a safe journey home

A Gentle Death by Lusea Warner

a safe journey home

The simple guide to achieving a peaceful death

Felicity Warner

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'You took my hand and I fell asleep.'

To all Soul Midwives past, present and future

The journey between life and death
flows peacefully as a slowly winding river.

BASHO

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since the first edition of this book appeared (entitled *Gentle Dying*), I have continued to spend much of my time working as a Soul Midwife, writing and speaking, running courses and teaching both from my home and within hospices.

It's been a very busy and inspiring time filled with deep friendship and intimate sharing with people on a soul-full level. It's also been a journey of learning through experience. Looking back, I can see how my path has opened up and my ideas have ripened with each person I work with, whether they are 'friends', which is the name I use for a dying companion, or the wonderful Soul Midwives I teach and mentor. When I first began this work (many years ago now) my ideas were formed by hearsay and certain clichéd ideas… One of them was that

death was just about the worst thing that could happen to you. Also that it was always distressing, upsetting, messy and painful. I thought that drugs were the answer and that you could blot out the awful bits, take away the pain and banish the fear with pills and injections.

I also thought the dreaded 'D' word was banned in the presence of dying people along with any talk that contained references about the future, or even the past. I thought that the truth and reality was probably too hard to bare and that being jolly and upbeat was more important.

How wrong I was...

I now know that most people derive great comfort in knowing what to expect and how to prepare for what will happen. They are usually empowered by making choices about where they'll be cared for and by whom… what level of pain relief they'd like in order to consciously move with the ebb and flow of the tides in their final days.

Some of them get very actively involved in preparing for their dying. They love creating keepsakes for their

grandchildren, they paint their coffins. Many become completely engrossed in planning their funerals to be events to be delighted in for their music, poetry and quirkiness.

And so they become increasingly creative and inspired, by their own thoughts and actions. They often ask questions such as, 'Who am I?', 'What is the meaning of life?' and 'What happens next?' When this sort of connection with mortality and immortality arises, death and its passage can become a process to harvest for its exquisite riches and valued for its unexpected miracles.

With love, openness and sensitive support, death stops being frightening. Indeed, its presence can bring an astonishing clarity, focus and illumination to the person facing it, which is wonderful to witness.

After reading *Gentle Dying* many of you wrote and described how you helped your dying loved ones and gave details of the highs and the lows, the memorable conversations, the music you played, the poems you read aloud, the songs you sang.

These stories were written from the heart. They were poignant, powerful and moving beyond words. Many had never been shared before and were so deeply personal that they brought with them a sense of being 'let out of a dark cupboard under the stairs'; the language chosen so carefully to describe the emotions contained within them.

As I read and then re-read them, I cried and laughed as many of them were also laced with humour as well as tenderness. The strength and beauty of the human spirit and how it evolves through the process of dying has the potential to lift people out of themselves and into a sacred space where all possibilities seem infinite.

Many of you said that *Gentle Dying* had helped you to face your fears of dying, or that it had exorcised painful experiences that had happened long ago such as the death of a baby or child, the passing of a parent or sibling. There was loss of all kinds and all these intimate sharings widened my vision and touched my heart.

It made me wonder if we could be experiencing a zeitgeist moment – a readiness to embrace death in beginning to

understand its potential for love, healing and spiritual blossoming. As one enthusiastic reader put it, 'This is the one book on the planet that everyone should be made to read, as everyone is going to die and also lose someone they love. This is why your work is so important.'

'We turned my father's death into a beautiful, loving and completely gentle experience. Thank you for lighting the way and showing us how to achieve this,' said another.

A postman in his early twenties with a large rural round in Yorkshire emailed saying that he'd just ordered his sixth copy.

'I keep it in my van and deliver it, with the letters, to any houses on my round where I know someone is dying. I hope it's one small way of helping people to share special emotions with the people they love,' he explained.

There were also stories of families who'd been inspired to 'do their own thing' after reading the book:

'We actually hi-jacked Gran from the care home and

brought her back to us. We only had a week with her but it was wonderful. There was this feeling of love that drew the family together. It's remained and we are now closer than ever.'

'We read *Gentle Dying* twice in one night as we sat with my husband at the hospice. He listened to the bit about the dark night of the soul and it made all the difference. He'd been struggling but as he listened, he really calmed down, and just trusted the process,' wrote a woman on a blog about her dying husband.

