

I don't usually argue with atheists. The interaction isn't usually productive. But in 2012 I picked up Christopher Hitchens' book *Mortality*, published shortly after his death, which documents his journey with esophageal cancer, because I was genuinely curious about what he thought about the end of his life. What insight could an atheist bring to the human understanding of mortality that a person of faith could learn from?

While many people praised this book as a courageous exposition of a dying man's final days, and there were moments of thoughtful insight, I found his book, at the end, to be hollow. Not because I thought he needed to pivot from his life-long atheism to start believing in God in his final moments. I wasn't looking for God in his reflections.

But what I was looking for was a deeper probe into his experience of dying. I found his book hollow because there was no room for mystery, no place for the unknown. His story showed no vulnerability. It's like we were hearing about his persona dying and not the man himself, which I thought was the book's intention.

Outside his patented crankiness about inattentive nurses and tacky hospital decor, there was little to discuss that hadn't already been talked about. He celebrated life as it

was given to him and said offhandedly, that love was the only lasting gift we could offer others.

While lovely and true, not exactly insightful. And it was presented almost like an afterthought as if he felt he needed to offer at least some gram of hope by the end.

Hitchens' main worry was that he would lose himself before he lost his life. Would he become an "imbecile," as he put it, with a twinge of judgement of those less intelligent than him? As the cancer takes over his brain would he accidentally become a believer in God and give satisfaction to his enemies? Would his life's work be stained by a last minute religious conversion?

But he believed that upon his death, the conversation would be over. His book reads like the first half of a eulogy. There's description of life's events, stories of occasional human connection, and acknowledgements of accolades and awards he'd received. But nothing about how he felt as he considered the nothingness that he believed that he was going to face when the cancer ran its course.

I share this about Hitchens because I worry that this is how our society deals with death. We've lost the language of death. We're not exposed to death. Most people today

don't know how to talk about it because they don't know how to feel about it.

So most people are in denial of their own mortality. We have lost that sense of ritual that helps us come to terms with the reality of our mortality. Our impulse is to immortality. Always trying to overcome our human limitations.

Except in the church. Today is Ash Wednesday. This is the day when we get real about our own mortality. This is the day when we consider the eternal mystery we call death. This is the day when we grasp the uncomfortable, and for many, terrifying reality that some day, all this will be over.

And when all this ends, what lies beyond is a great big question mark. We trust that God has taken control of our eternal destiny, but we don't know how that works.

When we close our eyes one last time on earth, we hope that they will open again sometime and somewhere. We are given that assurance. We are not given that certainty.

As we stand at the doorstep of Lent, we are being asked to consider our human limitations. And life has the ultimate human limitation built right into it.

But we forget our limitations when we strive for immortality when it's our limitations that bring us life's value and create human worth.

As I get older, my limitations become much more apparent, and they appear more and more as a gift. My life goals become more refined. My priorities change.

My understanding of legacy is different. As a young man I was hungry to make my mark on the world. I wanted to leave something behind that would out last my time here. So I immersed myself in my work. Took few vacations. And missed important moments in my children's early lives.

Now, my understanding of legacy is more momentary than it is eternal. Legacy is to last only into this moment, not beyond. I've come to realize that the only moment that matters is this one, because this moment is the only moment we really have. The next moment is not promised to us. The next moment could easily be taken from us.

But in our quest for immortality, we put our attention on the glamour that we think leads to greatness. We mistake applause for love. We confuse celebrity for worthiness. We mix-up career accomplishments for importance. And we

don't notice how temporary all that is. What we call "victory" and "success" is more fragile than we realize.

If I were to ask you who won the 1998 World Series, who would you say? Or who took the 2007 Stanley Cup? Who received Best Actor at the 2018 Academy Awards? Can you answer that? Or who was on the cover of Forbes one year ago, could you tell me?

Or what if I asked you who loved you the most? Who encouraged you when you were going through a tough time? What did you miss that you now regret because you were chasing after a dream or a goal that now seems empty and meaningless? Who stood by you when you were at your lowest? Who nurtured you to become the best of who you are?

These questions are ones to consider as you enter the Lenten Fast. The Lenten Fast is to remind you of your human limitations. The Lenten Fast is a bodily indication of your mortality. And the Lenten Fast is a moment in time when you reflect on your moments, for however many or few they may be.

The Lenten Fast tells you that life is grace, a gift that you cannot create for yourself, and an opportunity to give the

best of yourself to others in service and in love. And to receive from others the gifts that they offer you.

So when you enter that eternal mystery, when you return to the dust of the ground, when you trust in the promises of life beyond this one, your moments will reflect the love you have received and the love you've given away.

Then, when joined to the only one who's solved the mystery of life and death, Jesus Christ, you can enter into that eternal mystery with him knowing that what you left behind are moments that may be limited and temporal, but have been a precious jewel that can be passed on into eternity.

The conversation won't be over because it's a conversation infused with Spirit, to continue beyond the frame of this mortal life, to be joined with all the saints in light, among whom you will one day take your place.

Here is the hope we carry: not that the mystery of death is solved or its threat subdued, but that it is gathered up and held in a love stronger than fear and deeper than dust.

We entrust ourselves not to certainty, but to a living God who meets us in our limits and promises that nothing, not even death, can separate us from divine love.

And so we trust that the love we have lived and given is gathered into God's own life, where every fragile moment is remembered and made whole.

May this be so among us. Amen