

A reflective account from a Spiritual Care Team Volunteer

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Introduction

*"Yea though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death,
I will fear no Evil." (Psalm 23)*

When I began the first draft of this chapter, I became aware of writing from a 'safe' distance - talking about dying and spiritual care as a discipline, rather than from within the actual experience. When I realised that I would have to share these personal aspects, a wave of resistance arose. To do this meant making visible something very precious and often intimate, as well as being more deeply in touch with the depth of passion I experience in working with death. And yet it would be impossible to withhold this in writing about work I truly love.

I have therefore taken up the challenge to write from the heart of my practice as a spiritual caregiver in a local hospice, to share how it has changed me and what I have learnt about what helps contribute to a good death. I will describe how death is slowly transforming my perception and understanding, bringing me into direct awareness of the dying process in my own consciousness. I also include references at the end to some sources that have informed and inspired me along the way.

A personal reflection - the power of death

I was born into a Jewish family whose historic circumstances included trauma and emotional pain. Born in 1939, my father spent his childhood in wartime London with the Blitz raging. My mother was born in 1945 and by the age of seven both her parents had died of illnesses more preventable today. Both maternal and paternal lineages were also shaped by the Russian pogroms and the Holocaust.

I was about eight years old, in a Hebrew Class about the Shoah, when I was shown a photograph of emaciated dead bodies being pushed into a pit full of other decomposing bodies. The message was quite clear. Hitler said that Jews were evil and the source of the ills befalling the world, so they needed to be exterminated forever.

'I should not be here', my child mind thought, 'and it could happen again'. In that moment, I knew I was on the run, unconsciously pitted against life in attempts to evade the shadow of death.

At the age of 27, a friend took me to a workshop with Brandon Bays, a woman who appears to have cured her own cancer and then developed an approach to working with body consciousness. In an extraordinary guided inner journey, I found myself standing in the long, dark shadow of an enormous edifice: a tombstone the size of a tower. A wise guide handed

me a hammer and invited me to smash and dismantle it, placing each piece into a fire nearby, to be transformed in flames of love.

At that moment, I realised the true depth of loyalty I felt towards the dead of the Shoah and others. *Who will remember them and keep their memory sacred?*

I howled.

When I eventually agreed to the task, it took time and was not easy. When the flames had consumed every piece, time and space slowed down and stopped as unearthly light raised me into an ecstatic vision. When I returned to normal awareness, I was my usual limited self, but changed and now aware of a vision for human potential and a Grace beyond description.

Through full awareness, care flows

With this vision in mind, and through the study and practice of meditation, prayer and systemic constellationsⁱⁱ, I have come to realise that the nature of our mind and its needs are quite distinct from our *being* dimension. Sitting with a person, I see a physical body and a personality with beliefs, values, memories and self-images, but I also consciously recognise and acknowledge the *being aspect* of that person, often called a Soul, or sometimes Spirit.

Providing spiritual care to a dying person is enhanced by being simultaneously aware of the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of the process, all present and shifting from moment to moment. I was once sitting with a woman whose neck oozed fluids throughout our encounter. Part of me contracted in a natural, visceral response, but instead of avoiding it, I allowed myself to fully include the weeping wound in my field of awareness. And so I was able to include and communicate full acceptance of *everything* going on in the room to her, which had a deeply settling affect.

The practice of self-awareness and creating spaciousness is vital when working with the soul. Like therapists, our stance must allow awareness of our own inner world. Then we can contain and witness any tension, conflict or belief being triggered in us, so that it doesn't influence the encounter. Once this practice is established, it is possible to hold inner awareness together with awareness of what is happening 'outside'.

Through the practice of systemic constellations, I have learned to open my awareness in a particular way, to widen and hold different thoughts and possibilities in dynamic tension. I consciously refrain from analysing, judging or preferring any one idea over another. In this way, *something gradually emerges in awareness*, which we might then explore or follow. It is about allowing a *movement* – that is, an impulse that occurs in the soul realm, and which is restorative: re-establishing contact between people and the natural flow of love.

CASE STUDY 1 – Working with intense emotions

I was once with a big family sitting with a loved one who was taking a very long time to leave. Emotional strains could be felt in the room after eight long days and nights of sitting with the elderly woman: a wife, mother and grandmother.

The family was exhausted and tense from waiting, expressing their ambivalence in wanting her to both stay and go. I tracked the situation in my body and waited for any cue that might come. I inquired gently as to what might be useful. When the husband asked after the chaplain with a certain intensity in his eyes, I sensed an opening.

I responded, saying that the chaplain could certainly come and be with them, venturing that they might perhaps like a blessing. The husband burst out, 'No, no, no, she's not dead!' and I felt the expanding heat of anger and frustration pass through me, wondering if I'd spoken out of turn and simultaneously aware *this is not about me*.