'This is the start of a silent revolution... we have to get better at helping people to die well, starting with our own families. It's about taking love and responsibility for those we love back into our own hands,' emailed a hospice doctor.

The Gentle Dying method developed from a project I began called The Hospice of the Heart. It was an information resource and also a platform for sharing new ideas, and it quickly became a web-based hospice and a UK charity.

It explored how we looked after people in their final days, and showed how difficult patients and carers found it to access helpful information. Many of the concerns highlighted the worry that death had become a medical event rather than a special and natural part of life, a sacred time, that should be filled with respect and love.

There was anguish about the 'one size fits all' approach; people didn't feel that the dying were being treated as special and unique. I learned that people were fed up with dying within in the confines of a service industry. Most people wanted to die at home, with good pain control, but with their families around them. But in order to do this there has to be a support system with a team of health carers. It also helps if there is someone, perhaps a little distanced emotionally, who is calm, level-headed, kind, like a friend, to sit there, or be at the end of the phone comforting and giving reassurance and emotional and spiritual comfort, as well as putting the kettle on, walking the dog, changing the baby. This is how my own work unfolded at first. Someone called me a Soul Midwife when they heard how I'd helped a neighbour who was dying

of breast cancer. The name stuck and the idea of Soul Midwives evolved.

The work covered by Soul Midwives is now much more sophisticated than that. They have excellent skills as listeners as well as combining a broad range of holistic therapies. They have a diagnostic approach to the dying process and can help to alleviate physical, emotional or spiritual difficulties, often anticipating them before they become problems.

During the final hours they can to 'hold the space' and support the household during the sacred time as life ebbs away.

Simply helping people to die with love and tenderness is the main aim. Soul Midwives come from all walks of life – teachers, musicians, lawyers; men and women of all ages and backgrounds – all have a passion for kindness and are pioneers of love in action. I am so fortunate to teach and mentor them.

I teach these skills beside the fire in my draughty old

farmhouse, or in the small sanctuary amongst the apple trees, in the orchard where I write and make up batches of anointing oils and essences. Warmth and cosiness are vital attributes for practising soul midwifery as it combines a revival of an ancient craft along with new therapies. All our approaches are soul friendly and aimed at helping people who may be feeling fragile and frightened, as well as those more able to embrace the adventure ahead.

I have included two new sections in this edition, one on anointing and one on celebrancy, both of which are becoming very popular. I have also extended the Resource section at the back of the book.

My publishers, Hay House, have broken all bounds with their vision and enthusiasm in publishing a second edition of this book. In doing so they are extending a hand and honouring the passage for all life's travellers embarking on their safe journey home.

Death shows us how precious life is and how important love is. They say we limp into heaven on the arm of a

friend – have one, be one. Help one another. Nothing else on earth is so important.

All warmest blessings,
Felicity

PREFACE

If you've ever sat helplessly with someone who is dying and wished that you could do something positive to help them, then this book is for you.

When our final days come, most of us aren't sure what to expect. Throughout our lives most of us postpone getting to grips with this issue. But if at this stage, while we are fit, we can acquire our best understanding of just what happens as the death process unfolds, this will lessen our worries. And if we've explored the options well ahead of time, we will feel more empowered, as we die, to request and receive the best care possible for our body, mind and spirit.

You may be flicking through these pages to find out what a gentle death is, or perhaps you are a partner, lover, brother

or sister or friend of someone who has just learned that his or her life will soon be ending.

This guide will tell you how to help someone to die peacefully once medicine has reached its limits and when human touch can become a greater help than hard-edged medicine. You'll find practical information on using therapeutic touch, therapeutic sound, and simple breathing techniques as well as meditation and a host of other simple but safe methods to help not only those close to death but also those who are caring for them.

This guide also explores spiritual and psychological issues and advises on how to be a good companion to someone who is dying. Understanding what happens in the last stages of life is in many ways a vital part of helping someone towards a peaceful death. Pregnant women are encouraged to make birth plans stating their wishes before going into labour. You can do the same at the end of life, ensuring that it's as good an experience as you'd wish it to be.

Giving love and time to someone who is nearing the end of their life will bring untold miracles including:

- helping them to die with peace and dignity
- helping them to dissolve fears and feel safe
- ensuring that dying is a sacred rite of passage and that their life has been worthwhile
- ensuring that they have felt loved and supported right up until their very last breath.

