

From Death to New Life

Thought for the Day

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Can't the triumph of the human spirit over adversity can be extremely humbling?

Recently I helped organise an event for people in the West of Scotland who had benefitted from organ transplants to pay tribute to the organ donors and their families.

It was an intensely moving occasion, attended by many hundreds of people. Muriel Gray, not often given to emotional display, had a catch in her voice as she spoke of how a kidney transplant had changed her mother's life. Sam Galbraith told us with his usual wry wit just how close to death he'd been, and how someone else's misfortune had given him many extra years of political and personal success. Hundreds of recipients and their families came forward with bunches of flowers to be handed out later to the families of the donors.

But what was even more moving because it was so unexpected was the message from the donors. Marsha Gladstone, mother of the Glasgow teenager murdered in a terrorist bombing in Tel Aviv, and Ellen Burns, whose daughter had been killed in a road accident, both spoke movingly of their loss, and of the hard decision they were asked to take at the most awful of times – but what was so remarkable was that both found it in them to express not resentment but gratitude for the opportunity to turn hopelessness into hope, death into a new life for someone else.

Acts of charity are important in Judaism as in many other faiths, and the medieval rabbi Maimonides taught that different types of charitable deed have different moral value. Giving in public, for example, ranks very low, for the motive is suspect, whereas helping someone to help him- or her-self ranks highest.

Second only to this is charity in which the donor and the recipient don't know one another, for in that case there can be no ulterior motive, not even the desire for gratitude. That is the level that the transplant donor families have attained: they do not know who will receive the organs, nor do the recipients know from whom they came.

That is what was symbolised by this anonymous exchange of flowers, and I knew we had it right when, from the balcony above, a tear fell on my sleeve.