



## Stories From the End of Life

Extracts from *Facing Death and Finding Hope: A Guide to the Emotional and Spiritual Care of the Dying*  
By Christine Longaker, Broadway Books, New York 2001, 262 pp

### Story #1

#### **The story of Rose: a lack of honest communication**

A middle-aged woman was dying in a major city hospital. Rose was receiving palliative treatment for her cancer and was spending most of her days alone. In the last few weeks of her life, as her condition slowly deteriorated, she kept ringing the nurses' bell, complaining of pain. Although the doctor adjusted the medication dosage a number of times to ensure that her pain was well-managed whilst keeping her alert, Rose continued to ring the nurses' bell over and over, complaining of pain. A psychiatrist was called in yet before going to the patient's room he learned from one of the nurses that Rose had never been informed of her diagnosis or prognosis.

After greeting the dying woman, the doctor was honest about the reason for his visit. "I've been asked to see you because you keep calling the nurses and complaining of pain, but the nurses and the doctor have done all they can. So I'm here to spend time with you, to see how I can be of help. Tell me, what is it you need?"

"All I need is a cup of tea, but they keep bringing me these little pills."

"A cup of tea, is that all you want?"

"No, I am frightened, and I really need to talk, but no one has any time."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Well, I've got cancer, haven't I?" Rose asked.

The doctor asked the dying woman how she felt about cancer. She had heard of another patient with cancer who had terrible pain, and was worried his would happen to her. The doctor did his best to reassure her that her pain could be managed quite well until she died.

"Are you in pain now?" the doctor asked her.

"No", came the surprising reply.

"Are you afraid of death, Rose?" he asked.

Rose wasn't afraid of death, she had a confidence in God and in the hereafter; principally she was anxious about the process of dying. After this long and reassuring talk, Rose was much more relaxed and no longer complained of pain. The nurses continued to connect with her and reassure her. And, once her family realized she did not have long to live, they were frequently by her side, until Rose died peacefully a few weeks later.

As this woman's experience reveals, a large part of the unnecessary suffering of dying comes from not feeling safe to acknowledge or express our natural fears and sadness, and no one taking the time to communicate honestly, or appreciate us as a 'living person'.

### Story #2

#### **We can choose a positive response**

In the journal she kept during her illness, Treya Wilber wrote:

'Learning to make friends with cancer, learning to make friends with the possibility of an early and perhaps painful death, has taught me a great deal about making friends with myself, as I am, and a great deal about making friends with life, as it is. I know that there are a lot of things that I can't change. I can't force life to make sense or to be fair. This growing acceptance of life as it is, with all

the sorrow, the pain, the suffering and the tragedy, has brought me a kind of peace. I find that I feel ever more connected with all beings who suffer, in a really genuine way. I find a more open sense of compassion. And I find an ever steadier desire to help, in whatever way I can.'

After searching unsuccessfully for some sort of lesson or assigned meaning in her illness, Treya decided instead to invest meaning in her situation by choosing a positive response. As she was able to embrace and accept her own suffering, she opened to the immense suffering in the world around her, and deepened her love and compassion for all other beings.

### **Story #3**

#### **Dedicating your pain and suffering**

Father David, a retired priest and hospice volunteer, was conducting his weekly visit with an elderly, wealthy widow who was very bitter and suffering greatly. All Norma talked about were her troubles and her blame of others - the caregivers who neglected her, the doctor who didn't listen, the pain which was not relieved, her loneliness and abandonment by her children, whom she resolved to disown. Week after week, Father David listened patiently and wondered if his presence made any difference at all.

Then Father David was called in on an emergency to see a young woman whose husband had died suddenly at work. Laura had four small children at home, all of them under the age of six. She was in great distress and emotional pain, confused and in shock, weeping profusely and unable to cope with her children's incessant demands. Laura wondered out loud about how she was going to support her children emotionally and financially. In witnessing Lara's distress, Father David's heart went out to her, and he promised to continue giving her his presence and support.

When Father David next visited Norma, the elderly widow, and her continuous stream of blame and self-pity again, he lost his patience and said, "I know this is very hard for you; I see you are suffering and feel all alone. I wish I could make things better for you, but I can't. If you continue thinking only of yourself, you will only feel trapped in your suffering. A few days ago, I met a young woman whose husband died suddenly, and she doesn't know how she is going to survive. Why don't you dedicate your suffering and pain to Laura, so that she might find a way through her troubles and heartbreaking loss?"

