

It is a privilege to be with your loved one as he or she is dying--to sit with them, listen to them, breathe with them, and meditate with them during their last days, hours, and minutes.

When compassionate palliative care allows your loved one to be free from pain and discomfort, when there is an opportunity for life review and resolution, for forgiveness and affirmation of love, everyone's attention becomes free to focus beyond the medical condition of the body, beyond the interpersonal dynamics of the family and inner circle.

It is possible to catch a clear view of the profound spiritual transformations that take place in people as they come closer and closer, with each breath, to death.

It may become apparent that, sitting by the bedside of someone who is dying, just being there, in a centered way, for long hours allows for a level of deep and essential sharing that most of us do not normally get to experience. Simply being with someone who is very close to death allows the chance to observe a very subtle and profound process—the opening of a human being into his or her own spiritual nature, into his or her deepest nature.

There is an utterly unique moment in a human life, called the Nearing Death Experience. This Nearing Death Experience happens anywhere from a few weeks to a few days, sometimes a few hours or even in the last few moments before death itself. It is marked by the slowing and then the stilling of the physical body, a letting go and moving beyond the separate sense of self, and the increasing experience of Spirit, of grace.

Terminal illness is a radical and beautiful process that empties the mind and opens the heart, and expands our awareness into the landscape of the soul. Any time any of us begins to relax the sense of self, we open ourselves into far more essential being. A committed spiritual practice can create that movement. In adopting a spiritual practice, we have chosen to be transformed. Dying, however, chooses us...and powerfully leads us beyond all that we believed ourselves to be.

Qualities of grace begin to emerge in people as they enter the Nearing Death Experience. You may witness in your loved one, for example, an increased capacity for love and forgiveness, an increased simplicity and depth of being. We know these qualities of grace in the finest among us or in ourselves in our finest moments. Their source is beyond the small sense of self.

As people near death, we begin to see the emergence of the *quality of relaxation*. There is a sense of the end of struggle, a surrender, an allowing of one's contracted self to relax and melt. There is a feeling of sinking into safety, finally, after all the intensity of resistance. People will often say that they know that they have passed from a time of sickness into a time of dying. Many people have said that they are surprised that this phenomenon feels okay to them and that they feel safe. This quality of deep relaxation can be perceived in the relaxation of the muscles, in the deep sighs we know a bit of ourselves even in our health, when we sink into a chair after a long and hectic day, and in

the sense of peace dying people talk about and family members may notice as someone comes close to the end of life in this physical form.

Nearing death, we begin to perceive a *quality of withdrawal*. There is a withdrawal from the world we had inhabited and the worldly self we had used to negotiate that world. There is a move away from the often frivolous periphery of life and deeper in toward the center. Old abilities, old activities, old roles, and even old appearances simply slip away. One person told me that this experience was like clearing the world and her self out of the way so that God could fill her. This sense of withdrawal, close to death, has the distinct feeling of being positive, purposeful, and transforming. There is less doing, and more being.

The dying person's being is often characterized by a *quality of radiance*. One can perceive this radiance, sometimes pulsating, and one can often perceive an opalescence in the quality of the skin. Family members, even those unfamiliar with death and unfamiliar with the notion of subtle energy, often witness this as well. When one is present with focused and participating attention, the quality of light at the moment of death is extraordinary, the intensity of being is extraordinary.

There is a *quality of interiority* in the Nearing Death Experience. Attention is drawn inward, fascinated by the intensity of increasing awareness of the sacred. Spiritual dimensions seem to disclose themselves most powerfully at the moment of birth, when life enters form, and at the moment of death, when life leaves form. Many dying people indicate that much deep "soul work" occurs during this time of turning inward. One person said that he had lived his life as if it were a dress rehearsal. Dying, he said, was very real.

The Nearing Death Experience is characterized by a quieting, a hushing, a *quality of silence*. Any communication that does occur is essential and deep. We play no games at the edge of life and death. Communication is often symbolic, filled with metaphor. Just as awareness has moved beyond only what the mind can know, communication moves beyond words born of logic and reason.

Often, dying people have many and partial preparatory experience in dimensions of awareness beyond this one of bodies and words that we know so well. The closer a person comes to death, the more we can notice in him or her a *quality of transcendence*. We simply become aware that this person, whom we have known and loved, is becoming more real, more full, more essential. One woman said, "I have never felt more fully alive." There is a development of a consciousness that goes far beyond the personal sense of self, the ego identity in which we have all lived most of our lives, into dimensions far more spacious and illuminated, described by many people as holy ground.

The Nearing Death Experience often seems to confer a special kind of knowledge, a *quality of knowing*. The time of dying is often marked by deep insight and recognition, and of the need of the body to die so that the next experience might be entered. Often,

there is a knowledge of when the leave-taking will occur and the closer one comes to death, the greater is the certainty that what awaits is safe.

There is, lastly, nearing death, a sense that this experience is “right and fitting and just.” There is a *quality of perfection*. It is very common for dying people to say such things as: “I feel like I’ve entered something vast,” “I feel like I’m turning into light,” “It feels like I’m filling with light,” “Light is pouring into me,” “I feel God.” Families, too, at some point, begin to sense this quality and encourage their loved one to let go into that perfection, to relax into far greater being.

As people near death, the qualities of grace become more apparent. We can learn to look for them: an increased capacity for love and forgiveness, an increased simplicity and depth of being, relaxation, withdrawal, radiance, interiority, silence, and a sense of the sacred—of transcendence and knowing and perfection.

The qualities of grace are important signs and symptoms of the nearness of death. They announce the closeness of death as surely as a drop in blood pressure or the mottling of the skin. The physical signs and symptoms allow us to respond appropriately to our loved one with compassion and tenderness. The spiritual signs and symptoms allow us to become aware of the spiritual transformations that occur in the beloved soul about to leave the dying body. There is great power in simply recognizing that the movement from life to death is a rich and sacred passage...for our loved one and for ourselves. To the degree we allow ourselves to stay connected with them as they course through chaotic emotions, deep surrender, and the peace of transcendence, we are able to also experience some of the grace in dying and catch a glimpse of how to live in grace as well.