The Susanna Wesley Foundation

Podcast 18:
Beauty and Sorrow: the afterlife and a ‘good death’

June Boyce-Tillman and Emma Pavey

Transcript by Otter

Edited by SWF

SPEAKERS

Emma Pavey, June Boyce-Tillman

Emma Pavey 00:13

Hello, welcome to this conversation facilitated by the Susanna Wesley Foundation. At the foundation we are a community of scholars and practitioners who promote dialogue, support, research and create resources in order to equip churches and those who work in them and to facilitate the building of flourishing community through transformative change. You can find us at our website susannawesleyfoundation.org. We hope you enjoy this conversation. Hello, and welcome to this podcast from the Susanna Wesley Foundation. My name is Emma Pavey, and today we’re continuing a series of episodes that relate to a recent research project co-written by our Senior Research Officer Lia Shimada on beliefs, trends and practices in death, dying and the afterlife. Today I’m joined in conversation by June Boyce-Tillman to talk about the afterlife, different ways of thinking about what comes next after we die, and, perhaps crucially, how those beliefs affect the way we live before death and how we craft hope. So I’m going to start by asking you to introduce yourself.

June Boyce-Tillman 01:28

Well, I’m the Reverend Professor June Boyce-Tillman. I’m Professor Emeritus of Applied Music at the University of Winchester, and - I love this title - Extraordinary Professor at the Northwest University in Potchefstroom South Africa. And I’m a composer and a performer and an Anglican Priest in a church in South London. I was brought up in the Church of England as an Anglican, but I have explored shamanic traditions, a lot of interfaith dialogue on my journey along the way, and that has very different views of the afterlife, and so on. And recently, well, not so much recently, for the last three years, I’ve got very engaged with death and dying because friends of mine in South London have been doing a festival of the dead or festival of death and

dying on Tooting Common around Halloween, All Saints, All Souls.

And I am a priest and I do work with the dying. And obviously with the rituals of the dying, including those that want a very elaborate funeral, church funeral. And those who would like to substitute words like everlasting love for God, and have nothing of a religious tradition at all. I'm also at the moment, setting a set of five poems of Emily Dickinson on death and dying, because I thought it would help me clarify my own sort of dilemmas that I've met in, in this world. The one that I really like, and may apply to me, because I'm quite old now: "Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me". Wonderful poem. And of course, she did write a lot on death and dying, and so on. And that I was alerted to that poem by the head of department in South Africa, who had written a piece called 'Because I could not stop for death'. He is an atheist, but he wrote the piece as a ritual for grieving for his mother. So the the process of composing was a process of doing it. So that's where I am.

Emma Pavey 03:36

Thank you. I wonder how our beliefs on what might happen or not happen next, might affect how we feel.

June Boyce-Tillman 03:44

Well the churches have a process every year, that people are in fact remembered. And some of the religions still do have the recalling of death. There's a spectrum along which beliefs lie, so it's not actually a complicated spectrum, about life after death. On the one hand, you've got the atheist, there is nothing, but I can even question that, then you've got the reincarnational systems, that we're going to be reborn, perhaps as another human being, or perhaps as an animal, and so on. And then you've got the in general, the monotheisms, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, which have some concept of a life beyond death, which is somehow or other close to the divine. And in general, when you're with someone who's dying, and you don't know their belief, you have, first of all to see where they are on that spectrum before you can work with their approach to the afterlife. I was brought up on the Requiem, the requiem mass, not as a liturgy or a belief system, but as a singer. So my set work for O level which is what it was in those days was Mozart's Requiem. And there at the heart of it was the dies irae, the great song, which sets out the theology of purgatory

and so on. Meanwhile, in church, I was told we didn't believe that anymore. So I was already set up with a sort of rather strange mixed belief system, that it really was something of a mystery. The Requiem is actually one of the most purchased recordings, because people find it consoling as a as a way of grieving in some way.

Emma Pavey 05:26

Could you tell us more about that June because I, I believe that you have a, you have written your own Requiem, and you were, you wanted to sort of help others do the same? Can you..?