I stayed with the physical and emotional discomfort, both my own and the family's. When the husband then said 'it's too hot, I need air', I accompanied him outside and put a gentle hand on his arm. He began to weep as he released a good deal of emotional pain.

I realized the rightness of staying, and of not withdrawing apologetically, as may have provided temporary relief. Instead it was possible to remain and witness the full force of what needed to make itself known.

The explosive out-surge had brought something to a head and the relief that followed for the family was palpable afterwards. They continued sitting with their loved one with our informal support. I too made sure I was not left carrying any after-affects and debriefed the story carefully in supervision, so that I could leave the energy where it belonged.

The subtle skills of a practitioner

Our role is to help alleviate suffering by allowing each person we serve to discover their own truth, and sometimes a strengthened sense of wellbeing and acceptance about what is happening.

I remind myself that every person has access to the same source of wisdom that nourishes me, and that they may also find guidance through contemplation, prayer and visionary dreams. That way, we can discover together surprising resources and gifts hidden within even the most difficult situations.

By holding spacious awareness and using our *whole self*, we can perceive subtle phenomena happening now. This means staying present and paying attention to sensations without retreating into thought-processes and ideas.

Responding to the presence of death requires creative responses, as well as protocols and procedures. For example, on one occasion with a woman of faith in the last stages of her illness, I felt myself in the presence of an extraordinary lightness. She said: "When I close my eyes I have huge, beautiful wings. But I'm scared to fly. Can I go on your back instead?" We wondered together if she might gently test out her beautiful wings and whenever she felt ready, she would know when it was the perfect moment to fly.

In these "threshold placesⁱⁱⁱ" we cannot know (in the ordinary sense) what is called for. But we can remain open and be of service to this unknowable process by listening and attuning to what is happening – even more in the silence than in the spoken word. We can use our many capacities for sensing, feeling and intuiting, as well as thinking, whilst we align to a greater will and open ourselves to guidance.

It is also very important to tread very carefully, especially on first contact. We must ensure that we are not intruding into a person's space, or indeed holding any of our own judgments, or desire for something to happen for a person. This form of subtle self-discipline is needed when responding to spiritual distress and giving space to existential questions that go right to the heart of things.

One of the hardest things in my experience is to truly do nothing and let a process fully take its course. This means confronting our own discomfort with a person's suffering, and not falling prey to the idea that our skills in midwifery of the dying could - or should - precipitate a faster or different death. A young man in his late 30s (see Case Study 2) was a great teacher to me in this.

CASE STUDY 2 – None of your business!

With a wife and two pre-teen children, there was a young man whose active dying went on for many months. He had become noteworthy to all the staff. We marveled how he remained alive against all the odds.

I had shared many moving and searching conversations with him and it amazed me each time he went home, seemingly to die, that he returned again to the hospice. After every encounter I reconciled myself to the likelihood it would be the last. But he kept on living. In the latter stages, when he went onto the Liverpool Care Pathway, he'd return again from unconscious states and we'd find him sitting up in bed very engaged with us and eating heartily.

One day I came in and he was unconscious, but the interior work was very visible. I sat by the bed and attuned to his process. Part of me so wanted to be of use and assist in the completion. I approached his soul with inner seeing and received an image of him surrounded by people. There was great busyness within the barrier of people. Trying to see what was happening, I asked what I might do. I was put in my place by a direct instruction, which I experienced both as a felt sense of being pushed away and clearly audible words: "Please back off, this is none of your business!"

Learning about letting go

When I began hospice work I was curious about the process of 'letting go'. It often featured in coaching, where outdated beliefs and habits were holding clients back from moving on or creating change. If letting go served growth so strongly, how might it serve dying?

Faced with the imminent reality of death, many people who say they are 'feeling ready' and 'everything is sorted' actually exhibit signs of numbness, detachment and dissociative trances. I've learnt to be very cautious even in using the word death in conversation. It can jolt a person with that reality, even when they themselves are describing how they are preparing for it. The mind appears not to be able to cope with this directly.

As the mind can't apprehend death, it is even more important to connect to the *being aspect* of a person and to the ground of their faith if they believe in an existence beyond the body. This is where holistic care - including complementary therapies, relaxation, ritual and blessing - can soothe and soften the difficulties around dying.

As a person of faith, I actively inquire into selfhood, to experience a deeper connectedness to life, others and the source of everything. So I work intensely with my own inner attitude and resistance to dying. Having studied how my body stores fear and trauma patterns in cellular memory, I observe how these are re-activated by my psyche in moments of great change and instability.

