would the Christian Church look like if we actually stopped being afraid of death and started taking Jesus at his word? What if we cease our speculative arguing about what the afterlife looks like (with no one Christian agreeing completely with another), and focus on what we actually claim to believe: that in the death and resurrection of Christ we have been promised a life and a future that cannot be erased at death, but continues in ways we can only imagine. So let us stop worrying about death and actually start living!
By David Lose
Associate Professor of Biblical Preaching

Recent surveys on religious knowledge, like that conducted by the Pew Foundation, are fairly discouraging. For instance, it’s hard to feel good about the teaching and preaching occurring in our congregations when we discover that persons identifying themselves as Mormons, Jews, or Atheist/Agnostic know more about the Bible and Christianity than mainline Protestants. A perennial area of confusion concerns the afterlife. As one Newsweek writer recently commented, “while 80 percent of Americans say they believe in heaven, few of us have the slightest clue about what we mean.” In particular, people seem regularly to confuse the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul. Talk with a group of regular, church-going Christians for any length of time, and you’ll soon find out not only that there is a diversity of opinion about what life after death looks like, but that, more often than not, most people lean in the direction of believing that we each have an immortal soul that survives our physical death.

And, I’d argue, this is for good reason. Immortality, quite frankly, is easier for us to imagine. Most people are, as Yale Psychologist Paul Bloom has recently and persuasively argued, essentialists – that is, we believe that each and every person has a particular essence that is indisputably unique. (Why else would anyone, let alone scads of people, bid and pay significant amounts of money for clothing, golf clubs, even vials of sweat, associated with celebrities except that we believe these articles contain the essence of the person we adore?) Immortality aligns with our essentialist beliefs. That is, it makes sense that our soul, the most often used to capture a sense of our core essence, would persist after death. Whatever its inherent appeal, however, immortality of the soul is neither the same as resurrection nor is it the belief taught in Christian creed and Scripture, and four differences between the two seem to best capture what is at stake in the distinction.

1) Immortality of the soul often implies a denigration of the body and, indeed, the whole creation. At the heart of most Platonic and Neo-platonic conceptions of the immortality of the soul, which have most formed modern-day beliefs about the same, rests the belief in the corrupted nature of the physical universe; hence the emphasis on the release of the incorruptible and imperishable soul from the lesser physical body at death. A Christian understanding of the resurrection, however, offers a higher view of creation. The “Fall,” from this point of view, does not eliminate the original goodness of creation or God’s commitment to that creation. Resurrection affirms God as creator and, indeed, the goodness of creation insofar as resurrection is, manifestly, re-creation; God creating once again from love.

2) Immortality tends to deny the reality of death. One might argue, in fact, that that is the whole point of immortality: to reduce the specter of death by promising that some part of us never dies. Christian resurrection maintains that we do, in fact, die; that there is an end to our experience, to ourselves. There is no avoiding this common fate and destiny of humanity. At the same time, however, Christians confess that death does not have the last word. In this sense, death is defeated, not because it is no longer hauntingly and pervasively real, but because in the face of the resurrection we discover that death is no longer ultimate.

3) Immortality tends to favor the nature, being, and significance of humanity over that of God. While some versions of immortality assert that the soul, once released from the confines of the body, is rejoined to God, yet God is largely passive, hardly conscious of the process, and easily substituted out of the equation for some more generic sense of Eternal Being or Full Consciousness. Resurrection, on the other hand, depends on an intentional, active, and loving God who will, in fact, raise us from the dead, recreate us anew, and draw us together in eternal relationship with God and each other.

4) Immortality claims that a part of us – our eternal soul or essence – will survive, while resurrection promises that God redeems the whole person. For this reason, Paul spoke of a “resurrection body,” something that while being qualitatively different from our earthly existence, yet implies that God redeems the whole person, not just a special part or portion (see 1 Cor. 15).

What’s at stake in these distinctions, I think, is the depth and breadth of the promise we are communicating through resurrection. We confess that the God who created from love continues to be committed to us and all creation and therefore redeems us, the whole of who we are, from the reality of death. This is the promise we receive at Baptism, as we are joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the one who himself died, was buried, and raised again.

