

Until the Last One Alive

There are still incurable illnesses, but no one who is untreatable. This is an ancient truth we are increasingly aware of as we keep pace, paradoxically, with the advances of medical science in tackling the most serious diseases.

The emergence and development of palliative care is linked to the realisation that new therapies, though still fundamentally unable to gain the final victory over physical death, risk focusing on the disease – its causes, symptoms, evolution – and neglecting the person afflicted. Yet each one of us who gets ill, or is close to a loved one who is moving inexorably towards death, knows that we are not in search of a cure, but of the possibility that human relationships, companionship, and the flow of feelings, actions and words of love will not cease.

For a number of years, Attilio Stajano has been working alongside the palliative care team as a volunteer at a Brussels hospital. His experience, but more than that, his passion for the dignity of each human being, also and especially during the terminal phase of an illness, has prompted him to provide an account of the rich world of feelings that is woven at a bedside, whether it be in a hospital room or in the privacy of the family home.

*His book, *L'amore sempre* [English title, *Only Love Remains*, Clairview Books] presents a vision of 'the meaning of life through accounts of the last days'. However, these are not fictional but true accounts (only the names of the people involved have been changed*

in order to protect their privacy). They invite us 'not to allow ourselves to avoid the experience of a loved one close to death', as Marie de Hennezel, pioneer in the field of palliative care, observes in the preface to her seminal book, "Seize the Day, How the dying teach us to live". If 'we let our hearts speak' and 'let our intuition guide our actions', then we will not fear death when we see it overwhelm the body of a loved one, because the flow of life that our actions spread will have the last word. Stajano relates many of these 'last words' as proof that it is possible to prepare for and experience a peaceful death, provided that the terminally ill are recognised as 'people who still have a role to play, and as individuals to be respected for their dignity', a dignity no disease can compromise or condition.

The appendix to the book provides information on the laws governing the end of life and palliative care in a number of countries: the comparison is evidence of the ongoing debate in society and a prompt to 'thinking about' the final journey in relation to our own bodies and those our loved ones, because each of us is more than our body, or any disease that may strike it. Yes, every one of us can be treated. Always. We just have to desire it with intelligent love.

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