After speaking so strongly to Laura, Father David wondered if he would be welcomed back, but when he next entered Norma's room, he saw a complete transformation. "I don't use this word lightly - in fact I have never used it to describe a living person. But when I came to see Norma, she had completely changed; she was a saint. Her whole being and even the room was infused with her radiant love. Her first words to me were: "How is that young woman doing? I have been thinking about her and praying for her all week, and dedicating my dying to her. Is there anything she needs? How else can I help?"

We should train in this practice of dedication throughout our life, whether we are in happy or difficult situations, sharing the merit and positive spiritual power we generate each day with all other beings, and praying that anything we do may only benefit and help them.

### **Story #4**

#### **Family failing to connect with each other**

A young man told me of his father's last days:

'My mother didn't want my father to be told he was dying. She was afraid he couldn't handle it. She had committed herself to caring for him at home as long as she could physically manage it. When the family came to visit - my sister, myself, my brother and his wife - we felt extremely awkward, looking at his emaciated body and talking normally about the sports and weather as though nothing had changed.

We could see his symptoms were getting worse, and each day he was having more difficulty getting up and walking. There was a lot of tension and fear in the house. Then one morning, my

dad's breathing started to worsen, and we rushed him to the hospital, where he was admitted to the intensive care unit. He looked very far away, lying on the hospital bed with its bars on the sides and with all the tubes going into his arms and the machinery surrounding him. I didn't know how to get close to him.

We were warned that he might not get better, but when we insisted, the doctor admitted that it was possible that Dad might pull out of the crisis. So we pushed away our sadness, hoping and praying for the best. Each of us hoped to have a chance to speak to him if the time came that he was actually dying. We began a vigil by his side, and day and night there was always someone with him.

After five days we were all pretty tired. The nurse persuaded Mum to go home for the afternoon, have a bath and a good sleep. The rest of us went to the coffee shop down the back from the hospital, and we sat and talked about the whole problem. My older brother was really agitated, so he went for some cigarettes and must have smoked a few before he rejoined us. Finally we started back to the ICU. My feet felt like lead, I was so tired.

We were stopped at the door. The nurse called for the doctor, and he said that Dad has suddenly stopped breathing a short while before. They tried everything they could do to bring him back - but he was gone. Gone!

My older brother immediately went into a rage, attacking the doctor and the staff for letting him die, while his wife stood there, frozen with fear. My sister started sobbing hysterically, and though I wanted to stay by Dad's side for a while, I realized I had to keep it together and be strong for everybody else, so I took her into the hallway to calm her down. Later, they all told me it looked like I didn't care that he died.

My brother insisted on calling Mum and he gave her the news in a pretty stark way. She knew he was going to die, but still the news was like a lightning strike. She was really overwhelmed. She kept saying it was her fault, that she'd abandoned him in his hour of need. I never saw my mother like that, she was so out of control.

The funeral was a travesty - everyone was blaming everyone else. Nobody wanted to see my sister's and my mother's tears, and we were judging our reactions as a measure of how much we loved Dad. We all thought we had abandoned him, though, and nobody but my mum would say it. Pretty soon, we stopped talking about his death because we just wanted to forget it.'

One of the most poignant and unnecessary sufferings experienced by the dying or their loved ones is the failure to connect with each other before the moment of death. And yet many people - facing death unprepared - don't communicate all they would have liked before a loved one dies...Acknowledging your regrets can inspire the courageous resolve to live and communicate in a different way now. It's even possible to conclude your relationship with a loved one who has died.

## **Story #5**

### **Finding the Courage to Communicate**

It was late afternoon on Christmas Eve, and my husband, Lyttle, and I were at the leukaemia clinic for his checkup. The doctor examined the recent swelling in Lyttle's leg and frowned, "It looks like a new blood clot is forming in your left leg," he said. "This is very dangerous. If you are walking around, part of it could break off and destroy your lung or heart. I want to have you admitted to the hospital today."

This was a devastating blow. Lyttle hated being in the hospital. Since his diagnosis in late August, he had been hospitalised for three weeks in every four, dealing with with one life-threatening crisis after another.