While affirming the importance of this distinction, however, let me offer a word of caution and pastoral counsel. The piety our people have received or cultivated around these matters is often both largely unconscious and surprisingly strong. Therefore, when speaking with parishioners about these matters, go easy. The point isn’t to scold people because they don’t understand in its entirety or fullness the Christian doctrine of the resurrection (which of us really does?) but to offer the comfort and promise of the gospel. After teaching an Adult Forum on resurrection some years ago, a parishioner came to me afterward very upset. Her husband had died the previous year and her belief in the immortality of the soul had brought her comfort. As gently as I could, I said that I didn’t want to take that comfort away, but rather to make it stronger, more complete. “What I want and hope for,” I said, “is more than the wispy essence of your husband. I want the whole person for you, the whole person created, loved, and now redeemed by God in and through Christ.” That, it seemed, helped her reckon with her grief not by denying it but by promising that there would be an end to it; indeed, an end to all our grief, tears, limitations and suffering as the One who raised Christ from death promises to do the same also for us.
On Holy Ground

By Kathryn Schifferdecker
Assistant Professor Old Testament

“T would rather preach at a funeral than at a wedding. At a wedding, no one’s listening to you. They just want to see the bride and they want to party afterwards. At a funeral, now that’s when people really listen to your sermon.”

Don, a retired pastor in my internship parish, was fond of passing on advice to me, the young intern. And generally, I appreciated his advice, but this particular piece of wisdom struck me as a bit morbid, and somewhat self-serving. Who would prefer a funeral to a wedding? And wasn’t it self-centered to worry about whether people were listening to you?

In the years since, I have conducted a fair number of both funerals and weddings, and I have to say that I agree more and more with Don. Not because I dislike weddings, but because there is something sacred, something holy, about walking with people in times of death and dying.

One of my first experiences of standing on such holy ground was with Herbert, who was dying of cancer. In his 80’s, Herbert had lost his beloved wife a number of years before. The last time I visited him in the hospital, we both knew that death was near, and so we were able to talk about things that really mattered. Herbert was not particularly anxious about death, but he was disturbed by one question: “Will I know my wife when I get to heaven? Will we recognize each other?” Apparently, he had asked this question of another pastor who told him that they would not recognize each other, and who quoted Matt. 22:30 in support of his answer: “In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage.”

I told Herb that I felt sure he would recognize his wife in heaven; that she, in fact, was part of the “great cloud of witnesses” we read about in Hebrews 11-12, even now cheering us on in the race of faith. I said that the very good things in this life must be just foretastes of what we will experience in heaven, and that since the relationship with his wife was so central to the goodness of his life here, surely it would also be part of his life in heaven. That answer seemed to give Herb some peace. We prayed together and said our goodbyes. I shared that story with Herbert, who was dying of cancer. In his 80’s, Herbert had never been so full as at his funeral. His family later at his funeral, and it seemed to give them comfort to hear of Julie, for instance, a spitfire of a woman in her late 40’s who had been battling breast cancer for several years. One afternoon I got a call that Julie had collapsed. She was in a coma and on a ventilator, and family and friends were gathering.

Julie’s teenage son and daughter were heartbroken, as were her husband and numerous friends. And yet, even in that situation, I had a sense of being on holy ground. We all crowded into her hospital room. Her family had decided to take her off the ventilator, but they wanted some time together first. So I read some Scripture, we prayed together, and one by one her loved ones bent close to her ear and said their goodbyes. Then the friends left and I stayed with her family as the doctor took her off the ventilator. Plucky to the end, Julie breathed on her own for another day before dying. The church was never so full as at her funeral.

There are plenty of other situations of death and dying I could describe; some of them, like Herb’s death, peaceful—deaths mourned but not tragic. Other deaths that were, like Julie’s, unspeakably heart-breaking—the car crash that took the life of a teenage mother; the suicide of a wife and mother who lost her struggle with depression; the swift death of a beloved wife to pancreatic cancer. In each situation, even in the midst of grief, I counted it a privilege to walk with those going through the valley of the shadow of death. Holy ground, indeed.

But not holy because of death. Death, as St. Paul writes, is the “last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor. 15:26). Not holy because of death, but holy because of the presence of the God of life in the midst of the death and dying. Holy because I had the privilege and the responsibility of proclaiming in those situations the victory of Christ over sin and death, and the promise of resurrection.