June Boyce-Tillman 05:35

I wasn't thinking of the ritual of the Requiem, I was thinking of the music. So you know, you've got the big requiems, the Mozart, the Verdi, the Dream of Gerontius. I mean, all of those are, you know, there's a wonderful book called 'Sacred music in a Secular World', that these sacred musics are, are being used by a secular world, not in the way that they were intended to be used. Yes, I've not written not written the music, except that I've used my own hymns. I've written the the substance of my own funeral, really, rather than a requiem. And I'm still debating whether I would want to be taken into the church the night before as would have been the practice and, and there with the candles. But I have put the music that I want, I want to Cecile Chaminade's 'Autumn' played. And I think autumn is an interesting time, because autumn is a time for thinking in the north hemisphere, of thinking about death and dying, because you're surrounded with the leaves, and the fruits and all of that. And I think the notion of telling stories is the way that we come to grips with things, really, and again, in the Festival of the Dead. We had stories from a huge variety of cultures about dying, and so on and so forth.

To finish what I was saying earlier about the spectrum, I think it's a really interesting one, because if you then look at the ecological movement, and that, in fact, whether you believe in a heaven or not, when we go into the earth, we're going to turn into something else, whether we go in as ash, or as a body. So we're going to turn into a piece of soil, which may become a tree, and so on. So in a funny way, the monotheisms' inventions of an eternal life, which means that something identifiably June will live on, we've got eternal life, whether we like it or not, because nothing in the universe goes to nothing. It always becomes something else. So in a sense, why

do we like finding fossils on the coast, the Jurassic Coast, except because that's, a bit of a dinosaur is living on. So we're always I mean, our entire landscape, I'm looking out of my window here, is made up of my ancestors, is made up of the people, of bits of the bodies of people. And I think that's one bit that we haven't actually grasped - the indigenous cultures have grasped that much more than we have. We wanted to have, you know, an identified individual going on, but we shall become something else over time and over millions of years will become heaven knows what. I mean, one little story I have of my son, we had in the aquarium a very curious African Snail, who did nothing much except open up about once a fortnight to apparently breathe. My son said he thought that the snail had died. But it was difficult to tell whether it was alive or not, if you didn't notice the time when it opened up. Anyway, we took it out and it had, it had died. And he was devastated. A nine year old - he was my best friend, and I loved it. And no, what am I going to do without it? I mean, in a sense, difficult for us, you know, as adults to understand that, these tears poured down about his best friend, not knowing what to do, but having a background in prayer I remember putting it in my hands and saying, Dear God, please look after this snail, wherever it is now. I mean, as a priest, I was not taught any theology of snails and where they might go, we ceremoniously buried it in the garden. And now I think 100 years down the line, someone may find a bit of that shell in the garden in Tooting and be in touch with the grief of a nine-year-old boy, that will somehow or other be there. And so on.

So I think that notion of, of living on in some form, and if we regard the universe as I do now, as having, all of it as having soul, then we live on in the Soul of the Universe, as soil or as tree or what have you, because there is soul in everything. You know, I'm in a position of sort of pan-psychism, in a sense, and I did, one of the funerals I did very recently, it was so simple compared with some of the Christian ones I have to do. It was one that wanted to be spiritual but not religious. And I'd done the commendation over the coffin as usual. And it was very simple. What I said was, 'from Earth we come and to Earth with shall return, we have already committed our sister into the arms of eternal love, we now commit her body to be cremated'. And when I think of all the stuff that I have to say, as a Christian priest, it was so simple, really. I think that we do need to talk about it, not only because everybody will face it at some point or other, but also, because we've got so many beliefs around about it, that are there, people may not have thought about it, but they will have picked

up a bit of this and a bit of that, along the way. In my childhood, deaths would be much more accepted because it was part of real life. And now it’s not part of real life, and it’s all shut away, you know, shut away in a hospital and an undertaker, and so on. And in general, people have nothing to do with it, except perhaps the grief and the loss. But I mean, I’m not as old as sort of people losing lots of babies. But I mean, you know, many women would bear, you know, 14 children, because five of them were going to die along the way, either in birth, or, you know, during childhood, with diseases like diphtheria, and tuberculosis and things like this. And I think the loss of it in real life is quite serious.