We looked at each other, already aware that this would be our last Christmas together with our family and our young son. Lyttle told the doctor, "No, I want to be home for Christmas. It's very important to me. I'll take my chances. I will come back to the hospital the day after Christmas."

We returned home and celebrated Christmas with our family, without mentioning the new danger to his life. Neither of us spoke about or revealed our disappointment and fear. We wanted this last Christmas to be a happy one, so we carried our sadness in silence. As promised, the next day Lyttle came back to the hospital for treatment of his blood clot.

A week later, he was still in hospital, impatient and unhappy. Now it was New Year's Eve and once again we did not want to show each other the sadness we felt. At midnight most people celebrate New Year, but Lyttle and I knew that in the coming year he would die. He said Lyttle could go home on one condition - that he take his next dose of chemo before leaving. What we didn't know was that the drugs he was receiving were new and had even more toxic side effects.

Arriving home, Lyttle felt extremely weak, confused and nauseated, and he immediately went to bed. His condition persisted for two weeks; he could barely stand up and walk through the house without collapsing. It wasn't possible to celebrate our anniversary; Lyttle couldn't even leave the house. Our grief, fear and frustration were mounting, but we held it all inside.

Finally, Lyttle confessed his pent-up despair: "I don't want to go on like this. You had better hide my pain pills, or else I will probably take them all and get it over with. I just can't keep going like this."

I looked inside the medicine cabinet, filled with a variety of very strong narcotics, and wondered where I could hide them in our small house. With plenty of time alone each day while I was at work, Lyttle would be able to find them. So I decided I would have to carry the bottles with me. I looked again at the rows of bottles and the size of my purse, and realized they wouldn't fit. It was then I realized I would have to speak openly about my feelings.

I went back to Lyttle and said, "Your being sick is not easy for me. I'm either taking care of you at home or visiting you every night at the hospital. I look after our son, go to work each day and manage the house without you. And I know that one day I will be all alone after you're gone. None of this is easy, but I'm willing to go through it all because I love you. But if you were to take your own life, I couldn't handle that. That would be too much."

All the sadness, tears and disappointments we had held inside during the past month spilled out in the ensuing conversation. Finally, we connected. Finally we were being honest with each other. And rather than feeling a heavy cloud of doom descend on us, it felt like a cloud had lifted! After sharing our tears and grief, we were then able to express our love, and even our laughter and joy. It was like coming alive again, for both of us.

A person who is suffering or dying needs to feel a deep and meaningful connection with her closest loved ones. To engage in genuine communication, no matter how painful the subject matter, is to tap into the healing power of love.

Sincere communication with others includes the following qualities:

1. Openness without expectation
2. Really listening to and getting to know the other person
3. A sense of play, an easy humour
4. A sincere willingness to reveal oneself

## **Story #6**

### **Healing a relationship**

Joe's children and grandchildren were so warm and loving and their communication was so open, that Mark, the hospice volunteer, wondered if he should have himself assigned to another family.

Before asking for a transfer, Mark privately approached the dying man and asked, "Is there anything you can think of, anything at all, that I can help you with before you die?"

"I'm so glad you asked," Joe said, "I've been troubled by one thing that I really want to clear up before I die, but I need help to do it, and I didn't know who to ask."

"Forty years ago, my brother and I had a terrible fight, and we haven't met or spoken a word to each other since that day. I realize now that I was just too stubborn to give in, and I'm sorry all these years have passed without any contact. I wish I could see him before I die, to let him know I'm sorry and to ask his forgiveness. Could you help me find my brother?"

Mark was grateful there was something he could do, something which would help Joe face death peacefully. After some research, Mark finally located Joe's brother and explained why he was calling.

"I'm a hospice volunteer, assigned to your brother Joe and his family. Joe asked me to contact you, because he is close to dying now, and he really would like to see you and to extend his apologies to you before he dies."

The brother's answer was stark: "I don't want to see Joe or to have anything to do with him."

After the call, Mark wondered what to do. But soon he realized that the most important thing had already happened. Joe was truly sorry for his part in the fight, and through Mark he had communicated that to his brother. When he next went to visit Joe, Mark said, "I've contacted your brother and although he won't be able to come and see you, he got your message."

On Joe's side, the unfinished business had been healed. Perhaps his brother was not yet ready to let go of his own bad feelings. Yet, later, nearer the end of his own life, Joe's brother might also want to release this own burden, and if or when he does, he will know he has already received Joe's conciliatory message.

