

Being With a Dying Loved One

Ways to make the last days more precious

By Kathleen Dowling Singh

If your loved one is soon to die, you both are about to come face to face with the terrible beauty and fragility of life.

First things first: Use the resources in your community and on the [internet](#) to find knowledgeable and compassionate palliative care for your loved one's physical body. Get some of the difficult practicalities out of the way: Make sure legal affairs are in order, clarify end-of-life wishes, get some relief help if you can, and work toward resolving any past difficulties, angers, or disappointments, and focusing more and more on the love that binds you.

With physical pain under control (often a constantly shifting balance), there are some predictable facts in this course of unpredictable days and nights.

- You can count on the fact that you are, together, entering a vast unknown.
- You can count on the fact that this will be an exhausting time in every possible way.
- There will be great emotional anguish. Dying is very real. There is a certain measure of pain each of us must face in aging and in sickness and in death from which nothing we have done in our lives can spare us.
- You can count on the fact that this chapter in your life, the end of your life together, will be simultaneously heartbreaking and beautifully real.

Your loved one will be entering, in the end stages of terminal illness, a universally vast, transformative passage that we each experience uniquely and unprepared. Initially, the passage is rough--a chaos of turbulent emotions and insights. This passage does move each dying person, though, into more subtle, soul-healing dimensions where the sacred discloses itself.

And yet, difficult as it is emotionally, what is needed is simple: Be there with your loved one, as fully present as you've ever been. Let him or her share with you the fear and the wonder, the strangeness and the beauty revealed at the end of life. There's no need to have answers...who among us has answers? There's no need to know the way. How could we possibly know the way until we experience it for ourselves, and even then it will be a different way from the one our loved one is experiencing. There is a need to listen and to acknowledge and to enter into as closely as you can all that your loved one is sharing and wants you to understand of this completely unknown territory. You don't need to be an expert--you just need to love.

You both will find that there is a power inherent in death that draws us to contemplate meaning and purpose and depth. An Episcopalian priest, Ron DeBene, teaches a way of praying together during the time of someone's dying. He calls it the "breath prayer," and I have seen it used beautifully and powerfully many times, by deeply religious people as well as by people who have lived quite secular lives. You might find that even the act of creating the breath prayer together, you and your loved one, is an act of deep and loving intimacy.

- Quite simply, begin by asking your loved one to speak his or her name for God. Then, repeat that name with each indrawn breath, each of you together, breathing together, silently saying the same name for God with each inbreath.
- Continue by asking: "What is it you would want if you knew that you were speaking directly with God?" The answer often has to do with such qualities as "peace" or "courage" or "serenity."
- That word or phrase, then, can be repeated, aloud or silently, with each outbreath, still breathing together.
- What is created is a completely personal and, therefore, powerfully meaningful form of prayer, the entire prayer filling an entire breath, in and out: "Lord, grant me courage." "Jesus, give me peace." "Mother, fill me with faith."

The breath prayer is a practice you can do together in the quiet peace of an afternoon when all is calm, and in the urgent crises of a difficult night. It is a practice your loved one will be comforted to know you will continue to do with him or her, even if it becomes too difficult or too far along in the process of active dying for him or her to do it aloud, or even consciously.

The breath prayer is a way to accompany each other to the end of your life together. Sharing so closely, at such a profound time, we begin to catch glimpses of a grace that always surrounds us. Simply and powerfully, dying teaches us where to reach for grace--in depth, in intimacy, in our utter vulnerability.

Accompanying someone you love to death's door, you, like your loved one but in a different way, will be entering new territory, passing through the shattering of your heart and your life as you've known it. His or her death will be your halfway point in a painful, difficult journey. Having escorted your loved one to the moment of death, you will still need to live through your own grief and your own healing. Remember grace--and where to reach for it--during that time of grief.

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