

Go. Be with Your Dying Person

A simple guide to visiting someone close to death

I was young and stupid.

The man who had hired and mentored and befriended me was lying in his house in a neighborhood down the street, dying.

He was only 55. I was 27, so I thought that was old. His cancer had come back. This time, he wouldn't beat it. This time, he would die.

I loved so many things about him. He had shown optimistic faith in hiring me straight out of grad school. He had been a mentor, role model, and surrogate father to me. He believed in my excellence, he often told me. He was kind, funny, and generous. His smile was legendary.

And now, he was dying. I needed to go see him. I wanted to sit by him and tell him what his life meant to me. What *he* meant to me.

But I was young and confused and scared.

I made excuses: "He's not family." "I'll be intruding." "He won't want me to see him like this."

I knew he was dying. I knew he had days to live. I knew I had things that I wanted to say. But my youth and inexperience and fear kept me away.

He died. I wept alone in my room, curtains drawn to gray.

To this day, I wish I had found the courage to knock at his door. I wish I had spoken with his wife and daughter. I wish I had sat near him during his final days.

To this day, I regret that I didn't.

I wish I could go back in time. I wish I had found the simple strength to go and be with my dying person. I wish I had said good-bye.

I wish, I wish, I wish. But retroactive wishes never come true.

Tough lessons learned the hard way

Life has a way of teaching us lessons.

Sometimes, it seems we ride an unending merry-go-round of “You’re going to learn this, like it or not.” The great circle of life, one lesson after the other.

We fail and fail, then gather our wits to try again. We fall and rise. We stumble and walk on. And then the next lesson looms.

I love you, Mom. Good-bye.

4 years went by.

One March weekend, I gathered my two young boys and infant daughter to drive to my mother’s home in Portland. We stopped by the garden store to load the minivan with spring annuals: violas, marigolds, smiling snapdragons. My mom said she didn’t feel up to planting her walkway and front flower beds, so we would do it for her.

My mother hadn’t felt well in months. Her stomach bothered her. She couldn’t eat much. When she did eat, she had problems keeping her food down. She lost weight.

Mom opened the front door. Smiling weakly, she nodded at the flats of flowers. “It’s cold out,” she said, shivering. “I’ll take the children inside.”

Spade and shovel close by, I turned the cold, wet dirt. One after the other, I placed and planted and smoothed over the beds. Inside, I could hear the clang of dishes, the singsong of voices. My mother’s bright laughter rang out.

Six months later, she was dead.

Learning through losing those we love

It was a hard loss.

At the time, I was a mother with 3 young children. I had relied on my mother for comfort, support, advice, and humor, and now she was gone. I grieved deeply and for a long, long time.

Despite my pain, though, I felt blessed.

Why? Because I had the privilege, honor, and ultimate blessing of witnessing and living through her dying. I had rubbed my mother’s feet and legs with lotion, read her favorite Bible verses, helped lift and bathe her, and simply sat with her when words disappeared. It was anguishing and beautiful, all at the same time.

Death and life commingle. In our culture, we just don't admit it. We turn away from death. And often, we turn away from the dying.

Just as I had turned away from my friend and mentor's last and dying days 4 years prior.

Now, I understood what I should have done. Now, I had a sense of what I had missed. And I mourned for that loss anew.

Insights into visiting the dying

In *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying*, hospice nurses Maggie Callahan and Patricia Kelley offer their insights into the world of death and dying:

"A dying person offers enlightening information and comfort, and in return those close at hand can help bring that person peace and recognition of life's meaning."

With my mother's passing, I experienced this paradox firsthand. Watching my mother alter from her strong, vibrant shape into a skeletal, weakened slip of herself was wrenchingly, stabbingly difficult. But seeing her strength despite great pain, watching her reach for hope and help, feeling connection even when she could no longer speak: these were among the gifts of her dying.

Her dying changed me and blessed me beyond measure.

The visitors come and go

As my mother died, I watched and witnessed the parade of people trickle to a slow stop. In the end, only her one dearest friend stayed at her bedside. The others came once, and disappeared.

I get it. Watching my mother die was hard. It was hurtful. Uncomfortable. My mother had been a force of nature. In her dying, she became a wounded bird shot down by her predatorial cancer. Most people didn't want to see the suffering, or reach out to touch her clipped wings.

Callahan and Kelley offer an explanation of the difficulty of visiting the dying: "As spectators, people not only have to cope with the pain of knowing that someone they love is dying, but must do so in a state of uncertainty, not sure of what to do, how to do it, or when."

Most people want to visit to connect, comfort, and converse on a deeper level. Often, though, the unfamiliarity and discomfort with death and dying steals the opportunity for meaningful connection.

