Mortal Obsession

Joseph Sharp demystifies our greatest taboo

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Capturing the image of a man with AIDS in the midst of a graveyard may strike many as morbid. But for Joseph Sharp, long-term survivor and author of a new book that embraces mortality in everyday life, the notion is perfectly apropos.

“Dying is the big taboo,” he says. “Cemeteries are the symbols of death and dying. So what better image than having a picnic at a cemetery?”

A how-to manual intended not only for individuals diagnosed with a life-threatening illness but for every mere mortal, *Living Our Dying* integrates Christian, Buddhist and contemporary cultural and psychological concepts and metaphors by using poems, prayers, quotations and many of the author’s own personal experiences. “I know of no greater way to help myself remember the preciousness of life than to recall ’I’m dying today,’ ” he says.

While Sharp admits that life and death are indeed distinct, he sees them as indivisible. “In our culture we’ve separated living and dying into two opposite corners,” he says. “Repressing and denying our dying nature simply makes living less vital. It shuts a door to many very real aspects of our existence.”

Born in 1961 in the northeast Texas town of Tyler, Sharp, 34, says life with his father, mother and younger sister was “typical, middle-class, suburban.” With his sights set on becoming an actor, Sharp enrolled in the University of Southern California’s drama program. A classmate and fast friend, David Oliver (who went on to star in the soap opera *Another World* before dying of AIDS in 1992), helped Sharp come out of the closet. “He understood what I was going through,” says Sharp of Oliver. “He guided me.”

It was not long afterward, during one of his earliest sexual experiences at a bathhouse, that Sharp believes he seroconverted. “I had a lot of unprotected sex.” It wasn’t until 1985, however, while working part-time for a doctor with a growing AIDS practice in New York City, that Sharp determined he was in fact HIV positive. “I performed the ELISA test on myself the first day it became available.”

Soon after his diagnosis, Sharp fled to Texas, where, after gravitating to the spiritual teachings of Louise Hay, he founded the Dallas Center for Life Healing. “I look at my early journey with HIV in

stages of answers," Sharp says. "I was searching for The Answer, which I now know doesn't exist. My first answer was to ignore it. My second was mind over matter, self-healing. Then I realized I was using the Healing Circle to avoid my fear of death. My next answer was to really confront death once and for all."

For Sharp -- who relocated to New Mexico with his partner, artist Barry Lewis, in 1994 -- *Living Our Dying* is an ongoing attempt to embrace his own mortality. He hopes others will follow his lead. "One way of living your dying is simply to use what I call the d-words: death and dying," he says. "Often we use euphemisms like passed away or made her transition to the other side. Try using *David died last week*. See what happens. Notice your own resistance and avoidance."

Another practice Sharp suggests is to consciously label any form of change as dying. "It's easy to see with the change of seasons," he says. "The leaf on the tree turns brown -- in your thoughts, label it as dying. As you awake in the morning, your dreams have died. What this practice does is begin to demystify dying. It returns dying to its proper place, at the very center of our everyday experience."

While Sharp would like his book to reach the widest possible audience, he concedes he wrote it for strictly personal reasons. "I have a friend who changes the saying 'We teach what we need to learn' to 'We write what we need to learn,'" he says. "That's true for me. Honestly, I wrote to remind myself."

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