The love and care that we can give at the end of life are among the most precious gifts that we can ever share with one another.

INTRODUCTION

People are shocked when they hear that I help people to … die.

'What do you mean … you help people die? What you *do* exactly?' they ask, looking anxious.

'Isn't dying best left to the doctors who do a great job, despite difficult conditions? After all, they've got drugs and technology.'

'Aren't people best left alone to die, as long as they aren't suffering?'

'Why would anyone want to do such a weird thing with their life? Being with dying people must be really horrible and upsetting, no? Doesn't it make you depressed?'

It's true, I am not a doctor or a nurse. Neither am I a trained care worker. I don't seek to duplicate these professionals' work. I work alongside them. I have great respect for all they do, and they – increasingly frequently – respect what I do.

My approach as a Soul Midwife is completely different from theirs. My skills have nothing to do with machines or chemicals – in fact, just the opposite. The tools of my trade are all much more human – namely my voice, my hands and, more importantly, an open and loving heart.

I can help people to die well in any setting, whether it be in hospitals, care homes, hospices or in the dying person's own home – and I begin my role when the doctors have done all that they can.

My work fits in alongside whatever treatment is in progress. I aim to make the atmosphere around the dying person serene and safe to enable him or her to let go quietly, when he or she feels ready. It's an ancient and very human way of helping people die rather than any strictly medical one.

People don't realize that dying can take a long time and that it can be such a very lonely process.

All the best treatment and medicine in the world aren't going to keep someone alive when their time has truly come. Therefore switching the focus from trying to make them better to making them feel comfortable and safe is a wonderful way of honouring the end of life.

Controlling pain and all the other distressing symptoms is of course very important, but the heavy-handed use of drugs may mask the dying experience, robbing the person of the full richness and revelations that can occur. A gentle death, which is what we all hope for, can be achieved by combining the best care that medicine can provide alongside other subtler methods such as massage, visualization, breathing techniques and other holistic ways of calming and soothing. By using these, the amount of drugs required may be reduced, helping the person to feel more in touch with what's happening and also more in control of their own wellbeing.

Death is very similar to birth. It isn't, as some think, just

the moment immediately before your heart stops beating or when you take your last breath. It's usually a slow and gentle unravelling process. It involves a process akin to birth labour. There is a series of important and diverse stages which affect emotional and spiritual levels over and above the purely physical process most people are more familiar with.

There is no ideal place to die, although home is often most desirable. Hospitals are busy and noisy and are focused on curing disease. Hospices and care homes, however good, can be institutional and impersonal. The dying need a tranquil atmosphere with soft lighting and soothing sounds in order to feel supported on their journey.

Working with the dying can, of course, be very sad. It can also be very moving at times. Often it can be surprisingly funny and joyful. Some say that it can be the source of the richest blessings imaginable. It is certainly the greatest privilege to help someone die well and make them feel that somehow their life is complete and has been worthwhile and that they have been truly loved.

After hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution, why does the thought of dying still frighten us so much, and why is this fear actually increasing as time passes?

These questions puzzled me when I worked as a health journalist and was engaged in writing a series of articles about people facing death through terminal illness. Many of them were young, with small children, and were having to learn to live with the fact that life had somehow, and through no fault of their own, sold them short. They were all, coincidentally, women, and the majority of them had cancer.

They hoped that by telling their stories, their experiences would be able to help others who might find themselves in the same harrowing situation.

Most of them were very ill, but were still determined to live for the moment and make the most of what time they had left. The interviews often lasted for several hours – there'd be breaks while we waited for their painkillers to work and, while we waited, we chatted. I remember one asking me if I could help her rearrange the shunt that she

had in her chest which was draining fluid from her lung. It had got tangled up in her bra strap.

Another one asked me if I would like to feel the tumour in her groin, as she couldn't find a way of describing it. I'd never seen a tumour before, and while I hesitantly ran my finger over it, her four-year-old daughter offered me some Smarties and asked cheerfully if I had cancer too. If so, where was it?

These women were amazingly cheerful but they were all, hardly surprisingly, very frightened and anxious about what was eventually going to happen to them. In between treatments they were determined to carry on as usual with the daily routines of caring for their children, getting the shopping and also making plans ahead of time for when they knew that they wouldn't be there any more. Their main fears weren't for themselves, but for those that they were going to leave behind – partners, young children, elderly parents, close friends and all the people they knew and loved. Several of them even cooked meals to leave in

the freezer, knowing that the food would come in handy once they had died.

