



**Referat (in English) von Alec von Graffenried, Stadtpräsident von Bern,
anlässlich des «10th World Research Congress EPAC» in der Kursaal Arena,
24.05.2018 ©**

(Es gilt das gesprochene Wort)

My name is Alec von Graffenried and I am the Mayor of the city of Bern.

On behalf of the city government, I would like to you a warm welcome here in our City.

Dealing with death and taking true care of dying people – these are, unfortunately, not top priorities in our society. Instead, we prefer to hide the dying. We like to put the dead away, out of our sight, as quickly as possible. Moreover, we certainly do not like to talk about our own end of life, nor about the way, we will be dying one day. It makes many of us feel uncomfortable.

I am certain that this is mainly because we are not used to talk about it. Therefore, we do not know how to do it.

These are all facts that bother me. They have been bothering me for a long time. It bothers me, because in my mind, thinking about death should be a very important part of our life. Any person, anybody who does not think about the finiteness of life leads in some way a somehow unperfect life.

How do I mean that? I mean, this repression of a very important aspect of life makes a person seem not mature, a little naïve.

In my opinion, we should even on a level of public society absolutely talk about the end of our own life and about dying. Because to have an open public discussion about the end of life is not only crucial for own well-being, but for our entire society as well. It is time that we free ourselves from this self-imposed non-talking agreement.

This is, what I do not understand: Our society has successfully managed to take away the horror of the beginning of life. Today, birth is being considered as something positive and makes people happy. However, the end of life continues to be a great horror and an even greater taboo. This has much to do with the fact that death has been pushed to the edge of our society in recent decades. Death and our own finiteness do not seem to fit into our fun and lifestyle society. Therefore, dying people and corpses are usually disappearing as quickly as possible. Our relationship to death and dying is very bad, indeed.

Do not get me wrong: You as researchers and experts are giving your best to improve the situation. The 10th World Research Congress EPAC here in Bern, a meeting of 1000 top researchers and scientists, is of great scientific and practical importance.

But anyway, the end of life should not only be a topic for scientific research and clinical care. What we need in our society is an entire new way on how to deal with death and the dying. The inhabitants of our city, of the canton and the whole of Switzerland should actively take up the topic. You may call it the search for a new culture of death. Because after all the way a society deals with death and dying is an important indication of how mature a society is as a whole.

A society that denies represses and does not want to admit the inevitability of death, is somehow a little naive. A society that together defines an appropriate way of dealing with death, successfully integrates death into life. A common understanding of life and death leads to more community and understanding in the end.

We do not know, what was before us and we do not know, what will be once we are gone. However, life, in all its facets, must be lived. There is probably no greater appreciation of life – of our own life – than dealing with the end of it. That is what I would like to advocate, what I would like to do, politically and socially in our city of Bern. I would like to start a conversation. A few weeks ago, I spoke about eternity and the culture of death in a smaller gathering in a church in Bern. I was referring mostly to my own experiences with death, experience I had in my life and in my family. I got an enormous response from the audience and this reassured me, that quite many people share my views.

Two weeks ago, my predecessor, the ancient Mayor of the City of Bern died, at the age of only 66 years, on a heavy cancer on his liver. Bern still is mourning. He spoke open and in public about his illness and his dying, and he set free a lot of good emotions in our City.

Yes, people are ready to open up and to have a more open approach to death. Therefore, I think it is high time for our society to make this extra step, to grow up and to form a more mature relationship with death. In the coming months, we will dare a whole series of events in Bern on the topic of the end of life, and we will also motivate schools, to promote the discussions in the neighbourhood – on the way to a compassionate city of Bern. Thank you, Steffen, for helping us in this and for organising this congress.

Prof. Dr. Eychmüllers work and what he is trying to accomplish in and for the city of Bern, are inspiring. He has been Medical Director of the University Centre for Palliative Care at the Inselspital Bern and Professor at the University of Bern since 2016. I am very impressed by what he is doing and what he stands for. For example, he does not think much of only giving medical care to people at the end of their lives. If someone is dying, according to Prof. Eychmüller, the first step is to deal with the patient's fears. It is about relieve of stress and avoiding loneliness. Because people who are not alone, are less afraid of dying. In my modest opinion, this is the way to go. So on behalf of myself and many other people – thank you and thank all of you for your important and inspiring work!

Switzerland is known in Europe as a centre of Assisted Suicide. I wish, that Switzerland and Bern will become more and more a centre for Palliative Care!

I wish you a productive, quite possibly an eye-opening world research congress, and a wonderful stay in our beautiful city of Bern!