Because I’ve met you for the first time, Emma, and I know nothing about you. But I can be sure of two things. One, that you’re probably born of a woman and two, that you will die, those are the only things I can be sure of when I meet someone, interestingly, we pay pay very little attention to those crucial parts of what it is to be human. What constitutes a good death, having people around and my friend, Judith Silver, has the Companion Voices, people singing around the beds of the dying. One can say that, in general, in order to die, you need to relax. And that what the song does, is to enable the relaxation. So and I’ve been present at good deaths, and I’ve been present at not very good deaths. And I do have a sense, increasingly now, of times when the soul goes over easily, and times when the soul is not ready to go. And I have a real sense that certainly for some months, the soul is around and is watching what’s going on, and so on. But when I was working with the undertaker, there were four chapels of rest. And my job was simply to shut them up at night. And what you did was to turn the air conditioning up, cover the face, blow out the candles. And in some of those, there was nothing there, it was just a body. But in others one was aware of a presence in the room, I can’t understand I can’t explain why that was. But I do have a sense that the, that the church or the those religions, Islam, to a certain extent, has that notion as well that, that the soul passes over gradually. And that that process is is, can be easy, or it can be difficult.

And I think one of the things that bothers me at the moment, about the portrayal of the ghost world, or the soul world, is that it’s a story of fear. And that’s because we don’t talk about death and dying. But in a sense, it’s a world that exists, that did exist in the Middle Ages, does exist in many of the indigenous traditions, but that we have denied as being superstitious and rubbish. I’m not sure that that’s as true as,

you know, the materialistic press would have us believe. And that's why I go back. It may be for some people, it is a moment of release. But for other people, there may be quite a long journey. And I went to the three month celebration of John Taverner, who was a Orthodox and went to the Orthodox Church. And there's a real sense there that the soul takes a year to pass over in some way. And, you know, there was singing to help him go over and so on and so forth. And so I mean, that's a view of dying that many of my Anglican priests would not share with me. But I do believe that we need to look seriously at that, which is why I think the rituals, why I think palliative care is not just about reducing pain. It's about coming to grips with what a good death is like, and then having rituals which enable that process to go on, and then acknowledging the processes of grief. And I think that's important. I don't understand death, it's a complete and utter mystery to me. And I'm prepared to work as a priest with whatever system that the person has in front of me, really.

And my last funny story was my father, who was a very shy man, I often think that my father looked at the world and decided not to join. And just after he died, there was the Verdi Requiem in, in the Albert Hall. If you know, the Verdi Requiem, it's has a massive orchestra, and a massive choir. And the Dies Irae, that dreadful day of wrath, has drums going, Di-, bang, -e, bang, I mean, extraordinary power, and I was imagining my poor father. And I can remember saying, Dad, if it really is like this, I do hope you're coping. So that those are my somewhat random thoughts. But it is a mystery to me, it is a mystery. But I do have a trust in an everlasting love that will hold me and I have had a near death experience as well. So that's helped.

Emma Pavey 16:21

It would be wonderful to just hear a bit more of your reflection on because you have so much engagement with people thinking about afterlife and, and what that means for them in how they live and how they plan for their death. And I think those are separate questions, maybe? I'm interested in how beliefs about what might come next might impact how we live, not only in thinking about our death, and our funeral, for example, but just in how we carry out our everyday life? I don't know if you thought about that?

June Boyce-Tillman 16:56

Well I think the really difficult thing, and I don't understand it really, is whether there's any judgement. And I think that's the most difficult thing, really, because I

think Christianity, Islam and Judaism, have had a sense of judgement and a final judgement. And, you know, we’ve got the parables of Jesus, which, to a certain extent, are drawing on the Jewish sources like that the people will appear before God, and God will say, ‘Well, you people, you’ve done well’. And it’s quite a surprising parable, really. Because, you know, ‘you fed the poor, you visited me in prison, you gave me clothes’. And then the other lot, he will say, you know, ‘Go away from me, because I was hungry, and you didn’t give me any food’ and, and so on. And, you know, that parable is a very interesting one. Because, in a sense, it takes away the notion of belief in the judgement, it makes judgments simply on, on what you’ve done in your life. It doesn’t say, Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? It says, you know, did you visit me in prison, which is in general, not what, you know, a lot of, a lot of the religious traditions have been concerned with, you know, Do, do you think this is true, but that, in that I think it’s a brilliant parable, on the judgement, that it’s what you’ve done. And of course, you do have that in Islam with, you know, the sort of tithing aspects and, and all of that, and Judaism has always been very much about, you know, befriending the widow and the orphan and, and all of that.