We spent many hours in conversation, compiling the information to put the feature together. I got used to discussing diagnosis and treatment plans and also to asking them about their remaining hopes, fears and dreams. The most interesting part of their story always came once I'd put my notebook away and we were sharing a post-interview cup of tea.

Relaxing and letting go at last, they'd all say how good it was to – as one of them put it – 'talk dirty' about dying to a complete stranger, who listened and wasn't upset or squeamish, and didn't try to give them advice.

Although it was tough, for them and me, they were relieved to be able to use words like 'death' and 'dying' and not feel guilty about it.

I was astonished as they told me about their lives and how it felt to know that they were dying, and to learn just how lonely and isolated they felt.

Their friends and relatives were becoming increasingly distant from them and were refusing to engage with or acknowledge the reality of the situation. Although these friends would still telephone, their talk was usually full of false optimism. There'd be many conversations along the lines of 'Soon you'll be getting better' and 'Why don't we plan a treat for when you've got over all this?' A good proportion of my interviewees, sadly, were rapidly becoming disconnected from everyone they felt close to.

A good example was Sarah, an accountant in her thirties, who told me that her own mother was so furious with her for getting an untreatable form of breast cancer that she wasn't speaking to her any more.

Diana, an actress also in her thirties, told me that the despair from not being able to share her thoughts with anyone always hit her in the middle of the night when the family was asleep. She'd creep downstairs to the kitchen, pour a glass of wine and sob, with the dog on her lap for company.

They were all comforted by the fact that I clearly wasn't

scared of talking to them about dying. This was because in my own life I had lost two very close family members. This had happened when I was in my teens and at a particularly vulnerable stage in my life.

The first was my grandmother, with whom I had lived since the age of six after my parents divorced. The second was my stepfather, who died suddenly, and at a very young age, from a fatal heart attack. The shock and turbulence stemming from both these events led me, after much soul-searching, towards a very focused spiritual and healing path that helped me to create a personal philosophy about life and death, as well as to develop a set of skills in dealing with trauma. These skills, for me, are still evolving.

As their illnesses progressed, nearly all of these women spoke of a need to prepare themselves emotionally and spiritually for what lay ahead, in order to bring some meaning to what was happening to them. They also wanted to make their deaths somehow inspirational, to soften the loss and bring a positive glow to the memories of those they were leaving behind. Between them they left

a wonderful collection of poems, drawings, booklets for their children, pottery and even videos.

Most of them were strengthened by receiving complementary therapies, and loved having aromatherapy massage or reflexology treatments. These made them feel touchable and human again. During my visits, as we became closer, I'd massage them with essential oils, or bring my Tibetan 'singing bowls' for them to play and enjoy.

The greatest privilege of all came when three of them asked me to be at their death and to help ease them along by singing and giving them healing, even when they were unconscious.

Working with these pioneering women was an extraordinary time. It now seems no coincidence that many of them were very creative – writers, musicians, artists and actors. They all had the vision, although none of them actually met each other, to want their deaths to be beautiful, dignified and inspiring to others.

This has encouraged me to develop what they unknowingly

began – a desire to re-vision the way that we deal with death and dying, and the need for compassionate and holistic care in the final stages of life.

I became a volunteer at a local hospice, enrolled on a counselling course and honed my own healing and intuitive skills. I also did some research to find out how other cultures, now and throughout history, have helped members of their community to die. I realized that a huge body of knowledge about helping people to die had been lost – it had always belonged to the community and needed to be returned again.

I also trawled every faith and religion, spoke to people who deal with death every day and talked to many experts – doctors, priests, nurses, mediums, shamen, nuns and complementary therapists.

I discovered that, although they all had their own approaches, there wasn't any integration of ideas or practices towards creating a modern paradigm. It seemed that no one was thinking outside the box.

Gradually my ideas began to grow and eventually led me into setting up a project called The Hospice of the Heart, the world's first Internet-based hospice dedicated to providing help, advice, information and inspiration on death and dying. I also started to give seminars, workshops and classes on dying well and creating support networks along with a method called Gentle Dying which uses all the holistic skills described in this book. It can be learned in a day and used by anyone – it is so simple and can help anyone to achieve a peaceful and gentle death, wherever they are.

