

A Gift, but With an Expiration Date

"Coming to accept our situation, with all its ups and downs, helps us begin preparing for our earthly end, death itself, prompting us to take up core questions about life's meaning."



Diagnosed in 1995 with the most aggressive form of brain cancer known as glioblastoma multiforme, and given only a few months life expectancy, Dr. Ben Williams, a professor of psychology at the University of California San Diego, summed up his experience this way:

"When I was diagnosed with brain cancer, I knew almost nothing about the disease, other than it was one of the worst medical diagnoses you can get.... I hadn't even heard of a glioblastoma at that point. I was told it was the worst kind of tumor you could have, and that nobody survived it. ... For the first several months, most of my thinking was: I'm going to die — how am I going to deal with it? I thought a lot about death. When you receive a diagnosis that everyone tells you is terminal, that no one survives it, it's impossible not to become depressed by that information. I look at pictures from that period of time, and clearly I was depressed. It wasn't until I began doing research that said there was a possibility, that there are things that you can do that would be helpful, that I began to think, 'Well, this is worth at least making the fight.'"

The bewildering experience of receiving an adverse diagnosis reminds us how personal our physical health is. In a certain sense, nothing could be more intimate or immediate. As we age and start to feel poorly, and especially when we struggle with serious or life-threatening illnesses, it can seem that our bodily health is the highest good there is, the *summum bonum*, almost an "absolute" good. Declining health can trigger feelings of sadness and depression as we sense our life slipping through our fingers, and sometimes can lead to dark temptations like physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia. We may fall prey to oft-repeated cultural clichés such as: "I'm free to do what I want with my life and health," or even, "My life is no longer worth living."

Life and health are clearly very important goods. They are instrumental goods, enabling us to pursue and partake of other important goods, like interpersonal and familial relationships, employment, recreation, etc. Health and well-being are also "goals" worthy of energetic pursuit to the extent that we have some control over a limited set of variables like exercise and nutrition that affect our health.

While it is good to take steps to improve our health, we are not "entitled" to good health, nor is it a

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“right” we can lay claim to. We have not originally conferred the state of life or health upon ourselves but have received it gratuitously from the Giver of all gifts — a gift with an earthly expiration date. Our health and well-being, marked by fragility, are transient and contingent, and therefore not “absolute goods.”

Health challenges, of course, are part of almost every person’s life journey. We may struggle not only with physical maladies, but also with mental limitations like ADHD, obsessive compulsive disorders, depression or any number of other agonizing mental conditions that constrict our well-being and livelihood.

As we age and face an expanding list of ailments and infirmities, new opportunities for growth and transformation arise. Contending with weakness and sickness, for example, draws us into connection with other people, as we come to depend on them for assistance.

When we face a worsening health situation, we should earnestly pursue several goals: first, to take responsible steps to restore our health, including doctor visits, medications, surgeries, or other reasonable interventions; second, to seek to reflect more deeply, and in spiritual terms, on the meaning of our health burdens; and third, to work to accept

our situation without fear, desperation, or irresponsible actions like physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia.

Coming to accept our situation, with all its ups and downs, helps us begin preparing for our earthly end, death itself, prompting us to take up core questions about life’s meaning, the survival of the soul, life after death and even the resurrection of the body.

The afflictions we struggle against can lead us actively to surrender and accept where we are, even as we turn to the One who sees all things and knows the specifics of our situation better than we do.

When our lives are marked by good health, vigor and strength, we may hesitate to engage these kinds of core questions in any meaningful way. We tend to look past important transcendental priorities and focus on immediate temporal matters.

Health, then, is an instrumental good, but so is sickness. Both can serve to point us towards higher, more spiritual goods. At some point, we may even be able to see our ailments as a blessing and a gift from the One who better sees the big picture of our life’s journey.

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