

## SANCTUARY IN ILLNESS, DEATH & DYING

*“In the end we are always alone, but it is not the number of people who surround us in our dying, nor is it the number of years that we have lived that is significant; it is the quality of life and the courage and strength we have shown that ultimately give us the strength to face this final journey alone and with dignity.”*

**Elizabeth Kubler-Ross**

I was eight years old when my grandmother died. However, it was the way in which my mother approached her mother’s impending death that most stands out in my mind. She created an aura of respect and admiration in my grandmother’s room at the sanitarium. She brought objects of honor — vases of flowers, cards of respect, sweet treats for the soul, pictures of beauty and celebration of life and Nature. At my grandmother’s passing, I was standing outside directly below her second floor window. The sultry summer night was without a breeze. But suddenly, I looked up into the tree rising up to her window at the moment a brief zephyr wafted through its upper limbs. I saw my grandmother’s spirit lift away out through the window and head for the heavens. For an eight-year-old boy, the experience was beyond imagination.

My mother beautified my grandmother’s illness and death. She created a haven of soulful comfort, a sanctuary that honored and embraced the life *and* the impending death of a dear human. And this is something to think about. How often do we have a chance to beautify life and death in the same place, in the same proximity of time to each other?

Being middle-aged, Tricia and I have found ourselves more frequently experiencing the severe illness or death of older friends and family member. Many years ago we each worked or volunteered in settings where such conditions were common. So, when we recently began formulating strategies for creating sanctuary in daily life, we naturally saw the therapeutic value of sanctuary to be useful for those with severe illness, injury, or impending death. In this chapter, we want to share ideas on how to create a beautiful and honoring sanctuary for one who is severely ill or suffering from a terminal illness. We hope these tips spark your own imagination and inspire you to create an opportunity to help someone with such a need.

First, I want to briefly capsule several benefits of sanctuary for those who are ill, injured, or dying. Then Tricia will share thoughts on the necessity to understand the dying process or the effects of serious illness as key steps towards creating sanctuary. Following Tricia’s comments, I will outline numerous practical ways to create a room or home as a sacred space for a severely ill or dying individual. Then,

Tricia will conclude by sharing ways in which people attempt to create personal sanctuary in the grieving process and by creating memorial settings.

### **BENEFITS OF SANCTUARY FOR THE ILL AND DYING**

A short while ago a woman, Evelyn, wrote our Project asking for materials that might help her to create a sanctuary garden at her home. She described her husband's recent death from Lou Gehrig's disease. She shared how for over eight years she strove to create a beautiful home setting for his comfort. In her letter, Evelyn stated "I wanted to create a beautiful death by creating a beautiful life around him." In this one statement, this woman upholds all the ideals of sanctuary.

There are several benefits to creating sanctuary for an ill or dying person or pet. The benefits also extend to caregivers and visitors as well.

#### ***Sanctuary creates a special place that is perceived to be sacred***

The key words here are place and sacred. Having a place of one's own, be it a room or a home, is deeply dignifying. It is a personal haven, a castle. But it can feel empty of heart and soulful purpose if we do not give it our energy. The more we show our gratitude for place, the more we give it sacred value. We all know what this feels like — stepping into a church, temple, sacred landscape. A place that is special to us is our sanctuary; it holds a type of sacred energy that is worth honoring.

Our Western medical system depersonalizes the places we associate with obtaining medical care and supervision — hospitals, treatment centers, nursing homes and the like. This is one reason why hospice care has risen in popularity as a compassionate form of care for the severely ill and dying — it creates a haven of respect. But the individual should not be considered to be the only beneficiary of their bedroom or home created as a sanctuary. Care providers, family members and visitors each bring a soulful sense of honoring to such settings. They themselves help to create and enhance the sacredness of the sanctuary. Always, their life is deepened and spiritualized.

Consider the example of Rajella. She is a woman in her forties who is in the final stages of breast cancer, dying at home. After three arduous bouts of chemotherapy, she has finally decided that she's had enough. She is no longer afraid to die. Her last request of her dearest friends is simply this: to spend time in her bedroom meditating with her. This is profoundly touching. In spite of her emaciated condition, this is what is important to her, and only this. She *isn't* hiding herself away, and her friends know that

they can serve the powerful purpose of helping her prepare her soul for the transition of death. What an honor to share the deep sanctuary of prayer and meditation with one who is about to leave this Earth. Isn't this a startling departure from the common scenario, in which 80% of all Americans actually die in the hospital, with the circumstances of their final days and hours artfully concealed from their loved ones? If we only knew the golden opportunities that we are missing.