I also teach an increasing number of people who wish to work as 'Soul Midwives' and midwives to the dying. They support people on a soul level as they cross the sacred threshold between this life and the next. They are a growing band of exceptional people and are taking this work out into their community and making a significant difference to the lives – and deaths – of everyone they help.

Chapter 1

A GENTLE UNRAVELLING

A GENTLE UNRAVELLING

Death is usually a process rather than an event. It's the gradual unravelling of a life, and a slow and gentle letting-go, like a feather taking off in the wind.

Sometimes death is the result of an accident or sudden illness. Even then, the final and fleeting moments may have a surprising grace of their own.

Apart from the obvious physical aspects endured as the body winds down, death is a process that profoundly affects our inner being, emotions and psyche on many levels. Dying is a time that many of us think of as being

the end, but it's also often a beginning, when the inner life can unexpectedly begin to blossom.

Dying is an intimate and sacred journey best done in its own time, in a tranquil and peaceful way. When it goes well, it's an honouring of a life well lived and an important rite of passage.

The experience of dying, although similar in all of us, follows a highly individual route. We tend to die as we have lived – some with cheerful optimism, others with fear or boiling rage. We all die in our own unique way.

If our passing is gentle and meaningful, it can be a graceful and exalted experience for us and our families, and those left behind sometimes look back and see it as an event that healed family rifts, enabling people to reconnect with each other in a way that is positively life-changing for everyone involved.

Indeed, anyone who has witnessed a good death will tell you of the wonderful sense of awe it evokes, which is

similar in so many ways to the emotions we experience and sense of wonderment that we feel when a baby is born.

Birth and death, the two great opposites, share startling similarities.

Not so long ago when people were born and died in their own homes, arriving and departing were community events with friends gathering and supporting the families. Towns and villages had midwives and 'wise women' who were skilled in the art of birth and death, providing practical help and comfort.

In those days, everyone was used to seeing, hearing, smelling and knowing about death as well as preparing for new life.

When people used to die in their own beds with their families around them, enveloped in the safe hub of family life, the family were at ease, aware of the natural course of illness and death and supported by their friends and neighbours.

The fear of dying has increased as people die away from home and in hospital or in other unfamiliar surroundings. Smoothing away the fear and replacing it with loving care is one of the first important steps towards a gentle death.

More of us are now choosing to die at home, but this can only happen if we have family and friends who are able to support us. Good pain relief is one of the greatest attributes of modern medicine, but we mustn't forget to add affection and time and love. Miracles happen when people feel safe and nurtured. In helping people to die well, a kind heart is as valuable as medical training, because it is the source of happiness for both oneself and others. It is a parting gift we can give our loved ones, and by improving the deaths of everyone around us we will ultimately improve our own.

Gentle Dying

'We're sorry, but there is nothing more that can be done.' This is what we are often told. It's one of the bluntest

pieces of news we may ever have to receive. It leaves us without any sense of hope at all.

Knowing that someone you love is going to die is bad enough, but feeling that there is nothing you can do to make their passing a good one puts us in a very bleak dilemma – and it's a dilemma faced by thousands of us around the world every day.

Gentle dying is all about helping people to die in the best possible way for them. It may simply involve holding their hand and just being there with a warm and open heart. Or it may involve quietly reading them one of their favourite poems, massaging their arm, stroking their forehead or lying beside them and swaddling them with soft blankets.

If you find yourself sitting beside someone whose life is slipping away, I hope you'll be inspired to try out some of these simple techniques and help them both embrace and experience death in a compassionate, gentle and ultimately healing way.

When we arrive in this world we are greeted, loved and

welcomed by our parents, siblings, grandparents and friends. Everyone celebrates and opens their hearts to us. We are cuddled, cherished and adored. Our very presence celebrates the miracle of life.

But when we die, the story is often so different.

Most of us die away from home – in a hospital, rest home or hospice, cared for by kindly but busy strangers. Sadly, many of us die alone in unfamiliar surroundings that bring no atmosphere of love or comfort.

Helping people to die gently, with a sense of grace and dignity, is much easier than it sounds. By using any of the suggestions in this book you can make a difference, whatever your surroundings.

In ancient times the act of dying was regarded as a time of spiritual preparation for whatever lay ahead. The priests and healers tending the dying were initiates into the great mysteries of life and were skilled experts in treating the body, mind and soul. Their understanding and knowledge were so refined that each part of the dying process was

perfectly understood and managed, ensuring that death came peacefully and with a recognition of its sacred meaning.