I have realized, in the years since speaking with Don, that it is significant that people listen to what we have to say at funerals; not because we want to be the center of attention but because the message we are given to proclaim in those situations is so crucial: “Death has been swallowed up in victory! Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (1 Cor. 15:54-57). Take off your shoes, people. You’re on holy ground.
Funeral Director Wisdom
By Greg Gamm
Funeral Director, Macken Funeral Home, Rochester, MN

S
ince my graduation twenty seven years ago from Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Chicago, I have learned that dealing with people at one of the most difficult times in their life can be very challenging and rewarding at the same time. As a funeral director, or a clergy person, one needs to be very patient, caring, and compassionate, as well as a good listener and detail oriented. It is our job to honor the dead and comfort the bereaved by helping them adjust to an abrupt change in their lives.

Sometimes the family member dealing with the funeral plans is not always thinking clearly, especially if the death is traumatic. They are usually tired, stressed, and even frustrated. They can even come in being very angry about the death, which is a normal part of grieving. According to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross people go through five stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and, finally, acceptance. As funeral directors and clergy, we need to not take this personally. When making arrangements and dealing with a family during this time, it is important to go over the information slowly and to be very clear about what is going to happen in the next few days. Usually the first thing to determine is whether the body is going to be present for a service or cremated before or after the service. For some people, it is important that they view the body, while others do not need that part of the process.

The Minnesota law states that if a body is not going to be buried or cremated within 72 hours, it is necessary to do embalming. When family members have to come from long distances this enables them to be able to see their family member. A day, time, and place for the service are then arranged, and information for the death certificate and obituary are gathered. Social security and veterans benefits are also discussed at this time. Family members look to us for advice and direction in making decisions. We can inform them of the traditional way things are done, or what most people do. After the basic vital statistics have been gathered, we go over what services we will be providing for the family and the cost. If the family wants a traditional funeral with a religious service and burial, then they would choose a casket and vault. If the body is cremated, they would possibly want to look at urns, or urn vaults. After everything is arranged at the funeral home, we will make arrangements for the family to meet with the clergy person. Sometimes the clergy will even be present for the funeral arrangements. The funeral director and clergy then coordinate the times, choose songs, scripture readings, musicians, and arrange for a meal if the family desires. Funeral Directors are licensed professionals that are on call 24 hours a day and ready to help a family at a moment’s notice. Funeral directors and clergy work hand in hand to follow the family’s wishes as much as possible and create a dignified and meaningful experience for everyone involved in the death of a loved one.

Someone Must
Take Care of the Dead
By Kae Evensen
Pastor at Mercy Seat Lutheran Church, Minneapolis

U
ntil recently, I worked picking up dead bodies for a mortuary. Most of the removals were from homes or hospitals but there was the occasional stop at the morgue. If there is anything that can strip away sentimental ideas about death, picking up the dead will do it. One thing I quickly discovered was just how fast people begin to decay after death. As a pastor, I had dealt with death in the parish, but usually it was as they were dying and still looked pretty fresh, or when I saw them later all gussied up at the visitation.

On one level, body removal is just a job. Someone must take care of the dead. Someone has to get them from point A to point B. Carrying the dead is mostly hidden these days (which only lends itself to denial) since funeral directors don’t use fancy hearses anymore. Minivans are cheaper and if you take out the back seats, just the right size. So, when you’re driving along next to a minivan it’s just as likely that it’s a mortician as it is a dad hauling kids to basketball practice. You never know.

In the church we talk a lot about being a child of God. We tell confirmation kids about their baptisms, and we preach these promises from our pulpits. And of course, we lean into them at the funeral. But what about a dead body itself? How deep can these promises go?

Much like the task-y and tender duty of swaddling an infant, I would wrap the dead in a sheet. And each time, I could not help but think of John’s gospel, and Jesus who called rotty, old Lazarus out of the tomb. This Jesus, who then rose after mingling for three stinky days with the dead. So at a removal, whatever the condition I might find the body, I would say to myself, “This is a child of God.” As a Christian, a deeper reality pervades: made in God’s image, they are loved; their flesh is still precious to Christ. It was, is it, will always be.

In this short, lovely life together, we, elegant and curled, are always hurtling toward darkness. Life is brief, we are fragile, and each of us, knit so tenderly, is both frail and glorious. But Christ, true light, has entered the darkness ahead of us, and emerged, and we are woven into him, into life, into forever. All we need to know is that what we long for has already been given. All we need to know is that we, children of God, are never forgotten. All we need to know is there is someone who takes care of the dead.
When I Think of Death

By Dan Foster
MDiv Senior

When I hear the word death, I remember my mother, four months shy of her 59th birthday, lying in a hospital bed, unable to recover from a procedure to remove a bladder and kidney where cancer had been found. The doctors had done a bone scan. Twenty-one metastases of cancer were found throughout her skeleton. If she could only recover from the surgery she had, they would be able to treat the bone cancer.