So, the notion that good work somehow are a good idea, and that in the, in the story of the of the purgatory, you know, the book is opened, and all of your, you know, what you’ve done is sort of, recorded in some way. So I think, I don’t know, I don’t like the idea of judgement overmuch. And I think it’s been one that’s been very tricky. So in a sense, if you do believe in some form of judgement, then, in a sense, it is a pressure to live an ethical life, and to do ethical things. And there are some people that say the loss of a religious belief system, that’s the worst bit of the loss, that actually the reason that crime increases and so on, is it you’ve no longer got that notion that at some point, you will have to pay for it. That that’s been one of the losses, you know, the loss in the morality.

But I think that notion of judgement is one of the tricky, tricky, quite important, but very difficult to manage, particularly when somebody’s dying, and they’re saying, you know, ‘What’s going to happen’, you know, ‘I did this terrible thing’ and You know, there is that with some people who are dying who’ve, particularly people of my generation where judgement was quite a lot of the teaching of the Church, you think of the Victorian church, there were images of hell, which was so to make you live better on Earth, because you might get there, it was actually quite a powerful

way of getting people to behave ethically - or as the society thought was ethical. I mean, that's another, another little package around it. But I think there is a very interesting thing that the church did have the notion of confession. And I think there is a sense with some people that they need to say some things, the unsaid needs to be said before you die, because it isn't completed.

And again, I can only draw on little vignettes, which is my father-in-law, ex-father-in-law, was dying, and he could no longer speak, his brain was irretrievably damaged, but he clearly wanted to speak. And I couldn't hear what he was saying, and so on and so forth. And I went back that night, and I thought, well, what do I do? And the next day, I went back and said, 'It's alright, Dad, I've heard you. I know what you want to say, you can go'. And he died very soon after that. It was almost as if there was something that needed to be said, it didn't actually matter whether I heard it or not. But he needed to know that he had said that before he would die. And I think that was really where confession was a very good idea. Because it gave people a chance to say the things that they hadn't been able to say or they felt were necessary to be said. And although it got combined with judgement, I don't think it's about judgement. I think it's about completion, completion of a life in some way. And so, some of the things that the church did, they've been misused badly. But there was, you know, there was method in it all, there were, there were things that were right in it.

Emma Pavey 22:02

Kind of a pattern.

June Boyce-Tillman 22:03

Yes, that's right. You know, 'seven for a secret that's never been told'. Well, many people have got secrets that haven't been told. And maybe at the very end, they do want, at least to tell the secret before they die. And when you look at the 'unquiet', the notion that some souls are unquiet, it is often in that particular frame, the fact that there were things that they they should have said that they hadn't said they can't sort of complete the process until it has been said, and they've been heard. I don't think it's about just saying it, but somebody's listened. And of course, that's what, you know, that's what was difficult about this.

Emma Pavey 22:47

And so there are a couple of themes that I see there. So there's this idea of closure,

this idea of completion. And then there's also sort of theme of, of knowing and unknowing of, of how we handle mystery. And, yeah, it's interesting, isn't it, but the, the tension in a sense between, between those?

June Boyce-Tillman 23:09

Yes, I mean, as a priest, I have to have, have to hold that mystery so that I can, I can work with whatever the person, person has. You're not going to change belief systems at that point, you have to work with whatever system a person has. And if they haven't got one, then I say, you will go into the arms of everlasting love. Because I do believe that, whether you want to call that god or goddess or what have you, that there is an everlasting love, and that you will be held in some way. But then, of course, I'm faced with my own dying, and what do I believe? And I think that's hard. In a sense, that mystery, I have to hold on to that love.