### ***Sanctuary honors the individual***

The pain that some people have carried for much of their life may be based on the fact that they do not and have not felt honored and respected by those around them. We have seen ample evidence of this in marriages and within families. While illness itself should not be the reason a person feels cared-for, the very idea of sanctuary elicits thoughts about honoring an individual or pet. Intentionally setting such a tone, as the Viet Nam War Memorial wall exemplifies, can be a source of deep healing in and of itself. Depending upon the setting, we come to a sanctuary to honor a God or deity, a human or culture, or even Nature – her animals, plants, or other features. Or we come to enfold someone who is dear to us. We visit with a pure sense of heart. And we leave feeling more whole and more grateful.

This is how we should feel about sanctuary for an ill or dying friend or animal. The setting's energy and content, the way we relate to others within it — these should reflect our sense of honoring them. Familiar furnishings and objects, kind words, caring touch and holding, heartfelt sharing and listening, quiet and reflective sitting — these are noble behaviors befitting of a sanctuary. Everyone benefits by such an exchange, and the spirit of the place is deepened.

### ***Sanctuary upholds and beautifies life***

Sanctuary heightens our sensate awareness of life. An amazing transformation of consciousness takes place at the sanctuary entrance. We leave an aspect of the world behind — that darker part of it that weighs heavy on us: fear, violence, greed, injustice, insensitivity, obligations, illness, even roles and duties. And we enter into a place of light — peace, hope, love, kindness, caring, gentleness, honor, respect, joy, and beauty. We may realize that this is our haven, if only we choose to access it everyday. I believe that sanctuary upholds and beautifies life. It elevates life's preciousness in our mind. It deepens life's gift in our heart. It sanctifies life's value in our soul.

An ill person's sanctuary defocuses illness, although it can prepare one further in accepting their condition. Their sanctuary should focus on the celebration of life — their life as ennobled by objects and

features in their home or room. This focusing on and upholding the beauty of life well lived, well valued, and even well imagined creates a psychic energy of wellness. Illness may be present, yes, but it is upstaged by something so much more spiritually and soulfully well: the celebration of life.

I have seen many people suffering with physically or mentally debilitating conditions, but always I am interested in one thing: is their spirit broken or is it still alive? A broken and defeated spirit almost always has succumbed to the effects of illness and disease. But this is not how it should be if proper sanctuary is offered that honors and celebrates the spirit of life.

I shared a brief excerpt from Evelyn's letter above, about her efforts to dignify her husband's terminal illness at home. She further writes: "As medical supplies and appliances gathered in his room, I emptied one of the closets to keep all of these "signs of illness" hidden away. Everyday Don was bathed, shampooed and dressed. I found that when Don's hair was left unwashed he felt more like a patient than a whole person. I strove to keep him and his surroundings as normal as possible. I never allowed our home to become hospital-like." Evelyn was not denying her husband's illness; she was nurturing his human spirit by upholding his dignity.

### ***Sanctuary sets a mood and tone for visitors***

The power of a sanctuary be it human-made or crafted from Nature, is its ability to emit a mood or tone. In physics the term *harmonic resonance* describes the attunement of the energy of the parts of the whole. In a sanctuary, the contained psychic energy of objects, features, even thoughts, feelings, and prayers which make-up the setting affects the energy of the visitor. You can imagine that the more love and compassion that exists in sanctuary, the more one can be affected. This is why you can come into sanctuary carrying stress and angst, perhaps sadness and despair, and soon feel an interior sense of peace begin to salve your soul. The cloak of sanctuary — the setting's soft and peaceful mood and tone — is healing and soothing.

Imagine how important it would be to enhance the room of someone who spends all their time there. The mood and tone of an ill person's sanctuary is critical. It is affected by colors, lighting, objects, furniture, and natural features (plants, water, etc.). Sensorial features such as smells, sounds, and things worthy of touch also influence it. These help to embrace and celebrate life, both for the individual, caregivers, *and* visitors.

### ***Sanctuary prepares one further in accepting illness or death***

Sanctuary is often a solitary experience. It naturally creates a cocoon for contemplation. At its core sanctuary should always be about communing with some spirit. This spirit can be as lofty as our belief in a God or Creator, as humble as our own personal being, or as reverent as our appreciation of Nature and this planet. But even as we ponder all that is alive about us, we must also awaken to our ultimate need to accept death. Sanctuary, therefore, gives us opportunity to meditate on that vast yet tenuous terrain between birth, life, and death as transformation of consciousness.