## **Story #7**

### **Don't hide from each other**

Angie was forty-four, and her mother meant everything to her - more, she said, than her own husband and children. Angie's mother, Helen, had developed multiple metastases from advanced breast cancer, and her liver, spine and hip all had new tumours. When I met Helen in the hospital, I observed how frail and weak she was. She revealed to me that she knew her lifespan was limited.

Angie was agitated and tense when we met soon thereafter. "Whenever we visit Helen's doctor he says she is going to get better," Angie told me, "But the nurses in the hospital say her condition is terminal. So tell me: is my mother dying or not?"

Now I began to feel tense. If I told her the truth, it would be like dropping a bomb in her life. I searched for a way out.

"I'm not a medical expert, so I'm not qualified to answer your question. Isn't there another doctor you can speak with?"

"I suppose I could ask her other doctor, the radiologist who treats her every week. But I still want to know your opinion, since you have been working with hospice for so long. Is my mother dying?"

"Do you want me to be frank with you?"

"Yes."

"All right" I said, "But you must promise me to ask the doctor again for his assessment. Now, I know that people with cancer can go into remission and even be cured. But with the number of

metastases and complications your mother has, and as frail and weak as she has become, it looks to me as though your mother is dying.”

“HOW can you say that my mother is dying! You have no right to say that!” Angie shouted. “What do you know about my mother?”

Oh no, this is a mistake, I thought, as she continued to blast me with indignation. Yet I knew her anger was not really meant for me. As I reflected on the love behind her painful outburst, I was able to let her pain wash past me. Finally, Angie broke down into deep, racking sobs. I stayed by her side, reassuring her that it was alright to cry and she had every reason to feel sad. In ten minutes or so, Angie was calmer, having broken through the resistance and denial which had shielded her from grief. Then she asked me what she should do now.

“What do you feel you want to do?”

“I think it’s time to speak openly with my mother, and tell her I know she is dying, and that I love her. I’m going to stay with her and help her through this.”

Angie and Helen were finally able to speak with each other and to share their grief and love. They made the deep, meaningful connection for which they had both been longing. Afterward, Helen’s condition surprisingly improved, and she lived another eighteen months. During those months, when I apologised to Angie for having informed her that her mother was dying, she was actually grateful because facing the truth had sparked the breakthrough in their communication and brought them closer.

“Besides,” she said, “I know my mother is going to die one day anyway, so facing this now helps me to be more prepared for the inevitable.”

It is extremely difficult to create a meaningful communication if we’re hiding from each other, trying to avoid the inevitability of death. Sometimes, our deep attachment to the dying person makes it difficult for us to communicate openly.

### **Story #8**

#### **Confronting the dying person’s denial**

Judy was thirty-five years old when her father, Harry, was dying of cancer. Although the whole family had been informed together that Harry was close to death, he adamantly refused to let anyone speak about it. Continually tense and angry, Harry attacked anyone who tried to come near. After many unsuccessful attempts at making a connection, Judy and her family became increasingly frustrated and distanced from him.

Harry was weakening and Judy realized that if nothing changed soon, all they would experience in the remaining weeks or days of her father’s life would be distance, anger and blame. Realizing she had nothing to lose, Judy got up the courage to speak forcefully to her father. “We know you are dying and we wish you weren’t because we all love you. But we cannot change the fact that you’re going to leave us one day soon. You may not realize it, but when you are so tense and angry with us, we aren’t able to get near you anymore. Time is so precious now, and we want to spend it by your side. Won’t you let us be close to you, before it’s too late?”

The loving motivation behind Judy’s words and her courageous manner of speaking finally broke through Harry’s shell of self-imposed isolation. He allowed his family to come close, and they were able to communicate and share their love, expressing all that was in their hearts, before he died.

### **Story #9**

#### **The family’s journey towards death**

Just before midnight, the call came. As she listened to the young woman’s description of her mother’s condition, Lee, a hospice nurse, assessed that the mother would probably die during the

night. Lee gently informed the daughter that the physical changes she was witnessing were normal and no cause for alarm.

“Are you aware that your mother is very close to dying?”