At her bedside one evening, we were chatting. Talking about this, that, and the other thing. Mainly discussing options of dialysis (fighting for life) and hospice (acknowledging the end). Suddenly the left side of her face was not moving in sync with the right. She was talking out of the right side of her mouth and looking at my wife and I with only her right eye. The metastasis on her left temporal plate was affecting the nerve that controlled the left side of her face.

There was no hope now, the fight was limited to accepting the inevitable.

The next morning we walked into the room and she was smiling. She pulled her hands down from above her head and said to us, “I had a dream last night. Jesus was standing there and he said to me, ‘Linda, come home.’” She raised her left hand and made the ‘come here’ motion. My mother saw and understood the hope of what comes after death. She was comforted by Jesus’ presence, and I fully believe that she knew and understood the grace of God at that point. That afternoon she sent me out of the room with my father-in-law and told my wife Heather that the fighting was over, she was ready to go.

My mother was removed from life support. As she went into a diabetic coma, we sung the only hymn we could all quickly agree upon that we knew, “Jesus Loves Me.” By the time we got to the first refrain, her eyes were closed and she was no longer conscious. She was still singing though! Her lips were moving, words were being formed on the primal breaths, she was the only one singing as the rest of us stood by in amazement, tears running down our faces.

The next morning as dawn broke, after a restless night, mom breathed her last. She had been brought into God’s perfect embrace on July 4th, 2007. That Independence Day was like no other. In the morning we mourned my mother’s passing. In the evening, we celebrated the birth of the nation. Within 18 hours life and death were celebrated. Never before had the seasons of life been so close for me.

God came down in that moment my mom died, reminding us that life is still there to be lived, that death is nothing to fear, for in death comes life. So, when I think of death, I see life, the promise of what is to come.

“Never before had the seasons of life been so close for me.”

Seeing through a mirror dimly

By Dan Nelson
MDiv Middler

I have some thoughts on eternal life and resurrection. Jesus tells the criminal on the cross that he will be with him in Paradise. Elijah and Moses return when Jesus is transfigured on the mountain top. The dry bones are raised in Ezekiel. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Ultimately, there is the death and resurrection of Christ. Every Sunday I state that I “believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” But how does all that frame my view of death? I believe that Christ has liberated us from death and separation from God. So if death and separation are no more then we must have life and total communion. But how can I conceptualize a life in full relationship with God in light of my broken condition?

Death is becoming less of a theological abstraction as I watch my grandmother grow weaker and more confused with each passing month. When she was first admitted to the hospital after a fall last year, she had forgotten all nouns. My mother said, “You’re in the hospital.” “What is a hospital?” Grandma asked. “You are lying in a bed, mom.
Resting in Peace not Fear

By Denise Fossen
MDiv Middler

This past summer, quite a bit of my time was spent thinking about death and dying. I worked as a chaplain in a local hospital as a requirement for Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). Not surprisingly, when working on my assigned cardiology and oncology floors and being on-call for emergency room care, death was often the “huge elephant” in the room. Few embraced this next stage of life; most were in denial, avoidance, or passive acceptance.

I take that lack of embracement to be fear of the unknown. As Christians we have the promise that Jesus will be with us. Jesus is our example of resurrection. Still, that does not negate our fear of leaving the known and those we love, for that which we do not know the details about or have experience to understand.

This summer my sister-in-law died and so did a friend’s mother. Yet, through the joint experiences of death that impacted the lives of certain patients and their families, my friend and her family, and me and my family there was still an undercurrent of joy. Joy in the resurrection means knowing that we would meet again. There was a common faith in the God that would be with us always, even in our suffering.

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For my friend, family, me and those that had embraced their own impending death, it drove us to God. Faith believes that God is with us in our suffering and grief, and hope gives us the courage to continue. Love allows us to trust God and God’s promises. We know this “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). We come closer to the mystery; resting in peace and not in fear.
A Reflection on Death:
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

By Frank Johnson
MDiv Senior

“The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death”
(1 Cor. 15:26; Deathly Hallows, Ch. 16)

Warning: Contains spoilers regarding the Harry Potter series.