The sanctuary of a person suffering from a life-threatening illness can never cover up the issue of death, nor should it ever expect to! Yes, sanctuary beautifies life, but it is also an opportunity to embrace and honor death as but a necessary spiritual transformation. This is as valuable for the individual as it is for any family members, visitors or caregivers.

Evelyn, in her letter, once again speaks to this point: “An important aspect of creating sanctuary for the terminally ill is to allow for the free airing of all fears, etc. without feeling they are a burden. It is vitally important to allow the person who is going through transition to talk and feel free to express fears, doubts, beliefs and plans with his/her family or caregiver. Our society often doesn’t allow the sharing that is so needed at this time. However, this is a blessed time to share and receive love.” These are wise words that apply to another friend of ours, Ellie. I want Tricia to briefly share her experience with this dear friend.

Ellie, in her seventies, had been ill on and off for fourteen years. Forrest and I had long been witness to her incredible determination to overcome her complex health problems. But during her last two years she had been bed-ridden and was being patiently cared for by her husband. As her condition worsened, Ellie grew more and more frail. Still, being a strong German woman, she was strangely reluctant to die. One evening, I sat with Ellie in her bedroom holding her thin little hand, surrounded by pictures of saints and photographs of her family. As if they were suddenly speaking through me, I looked into her gaunt eyes and asked, “Ellie, why are you holding on so hard to life? Is there anything remaining to do that you have not already accomplished?” She was stunned. “Well...my grandchildren need me,” she stammered. “Ellie,” I said, “I know you love your grandkids, but you’ve done all you can for them, and now it’s time to let them go. Is there anything else holding you here? She started to answer and then her voice trailed off. “No,” she admitted. “It’s okay to let go now,” I said. “You’ve lived a good, long life, and God is calling you home now to rest.” There was a softer look on her face, as I left Ellie that evening. And not surprisingly, she died peacefully late that night. I woke in the morning with a dream that I was watching her soul rise into the heavens, and it turned into a beautiful star.

When we share sanctuary time and space with one who is ill, it is as if the spirit of the place enters into us, and we become an instrument of profound healing. We may be moved to say or do just the right thing that provides physical or emotional comfort, or we may find ourselves speaking soul to soul. I certainly didn't plan what I was going to say to Ellie that night. I was simply intuitively guided in the moment. Trusting this mysterious process and praying that we be used for the highest good allows incredible grace to flow. Even if the person is ill for months or years, our presence in their life can be like an angel. Hopefully we can also be mindful of the needs of the caregiver as well, providing much-needed respite and emotional support for them, for the caregivers may well have the most difficult task of all. They too need sanctuary and the opportunity to prepare themselves for the approaching death of their loved one. And once death comes, they need our patience and love as they move into acceptance of all that has happened and the inevitable changes that lay ahead.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE DYING PROCESS: A Key Step Towards Creating Sanctuary**

It seems that so often in this culture, death and dying is looked at with fear and even dread. This is the opposite of seeing it in the context of sanctuary that Forrest has outlined. Dying may well be the greatest challenge many of us will ever face, the "final stage of growth," as Kubler-Ross puts it. And because the circumstances of our dying and death are an unknown, and the dying process of others is often hidden from us, it is only natural that we might feel some fear around this issue. But that doesn't mean we should look the other way, minimizing our encounters with those whom we know to be dying. There is much we can do to ease the suffering of others and to educate ourselves in the process so we are not quite so unprepared when our time approaches.

No one *wants* to suffer in the process of dying, but the fact is that most people do. Therefore we must be prepared to deal appropriately with *this* part of the process — for ourselves as well as others. We must find the means to act in a compassionate, supportive, and knowledgeable way that honors the person who is dying and helps them to complete their life, as much as is possible, with dignity and grace. We can better support a dying friend or family member if we are comfortable with death itself, through our own depth of spiritual understanding and inner strength. But we should also make it a point

to be informed about their particular illness or condition so that we know what to expect in terms of the progression of their symptoms and the appropriate treatment to insure their optimal comfort and clarity of mind.

For those with the courage to read it, there is a remarkable book entitled *How We Die — Reflections on Life's Final Chapter* by Sherwin B. Nuland, surgeon and teacher of medicine. According to Dr. Nuland, “an entire mythology has grown up around the process of dying. Like most mythologies, it is based on the inborn psychological need that all humankind shares . . . to disarm our terror about what the reality may be. But, says Dr. Nuland, “We rarely go gentle into that good night.”

