

Keeping Vigil, Creating Sacred Space, and Honoring the Final Transition

By Loretta Downs

Dying is a spiritual experience with medical implications. The journey to our final transition cannot be walked alone. Dying is unfamiliar to most of us and mysterious to all of us. We are challenged to give care and to accept care. We are asked to surrender resistance to the Lord when He extends his hand to lift us out of our bodies into eternity.

“To be present at the end of someone’s life is not a horror or embarrassing, it’s a privilege; a sacred invitation into what it means to be human.” -- Dr. Sanjay Gupta

Keeping vigil is deeply personal. The loved one who is dying may be in the chrysalis stage, sleeping, not eating, drinking, or talking. What can you do? Hearing is the last sense to go. Talk to them. Tell stories at the bedside. Enjoy the memories. Laugh. Cry. Reconcile. Feel.

Keep fresh flowers in the room where you know a person will make their transition. Take photographs. You can delete the ones you don’t want, and you will treasure the ones you keep.

Within sight, place any personal and meaningful objects including photos, religious objects, and souvenirs that will enhance the person’s comfort and spiritual connection to the sacred process that is happening.

Try to place the bed with a view into nature. Keep the lighting soft. Put scarves over lampshades to soften the light. Tip window blinds. Aromatherapy, soft music, and candles (even battery-operated) can be soothing and create the feel of a sacred space. Of course, always ask the person what they would like in their environment.

Avoid televisions, loud noises, and offensive odors. Sometimes perfume can be offensive near the person. If the smell of coffee or a special food is pleasing, by all means, provide it. Even little tastes can be satisfying.

Always call your hospice provider when you are uncertain about what is happening to your loved one. They have a 24/7 hotline.

As death draws near, the person will not want to eat or drink and they will sleep most of the time. Ice chips, popsicles, and sponges dipped in water will soothe the mouth. Dry mouth sprays can be helpful if wanted.

Often, dark spots called mottling appear on the hands and/or feet. This will begin the active dying process as the heart slows down and blood pools in the extremities.

Sometimes breathing becomes labored. There is agonal breathing that manifests shortness of breath and gasping. Ask your hospice for advice about how to manage it. Often, morphine will ease the symptoms.

Apnea or death rattle is a sound made when phlegm collects at the back of the throat. It sounds worse for those watching than it does for the person experiencing it. Turning the person on their side or putting a fan close can ease the symptom. Contact your hospice provider.

As death nears, pulse and blood pressure will slow down.

Biological systems are naturally ceasing to function. An amazing cessation of movement occurs after the last breath.

This is the miracle of birthing out as the essence of the person leaves the body. Consider the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis in a new form, free of its previous container.

After the final transition, just sit. Perhaps you were not in the room. Do not fret, your loved one wanted to be alone. Perhaps you were holding hands, or beside the person in bed, or across the room. Just sit. Feel the changes in the air, the quiet in the room. Feel your love flowing. Feel your sadness. Feel whatever comes up.

Turn off all the machines. Call the hospice. They need to know the time of death. They will call the funeral home but do not rush them. You will want time to process what you witnessed, time to remain close to your loved one, this one last precious time. There may be people to call who want to say goodbye, too.

“Rituals provide a communal spiritual structure in times of big transition. They help us come together to face things that are too hard to face alone.” --Sarah Kerr, SacredDeathcare.com.

Treat the body with love and kindness. Weep if you feel like it. Close the eyes by putting gentle pressure on the lids. Close the mouth. You may need to roll a small towel under the chin or wrap a scarf under the jaw and tie it on the head. Tidy up the bed.

Don't be afraid to do what comes naturally to you. Many people feel that bathing the body, or parts of it, and dressing it in fresh clothing is healing. Remember that these moments will remain in your mind's eye for the rest of your life.

Pick the petals of the flowers in the room or the garden. Put them in a box or bowl and ask everyone in the room to place some over the body as a final gift of love and gratitude. Pray.

After the room is settled and the body has been treated with holiness and awe, sit again while you wait for the funeral home to arrive. Tell stories. Many believe that the soul hangs around awhile because it wants to comfort the loved ones who are grieving. Offer thanks.

You are in the presence of grace. Hold the truth that energy is neither created nor destroyed. Your loved one will always be with you.

The first year of birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays without your loved one will be turning points in the grieving process.

Use your grief to foster spiritual growth and gratitude. We are all just walking each other home.

