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Bob Jones has only a few months to live. Just moments after learning of his grim prognosis, Bob begins to reevaluate the priorities that have shaped his life. His self-examination serves as the storyline for the 1993 triumphant albeit tear-jerking film, "My Life" starring Michael Keaton and Nicole Kidman. I watched this excellent movie shortly after reading the latest results of a study published this week in the Journal of the American Medical Association. According to the account I read in the Los Angeles Times, researchers "found that terminally ill cancer patients were nearly three times more likely to go on breathing machines or receive other invasive treatments if religion was an important part of their decision-making process." Statistically, these treatments did not improve the quantity and certainly not the quality of a person's life.

After his initial desperate attempts to secure a different outcome, Bob comes to terms with his inevitable death and decides to make a home movie for his son to remember him by. This movie within a movie provides some exceptionally helpful insights into the process of value-rearrangement that accompanies our confrontation with our mortality. It is not surprising that a bigger home, a newer car, a more prestigious job diminish in importance in such circumstances. Instead, more mundane matters move to the forefront: time with loved ones, acts of reconciliation and forgiveness, a sunrise.

In my three decades as a minister, I witnessed this reevaluation process many times. Having the great privilege of attending to the dying offers an unforgettable opportunity for values edification. Watching "My Life" was a poignant reminder to remember what I had the honor to once learn.

All of which is why I found the AMA's report so curious. One would think that religious folk whose faith has allegedly guided them through their lives would be less inclined to panic at the end. Nevertheless, the study indicates just the opposite. I suppose we could draw two quite different opinions. In the first, we might assume that this vigorous attempt to prolong one's days represents a deep reverence for life and, therefore, an equally deep resistance to giving it up. The other, more cynical, opinion might be centered on the proposition that the religionist's faith isn't as strong as publicly proclaimed

and when push comes to shove, one's true beliefs come forth with the subsequent reluctance to meet one's maker.

In my own experience, I found that, generally, one died the way one lived. If someone spent their life nurturing relationships and welcoming new experiences, death was met with little fear and often a profound sense of satisfaction. Coming up to the threshold of death with many issues unresolved, on the other hand, was often a difficult and frightening encounter. This profound fear may account for the fact that 1/3 of the Medicare budget goes to the last year of life and 80% of that is for the last month. Judging from this new AMA study, religionists do not go gently into the night.

Another recently released study indicated that Americans were less inclined to affiliating themselves with religious institutions. Fully 15% of Americans now claim they have no religious affiliation, up from 8% in 1990. One hypothesis that might be drawn here could be centered on a growing awareness that specific religious doctrines provide less guidance for a well-rounded life and death than a simple adherence to more universal principles. In an increasingly connected world, assuming one's religion is supreme holds less sway it would seem than the golden rule of doing unto others as one would want done unto them.

The fictional Bob Jones reveals the non-fictional truth that our lives take on deep, satisfying meaning when we spend them pursuing matters that really, well, matter.