The *ars moriendi*, or art of dying, has been portrayed for centuries in art and literature as a soulful and uplifting experience for friends and family — “the beautiful death, the correct way to die.” But, Dr. Nuland says, modern culture has attempted to conceal and sanitize death, and above all, to prevent it. The good death, he states, has increasingly become a myth. So this book sets out to demythologize the process of dying by presenting it in its biological and clinical reality, as seen by those who are witness to it and felt by those who experience it. As Dr. Nuland suggests, “only by a frank discussion of the very details of dying can we best deal with those aspects that frighten us the most. It is by knowing the truth and being prepared for it that we rid ourselves of that fear of the terra incognita of death that leads to self-deception and illusions.”

By examining six common disease categories (cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, etc.) Dr. Nuland presents the step- by-step ways that the human body deteriorates in the dying process: the stoppage of circulation, the inadequate transport of oxygen to the tissues, the flickering out of brain function, the failure of organs, and the destruction of vital centers. As gloomy as it might sound, I found the information to be illuminating. As a woman, I have naturally concerned myself more with the emotional aspects of dying, and yet I finally feel ready to see the larger picture, willing to take a more proactive role in the lives and deaths of those whom I love, whenever the opportunity shall arise.

As I read the Dr. Nuland's chapter on Alzheimer's disease, our friend Jeannie's mother came to mind. Elizabeth was diagnosed with Alzheimer's five years ago and is now in a nursing home, in an advanced stage of the disease. I have worked with such patients in my years as a gerontologist, but I have to confess, I've never observed the entire tormenting process of this illness. The progressive degeneration of the nerve cells of the brain and the resulting loss of all the higher functions, such as memory, learning, and judgment, is disturbing enough when viewed at any given stage. But to watch someone — a person whom you have known and loved much or all of your life — gradually lose all his or her faculties is undoubtedly devastating.

I began to think that perhaps by not fully understanding all of this, I wasn't giving Jeannie the emotional support *she* needed. So I called her. I wanted to know how she is doing with all this and what her mother's symptoms currently are. She was very grateful for my concern and shared that she has always felt supported by Forrest and me. But she did confess that because of her own incomplete knowledge of her mother's condition, she was sometimes unprepared for Elizabeth's behaviors. "You have to keep adjusting every month or so to a new level of deterioration," she says. "One month she can only take two baby steps, and the next month she doesn't know who I am. Now, her words don't form right, and I can no longer understand her. Oh God, now this . . . and I just do the best I can. I look for the best and see what's still left."

Jeannie says her mother loves to have her feet massaged and still very much enjoys music. It's easier now because Elizabeth has become more content and no longer understands that it's odd that she can't walk or remember anything. But later in our conversation, Jeannie shared more about herself, admitting her sadness and occasional feelings of deep loneliness. Some days she leaves the nursing home in tears, other times deeply troubled. But the hardest thing, she confesses is the total lack of support, financially and emotionally, from her brother, Ed, who refuses to visit his dying mother. His inability to face the reality of her Alzheimer's is classic and not at all uncommon. Yet his lack of courage has placed a huge burden on his sister's shoulders.

Wanting to be even better prepared, Jeannie asked to borrow *How We Die* so she would know clearly what to expect as her mother nears the end. Feeling more prepared, coupled with the recent intensifying of her efforts to create more sanctuary time for herself, is Jeannie's way of taking care of herself and keeping her otherwise high level of stress under control. *Self-care* strategies such as this are absolutely essential for every caregiver.

It certainly is not possible in this chapter to go into all the psychological aspects of one's involvement with severe illness, dying, or loss. The well-known processes of grief, denial, anger, acceptance, and the like beg for the consideration of sanctuary: those places of healing, and the sacred time necessary to commune with one's soul.