The near death experience, when I got wired into a circuit - I was changing a light bulb when the glass broke and the, the filament was still live. It was the most beautiful place, it was the most beautiful, the most beautiful, you know, glade in a wood with a stream and my two parents sitting on a bench. And it you know, I have to try and remember that - it was a long time ago now. And I believe that was a manifestation that there is an eternal love and I can hope.

It's very difficult as a priest to keep the uncertainty and the mystery, and at the same time to have a frame that will enable you, yourself to be able to do it, in a way, and that's the best I can... I have nothing. I mean, one of the chants that I use in my own prayer is based on one of the Jewish / Christian, you know, I have held you in the hollow of my hand, I am holding you in the hollow of my hand, I will hold you in the hollow of my hand, I am holding you in the hollow of my hand. And in a strange way, that's the best I can offer really. But it's hard. It's not easy. You know, being able to deal with other people's death is not necessarily being able to deal with your own.

Emma Pavey 25:29

Sure.

June Boyce-Tillman 25:30

And that's the hard bit of it. I mean, I've tried to put everything in order for my sons. So the service is done. And, you know, powers of attorney. And that was really hard.

But it was very helpful to have the conversation. Because I think, you know, I've left it as prepared as I can. You need to face up to it, you can't just say I'm just going to be burned and, and then we'll have a party. It's not as simple as that. And you miss out on a lot of things that you need to do. And so on.

Emma Pavey 26:03

Yeah.

June Boyce-Tillman 26:03

Because funerals can be a place where the, the cracks in the family show most, most clearly.

Emma Pavey 26:11

Yes, I mean, I guess beliefs and afterlife obviously affect the person who's dying, and how they approach that. And they affect the people who are grieving, as well.

June Boyce-Tillman 26:21

That's right. The first funeral that I took was when I was ordained. As we were leaving the crematorium, two bits of the family were fighting on the floor of the car park. And that's not uncommon. And so one needs to, it's usually around what the person wanted, but, you know, to leave what you really want, but also allow space for what they would want. And so on. I think that that's hard. But if one has a sense, a notion that something that is identifiably June lives on after that, then it's important. Well it's like all the other rituals, it's like marriage, it's like, you know, having a new job or leaving a job or being dismissed, they have to be managed. You can't just it doesn't happen like that.

Emma Pavey 27:14

Yes.

June Boyce-Tillman 27:16

You know, there's a process. And I think that we've, because we want a time for death and it's convenient bureaucratically to say, that person died at 10.54, I think we've forgotten that it's a process that, you know, people are going gradually down into it. And then, you know, probably going gradually on after that moment, which is

simply an arbitrary moment. And the body is carrying on, for example digesting. You know, it's, it's much more complicated than, than that, I think. And we've made it, yes, we've made it too easy, I think. Very little, very few of us know what is happening, the body only shuts down gradually. We see that in palliative care. But we don't see it beyond death, that it's still going on being a body for quite some time, even though the brain may have and the heart may have stopped.

Emma Pavey 28:16

It's interesting. Yeah. You mentioned Poppy. We had her on the previous podcast. And yeah, she talked about, about that. How this process of how, she talked about Direct Cremation. And she said, oh, people think oh, no, you know, it's fine. But then five days later, suddenly they wish they had, they had seen the body afterwards. And so allowing for just a little more space for people to process is really helpful.

June Boyce-Tillman 28:42

I mean, I think she's right, because when my mother died, I was pregnant. And people were really afraid of what it would do for the baby. And they didn't allow me to see her. No, not my mother, my father. That's right, my father died. And I still remember her coming back. And I said, but what did he look like, because I'd only seen him with all the tubes in hospital. And she said, he looked as if he was just going to wake up and, and say, 'Another cup of tea dear?'. And I never saw that. So when she died much later, I made jolly sure that I went there and saw her several times.

