

Attilio Stajano

## LOVE, ALWAYS

Lessons from the Dying on the Meaning of Life

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For the preface by Marie de Hennezel:

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### PREFACE

What Attilio Stajano and I have in common is the profound, shared conviction that to die peacefully, without suffering and surrounded by love and spirituality, is not an exceptional experience.

I know this because for nine years I worked in the first palliative care unit in France, among people for whom curative medicine no longer held any prospects, but who were still alive and wished to remain so until their last breath. Together with a motivated and competent team, we decided to do everything possible to ensure our terminally ill patients did not suffer, and could die at the proper time with the sense of still being the subjects of their own death. Twenty years ago, I wrote about our pilot scheme in a book called *La Mort intime*,<sup>1</sup> whose preface was written by the then dying president, François Mitterrand. The book spread around the world and acted as a model for the development of palliative care units throughout Europe.

In fact, it was at one of these units in Brussels that Attilio generously offered his services as a volunteer after he retired. Reading his narrative, written with delicacy and feeling, I experienced the same emotions I had felt all those years ago. I rediscovered the lessons that the terminally ill had taught me through their way of being, their sense of humour, their humility and their courage.

Offering daily support to men and women whom medicine can no longer heal, yet can assist in the most dignified and humane manner possible, is no trivial matter in a world that denies death and regards

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<sup>1</sup> Marie De Hennezel, *Seize the Day. How the Dying Teach Us to Live (1995)*, Pan Macmillan, London 2007

the *time of dying* as a useless, painful and absurd time. Public opinion today widely considers that it is better to limit this time rather than live through it. What is the point in waiting for death when we know that medicine will not be able to heal us? But this way we exclude an incomparable experience. And it is precisely this that we discover when reading Attilio's account. Because the last exchanges with someone who is on the verge of death: the looks, the gestures, the words of love, relief or trust, allow those left behind to experience grief in a completely different way and enrich the rest of their lives. We are no longer the same people we were after assisting a relative or friend on the brink of death. Assisting them transforms us. Why is that? Because we are all mortal, aware that we are visitors on this earth, and that those we love will not always be by our side. And if, on the one hand, this closeness to the death of others is a sword that strikes at the heart of our humanity and hurts us, on the other, it brings us back to what is essential.

Of course, it is not easy to assist people in their last moments in hospitals that have moved away from their vocation of caring for and supporting patients to become instead economically oriented technocentric structures. There is a whole movement, one in which I actively participated, that has done its utmost to ensure that the practice of palliative care is firmly established in hospitals, and in the medical and medical social services. The aim is to develop a *palliative spirit*, so that wherever death occurs, people are able to conclude their lives with dignity. When, for example, the head of a medical oncology department, or the director of a nursing home for non-autonomous elderly people, has grasped the importance of *not abandoning* the patient for whom there is no longer any prospect of recovery, and when there is a medical team and skilled volunteers like Attilio to talk with people who, in fact, often suffer from being banished behind a screen of lies, or to help relatives remain by the side of the one who is about to leave, then the *time of dying* can be a rewarding time.

Yet, by contrast, when the terminally ill feel they are a burden to others and no longer have a place among the living, they often ask to end their lives. This request for euthanasia conceals anguish and despair.

These days, there is a kind of advocacy of premature death. We talk about *the right to die*, the right to choose our own death, our own chosen moment of freedom and dignity. But where is the freedom in this for fragile and vulnerable people who believe they have become a problem for others? What is this narrow conception of dignity that reduces it to an image we have of ourselves, or one we attribute to another person? Have people who are ravaged by illness or advanced age perhaps lost, in our opinion, their dignity as human beings?

Attilio asks the right questions. Troubling questions. And what particularly struck me in the pages that follow is the personal, humble involvement of this man, who takes his readers by the hand in order to

show them the road that all of us will one day take. A road made of separation, sometimes painful but rewarding, a road that opens towards the best part of ourselves.

In spite of their situation, the dying offer us an example of what matters in life. They free themselves from the constraints that have burdened their lives. They become lighter. They help us to live in the present and look towards the future 'with optimism and gratitude', without regretting what has been taken by illness or old age. They show us how important it is to accept our vulnerability and to be able to receive from others.

Reading this book leads to the conviction that we should not miss this experience of assisting a loved one who is close to death. We should not be afraid. We should let our hearts speak; let our intuition guide our actions. We will discover unexpected resources in ourselves: a tenderness, a touch, a readiness to assist that, perhaps, we did not even believe ourselves capable of. In brief, we will emerge from this experience more generous and more human, because on the brink of death it is love that has the last word.

*Marie de Hennezel*