“Yes. It’s hard to hear it once again but I knew deep down that the end was near. She wanted to have a peaceful death so I arranged everything I could to bring her home to die. We’ve only had one visit from the hospice nurse since then. I feel so unprepared. Is there anything I can do for her now?”

With a few more questions, Lee learned that everything that could be done medically for the dying woman had been done. She was alert and relatively pain free. On a personal level, Lee asked, “Have you and your mother spoken about her coming death? Have you expressed all that you wish to and said goodbye?”

“Oh no,” said the horrified young woman, “I couldn’t bring that up. I wouldn’t want her to think I was giving up on her.”

“You’re not giving up on her. She is dying and from what I hear, you love her very much. Isn’t it time you told her so? Look at how lucky you are! Some people have a loved one die without any warning, or when they are not by the person’s side. You have put off speaking personally to your mother, but she is alert and aware, so it’s not too late. Please use this special time you have together - possibly her last few hours - to express all that is in your heart before she dies.”

The next day, the daughter phoned Lee again. “You were right. My mother did die during the early hours of the morning.” She paused. “And thank you for encouraging me to speak openly with my mother. We were able to have a wonderful conversation before she died. I will always cherish all that she said to me. In my heart I was yearning to do this, but I was so afraid to begin - I was worried about what she would think. Without your having pushed me a little, we probably wouldn’t have had the opportunity we had last night.”

## **Story #10**

### **When time is running out**

Each afternoon, when the father of a twenty-four-year-old son who was dying came to the hospital to visit, the nurse, Anne, observed a similar painful scene. The father entered his son’s room, slightly hunched, his face a mixture of sadness and feigned cheerfulness. He would move a chair to the side of the bed, hoping to look into his son’s face, and every day as he started to speak, his son would turn his head toward the opposite wall.

A week passed with this continuing standoff, a week closer to the son’s imminent death. Although she felt uncertain, Anne decided to intervene, reminding herself, “Time is running short for them, and though they may not realize it, if nothing changes, they will never connect or communicate before the young man dies, and both of them will lose out. Besides,” she realized, “Even if my intervening should backfire, I don’t think things could get any worse.”

The next day, before he entered his son’s room, the nurse brought the father into an empty room and spoke to him forcefully to break through his daze.

“Why do you let your son treat you like that?” Anne implored. “You know you need to talk with him, in order to release both of you from any hurt feelings or regrets. And you need to tell him that you love him before it is too late. I don’t know what happened between you, but now is the time to go beyond it. Your son’s time is running out, and he may slip into a coma before he dies. There’s no telling if or when you’ll have another chance!”

Anne’s strong words did break through the father’s shell and he thanked her. Now he knew what to do. With determination, he walked into his son’s room, and as he began opening up his regrets and his love, his son slowly turned and looked into his father’s face, tears in his eyes. The healing of their relationship, the love they both yearned to feel and to express, was made possible by the

father's determination to take a risk, to speak openly, and make a meaningful connection with his son.

### **Story #11**

#### **Supporting Those Who are Nonreligious**

Paul's mother, Isabelle, did not have any religious faith and clearly told her family she didn't want to speak about spiritual matters. Near the end of her life, Isabelle became quite agitated and anxious and required frequent doses of pain medication. Whenever Paul visited her, he spent part of the time silently continuing his practice of the *Essential Phowa* while she rested. After a few such visits, Isabelle confessed to her daughter that whenever Paul was with her, she felt much more peaceful and was able to skip her next dose of pain medication. Overcome with curiosity his sister asked Paul what he was doing, and eventually she also began practising the *Essential Phowa* for her mother while sitting by her bedside.

Now, whenever her daughter came to visit her, Isabelle felt a deep peace and relaxation, so she asked what they were doing that was helping her so much. Learning that her children were offering this spiritual practice to help her with the suffering of dying, and having already found one benefit from it, Isabelle asked them to continue practising for her, and she became more and more peaceful and content as her death approached.

### **Story #12**

#### **Compassion and Dedication**

Jean, a close friend, called me in distress. She would be visiting her dying father-in-law soon, probably for the last time. Ed was comatose, so Jean wouldn't be able to have a normal conversation with him. Her feelings were mixed - she knew it would be good if she could help him let go and die peacefully. Yet because of his alcoholism, he had brought considerable emotional suffering to his entire family, including his son, Jean's husband. Over the twenty-five years she'd been part of the family, the family members were always distant from each other, uncommunicative and unsupportive.