And I think sometimes, that that, you know, the Caribbean traditions, often, you know, before COVID had an open coffin, where people did come, you know, everybody came and looked at the body, and some people put things in, you know, extra things and so on. And one thing I like about the wicker coffins is that people can add little messages. So people often stick little messages in the side of the coffin. And all of those are important and I, if I have to take a funeral, I always take a basket of rosemary and say, you know, there may be things that you wanted to say to the person so take a sprig of rosemary and say it to them and throw it in the grave, which means that everybody has a chance to say those last words. I think everybody needs last words. The person needs the last words. And so do the people who are grieving, need, need the thing. I mean, I think one of the most beautiful

ends I saw was an atheistic funeral taken by humanistic celebrant, and his daughter, you know, we went down into the forest and so on. And his daughter threw a rose into the coffin and said, 'Thank you, Dad, you've been marvellous'. And I thought it was almost better than any blessing that I can say, if that's the last thing that's said, 'Thank you, Dad, you've been marvellous'.

Emma Pavey 30:38

It's its own blessing in a way.

June Boyce-Tillman 30:39

It's its own blessing. That's right. I suppose having, being in close touch with death, both my own death and other people's death, it makes it even more mysterious. But it means that it is a process for everybody. And to go back to George the Third, you know, he didn't have a chance to process. He was too busy being a king to process. He had 15 children, I think, and quite a lot of them died as they would have done in the 18th century. He didn't have time to process them. And of course, in my grandmother's generation, you wore a black cross, you had black armband on, the curtains were half drawn, and nobody expected you to do anything for six weeks. There was a grieving period, the loss of that is serious.

Emma Pavey 31:29

So you've mentioned a bit about the theology and the rituals in the Anglican Church in which you minister, and how there are some aspects that are not fully developed. And I'm wondering, because obviously, there's a funeral service. Do you feel then that it's the after that that there's there's a lack of ritual and ongoing?

June Boyce-Tillman 31:49

No, no, I think, I think I try and construct the service so it's right for everybody. Sometimes there's no mention of Jesus or anything, I will take whatever service is appropriate for them. Hence, the one that had, you know, they didn't want God so I said, What would you like? They said, eternal love. That seemed perfectly reasonable.

Emma Pavey 32:09

So you work with people to sort of create rituals, in a sense, and language with them.

June Boyce-Tillman 32:13

I always show them what I’m going to say beforehand. So, you know, I will, and one, one of the people whose funeral I took, nobody knew what her belief system was. The one group of people said she was a pagan. So I worked on that, and she was going to be buried and ecological burial site. And then they didn’t want the body to go into church. And we found that a body can’t be put in the village hall, which is what they wanted. And then the priest came into the church said she’d sang in the church choir for the last 10 years. So nobody knew what was appropriate. So I did a Christian burial, a Christian service in the church, and then did a pagan service upon up in the ecological, I mean, you know, I mean, it’s the best you can offer really.

Emma Pavey 33:01

Yeah. And I should imagine people really value that flexibility.

June Boyce-Tillman 33:07

Yes. I mean, they’re surprised that an Anglican priest will offer what, but I think it must be whatever you need. And I think the process of preparing it is quite important. I mean, the saddest one I’ve just done relatively recently, was a divorced couple with a nine year old child who was in the custody of her father. And the mother had a problem with drink, and was then found dead. So you had a funeral with a nine-year-old girl and her father, who was also suffering from cancer. And it probably was the one of the hardest funerals that I’ve done. They weren’t churchgoers. So I went round to them with the girl and I took all the robes I will wear. And I said, you know, I shall wear these, you know, this is what I look like, because it’s very special. I managed, I did the theatre with her, you know, the coffin will come up, and it will go and the curtains will close. We weren’t going to have any more than the curtains closing because the grinding mechanisms are often quite very difficult in the crematoria. So just close the curtains. And she would she was then showed me the pictures, which is already written, she’d made the picture for her mother and there was the cat was in it. And the dad was in it and her mother was in it and she was in it. And she was going to go and they were going to choose flowers. And she was going to make the posy for her mother, wasn’t going to be done by them. I mean, that was so important.

Emma Pavey 34:37

Yeah. Yeah. What a privilege to have that role to to shepherd people in that way.

