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Remember when a small arena of pundits and politicians professed willingness to risk martyrdom, theirs and ours, for the sake of the economy? Texas Lt. Gov. Dan

Patrick [told Tucker Carlson on Fox News](#) that "there are more important things in life than living," and Glenn Beck [boasted on his radio show](#): "Even if we all get sick, I would rather die than kill the country."

Did anyone really believe them?

Dying is a unique and sacred experience, and the state of our economy is not a worthy reason for anyone to die, either by poverty, malnutrition, poor health care or COVID-19.

My most recent encounter with death was with my sister, Sharon. On March 1, she died at age 74 of neuroendocrine carcinoma. That cancer was diagnosed just three weeks earlier. She is my third sibling to die from this rare type of cancer.

I am the lone remaining member of my family of origin. A unique loneliness accompanies this stark reality.

Faith is the story we choose to tell ourselves about the mysteries of life, including the mystery of death. And Sharon's death slapped me in the face once again with that mystery.

I saw her most often in the past few years at our almost monthly lunches. We picked a restaurant, often Panera Bread (St. Louis Bread Co.) or Wendy's, and she would choose a sandwich without garlic since she was dangerously allergic to it as well as many other things, including strawberries. I would order a salad that did not offend my diabetes.

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"What's going on with your family?" she would always ask, and I would update her on my wife, Fran, our son, Kevin, his wife, Emily, and our two grandsons, Luke and Christian. That answer always included some reference to the boys' sports activities, which she was eager to hear about, being an athlete herself.

My standard question was: "What is your pain level today?" and she would hem and haw and usually say "OK." Beginning when she was in her 20s, Sharon has had at least 10 operations or procedures on her back, knees and neck and was never free of pain despite all the pain management treatments available, including a monitor

implanted in her back. She had just qualified for medical marijuana when the cancer took precedence. So, I always asked about her pain. I got to know her better these past few years through those lunches and phone calls, and I am happy about that.

Like many of us, I now live with memories of her and the rest of my family. They are living memories, the kind that bring more than nostalgia. They elicit emotions that are active today. Mostly they are feelings of gratitude that I was fortunate enough to be part of this particular family, and joy in all of those interwoven relationships.

But my loss and loneliness remain.

Sharon's death created a specific shape of aloneness. There's a responsibility and a burden on being the last. Do I now represent mom's compassion, dad's strength, Roy's loyalty, Rosie's gentleness, Kathy's dedication and Sharon's boldness? That's too much, of course, and it is not reasonable. But I am the only one who experienced that unique family experience, not just the individual memories of each of us, but the family unit that we were. I am the lone survivor. And the last one standing mourns each individual death with the added twist of mourning the loss of the whole family experience. The lone griever grieves alone.

Sharon's death also highlights a fear: Will I too die of neuroendocrine carcinoma? I know I have lived longer so far than I will live in the future. And I have faced death before, even the suicide of our daughter, Karla. Coping with my own death is a related but different matter.

Since this cancer seems to be a family trait, do I now make peace with it and accept it if it shows up? On the other hand, maybe COVID-19 will come calling first, and I will no longer be a burden on our economy since I draw some Social Security money. Beck and company will cheer me. Most of us don't know how we will die, but this cancer is my best bet at this point. I do not like it since I saw it in three of my siblings. On the other hand, I want to die as gracefully as possible and that means I must prepare myself for the invasion of this cancer.

I do not want to die soon. I want to love more, do more, be more and discover more. My family is gone and I still love them all, but I want more.

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That preparation is intellectual, emotional and spiritual. I do not want to die soon. I want to love more, do more, be more and discover more. My family is gone and I still love them all, but I want more. In this milieu, a resurrected Jesus symbolizes hope and ongoing life, and I need that kind of faith.

As I once again say goodbye to Sharon, and my whole family, I say "thank you" for our lives together, the laughs, the rivalries, the support, the varied interests, the disagreements, the various personalities, the in-laws and children they added, and, especially, the love we still share.

The coronavirus is a current threat to life on this planet, but death is not new. Reminders of our inevitable death are always opportunities to live more fully now, to love better, to serve more, to do what we know is right, to show we are grateful for family and friends, to worship our God, to smile at our neighbors.

Regardless of how we or our loved ones die, it is never about "saving the economy."

[Tom Smith is a frequent contributor to Soul Seeing. He and his wife, Fran, live in Shiloh, Illinois. You can read all of the Soul Seeing columns at NCRonline.org/columns/soul-seeing.]

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