As a mirror of life, death is an empty dark space into which we naturally project our fears. I've gradually learned to meet the darkness of the unknown differently - choosing work that requires me to stay right at the edge of my skills where my knowledge becomes redundant, where I am at the limit of everything I know and understand. I've learnt to stay there long enough, with the intense discomfort, until I have truly surrendered my limited self and let go of my need to know.

Allowing death close has meant experiencing its effect on my instincts, emotions and identity. Sometimes I discover I am holding on too tightly to a desire or outcome, so it's a very practical means of confronting immediate loss and dissolving attachment. Sometimes the process stimulates a primary fear, activating a deep personal pain and threatening the link that binds me to a familial and ancestral source.

Like many, I have feared death as a murderer of potential, hope and life - the Grim Reaper. But in working with the dying, I experience it more as a transformer and healer, reflected deeply in my dreams and meditation. In meditation, I now see a beautiful and hopeful archetype - for Death has become a feminine figure absorbed in separating many fine threads as she gently releases the soul from the body.

CASE STUDY 3 – A personal dream about death

Reproduced without interpretation to allow us to wonder about its message and the different levels of meaning that it contains:

I dreamt that I was working at the hospice with an elderly Indian man. He arrived already unconscious and I was sitting by his bed speaking gently and occasionally putting a reassuring hand on his arm. He slipped away at some point and I found myself continuing to sit with his dead body.

Doctors and nurses came and went and he just stayed there in the bed. Nobody moved him, so I continued to sit and this appeared to be treated as quite normal. This continued for two days and I began to wonder why he'd been left and concerned about decomposition, even though there was no smell, or outward signs of decay.

A few hours later a nurse came in to do something and the man started stirring very gently. Incredibly he started to move and speak and it was clear that he wasn't dead. I tried to move towards him to speak to him, but he was really disoriented and startled by me, so I stood back whilst the professional staff moved in and did various things efficiently and beautifully.

The next thing that happened was astounding. All the doctors and nurses came in and formed a circle with the man. Arm in arm they sang and turned, somehow singing his return to life with joy. I asked someone what was happening and they said that this was what always happened.

There was a tall man in the room who I thought was another Chaplain. He looked at me and I was obviously bewildered. He asked if I was ok. I was full of tears on the inside and shocked at what had happened, but I held it all back because everyone else seemed so joyous at this event.

After that, I was in the locker room getting changed and a large, motherly looking matron came in. She spotted my true state and I just started sobbing, so she took me in her strong arms with a big hug. I said to her, "I understood and dealt with things knowing that the dead were dead and the living were living." She smiled at me and understood the change within me.

Where do we go from here?

Through encounters with the dying and their family members, I am aware of a whole *phenomenology of connection* that extends well beyond 'me' and my conscious abilities. For example, whenever words of blessing are spoken in language that I wouldn't ordinarily use. I become aware of the unique connection at that moment in time and space, and of a timeless presence that contains the moment as it communicates through me.

Through dreams, meditation and a growing awareness of shared 'fields' of connection, I glimpse consciousness beyond physical death. I am seeing that what separates the living from the dead is much less than we imagine from our material perspective.

In conversation and collaboration with others, I am exploring the frontiers of selfhood and consciousness – mapping my direct experience to research from neuroscience, quantum field theory and psychology. Their findings indicate that human beings share in and participate in a single, continuous reality now being referred to as *the field*. We might call this *Source*, *Oneness* or the *unity of God* in spiritual language.

I am very aware of being at a sacred threshold with another human being on the dying journey, particularly in the final moments. The unknowability of this transcendent 'space between', where inner subjective experience and outer observable reality meet, brings me into a quiet loving presence. In this place I feel most whole, most connected and most free, as my own deep fear slowly transforms into a gift that serves life.

With new knowledge from science and practices from faith traditions, I believe we can do even more to help lessen the fear of death and support people to further open to the dying experience. This inspires me to continue developing my own learning and understanding, so we can further realise Cicely Saunders' founding vision for high-quality palliative care to: "*aid in the spiritual search for meaning, sense of self and the possibility of growth through loss.*"^{iv}

Acknowledgements & references

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Here are just five of the publications that have touched and inspired me:

Levine S (1989) *Who dies?: An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying*. New York: Anchor Books.

Warner F (2011) *A Safe Journey Home: A simple guide to achieving a peaceful death*. London: Hay House.

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ⁱ Shoah: The Hebrew word meaning "catastrophe" denotes the catastrophic destruction of European Jewry during World War II.

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.thecsc.net> for more details about this systemic approach.

ⁱⁱⁱ a phrase introduced to me by our chaplain.

^{iv} Quoted from www.cicelysaundersfoundation.org/about-us, Cicely Saucers International.