June Boyce-Tillman 34:43

Yeah. And I think it’s still an image that will stay with me, can’t even talk about without crying still. You know, there’s the coffin coming up. And the father and the daughter with their arms around one another clutching the picture and the flowers that she’d made, both in tears.

Emma Pavey 35:03

Yeah. I mean, it’s it’s sort of sad and beautiful at the same time.

June Boyce-Tillman 35:07

Absolutely. Yeah, it was the ultimate sadness. But the ultimate, you know, beauty. It was an unbelievably beautiful image. It was the first time she’d cried. First time she’d cried. And, you know, I thought if one can make it that, if one can make the beauty and the sadness come together, in some way. But it’s hard.

Emma Pavey 35:32

Of course,

June Boyce-Tillman 35:33

It’s hard for everyone.

Emma Pavey 35:34

Yeah. So I think sometimes we give the impression if we talk enough about death and dying, it will be comfortable, and we’ll be fine. And I think, you know, there’s an element of, we can do a lot of learning that will make things easier. So but it’s, isn’t it always hard?

June Boyce-Tillman 35:50

I mean, it was a very difficult situation. And everybody in the crematorium was crying. And the tears were behind me and I thought, come on, June, the only one here who can’t cry. The only one,.

Emma Pavey 36:04

At least not, not in the service. But afterwards, it’s okay.

June Boyce-Tillman 36:07

That’s right. But I find it, I do pray for the souls. And one of my friends died a couple of, a few days ago, and every morning, I pray that the soul, that she’s passing over smoothly. And I see that as my job as a priest. Whatever one may think about the theology of it all, if I’ve taken a funeral, for several weeks after, I will pray for the person passing over.

Emma Pavey 36:12

Well like you said, it’s a theology that works for you.

June Boyce-Tillman 36:37

That’s right. I mean, she’s not buried yet. So you know, there’s all of that process going on, you know, people now, like Poppy, but other funeral directors are giving people a chance to wash the body, and dress the body. I mean, when my mother died in 77, all I was given was did I want a shroud with a frill or not, there was no chance for me to do anything for her at all. But now people are having. And I did do that for my ex father in law. And it was the last act of love you can do, and to take that away from people, which is why you need that, you know, the sort of, you know, you need to talk about it. I mean, I loved him a great deal. And it was, in a sense, the last act of love I could do was to wash his body and make sure it was dressed beautifully as he would have wanted it. And I found that in the undertaker when I was there, you know, if you could dress the body beautifully, and the people would say, ‘Oh, she looks so lovely’. You felt you’d done your job in helping them with that.

Emma Pavey 37:42

Well in a sense your job is sort of the spiritual side of that isn’t it is to kind of help create a beautiful, sort of spiritual experience that mirrors a good funeral director’s work.

June Boyce-Tillman 37:54

That’s right. And what was interesting working again with the undertaker was some cultures had the notion that the person in the coffin was still around. So I can

remember one conversation, which was, 'Well Mum you wanted 10,000 spent on your funeral. This has cost me about 5000 because we've got to have the horses Mother, I've just got to get the doves and that's just cost me 1000. By the time I've ordered the food, Mum…', you know, and there she was having this wonderful conversation with the person in the coffin. But many people, because exactly the things that come in, they, they don't feel able to do that, you know, they feel they're dead. But for some people, they are still there. And my experience too, not going to talk in any detail about this was it's possible to sort out the relationship when they're dead more easily than when they're alive. And that time, things that couldn't be said in life could be said.

Emma Pavey 38:54

And your, your in a sense, your afterlife beliefs enabled that.

June Boyce-Tillman 38:59

They do.

Emma Pavey 38:59

Which is where we've come back to the, to the theme. I've appreciated everything that you've offered. Thank you very, very much for your time. Really, really appreciate it.

June Boyce-Tillman 39:09

Thank you. It's lovely to meet you, Emma,

Emma Pavey 39:12

Lovely to meet you too, may the rest of your day go well, Thank you for listening to this conversation facilitated by the Susanna Wesley Foundation. You can engage with our work through following us on Twitter and Facebook. And our website susannawesleyfoundation.org. We would love to hear from you.