There’s a pause in the Battle of Hogwarts while Voldemort waits in the Forbidden Forest and the survivors of the siege gather together. The reality of a broken world has never been more obvious, characters we have grown to love are dead, and it’s against this backdrop that Harry Potter begins a walk. Invisible under the cloak his father left him, he exits out the shattered front doors and across the grounds, passing through a scene of death and dying. Harry moves inexorably toward Voldemort, accompanied by the ghostly images of those who had gone before—his mother, his father, his godfather, and his teacher. He walks toward death, knowing that the only way to be finally victorious is to give up his life. As Dumbledore will soon tell him in the surreal scene at King’s Cross, Harry is the “true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying.”

I never would have thought when first opening Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone that what would follow seven books later was a profound meditation on death. Against all odds, J.K. Rowling hits at the heart of our mortality without appealing to vague, de-theologized accounts of the afterlife that so pervade popular fiction. She does not diminish death by suggesting it’s all going to be right in the end but instead places it in the context of an ultimate victory. Death is not avoided; it is defeated. This is a story that sets out to show the difference between the one who runs from death—Voldemort (“flees from death” in French)—and Harry, who walks toward death with the knowledge that love wins. He realizes that this world is a broken one in which all manner of tragedy may befall those he loves. Ultimate victory is achieved not in holding on to life but in the death of death.

When we reach the end of the story what should have been evident all along smacks us in the face: the whole Harry Potter adventure has been a theological reflection on death and loss. Never does a character pray, never do we hear about the cross, never does Rowling say the words “justification,” “righteousness” or “salvation” and yet it is all there, wrapped up in the sacrifice Lily Potter made for her son to set the whole journey in motion. On the Potters’ gravestone is that at once melancholy and wonderful phrase from 1 Corinthians: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” When Harry falls he finds the reality that matters most is not death but resurrection. And lest you think this is not a Christian resurrection consider what it is that saves Harry. His goodness? His worthiness? His knowledge of magic? None of these. It was the sacrifice of those who had gone before, especially his mother’s death for him. Death died with Lily Potter, just as death died on the cross.

While Rowling’s story may defy easy allegorization the overtones of the crucifixion are ever-present. Death died in Godric’s Hollow just as in Golgotha, and only because of that can Harry walk toward Voldemort with his head held high, knowing that he faces not an end but just what Dumbledore told him six years earlier—“Death is but the next great adventure.”

The first installment of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows opens in theaters nationwide on November 19.
**Healthy Leaders**

**Vocational Well-Being**

By Karen Treat  
Parish Nurse

This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed. —Martin Luther

Luther Seminary’s Healthy Leaders “Living Well at Luther” is different this year. It comes with an expectation of reading the short book, *Well-being: The Five Essential Elements* and taking a health assessment survey on-line. The book is a quick evening read, with a focus on career, social, physical, financial, and community well-being. Although these five elements are not the same as the Luther Seminary Wholeness Wheel, it does have good points to pay attention to when thinking of our health and well-being.

Career well-being is the first area the *Well-being* book focuses on. Career well-being encourages us to work from our strengths. When we work from the gifts we have, we are more apt to be engaged in our work. Being engaged translates to better work output. Being engaged results in a happier person. The studies cited in the book find that if we are happy in our work, our blood pressure, our total blood cholesterol and our stress hormone, cortisol, are all lower.

For students, staff and faculty at Luther Seminary, we hope we are paying attention to our Vocational well-being alongside our Career well-being. We are here because we feel “called.” Yet, sometimes we lose sight of why we are here.

With that in mind, here are some ways to tend to your career and vocational well-being:

- Know your gifts, embrace those gifts and work from them. Take Strength Finders or a Dependable Strengths assessment and workshop
- Attend weekly discipleship group
- Attend “vocational” groups- i.e. CYF, CML, Diaconal, Deaconess, MSM
- Surround yourself with people who lift you up and don’t wear you down
- Most importantly, pay attention to your spiritual well-being. If that is nurtured, then vocational and career will easily follow

For more information on participating in Healthy Leaders “Living Well at Luther” contact Karen Treat, ktreat@luthersem.edu

Blessings on the road to becoming well.

