



# SACRED PASSAGE

## Conscious Dying as a Transformative Healing Journey

by Linda Sechrist

**W**hen properly viewed, the thresholds of all of life's transitional moments can be both emotionally and spiritually rewarding. Whether it involves marriage or birth, job loss or illness, gleaning insight from the experience can yield fresh perspective on how to live life more fully today, if we remain mindful and lovingly attentive through the process.

Like birth, death is a transition we can wisely prepare for. In recent years, compassionate individuals and grass-roots movements have emerged to help us conduct ourselves, heal and grow from losing a loved one or face our own passing. An increasing number of initiatives support a new model in

palliative care that treats death not as a failure, but an expected aspect of the human experience. Each in its own way advocates for a grace-filled passage supported by dignified, caring and compassionate practices.

### Profound Shift

The Conscious Dying Institute, in Boulder, Colorado, aims to restore death and dying to its natural place in the sacred circle of life. Its end-of-life literacy curriculum and certificate training programs are helping to create a new, wisdom-based culture of healing teachers and end-of-life doulas that serve among the frontline caregivers and companions providing the comfort people want and need most. Founded

by Tarron Estes, a healing artist, poet, Caritas coach and transformational learning educator, the institute is grounded in love, spiritual openness, compassion and a universal field of consciousness.

"Training is open to nurses, physicians, clinicians, caregivers, family members, healthcare teams and anyone else interested in exploring what it means to die consciously," says Estes. It attends to the provider's inner awakening and helps them strengthen their ability to give spiritual, emotional, physical and practical care to anyone, helping to relieve pain, regardless of diagnosis.

"Rather than curative care, it's all about seeking to increase precious,

meaningful moments, a sense of spiritual sanctity, beauty, interconnectedness and appreciation of life for the families and patients they serve. An end-of-life doula at bedside assures that families and loved ones can focus on what is most important," explains Estes, who believes that our true nature lives within us as an unblemished jewel.

Helping individuals become comfortable talking about death is the work of Dr. Karen Wyatt, of Dillon, Colorado, founder of the End of Life University, an online interview series with end-of-life care experts. She provides a trustworthy loving environment in monthly death cafés. The author of *What Really Matters: 7 Lessons for Living from the Stories of Dying* expands the conversation through related articles and podcasts at [eolUniversity.com](http://eolUniversity.com).

Death cafés benefit from Wyatt's experience as a hospice doctor. "There is never an agenda. Of the 10 to 12 people that generally join in, one is always a new caller, recently awakened to the idea of conscious dying or their own mortality. They're seeking information and someone to talk to because family and friends aren't interested. Some already embracing their mortality wish to explore their thoughts with others. Some callers join just to listen," advises Wyatt.

Because death in the West has become a commercialized, medical event with funeral home packages the norm, Wyatt recommends the National Home Funeral Alliance to those interested in a deeper understanding of options and resources for a gentler model. The nonprofit, grassroots movement and its members, such as Sacred Crossings, in Los Angeles, seek to restore the lost art and healing ritual of a home funeral by preserving the rights of families to provide home after-death care.

Supporting and educating interested families is the mission of Sacred Crossings founder Rev. Olivia Rosemarie Bareham. The certified death midwife and home funeral guide draws from her experiences as an auxiliary nurse and hospice volunteer to assist families with end-of-life planning,



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**We rediscover that in order to die well, we must live well. Dying gracefully is the result of a mindful, day-to-day journey—a culmination of informed choices, honest discussions and deference to the hallowed fragility of nature's life-death cycles.**

— William Rosa

death midwifery and arrangements for an at-home vigil and funeral, as well as cremation and burial choices.

"We also offer sacred singing to help ease a loved one's transition. Music by a bedside soloist or choir before, during and after death can be deeply relaxing and comforting, and even provide pain relief," advises Bareham.

### Exploring the Mystery

For more than 40 years, philosopher, psychologist and physician Raymond Moody's life work has been acknowledging the mysteries and validating the unexplainable events at the end of life. His seminal bestseller *Life After Life* appeared in 1975. Lisa Smartt's mentorship by Moody led them to co-found [FinalWordsProject.org](http://FinalWordsProject.org). She's also authored *Words at the Threshold*,

a study of the nonsensical, metaphorical and paradoxical language and visions of the dying.

Moody and Smartt agree that by better understanding the unique language patterns related to end of life we can share more deeply and build bridges with our beloveds throughout the dying process. "When we do so, we offer greater support to the dying and ameliorate our own experience of loss as they cross the threshold," remarks Smartt. Like William Peters, founder of the Shared Crossings Project, in Santa Barbara, California, they caution that compassionate etiquette during events at death is important.

"Assume that levels of awareness exist in the dying so that our energy and presence are felt and our voices heard," advises Moody. "Respect your words and actions, regardless of the person's state of consciousness. Be a compassionate listener and validate their vision. Don't pretend to intellectualize or explain anything."