The sick were tended in tranquil temples, so different from our modern hospitals, where the sound of water soothed their emotions, and scented herbs and oils anointed their bodies.

This knowledge is gradually and once again being remembered and brought back into use.

What Is a Gentle Death?

Last year I visited my friend John who was in a coma following a heart attack. He was being cared for in an intensive-care unit and was wired up to an army of whirring machines which watched every minute sign of life in his body.

The flashing monitors were connected by electrodes to his chest and scalp. They showed that his heartbeat, brain activity, oxygen content in his lungs and levels of vital

hormones were all hanging by a thread. Even if he did wake up from this terrible trauma and survive, he would never be able to see, hear, talk or move by himself again.

We all knew this, and the doctors confirmed it, and yet a good and peaceful death was never considered to be an option – the fight for life in this hi-tech unit was the driving force behind John's care. To lose the battle would be seen as a failure by the medics. As John slowly slipped away, looking like a piece of meat on a butcher's block, no one was encouraged to comfort him, hold his hand or stroke his cheek, let alone whisper any soothing words of kindness or love in his ear. He died surrounded by experts and millions of pounds' worth of equipment, but untouched by human hands.

John's death sounds extreme, but it's common enough. Cold and lacking in any tenderness.

Yet my friend Marianne's death was a totally different experience.

I visited her on the day before she died. She was upstairs

in her own bed, covered in a soft quilt that she had made herself many years ago from the outgrown frocks of her daughters. The quilt, to Marianne, contained so many loving memories.

John Taverner's exquisite and ethereal music – The Protecting Veil – played in her bedroom, which was softly lit by candles. Her sister Serena had flown over from Australia and was massaging her feet with rose oil, the smell of which filled the room – which seemed for at least a moment to have the air of an exotic Moorish palace.

Another friend, Charlie, arrived to give Marianne a further sound experience in the form of what he called a 'sound bath'. He played Celtic airs on a small harp. Her pain was eased. Her troubled breathing became more relaxed. Downstairs, delicious food was being prepared amidst much laughter and more music.

Many whom Marianne loved were there keeping vigil around her bed through what turned out to be her very peaceful last hours. It was a gentle and loving death, and although she was mourned, her friends celebrated her life

to the full as she died. They watched over her and enriched her to the end.

The Perfect Way to Go

Today is a good day to die,
for all the things of my life are present.

NATIVE AMERICAN SAYING

Most of us have a slightly romantic picture in our minds of how we would like death to be. It would probably be at home, in our own bed (with the cat at the foot of it), pain-free and surrounded by our loved ones.

This is probably one of the most perfect ways to go, but unless we spend just a little time thinking about it, while we are still well, the chances of it turning out like this are slim.

Statistics show that although 70 per cent of us would like to die at home, in reality only around 17 per cent of us actually achieve this. The majority of us end our days in

hospital, a care home or a hospice, where we place our care and wellbeing in the hands of strangers.

Obviously, sudden deaths are impossible to plan for, but given time and preparation we can put in place ideas and instructions so that everything is just how we'd like it to be.

Exploring the following ideas might help you begin to get ideas about planning for a good death – or, at least, to get you and your loved ones talking about what's important to you and also what's important for them.

How would you prioritize the following considerations on a scale of one to ten?

- to know when death is coming and what to expect
- to have someone with you (unless you prefer to die alone)
- to be able to make decisions regarding treatment
- to have dignity, confidentiality and privacy

- to have access to hospice-quality pain relief and other symptom control, wherever you die
- to be able to choose where death will happen (hospital or home), to refuse treatment if you want to, and, if you choose after any treatment, to be brought home again to die
- to have access to up-to-date information and expertise
- to be spiritually and emotionally supported
- to choose who will be present
- to be able to issue advance directives such as rejecting certain treatments including blood transfusions, heart stimulants, etc. in accordance with your wishes
- to have time to say goodbye
- to be able to leave when it is time to go, and not to have life prolonged pointlessly

- to retain the right to fast as death approaches, and not be artificially fed or hydrated.

Write your ideas down, then give a copy to your next of kin, doctor and lawyer. Carry a card in your wallet or purse which notifies people that you have written down what you want and where to find it.

When you were born, you cried
and the world rejoiced.
Live your life in a manner so that when you die
the world cries and you rejoice.