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#### **BOXOUT:**

#### **Ways to Make an Ill or Dying Person Feel Your Love Without Smothering Them**

1. Visit and/or call the individual on a regular basis so they know you are really there for them.
2. Keep them in your loving thoughts and prayers, visualizing them as being peaceful and calm in spite of the challenges of their illness.
3. Be well informed about the stages or progression of their particular physical condition.
4. Be willing to listen to and empathize with their complaints, but try not to take their negative emotions, criticisms, or fears personally.
5. Strive to be a positive presence in their life, as much as possible remaining patient, kind, and cheerful. Visualize yourself as a human form of sanctuary here to bless this person in their final days.
6. Don't talk about the dying person's condition to others in their presence, assuming that they can't hear or understand what you say.
7. Unless the person is no longer mentally alert, include them as a participant in discussions and decisions regarding their care and welfare.
8. Since successful pain management is a primary predictor of positive emotional adjustment in terminal illness, be well informed about the appropriate types of pain medication available and also familiarize yourself with alternative therapies that may have less adverse side effects.
9. When the person is ready to accept his or her own death, strive to be ready yourself to share in this acceptance.
10. Without pushing your own point of view, support their spiritual well being and encourage them to talk about their feelings on this matter. Be patient; this kind of openness may take time to cultivate. If they simply are not comfortable in talking to you about deeper topics, make sure they have someone whom they can trust and confide in. Especially good is someone who is themselves facing their terminal illness with inner peace.
11. Be willing to serve as an advocate/interpreter for the person in connection with doctors and medical personnel. It is frightening to be sick and to not understand what you're being told about your condition.
12. Let simple, heartfelt gestures symbolize your love and caring: bringing fresh flowers to the your friends room, an inspiring poem or story to read aloud to them, a healthy, tasty treat that is within their prescribed diet, your humorous or light-hearted observations about life that deflect some of the seriousness of dying.
13. Honor the chosen lifestyle, religious beliefs, diet, etc. of the dying person as much as possible. They may not be willing to change, and that's okay. Ultimately, it's their life and their death.
14. Take good care of yourself, keeping current with your own emotions and any fears that arise. Find a friend or counselor who can really be there for *you*.

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### ILLNESS OR INJURY AS SANCTUARY

One aspect of sanctuary is that of convalescence from injury or severe illness — time and opportunity to heal, pull back from worldly activities, receive love and support, and reflect on the circumstances of our life. A number of years ago I spent months convalescing from a broken hip and, more recently, from a

serious car accident. In both cases, I felt tremendous blessings and insights coming to me *through* my sustained discomfort and lack of mobility. I felt increasing peace and a sense of freedom. These two experiences were spiritual and emotional turning points in my life. Forrest, who lovingly cared for me after the hip injury, was so impressed with the overall improvement in my stress level and temperament that he confessed to me one day, “I wish you wouldn’t get well so fast. You’re so much more accessible when you can’t do everything for yourself. I want to be here for you, but usually you’re so independent and you don’t seem to need me.” It never occurred to me that my independence was actually keeping us apart, and that my injuries actually allowed my family to give me support within the blessing of sanctuary.

Living with an ongoing health problem requires courage because it often presents challenges that are very different from those posed in the dying process. A long period of illness may necessitate significant adjustments for the individual, family members, and friends. When Roberta was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, she suddenly understood her unexplained pain and fatigue. As her symptoms increased, Roberta had to learn to do less and ask for help. Her husband Jack realized that he would need to assume full responsibility for maintaining the household — cooking, cleaning, shopping. At first he was dismayed, but now he feels more confident. “I can do this,” he says with assurance, “I can handle it.”

I recently spent an evening with the well-known spiritual teacher, Ram Dass (a.k.a., Richard Alpert). I understand better how one might experience personal transformation through a long-term debilitating illness. Several years ago, Ram Dass had a stroke that left him paralyzed on the right side and unable to speak. He too had to get used to asking for help. Gradually his speech returned, but he speaks much more slowly now, with occasional lengthy pauses to search for the right word. This makes some people uncomfortable while others become even more attentive.

Long known for his quick wit and his inspiring and articulate lectures and workshops, Ram Dass says he has come to appreciate the silence in between his words. He calls it “surfing the silence”. His spiritual teacher once told him, “Lectures are for entertainment; silence is golden.” “But,” Ram Dass adds, as if reminding himself and us, “Don’t use the silence to wait for something; use the silence wisely.” This is profound wisdom. Much of what we say is often superfluous. The time we spend waiting is often filled with impatience. Ram Dass now has cause (and time) to reflect deeply about what is important in life and, as a spiritual teacher, what is worth sharing with others. I was especially struck by his qualities of simplicity, humility, and honesty. I was reminded once again that illness or injury

often simplifies our daily duties, and humbles our ambitions. Thus, similar to when we are in sanctuary, we may find ourselves relaxed, receptive, and reflective.

A debilitating illness may naturally open us more to the spiritual light. Doing so can help alleviate the stigma or shame that one may attach to their own sickness or aging process. For example, Ram Dass calls stroke, cancer, Alzheimer's, and other illnesses/diseases "fierce grace." These conditions allow us, if we choose or have the ability, to assertively dive into our inner world while necessarily disengaging from the outer. His own response to loss of memory or motor skills, or physical pain, is "Oh boy, I'm getting on with my soul work."