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**Financial Health**

**Expression of Faith**

By Jerry Hoffman  
Director of the Center for Stewardship Leaders

Dr. Sharon Miller works as a researcher with Auburn Seminary. She states in an email recently sent to me that “A substantial number of incoming students who enter seminary could be described as financially insecure; they feel their finances are inadequate to meet their needs; they carry educational debt and expect to borrow more; they have credit card debt they are unable to pay off and they lack the skills in personal money management. They either don’t know how, or are unable to plan and live within a budget; and perhaps some are spending too many hours working in order to meet their financial needs and thus are not doing justice to their studies. To compound this financial stress, most feel that their finances are their personal and private business and they are hesitant to talk about them with anyone other than a spouse or partner.”

At the same time, congregations are stating that it is important for faith communities, such as churches, to have competent stewardship leaders. I have been part of a group of persons in the ELCA who sought to identify the competencies of well-formed stewardship leaders. Faculty members from all eight of the ELCA seminaries were asked three questions regarding the readiness to be a stewardship leader by the time a seminarian graduates. 1. **Perspective** - What core messages should this leader be able to articulate to self, church and society? 2. **Practices** – What core practices should we expect? 3. **Skills** – What core skills should we expect to see in a well-formed stewardship leader who can help bring capacity to this church’s mission in witness and service to God?

One of the core themes we heard was that a competent stewardship leader *embraces financial health as an expression of faith.*

Such leaders will **perceive** that their relationship with money is an integral part of our relationship with God. They will also understand the power money can hold on one’s family, church and community. The competent leader will **walk the talk** by being transparent with others regarding their relationship with money and are committed to managing and monitoring their own financial health. They will **possess leadership skills** which foster a climate that supports others as they deal with money in their lives (giving, saving, spending). They will assess a congregation’s money/finance/stewardship culture (ethics, transparency, etc.) and will comprehend how the basics of congregational finance (budgets, balance sheets, risk management, etc.) impact the mission of a congregation.
My family loves giving and receiving greeting cards. We spend time finding cards that capture the moment and express emotion. Combining this with the tech savvy world we live in, my parents go crazy when it comes to sending e-greetings. The animated dancing elves or blooming flowers are a huge source of entertainment for mom and dad. And when my parents purchased a card making program, you would have thought their lives were forever changed. My dad almost cried when I took a family picture and imposed it on a card as part of his Father’s Day gift. The present that accompanied the card was not nearly as important as the fact that I had taken the time to express my sentiments in a card personalized just for him.

I’ve joked about this with friends who know my parents. I didn’t understand why my parents would get so sentimental over a simple greeting card that took maybe five minutes to complete. This, however, was before I received my first homemade card. I was worshiping in a congregation and briefly introduced to a retired pastor. A couple days later I received an envelope in the mail. It was a handmade card with a scenic picture posted on the front and a typed note inside. It wasn’t the quote from Shakespeare or the hand written encouragement that moved me as much as the fact that someone thought enough of me to take time out of their busy day to actually design a card, hand write words of encouragement, look up my address, and mail it.

Now I understand how my dad felt. I was consumed by joy when someone showed they cared by creating something personal for me. I can’t tell you what I received for my last birthday, but I don’t think I’ll ever forget that simple act of kindness shown by a near stranger.

As we go through life, there are many memorable occasions where we experience joy (along with the sorrows). These include marriage, the birth of a child and other celebrations of life that I have been blessed to experience. Even through my experience with cancer, there was joy in the words, “we believe we have caught this early,” and as the years passed, “you are still cancer free.” But as I reflect on one specific experience, I believe that the day I was commissioned as an Associate in Ministry was one in which I was consumed with “joy.” This culmination was humbling as well as uplifting. It was a journey of discernment of the call God kept directing in my life. In this journey, there was further education to complete my undergraduate degree thus validating that goal in my life. Then through the candidacy process, one explores further who he or she is and how God has been the director of a journey to being His called servant for service to His church and to this world. So the day of my commissioning by Bishop Rogness in the morning chapel service here at Luther Seminary, and the receiving the call “letter” to my present position was an experience in which I was “consumed with joy.”

If it’s often the case that joy comes only after someone has experienced hopelessness, then I was a prime candidate. I had resigned myself to endure the disappointment of unfulfilled longing. Yes, friends occasionally rallied around me and my spouse, urging us not to give up. Some of them recommended places to go; others recommended people to consult. But none of the providers we visited could give us what we wanted, so we usually left them feeling worse than when we came.

