

Death Need Not Be Scary

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Are you scared of death? I understand; that was me also, before my first close encounter with death. My gradual shift in perspective began with a series of prophetic dreams and visions when I was twenty-nine. The first was of someone drowning at a specific beach in Laguna Beach. Seven days later, it happened. Another was of my grandmother dying. Because the drowning dream and other visions had come to pass, I wondered what would happen and paid attention.

My grandmother was eighty-seven and had Alzheimer's. My parents were caring for her and needed a respite vacation so we took her to a small private nursing home. Five days later, the owner called to say my grandmother had pneumonia. She said I had to pick her up as soon as possible; she didn't want her to die there. I was shocked and my parents couldn't be reached until the following day. I didn't know what to do—it would be my first time caring for someone who was dying. I called her neurologist, who told me to take her to the hospital immediately, and to call an ambulance if needed. I knew my grandmother didn't want to be hooked up to machines in a hospital; she had signed a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) form years earlier. Needing a second opinion, I called her primary care physician. After listening attentively, he said, "If you choose to bring your grandmother home, I will help you in any way I can." His words bolstered my courage to bring her home.

A friend went with me and we brought her home. Shortly after seating her in her favorite armchair, my grandmother tilted her face upwards and uttered the words, "Mom . . . mom . . ." I wondered if she was seeing her mother, who had died when she was three. *Perhaps her mother is here to help her . . .* After several minutes, when it felt right, I knelt beside my dear grandmother. Stroking her soft, curly hair and touching her hand, I told her how much I loved her, and how much everyone in our family loved her, naming each person. I told her what a wonderful grandmother she was and how grateful I was to have her in my life. Ten minutes passed and I left the room to get something. When I returned, my grandmother was leaning to the side of the chair with her head resting on the upholstered arm. I checked her breathing and her pulse . . . she was still; she had taken her last breath. The look on her face was so peaceful and serene that my fear of death melted entirely away.

Three years passed and I had a vision during a workshop with psychiatrist Stan Grof. I was one of 150 people lying face-up on the floor while another 150 people assisted us in a deep breathing process known as Holotropic Breathwork. I was doing the breathwork when I "saw" my grandfather flanked by two angels on my right. Seeing him with angels prompted me to think that this was his time of passage and I began to pray for his peaceful transition. After several minutes praying, the thought came to me that perhaps this was not his time of

passage, so I stopped praying. I glanced to my left and saw Stan Grof walking toward me; behind him was the opening of a tunnel of light. I closed my eyes and sensed his presence as he walked by. When I opened my eyes, I saw energy forms (visible as whirls of white light) enter the room from the opening of the tunnel of light. The energy forms whirled around the room in long streams counterclockwise for several minutes, and then exited. I wondered if they were spirits. When the session ended, I called my father. There was sadness in his voice when he told me that his father had died at 10:10 am, the approximate time of my vision.

I was close to my grandfather and was saddened by his passage. "Seeing" him with angels assured me that his transition was filled with Grace. I was grateful to be in a receptive and open state of being, which enabled me to see him.

In 1991, I was hired for my first job as a caregiver. Betty was eighty-six and had advanced Alzheimer's. I was walking close behind her as she traversed the floor using her walker when suddenly, her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor. Quickly catching her, I lowered her all the way. Her skin was ashen and her eyes had a vacuous look. "Betty . . . Betty . . .", I uttered, but she did not respond. It seemed she had a stroke or a heart attack.

What was I going to do? The family didn't want us to call 911 and I was committed to being there for her. Thoughts were racing around my head . . . Knowing the importance of being calm, I quieted my mind. Being calm and centered helped me access the still, silent place within, which helped me listen to inner guidance. I uttered words that came intuitively to me, "Everything is all right, Betty. Everything is as it should be." Betty's face was frozen in fear and her body was contracted with tension. I wondered what she was afraid of. It was as if one of her feet was firmly planted in the world familiar to her, while the other one was probing the unknown.

I wanted Betty to feel loved, appreciated and supported. "You are safe, Betty. There is nothing to fear. It's okay to let go when you are ready." I continued speaking as I stroked her bushy white hair, "It's okay to let go when you are ready." I touched her heart with my right hand and placed my left hand on her back, "holding" her heart. For ten precious minutes, we were bonded in a sacred space of loving care. As Betty hovered between worlds, barely breathing, I was her mid-wife, encouraging her to relax as her body's natural wisdom took over. Suddenly, Betty gasped, paused for a long moment, and then let go of her breath and fully released the physical burden of her existence. I sat there in utter amazement, reflecting on this sacred moment of transition.

Taking care of someone when they are dying is an act of love, but it can be scary if we are unfamiliar with the dying process. Over time I came to realize how the Five C's have helped me be more comfortable and at ease with people who are dying.

The first C is Compassion. My love and compassion for my grandmother gave me the courage to honor her wishes and bring her home to die.

The second C is Courage. The word courage comes from the French *courage*. *Cour* means heart, and *age*, or *agir*, means to act. Courage thus means to act with heart or from the heart. I have called upon courage many times while caring for the dying. My love and compassion for my grandmother gave me the courage to follow inner guidance and to give the best of myself to the situation as it unfolded.

The third C is Commitment. I made a commitment to Betty's family not to call 911. I didn't know what to do after she crumpled to the floor, but I trusted that my intuition and inner wisdom would guide me once I quieted my racing mind.

The fourth C is Connection. The spoken word and touch can be powerful connectors. Speaking in a soothing tone and using caring and supportive words strengthens our connection with others.

The fifth C, Calmness, is the common thread woven through all C's. Being calm and peaceful transmits a feeling of comfort and safety to others. If we are frightened, someone who is dying might sense this and become fearful as well. When we sit next to someone who is approaching death, we can transmit calmness and security simply by having a serene and peaceful presence. Our emotional state effects those near us; we can have a positive influence on the last days, hours or moments of someone's life.

It is important to honor our loved one's wishes, when possible. Some people want to die in a hospital, while others prefer to die at home. If you have an opportunity to care for someone at the end of their life, I hope you will accept. The experience can be profoundly life-changing for both you and the person who is dying.

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