Dianne Gray, president and executive director of the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Foundation, also owns Hospice and Healthcare Communications. "The dying often wish to leave here surrounded by peace and harmony. They choose to let go of contentiousness and often wish family members would do the same, which is facilitated by mapping out Advance Directives according to the final wishes of the patient," says Gray.

Questions she frequently addresses in public talks and Death Over Dinner party conversations include: the necessity of finishing unfinished business; bringing closure to unresolved relationship issues; finding words to express our compassion; soothing the sense of impending loss; and managing to take only love with us to the other side, yet leave enough of it behind to help loved ones through their grieving process. She cautions that no matter how well we plan for death, things don't always go as planned.

"Sometimes no matter how many advance care conversations have taken place, discord can dismantle the best laid plans. It requires the tough work of

## As many as 80 percent of us say we want to die at home.

-CNN

compassionate communications. Friends and families need to remember that this is the patient's end-of-life experience, not theirs. It is possible to find peace in the midst of conflict, understanding that the one leaving overwhelmingly wishes for a peaceful passing, including peace within the family."

The Death Over Dinner initiative, founded by Michael Hebb in 2013, has been hosted by groups in more than 20 countries to help people engage

in conversations on "how we want to die"—the most vital and costly discussion Americans aren't having (*DeathOverDinner.org/stories*).

### Practical Plans

The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants and its 360 Degrees of Financial Literacy program offer a free downloadable national *Guide to Financial Decisions: Implementing an End-of-Life Plan* at [Tinyurl.com/EssentialPlanNeeds](http://Tinyurl.com/EssentialPlanNeeds). It includes basic descriptions of issues that arise as we age beyond retirement and details the critical documents needed for the individual, dependents, property, assets, estate planning, wills and trusts. It also addresses issues related to advance, treatment and

do-not-resuscitate directives, insurance, types of funerals and costs, and Social Security, Medicare and veterans' benefits. Guidelines suggest consulting with a certified public accountant or personal financial planning specialist.

The latest innovation is the blessing of a living funeral, a celebration of life while the honoree is present to hear the eulogies, praises and farewells before they depart.

*AgingWithDignity.org* provides a downloadable *Five Wishes* document, a popular advance directive, or living will that covers personal, spiritual, medical and legal aspects. It's easy to use and can serve as a family guide to prompt conversations about personal care preferences in the event of serious illness.

*New York Times* journalist Mark Leibovich wrote about how Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy chose to spend his final weeks in pursuit of a "good ending." As death approached, Kennedy told friends that he wanted to take stock of his life and enjoy the gift of his remaining days with the people he loved most. As a result, he continued enjoying his morning ritual of reading newspapers while drinking coffee, playing with his dogs, watching James Bond movies with his wife and holding family dinners and sing-alongs near nightly. He reveled in his bedside view of Nantucket Sound, sailed when he could and ate lots of his favorite ice cream. His mantra was, "Every day is a gift."

"As our time winds down, we all seek comfort in simple pleasures—companionship, everyday routines, the taste of good food, the warmth of sunlight on our faces," remarks Boston's Dr. Atul Gawande in *Being Mortal*. "If we strive in our final months for independence, companionship, mindful attention, dignity, wisdom, joy, love and freedom from pain, we have the power to make those days less miserable, confusing and frightening."

In these many ways, we can manage to gently embrace and tenderly navigate life's final transition with grace and love.

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## WRITING OUR LEGACY

by Linda Sechrist

In their books *Caring for the Dying* and *Having the Last Say*, authors Henry Fersko-Weiss and Alan Gelb, respectively, advocate reviewing our life and writing a short narrative to explore its value as we approach our final act of Earth's play.

Processing experiences from the past and what they mean at this juncture presents us an opportunity to achieve greater clarity and integrate them in a positive way in our life story. According to Fersko-Weiss, it has the power to reduce depression, increase life satisfaction, promote acceptance of self and enhance integrity of spirit, no matter what phase of life we are in.

The harvesting of life experiences should reflect our true humanity—flaws and all—and what we've learned through mistakes and failures, as well as triumphs. Conveying a compelling mythic family story, values we've lived by and our embrace of meaningful relationships will help the people we know understand that, for all its difficulties and complexities, life is worth living. Our narrative, whether recorded as an essay or scripted video, becomes an act of praise for the gift of the life we've led, imperfect as it may have been. It can also serve as a potential keepsake that passes along life lessons and values from one generation to another.

Gelb suggests that summing up what's most important to us in 500 to 1,000 words can be an experience to savor and enjoy at a reflective time in life, an opportunity to capture our legacy and even serve as our own eulogy. When we want a loved one no longer here to feel near to us and hear them one last time, it's a way for them to literally have the last say, he adds.



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