

Opinion: What makes a life worth living?

By [G. Scott Morris](#), Special to The Daily Memphian

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A few weeks ago, my 93-year-old father died.

Ninety-three is a long life — long enough to gather contradictions as well as accomplishments, tenderness alongside rigidity, wisdom mixed with blind spots.

Long enough for relationships, especially between a father and a son, to be layered, unfinished and sometimes unresolved.

Opinion: A Memphis treasure is being lost

As I have tried to come to terms with his death, I have found myself thinking not only about who my father was, but about who we were to one another.

He was a complex man. My relationship with him wasn't simple, and at times it was genuinely challenging.

Like many families, we carried affection and frustration, gratitude and disappointment, closeness and distance — often all at the same time.

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY
MEMPHIAN

G. Scott Morris



The Rev. Dr. G. Scott Morris, M.D., is founder of Church Health. He is a regular contributor to The Daily Memphian.

Grief doesn't erase that complexity. In some ways, it sharpens it.

In the quiet after his death, a question has kept returning to me: What good did my father accomplish in his life? What did he do that made his life worth living?

Opinion: Rising health care costs will be breaking point for many Memphians

It's not a question asked from sentimentality, but from honest reckoning. When a long life ends — especially one marked by both strength and struggle — the question feels unavoidable.

And once asked, it doesn't stay politely aimed at the past. It turns, uncomfortably, toward the present.

If I'm willing to ask whether my father's life mattered, then I must also ask what will someday be said — or silently weighed — about my own.

I'm aware that many people don't spend much time pondering such questions. Life is busy. Distraction is abundant. Reflection can feel indulgent, or even unnecessary.

It may simply be a sign of my own inward turning, prompted by age, vocation, loss, or temperament, that I'm lingering over these questions now. I don't assume this makes me wiser — only more unsettled.

Opinion: Even now, there's much to be thankful for

Still, I wonder whether the question itself carries a quiet grace. What makes a life worth living? And how would we even know?

Our culture offers ready answers. We measure success in titles, income, productivity, recognition and influence. These metrics are efficient, public and easy to compare.

But they feel insufficient when applied to a real human life, especially one who lived over many decades, shaped by family, faith, fear, love, regret and change.

From a spiritual perspective, scripture suggests that the truest measures of a life are largely hidden. “God looks at the heart,” we are told — not at the resume, not at the public record, not even at how a story appears when summarized.

The heart is a far more mysterious place, the site of longing and resistance, generosity and resentment, courage and fear, faith and doubt.

Opinion: The quiet grace of listening

Standing near the end of a long life exposes us to how little we truly know about another person’s inner journey, even someone we loved, even someone who shaped us.

It also exposes how tentative we must be when we speak of judgment, whether of others or ourselves.

In recent weeks, another death has interrupted the national conversation: the killing of Renee Good by a federal immigration agent. I didn’t know her. I can’t speak about her character or her life. But her death — sudden, violent and public — forces a different kind of reckoning. It reminds us how fragile life is, how quickly it can be taken and how easily human beings become symbols rather than souls.

Her death, though, presses the same underlying question upon me: What is a human life worth? And how carefully do we live as though the answer matters?

The spiritual life doesn’t offer simple formulas in response. Instead, it invites us into discernment — into asking not only “What have I done?” but “Who am I becoming?”

“What loves are shaping me?”

“What fears still govern me?”

“Where am I resisting grace?”

“Where am I being invited to grow, to repent, to forgive, to change?”

Opinion: Respect for the National Guard and respect for our community are not opposites

My father’s life, in all its complexity, reminds me that none of us arrive at the end neatly resolved. We are unfinished people. We live with mixed motives and partial insight. And yet, faith insists that even a complicated life can be held within mercy.

I can’t fully answer the question for my father. I can’t yet answer it for myself. Perhaps no one ever can with certainty.

But I can keep letting the question accompany me — not as an accusation, but as a guide, not as a source of anxiety, but as a call to greater attentiveness.

And perhaps that is enough. Perhaps a life worth living isn’t one that can be easily defended or summarized, but one that remains open — open to truth, open to love, open to correction, open to grace — right up until the end.

TOPICS

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