Together, we acknowledged that Jean's anger was normal. We discussed a way for her to communicate her frustration to him, while at the same time releasing herself from it. I suggested that before communicating with Ed, she could sit quietly by his side and meditate, reflecting on how much she would have liked to know the real man, not the alcoholic.

Together we found a way she could view the situation from a new perspective. We reflected together how much Ed must have suffered in his own childhood to be recreating the same anguish in his family now. And I proposed that Jean consider what it was going to be like for him to undergo the review of his entire life that is said to be part of the death experience. At that time he would be acutely aware of all the pain he brought onto his loved ones; he would experience all of their suffering, together with his own painful remorse.

As Jean reflected on Ed's past, future and present suffering, her anger melted into understanding and compassion. "Is there anything I can do to help him now?" she asked.

"When you're with him," I suggested, "Remember that although he appears to be comatose and unresponsive, the pure awareness of his true nature is still there, and this aspect of him can always hear you. Let him know that if he feels any regret for the way he's lived, he can dedicate his suffering and his death to benefit his family, radiating his love and blessings to each person he cares about, with a strong prayer that they be healed of any hurt or pain he might have caused them."

When Jean began speaking to Ed, she kept thinking, "This is crazy. He can't possibly hear me. And if he were awake and knew what I was doing, he would kick me out of this room!" Still, when she first sat and meditated, sending her understanding and compassion to Ed, she sensed that it was gratefully received by the unconscious man. Jean went on to suggest to Ed that he use the

moment of his death to heal his relationships and generate a strong, healing love toward his family. Then Jean said her last goodbye.

Later that evening Jean was driving home, while her husband slept in the passenger seat. Suddenly, he woke with a start, saying, "This is so much easier now. The bitterness I felt earlier is simply gone." Later we learnt that this was the moment of Ed's death. Jean wondered if Ed had in fact dedicated his death to atone for his life. A different kind of confirmation came the next day. Jean witnessed something she had not seen in all her years with the family: after the funeral, the family gathered together at their father's home, and the conversation and depth of connection between them was loving and affectionate, very caring and genuine.

### **Story #13**

#### **Prayer for Those in a Coma**

My second grandmother, my father's mother, was a widow well into her eighties. She had become very frail in the last few years, and had begun to prepare for her death. Before going into surgery for a bowel obstruction, she'd made out a Living Will, requesting to dispense with any artificial means of life support if she were dying. During the surgery, she did die, and was eventually resuscitated, but she came out with severe, irreparable brain damage. She lay in an unresponsive coma for days, connected to every means of life support, with a respirator going constantly and a monitor tracking every heartbeat. My father had pleaded with the doctor to discontinue the life support, showing the written evidence of her wishes, but to no avail. Besides the new machinery supporting her life, my grandmother had a pacemaker, so my father and I wondered if it would be even possible for her to die.

When I went into her intensive care room, I meditated quietly for a few moments and realized that I did not know how fully she had prepared to die or if anything might be holding her back.

"Grandma, even though we would rather you get better and come back to being with us, it doesn't look like that's what's happening. It looks like you are dying. We love you and we won't leave you alone. We'll continue to visit you, no matter what happens. And whenever you are ready, you can let go. You don't need to worry about the rest of us, we'll be alright. You can release any feelings of responsibility for those you are leaving behind. We love you; and we don't want you to suffer anymore.

"You gave a lot to others during your life, raising a family and helping others in trouble or alone, even helping the other old people in your retirement home, and that inspires me in my own life to do the same. Your life had meaning, and you contributed to others and taught us how to live. We will always cherish that.

"If there is anything we have done to hurt you, we are sorry and ask your forgiveness. If there's anything you have done to harm others, please know that we forgive you and release you of those memories.

Stroking the side of her face as I spoke, I could hear the respirator rhythm alter every so often, as if she had sighed deeply. The line on the heart monitor would sometimes go flat, and gazing into her face, I could see my grandmother's eyes moving beneath her closed eyelids!

"Grandma, you kept all the commitments of your religion, and had a devotion to Jesus Christ all your life, and this will help you now as you face your death. You can trust in God's mercy and love, knowing that any remaining sins which might be troubling you are forgiven as soon as you acknowledge them. I am not sure but perhaps you just don't know how to let go at the time of death, so now I will meditate with you and show you one way that might help you.