Ram Dass's view about death is simple: "I don't care." Of which he adds, "I would like the place I die in to not seduce me too much to stay on this earth plane. Photos of friends and family say 'Come back!' You want to hear 'Go! Go! Go!' In the moment of death you want a neutral environment." I never thought of this, but it is something to consider. As shown in this chapter, we believe that creating sacred space for an ill or dying person helps in celebrating their life. The intent is not to deny trauma or death. However, in India, where disease and death is ever-present, Ram Dass saw dying people everywhere he went, many with just enough coins in their pouch to pay the cost of their funeral. When he looked into their eyes, he realized that individually and as a culture, they accept the idea of death and are not afraid of it. Western cultures could learn a lot from this attitude of acceptance. And yet there are extraordinary examples of courage when facing terminal illness.

While on Eugene's monthly gallery walk recently, I came upon a beautiful community event. In the White Lotus Gallery was hanging a striking collection of photographs on the theme "Continuation — Embracing Your Own Experiences with Death and Dying." They centered on the remarkable story of Larissa Caldwell, a 19 year old who died of lung cancer in 1997. During her nine-month illness, Larissa deeply explored the philosophical aspects of life and death. In one book she read, *365 Tao*, by Deng Ming-Dao, she discovered 365 Chinese symbols that reflect Chinese philosophy, the last of which was the symbol for new life or "Continuation." The concept so impressed Larissa that she had this Chinese symbol tattooed on her body as a reminder that the soul can never die. To think of continuation rather than ending gave her great comfort. She wrote some poignant pieces about the dying process for the local newspaper, sharing her own deepening through her experience with cancer. Friends and family members, in a show of heartfelt support for Larissa, decided to have the continuation symbol tattooed on their own bodies. Then others across the country, some perfect strangers, followed suit, finding their own personal resonance with the theme of Continuation as a way of transmuting fears of death and dying.

Mariah Dodd, a clinical social worker, was one person who chose to have a Continuation tattoo. In her own deeper understanding, she says: “Death is not a failure, death is not the enemy. It is with deep awe and respect that I accept death as part of life.” I am of the conviction that the concept of sanctuary is a necessary part of the creation of awe and respect for life and death. Our soul’s love affair with this physical plane is easily transitioned to the spiritual dimension by the creation and enhancement of both sacred space and time. In sanctuary we are afforded a deeper view into that same Spirit that invests itself in the world, our friends and loved ones, and most importantly, in ourselves.

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### **BOX OUT**

#### **Embracing Your Own Experiences with Death and Dying**

From *Your Journey Website* ([www.continuationbook.com](http://www.continuationbook.com))

Becoming aware of your own mortality or the mortality of a loved one is an emotional journey. Although difficult, this can become an opportunity to embrace your emotions and discover your courage and strength within. In our society, knowledge of death usually catapults us into fear and the unknown. Some people shut down and withdraw; some depend on religious beliefs to cope with death; some find the answers in poetry, music, art, or quiet reflection. We would like to share some personal thoughts that might offer some assistance in facing your own experience with death and dying.

- Keep an open mind.
- Accept not knowing all the answers.
- Establish boundaries; don’t allow others to impose their agenda or dictate what you believe.
- Don’t view death as a negative or positive experience, just accept it as a sacred human experience
- Focus on living in the moment.
- Use music and art to quiet the mind and heal your emotions.
- Create a comfortable ritual to express yourself.
- Ask for what you want.
- Embrace all of your emotions and experiences and don’t judge them.
- Remember that physical and emotional healing requires time and patience.

- View your difficulties and challenges as opportunities to discover your courage and your strengths.
- Remember; take the time to nurture your body, your mind, and your spirit.