Callahan and Kelley note the disconnect between many a visitor's intent and actions:

“Visitors may spend their time with the person wrapped up in idle talk about the weather, sports, or politics. Perhaps because, consciously or unconsciously, it’s intended to do so, their chatter keeps the dying person from being able to speak intimately.”

When my mother died, I observed how her visitors acted. I categorized them in the following ways:

The visitors

Superficial — Friends who stopped by to “check in.” They briefly peeked into the room, chatted quickly, and left just as quickly. Sometimes it felt they wanted to just find out it was true my mother was dying. They didn’t come back.

Overwhelmed — Often close friends who couldn’t “deal with” my mother’s illness or dying. They were highly emotional or overwrought, and would pull me or my sister aside and say how awful it was and how they couldn’t take it to see my mother this way.

Solution-oriented — Visitors who came armed with some way to “fix” my mom, whether through prayer, ritual, vitamins, diet, or other novel and usually anecdotal solution. Many (not all) of my mother’s church friends fell into this camp. Most didn’t return as they saw my mother’s death as a failure of prayer, or as an inability to believe or manifest her healing.

Sympathetic — These visitors felt bad for my mother. They told her how badly they felt. They told my sisters and I how badly they felt. Often, they had stories about the illnesses of others, and how those people had overcome and survived. Generally, these friends also did not return.

Helping — People who want to do something to help. They required action to prove their love. Sometimes, they brought meals, gifts, or offered to do a chore. If no help was needed, they felt unwanted.

Reliable — These friends were an extreme minority. They made themselves comfortable with dying. They could sit with my mother, talk, read, rub her feet, and simply be with her. They showed up more than once.

Most visitors to the dying have good hearts. They want to do something. They want to show their love, care, and affection for the dying. But often, visitors who come armed with expectations leave with disappointment.

Dying is a fluid process. Placing demands on it can cause stress. Visiting with an agenda can leave the dying person feel unheard, marginalized, or ignored. Sometimes, superficial visits can leave the dying feeling even lonelier than before the visit.

Dying people want to feel loved, supported, and understood. For those of us still living and still deeply embedded in life, it's our job to provide these last gifts to those we love.

Being a visitor to someone dying

When going to see your dying person, the experience can vary widely. Earlier on, the potential for conversation may exist — if the person is conscious, not intubated nor heavily medicated. The world of the dying person constricts the closer they come to death. Keep this in mind when you plan your visit(s).

Things to consider when visiting the dying:

1. Be ready for the experience. Prepare by reading about dying, or about the illness your loved one is dying from. Contact the family or hospice for preliminary information and best times to visit.
2. Reflect. Take some time to consider what your person means to you. Consider what you may want to say. Take notes if it will help you.
3. Be open to the situation. Your dying person may be in a state you don't recognize, or in a frame of mind unfamiliar to you. Be open to understanding. Set your fear and discomfort aside before you enter the room.
4. Listen. Try to really listen to what your person wants and needs from your visit. Ask open-ended questions. Listen to responses. If they are able, let them lead. Deeply try to understand and empathize.
5. Don't push, argue, confront, or control the conversation. This is not the time. If you have unresolved issues, meditate or journal them out before you visit. Don't make your person feel defensive or angry.
6. Understand where they are. Dying people may be highly conversant, muddled, agitated, pragmatic, emotional, or any combination of states of mind. Accept where they are, and be understanding.
7. Don't expect too much. It's hard to set aside our expectations, especially around highly emotionally charged events such as illness and dying. Be ready to accept what you find, and don't expect your person to comfort you, reassure you, or give you pearls of wisdom.
8. Adjust and adapt. Be flexible. You are visiting as an act of love, respect, friendship, and connection. Be able to switch topics, delve deeper if your person wants, or just sit and hold their hand if that is what they need.
9. Don't withhold emotion. Feel your feelings. Listen to your person. Laugh with them, cry with

them, be angry at the illness with them. There's no way to remove your feelings from their dying. Open your heart. Feel.

10. Be comfortable with yourself, and be accepting of the dying process. Your loved one can sense your discomfort, confusion, or fear. Don't make them reassure you: you are there to support and love them, not the other way around. Sink into the experience. Let things happen. Let your love lead.

Life + death

In death, pain and beauty commingle.

In many ways, dying parallels birth. The person moves toward death, hour by hour. Struggle follows acceptance. Relief follows pain. In the end, the passage is complete. And to partake in and witness the death of someone we love is in itself a miracle.

Eventually, life ends in death. For all of us.

Embracing, accepting, and learning from the death of someone we love is challenging, heart-wrenching, and so, so hard. It is also beautiful, instructive, and soul-touchingly true.

So go. Be with your dying person. Visit. Talk. Laugh. Cry. Love them until their final moment.

Because, in the end, being with your dying person may be their best and final gift — to you and them, both.

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