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Buddhist teachings can help caregivers comfort the dying

April 30, 2004

BILL KETTLER, Mail Tribune

Frank Ostaseski says death can teach us about living.

The presence of death gives an urgency to our lives, he says in a telephone interview from California, where he founded the first Buddhist hospice in America in 1987. It shows us life's precariousness and reminds us not to waste it. If there's someone we love, we tell them. If there's something we want to do, we do it. We're a bit kinder to one another.

Ostaseski has worked with the dying for more than 25 years, bringing a Buddhist's sense of compassion and mindfulness to end-of-life care. His work has been featured in print and on television, and he serves as a consultant to several health-care organizations. He's in Southern Oregon today and Saturday to conduct a two-day workshop on Being a Compassionate Companion for Asante Hospice.

Death is much more than a medical event, he says. Working with the dying is much more about relationships.

Ostaseski says Buddhism's notions of mindfulness ' focusing attention on the immediate present ' and the impermanence of human existence can help caregivers develop the mental attitude to provide compassionate care during the last days of life.

— We draw on the Buddhist tradition, he says, without hitting people over the head with Buddhist doctrine.

Ostaseski says end-of-life care must address two basic fears: first, that dying will cause pain; and second, that the living will abandon the dying.

Modern medicine is getting better at treating pain, but still does little to address emotional issues such as abandonment, he says. This is where our medicine fails. We're not accustomed to being with other people's suffering.

He says sharing someone's suffering requires a certain amount of intimacy, a willingness not to turn away from suffering that is increasingly scarce in modern America.

Grandma used to die in the parlor and everybody was a little less afraid, he says. We're missing that now.

Along with avoidance of death, Americans leave themselves little space to grieve the loss of a loved one. People in other cultures routinely have grieving rituals that give them a year or more to adjust to loss, but Americans seem to expect grief to pass like a summer shower.

In the most progressive companies, we might have three days of bereavement leave, he says, and then you're supposed to come back Monday and go to work.

Ostaseski came into hospice after working in refugee camps in Mexico and Latin America and helping AIDS patients. He found himself increasingly interested in the spiritual aspects of care for the dying.

There are no generalities when people consider their own mortality, he says. Everyone is absolutely unique.

Some people focus on the dying process. Others tend to think about what happens after you die. I'm always fascinated by what people think about this.

For more information about Asante Hospice, call 608-5005.

Reach reporter Bill Kettler at 776-4492, or e-mail

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