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## **CREATING A HAVEN THAT COMFORTS THE SOUL**

Several years ago we placed an article on our Cortesia Sanctuary & Center website, offering many suggestions about how to create a sacred space for an ill or dying person. Since then, we have received numerous emails, especially from caregivers (nurses, social workers, and other staff) in hospice settings, who have found tremendous inspiration for creating dignifying sanctuary space. A number of the concepts offered below reflect strategies we shared in the chapter on home as sanctuary. But when the well-being of an ill or dying person is considered, there are some particular strategies worth trying in the following areas:

- Lighting, color, and windows
- Comforting images and icons
- Sensory stimulation
- Integration of Nature
- Creation of an Altar

### **Lighting, Color and Windows**

A sanctuary space should not feel like a cave. Illness itself is enough to create a cavern of fear and hopelessness. Therefore, lighting should feel intimate and natural, serving to enhance and highlight life. When I think of intimate lighting several things come to mind. First, that overhead ceiling light is not intimate! Be it fluorescent or incandescent, it is distancing and impersonal. Floor and table lamps give a homier feel. Use a full spectrum light bulb to give a feel of more natural light. A regular incandescent light casts a yellow hue and emits a ghostly pall over the ill individual. I also suggest that any lamps and lampshades be decorative and artful. Make that extra effort to get lighting that is attractive and functional.

Selective lighting in a room is effective for highlighting objects or special areas. For example, a fine painting or print can be selectively spotlighted with a small light attached to the top or bottom, like those you see in an art gallery. This draws the individual's attention into a lovely artistic expression of life. Similarly, an altar can also be highlighted with a small light or lamp, even a candle.

Color has been well documented to have therapeutic and psychological effects. Therefore, color can also enhance the feeling of sanctuary. I do not recommend white walls — there is something simply too sterile and hospital-like about them! A soft color of blue, green, or violet is very enfolding and comforting. Wallpaper or wallpaper trim can also make a room feel very inviting. I highly encourage the use of wood in some parts of a room. Do not use cheap, fake-wood paneling. Natural cedar or pine is especially warm. Determine what colors are attractive to an individual and try to incorporate them into design features and furnishings.

A window is one of the most important features of an ill person's sanctuary. Most of our sensory awareness comes through our eyes. This is how we vicariously feast on life. The quickest way to disempower an ill person is to enclose them in a room (or home) without a view. A severe or terminal illness is itself enough of a psychological imprisonment. We can succumb to it as if drawn into some black hole in outer space. We can only be expected to peer into our illness or impending death for so long each day. But while we breathe and are alive, let our eyes rove, long for and admire the passing of the world by our window.

If an individual is confined to their room sanctuary, here are some strategies about windows. First, it does not matter what the view is out the window. A window is psychological — an escape for the mind and imagination. If the view is not especially good, still don't worry — you'll simply have to be more creative in enhancing the view. Perhaps a bush or similar vegetation will have to be trimmed back to open up a vista. The mere placement of a birdhouse, birdbath or feeder just outside the window is often an easy solution. A planter box for flowers can be installed on the outside windowsill. Or, flower pots can be arranged on the inside sill. Hang a crystal or two in the window if it gets some direct sun — the rainbow refractions in the room will seem like heaven! Similarly, you can hang a small mobile, wind chime, or the like that may pick-up a breeze. Okay, so there's a brick wall or building just outside the window. Still try to do something. Don't succumb to defeat. The window is symbolic. Give it fancy curtains, a good trim. Replace the glass with stained glass, or attach a beautiful Nature scene. Place a table beneath the window that has objects of Nature, a vase of flowers, personal mementos.

I believe a window is an important tether to life. For this reason, seriously consider enlarging a small or medium-sized window. The term "picture window" did not get its name for nothing. A room

to an ill person is like being in a space capsule of time. So, have a good-sized view out! Give this sanctuary its due — a room with a view. Similarly, do not be afraid to move a bed closer, if not right next to the window. Or perhaps have a comfortable chair sitting there. This can be tremendously uplifting to a bed-ridden or sedentary person.

### **The Power & Comfort of Images**

An image such as a painting, print, or picture can have a powerful therapeutic effect on any person. Imagine that you were confined to a certain space for a particular length of time. What images on your walls would give you comfort, peace, and joy? An ill person's sanctuary room should house a gallery of comforting and inspiring images. An exquisite painting or photograph may do, especially if well highlighted. An older woman friend of our family had in her room an especially large and beautifully painted picture of Jesus on one wall, two pictures of her Indian master on another, and a lovely family portrait on a third. Outlining her dresser mirror were many other pictures of family and religious symbols. She spent her last remaining weeks confined to her bed in this room, but these images gave her deep spiritual solace and symbolized her fervent spiritual focus in life.

Images are highly personal and should not be judged. A woman wrote us about her teenage son dying of cancer who wanted a deer's head mounted on a wall before him. He and his deceased father had a special bond — he learned a deep reverence for animals, especially deer, in their frequent hunting trips when he was a small boy. For some people, the deer's head may appear to be highly inappropriate and insensitive — an ill-placed or misconceived value. But to this teenager it was a tether to life and a reverent memory while in the confined sanctuary of his bedroom.