NATIVE AMERICAN PROVERB

Imagining Your Own Death

Practical considerations play a big part in planning for a good death. But now it's time to imagine *creatively* how we'd really like it to be if we could only choose.

This will show you what can be possible. The answer is 'Quite a lot!'

I had a conversation, many years ago, with a woman called Pat who was a wonderful healer and medium. She was in her late eighties. She told me glowingly and with a mischievous chuckle that she had absolutely no fear of dying, as she had already chosen what would happen and had been 'allowed' to have a sneak preview in her dreams.

She explained,

My guides were old friends to me, having worked with me all my life. During meditation one day I was invited, by Kwan Yin, the Goddess of Compassion, to choose what sort of death I'd like. I really wasn't sure and so I was invited to review all the options and scenarios and see the outcome of each one. It didn't take me long to work out that I'd like to die peacefully in my sleep outside in the garden. That night, as I slept, I was shown exactly how it would be – and when I woke up I felt utterly at peace and filled with a sense of bliss.

Just a couple of years later I had a telephone call from the retirement home where Pat had later moved to say that she had died very peacefully in her sleep in a chair, after afternoon tea in the rose garden.

She'd also left a note in her diary, found a couple of weeks later, saying 'Death isn't the end – it's just a change of address.'

I'm always astonished at how imaginative people become in my 'How to Have a Good Death' workshops. The workshops are attended by people of all backgrounds and of all ages. They are always light-hearted and jolly. Against this background they come up with some very serious plans and solutions.

After exploring what death actually means to them personally, the participants split up into groups of four or five and imagine the time, place and props they might need. There's always much laughter as the suggestions are read out. Going off in a hot-air balloon, sailing out to sea in a punt, going off in a giant firework display. These are some of the favourites. One vivacious lady in her late seventies shocked everyone by saying she wanted to die in the arms of her lover (20 years her junior), drinking champagne!

BUDDHIST PRACTICE

When Buddhist monks begin their long and arduous training, they are required to spend many months meditating on their own deaths as a way of understanding the nature of immortality and reincarnation.

As part of this practice they spend days and nights in cemeteries, alone and surrounded by the remains of the dead. While they live and sleep among the tombs, they have to visualize every detail of their dying and eventual decomposition. Eventually, they reach a point of total acceptance about the impermanence of our physical bodies and, in doing so, conquer all fear of death.

This practice is a bit extreme for most of us, but a simpler version, done comfortably at home either on our own or with a group, can enrich our understanding of how it feels to die and also how it might feel if our time is growing shorter. It can also strengthen our inner psychic tools for coping with death.

Only do this exercise when you are feeling upbeat, buoyant

and centred – and don't forget: thinking about death isn't going to kill you!

Imagining Your Own Death Exercise

Set aside around 45 minutes, unplug the phone and sit or lie down comfortably.

Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing, taking 15 slow in- and out-breaths to calm your mind.

Tell yourself, 'I am quietly and gently and peacefully slipping between two worlds. I am at peace, without pain and surrounded by love. I have no fear or anguish about the journey I am about to take.'

Then ask yourself, 'Where would I most like to die? At home in my own bed? At the home of a friend or relative? In a hospice? In a hospital or care home? Outdoors? Beside the sea? In a chair or on a sofa, on soft squishy cushions in front of a blazing log fire, on a padded reclining chair in the garden, on a blanket under a favourite tree, beside a

river or stream, on an airbed on the sea, or maybe lying in a field of gently blowing wheat?

'Would I like to be on my own or would I like there to be someone with me? Would I like them to be silent, or to speak or sing to me gently? Would I like them to hold my hand or lightly stroke my hand or arm?

'What would I like to hear, smell or touch? Would I like to be wrapped up warm and swaddled with soft fabrics, or would I like to feel the lightest covering over me and a breeze across my face?'

Imagine the setting, relax your body, feel serenity ooze over you. Imagine that you are in a very favourite place, warm and comfortable and feeling peaceful and ready to let go.

When you are ready, return to normality and write down any ideas or sensations that came into your mind.

Of course, none of us can really know for sure when death will visit.

On the 'shopping list' there are quick deaths such as accidents, heart attacks, fatal strokes, asthma attacks or allergic reactions, moderately quick deaths including certain cancers, lingering deaths from chronic disease and, most commonly, the complications of old age, including pneumonia and fractures.

