

# What dying patients can teach us about life

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Doctors in an intensive care unit in Belgium, a nation that embraces 'mercy killing' (Photo: AP)

*Many patients cannot find peace until they have become reconciled with those they love*

**Only Love Remains** by Attilio Stajano, Clairview Books, £14.99

Attilio Stajano, a volunteer in a palliative care department of a Brussels hospital, writes that his book has been inspired by the testimonies of dying patients whom he has encountered in his work. Its subtitle is “Lessons from the Dying on the Meaning of Life: Euthanasia or Palliative Care?”

The author does not argue with clear Christian teaching in mind, and few of the patients he supports ask for sacramental rites before they die. Yet his book is unabashedly anti-euthanasia, offering an eloquent pro-life voice in a country which, once Catholic, has slowly and inevitably widened its criteria for “mercy killing”.

You cannot read these deeply affecting stories without becoming aware that, even if the patients have long lapsed from their faith or have never known religious belief, they all have an instinctive and unappeasable longing to give and receive love before they die. Such are the normal problems of life and relationships that many of these patients are estranged from their children or wider family. Yet they cannot rest or find peace until reconciliation and forgiveness has taken place.

This is where the unobtrusive and sensitive support of people like Stajano can help patients: by contacting long-lost relatives and effecting reconciliation, even in the last hours of life. Tellingly, some patients enter the palliative ward having made it clear they have chosen euthanasia. Without denying their legal “right to die”, the medical team reassures them that their pain will be managed effectively, alongside the volunteers who offer companionship and solace at a time of acute loneliness and fear. Essentially the patients are supported so that they “wait for death mindfully, without giving up on life ahead of time”.

All the stories are very moving, but one particularly stays in the mind. It is of an elderly mother who makes a long journey to visit her daughter who has terminal cancer: “In front of her dying daughter she realises she let year after year go by without showing any interest in her, in her studies, her personal life, her work.” Now, stricken with remorse, she helps tend her daughter’s physical needs, recalling the care she gave her as an infant. Fearing that she has come “too late”, the nurse

assures her that those close to death “have an awareness and an ability to understand that is totally unexpected”.

Stajano’s book reminds the reader that family estrangements come at a great cost and that when ordinary life is ending, “only love remains”.