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'Death and dying' pioneer may have personal lessons to offer



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SCOTTSDALE, Arizona (CNN) -- The woman credited with helping millions face death with dignity and peace is now struggling to have the same dignity and peace as she awaits her own death.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross says she's at the point of acceptance, fifth of the five stages of death she made part of medical establishment with her 1969 book "On Death and Dying."

But in interviews with her here at her home, I found her less than totally accepting about the terms under which her final years are being spent.

After several strokes, Kübler-Ross is eager for death but discontent, even at times bitter, with her medical condition. She seemed in some ways to be experiencing all five stages --

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including denial, anger, bargaining and depression -- at once.

Although she is miserable physically, she adamantly opposes assisted suicide and the work of Dr. Jack Kevorkian.

Her struggle leaves her spending much of her days sitting in a darkened living room -- in sunny Arizona. A very human response, but not fully what I expected from the woman who created the model for coping well with death and dying.

Coming to terms with aging

The inside of her adobe-style home is dimly lit and cluttered with vases of dying flowers, stacks of papers and packages.

It took me a few moments to see Elisabeth Kübler-Ross sitting in a corner of a room, illuminated by a lamp over her shoulder. She's a small woman who looks older than her 74 years.

She greeted me with a smile but let me know she's impatiently awaiting her death.



A simple sign points the way to Kübler-Ross's home in Arizona

"I'm ready to take off anytime. Tonight's not too soon."

I asked if she's afraid of dying.

"Oh come on, that's a joke."

She's not afraid of dying, but it seemed to me she is afraid of living -- or doesn't want to accept living life disabled.

"I'm not complaining about dying. I'm complaining about the s---ty life," she said. "That when you finish your work you can't move, you can't work, you can't live and you can't garden."

She used to blame God -- "I was more angry than angry" -- but says she's since made peace with God.

She won't give up her cigarette habit, even though she knows it likely contributed to her strokes. Again, perhaps, a very human response.

Going through her own '500' stages

The journey to death would come more easily, I thought, to the woman who held the hands of hundreds of dying patients. But it appeared to me that Kübler-Ross has struggled, and is still struggling.

I asked if she went through the "five stages" of death herself.

"I went through 500! First I had to get rid of my anger and resentment."



Kübler-Ross copes daily with the effects of stroke

Kübler-Ross was only able to work through her anger, she said, after a spiritual healer, Joseph Bortniak, came into her life a year and a half ago.

"She put herself last on the list, so I came along to remind her that she's important," Bortniak said of Kübler-Ross.

"I realize how difficult it must be for someone like Elisabeth who has helped thousands and thousands of people -- who would she turn to when she's the pioneer."

For her part, she grudgingly suggested her strokes may have been a blessing.

"I finally had to look at my stuff. I always help other people and now I had time for my stuff. I don't like it, but I had nothing else to do."

She says she also gets help from her "spooks," or spirits from the "other side," whom she talks to every day.

Still, Kübler-Ross is uncomfortable talking about herself, specifically about what lessons she might have left to learn. She mentioned patience and trust, but clearly wanted to go no further.

'No use for' Kevorkian

Although Kübler-Ross is impatiently awaiting her death, she believes health professionals should not help patients die.

"We're here to heal and help," she said.

She recalled inviting



Kevorkian, now on trial for murder in Michigan, to her workshops. But he said he'd only come if she attended one of his assisted suicides.

"He should go to jail for a hundred years for every person he killed," Kübler-Ross said.



Helping by being human

Even now, Kübler-Ross continues to help others. Her telephone number is listed and she gets calls at all times of the day.

"It's usually a call from someone who has lost a child," she said. "I tell them when we fulfill our purpose, we return to God."

It struck me that perhaps Kübler-Ross thought that because of her work and contribution, she, too, expected that dealing with her own final days would be easy.

But her physical limitations, her pain and her anguish show she's human -- like the rest of us. None of us knows how we'll deal with our death until we're there.

Perhaps there is more to learn from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

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