Imagining your own death can be a liberating experience. In other parts of the world, such as India – where death is far more integrated with daily life – it's quite normal to have some plans in place and to tell others about them.

Taking this idea one step further, lots of people like to imagine what their funerals will be like and often make elaborate plans for them well in advance – a church filled with the people we have enjoyed sharing our lives with, a moving service where our favourite music rolls out like Desert Island Discs … moving eulogies, poems and readings by a few chosen friends, followed by a fantastic party afterwards. Or perhaps a procession to a woodland cemetery with songs and inspirational readings out in the open air followed by a ceilidh in a barn or pub. Or … a

service in a beautiful house with everyone dressed in their finest, sipping champagne cocktails before a delicious banquet (decided on and paid for by you in advance). Here again, let your imagination run riot.

Learn to die and thou shall learn how to live. There shall none learn how to live that has not learned to die.

Tibetan Book of the Dead

What Death Teaches Us

Eric Carle's book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* tells the story of a bright green caterpillar munching its way through huge quantities of ice cream, water melon and salami, and its gloriously greedy appetite for life. Then one day it pupates, becomes a chrysalis and lies dormant for a while before morphing into a beautiful butterfly.

As well as being a great and simple analogy for death and transfiguration, the butterfly, an age-old symbol of

transformation, takes us through the mystery of shape-shifting and metamorphosis and shows us that death is just part of a continuing cycle.

As Sogyal Rinpoche explains in his *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, 'according to the wisdom of Buddha, we can actually use our lives to prepare for death.'

We don't have to wait for the painful death of someone close to us, or the shock of terminal illness, to force us into looking at our lives. Nor are we condemned to go out empty-handed towards death to meet the unknown. We can begin, here and now, to find meaning in our lives. We can make of every moment an opportunity to change and to prepare – wholeheartedly, precisely, and with peace of mind – for both death and eternity.

The Buddhist Bardo teachings tell us that unless we are comfortable with the idea of death, and all it implies, we won't be able to enjoy our lives fully. Embracing death and its unlimited boundless freedom should be our life's most important work. Knowing that we will all die one day focuses the need to live in the present. If we can begin

to master this we can die like a newborn baby, free of all worries and fear.

Life and death are an infinite continuum where death is simply the beginning of another chapter of life, and at the same time death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of our life is reflected back to us.

Death by Choice

Sometimes death comes by our own hand and invitation. We can never know the full story or facts behind the reasons for anyone taking this decision. But I believe that we are the owners of our own destiny, so how can the choice to take our life away by our own hands be morally wrong? Or be judged harshly by others? Shouldn't we honour the decision and create a loving space around the soul that has chosen to go, for whatever reason?

Taking one's own life is often the result of a major conflict between the soul's needs and the ongoing struggle to resolve them. Not only does the soul have its own agenda,

but it also has its own deep wisdom and knowingness and perfect sense of timing according to the greater divine plan.

We cannot possibly know the wider picture of someone's destiny, or the tormented inner landscape of someone in the hours before their action. Nor can we understand the karmic burdens they are carrying, the soul wounds they bear and the precise impetus that brought them to their decision … but we do know of the grand intelligence of the soul.

Shock, anger, extreme despair, feelings of betrayal and of having let someone down are often the emotions of those left behind.

In the past, a blemish has been cast on those who've made this choice, by branding it a sin against God. But I think most soul workers would agree that God, or the wise beings, help people die from suicide in just the same unconditionally loving way that He or they help everyone else.

Some people believe that all deaths are indeed an act of suicide – a decision to go – and that we all choose the time of our dying when all is in place and all is complete.

Working with souls who have taken their lives can be a fragile and heart-rending experience. As a psychopomp (guider of souls), I am sometimes aware of a deep, dull, darkened presence nudging me, trying to talk. It feels as if it is speaking from the depths of a very deep hole, in a confined place of darkness. On a psychic level many people who commit suicide are similar to those who have died very suddenly and don't realize that they are actually dead. They can be very frightened, disorientated, frustrated and feeling trapped. It's important to tell them that you are able to help them to find their way towards the light.

If you find yourself drawn to help souls such as these, check first that you are feeling both grounded and safe. Comfort them and talk to them as if they are physically present, and explain that they will have the chance to put things right and release themselves from guilt and blame. Then lead them to the light and walk them home as you

would any other person who has passed across, and ask for someone to meet them.