Then one chilly afternoon I received a call to consider another possibility. I agreed to give it a try and said I’d be there soon. Before the time the fork got back to the plate after delivering the first mouthful of the evening, I was already awash in pure joy. My gastronomic delight was magnified by the total reversal. What had seemed impossible was right there in front of me. Possible. Perfect. On my plate. And I knew how to get more.

Sometimes joy comes that way, in an instant, when you know that everything has changed and a whole new future opens up in front of you. It was undeniably true: Someone in Minnesota—the good people at El Burrito Mercado—really does know how to cook good mole (the sauce, that is; not the burrowing mammal). Now, if only I could discover similar ecstasy with some Chinese food around here.

For many the holidays begin well before we start singing the hymns of anticipation or lighting the candles on the Advent wreath. How as Christian public leaders do we work against the growing tide of cultural consumerism and instead focus on the joy found in Christ’s coming and in our relationships with one another? We want to hear what you think! Articles are due Monday, November 29 to concord@luthersem.edu.

Pay rate is $15 for articles less than half a page (of Concord space) and $30 per article a half-page or larger.

Next month ... CONSUMED BY JOY
The Concord asks…
If you were a ghost, who or what would you haunt?

“That sounds like a miserable afterlife.”
—Laura Aase, MDiv Senior

“When I die I want to be a ghost and pester the bishops, priests, and godless monks so that they have more trouble with a dead Wolfgang than they could have had before with a thousand living ones!”
—Wolfgang Laudert, MDiv Senior

“Which kind: a creepy one or a friendly one, like Casper?”
—Pippi Maybee, wife of MDiv Middler Tim Maybee

“Someplace where there were a lot of people not expecting it...like Super Target.”
—Brigitte Leininger, MA Junior

“Why the White House of course.”
—Greg Olsen, MDiv Senior

Correction: In last issue’s Concord Ask Ali Ferin, MDiv Junior was mistakenly listed as Abi Ferin

Table Talk

Down the Hill

The Seminary through younger eyes

By Joe, Amanda, Wyatt, & Charlotte Johnson

Joe Johnson is an MDiv Senior

In the past several months, our family has been experiencing considerable loss. We returned from internship in Kodiak, Alaska where we had to say goodbye to our internship congregation, community, and friends. This doesn’t sound very traumatic, but for our kids, Wyatt (4 years old) and Charlotte Jane (2 years old), this has been a big adjustment.

From the time we left our internship site to the time we arrived at seminary, Wyatt developed an imaginary friend. Actually, it is his imaginary brother, “Bob.” Wyatt and “Bob” go on many adventures and have a great time together.

A few weeks ago, a close family friend passed away. Amanda and I explained to Wyatt and Charlotte that our friend had died and was going to heaven to be with God. The next day Wyatt seemed really sad.

Amanda asked, “What’s wrong?”

[Wyatt] “I’m really sad.”

[Amanda] “Why?”

[Wyatt] “I’m really sad because I won’t be able to see Bob anymore.”

[A] “Why can’t you see Bob anymore?”

[Wyatt] “I won’t be able to see Bob anymore because Bob died. I’m really sad because I’m going to miss him.”

As we held him, Wyatt’s eyes filled with tears. We held him as the tears began to stream down his face.

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”
—Matthew 18:3-4

As he held him, Wyatt’s eyes filled with tears. We held him as the tears began to stream down his face.

“It’s okay though,” Wyatt said. “Bob is going to heaven to be with God.” We consoled him, but Wyatt continued to grieve the rest of the day.

The next morning, Wyatt woke up and started talking about all of the things he and “Bob” were going to do that day. I said to Wyatt, “I thought Bob was dead?” Wyatt simply responded, “Nope, he’s not dead anymore!” That was the end of Wyatt’s grieving, and there was no more talk about Bob’s death.

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells us to become like little children. Unfortunately, grieving and healing do not happen overnight. Grief is a long and painful process. But because of Jesus’ own death and resurrection, we live a new life of faith, from death to life. On the cross, Christ took everything that was ours: our sin, our pain, and our death. In exchange, Christ gave us everything that was his: his mercy, his grace, and his life. As a gift, God gives us mercy, grace, and life through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ.

The death and resurrection of “Bob” is a reminder that we are called to have faith like a child. It’s a simple story about a man named Jesus. He’s not dead anymore!