"Consider that above your head is the radiant, loving presence of Jesus Christ, and imagine tremendous rays of light streaming from him onto your body and soul, purifying any regrets and feelings of unworthiness, and releasing you from any attachment to this life. Feel the compassion

and love of Christ fill your beings those rays of light come into you, and let them transform your whole being into light.

“With all the devotion in your heart, keep this presence of Christ with you in this room from now on. And at the time of your death, consider your entire being, purified into light, rises up and dissolves into the loving heart of Jesus. And in that blessed union, remain.”

“Grandma, I have to leave now. Know that you have all my love. Remember you are not alone. And I will remember you and pray for you. Good-bye.”

In the morning, we were grateful to learn that grandma has died peacefully during the night.

### **Story #14**

#### **Healing and Concluding the Relationship**

Getting stuck in any kind of emotional unfinished business prevents us from completing our mourning. We may sustain an unbalanced image of the deceased, seeing him or her as our lifelong nemesis or as a saint who could do no wrong.

After a death, whether expected or sudden, we are challenged to communicate all of our conflicting emotions, frustrations and unexpressed regrets. If we didn't do so previously, we will also need to conclude our relationship and say goodbye.

Jenny, an old friend of mine, showed me her account of her encounters with death, which was written for a college class. In two pages, she described in great detail her father's illness and death, which had occurred three years earlier. I was startled to see one sentence standing alone at the end of the story: “Six weeks after my father's death, my mother died.”

When I asked Jenny about this, she said she felt so guilty about her mother's death she couldn't even think about it. Jenny had remained in the family home to support her mother for a few weeks after her father's death, but she and her mother had always had a difficult relationship and this recent death strained it even further. Finally, Jenny had flown back to her own home and returned to work. Her mother died alone a few weeks later, after suffering a bad fall.

Because of our long friendship, and Jenny's willingness to heal the past, she agreed to work with me on resolving her unfinished business with her mother. I asked Jenny to imagine that her mother was in front of her once more. “See her as very open and receptive, willing to hear what you have to say. What do you want to tell your mother?”

Jenny finally said out loud all the things about which she felt guilty. I invited her to express as well any other old angers, regrets, or hurts from their long relationship. Finally, Jenny was able to express her love to her mother.

“Jenny, if you were speaking to the 'best part' of your mother, and if she were able to really hear your pain and remorse, would she forgive you now?”

“Yes.”

“Allow yourself to feel your mother's forgiveness coming toward you,” I suggested. “And, Jenny, if your mother felt a similar remorse for any times she hurt you, would you forgive her?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Tell your mother you forgive her, and let go of these past memories now.”

Jenny's unexpressed pain and tears flowed freely, enabling her to forgive, to accept forgiveness, to grieve and let go of her mother.

## Story #15

### Caregiving as Spiritual Practice

Marisa, a vibrant and pretty doctor in her mid-thirties, asked me how to deal with an angry and demanding patient. I suggested she try one of the Buddhist meditations she had learned, especially before going into the patient's room.

Marisa took time to do the compassion practices of 'Seeing the other as another you' and 'Exchanging places'. "When I exchanged places with my patient, suddenly I was this old woman who had constant pain, felt ugly, helpless and unwanted," recalled Marisa. "And when I saw this attractive young doctor come into the room, full of smiles, I hated her more than anything."

The next time Marisa went into her patient's room, she wasn't smiling cheerfully. Feeling genuine understanding and love for the old woman, Marisa was able to meet her gaze, even while the woman continued to scream in anger at her.

"I just knew how she felt. In my heart, I told her I understood her anger, and that it was all right. She continued to be demanding, but when she saw I wasn't reacting anymore, her tone grew quieter. When I left her room and walked down the corridor, my mind was peaceful and centred, as though the meditation were still continuing."

I asked Marisa what happened when she went to see her next patient. "That man was very sweet and kind and I reacted immediately with pleasure." She laughed. That's when I realised I had lost my equanimity, and how important it is to keep my meditation going in every situation, whether it is difficult or pleasant."

Extracts from *Facing Death and Finding Hope:  
A Guide to the Emotional and Spiritual Care of the Dying*  
By Christine Longaker, Broadway Books, New York 2001, 262 pp

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