Images of Nature are particularly comforting to people. Something about pastoral landscapes, mountains, and oceans affect the soul. They also provide the opportunity for one to escape in their imagination, to adore, appreciate, and reflect. One caretaker in our Project regularly visits the bedrooms of elders. She takes with her pictures of Nature and reads Nature poetry. One day she visited a woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease. She showed her a picture of the ocean and the woman suddenly sat upright in bed with eyes wide open. Pointing to the picture she exclaimed, "The ocean is beautiful, do not let anyone destroy it!"

### **The Value of Sensory Stimulation**

The opportunity to touch and be touched when ill is critical to spiritual comfort. Touch reaffirms the soul in its love affair with life, not just to see that which is artful and beautiful but also to touch it, hold

it, take in its texture and “feel.” For this reason, furnish a sanctuary with items comforting to the touch. Nature objects, such as pieces of wood, touchstones, even plants are especially valuable. Sculpted items with varied surfaces are also stimulating. A soft lap blanket or shawl creates coziness. And of course, children’s little stuffed animals can provide further comfort and stimulation. I would also suggest that if a person is bed-ridden, that silk sheets might provide a sensual and elegant feel.

Strive to stimulate the senses of smell and hearing as well. Determine what types of scents an individual is attracted to. Most any natural scent is available in concentrated essences and can be burned or sprayed in the sanctuary setting. Aromatherapy is a very well established medium for using scents to elicit physical and psychological responses. Scented candles, sachets, as well as incense can also emit a subtle fragrance.

The therapeutic value of music also cannot be understated. Sanctuary music can be extremely comforting and relaxing. It can also reflect the value of music in the individual’s life; for example, one may have been especially attracted to classical music or maybe Country Western. There is a special type of “New Age” music available that is especially soothing and inspiring, and often integrates Nature sounds into new or familiar melodies. In her letter describing her relationship with her dying husband, Evelyn states: “We spent many hours in meditation and listening to soft soothing music. We went to sleep with this music playing. We found that by relaxing to music at bedtime it helped keep those feelings of sadness or even panic at bay — those thoughts that are harder to control as darkness falls.”

Gentle sound can also be brought into the sanctuary in other ways. A wind chime just outside the window, for example, is especially soothing. These chimes should be of high quality with a medium or lower resonance (found in chimes with longer or larger tubing). A chime tuned to a minor scale is particularly soothing (a major scale, while cheerful, can also begin to get on your nerves!). The sound of water is especially worth considering in a sanctuary room. Water stimulates something very primal in humans. Its psychological effects are well understood and extremely therapeutic. Moving water in a room particularly arouses life-force energy (called “chi”) and vitality. Small tabletop fountains have become increasingly popular and provide a wonderfully pleasing background sound. Similarly, an aquarium can provide therapeutic benefits, giving many hours of visual and subtle auditory enjoyment. Of course, taped Nature sounds — a mountain brook, the ebb and flow of tidal waves, breezes through forests, even the varying sounds of a boat harbor — each of these playing softly in the background can be comforting and uplifting.

I strongly believe that a sanctuary space is about creating a heightened sense of appreciation for life and those things that give one joy in life. As I have suggested with the above examples, sensory

stimulation is very important. Let me conclude my thoughts on this topic by also saying that you should not overlook the great pleasures of the palate. An ill or dying person should always have the opportunity to taste wonderful food that is thoughtfully selected and prepared. For example, fruits and vegetables should be organic. Why? If you haven't tried such produce you may be in for a startling surprise — organically grown food has incredibly full-bodied taste. Plus, it is nutritionally charged.

### **The Integration of Nature**

You have probably noticed by now that many of my suggestions incorporate a healthy dose of Nature in one's sanctuary. The fact is, Nature has always been a *nurturing* force in our life. Even the word human derives from "humus" or earth. Perhaps the greatest disease we can experience in our life is our alienation from Nature. At one time, as children, we were absorbed in Nature, awash in all its beauty and wonder. But as adults we often pass through a day with little or no thought about this great provider and healer in our life. Sanctuary changes all this, for sanctuary honors Nature in all its fullest.

I do not need to belabor the point. Throughout this book we have hopefully inspired you to consider every way possible to integrate Nature into a sanctuary setting. And if an ill person is able to literally stay in touch with Nature — gardening, houseplants, animals, and the like come to mind — then their spirit will remain comforted. Years ago, one particular organization in New York, The Tamarind Foundation, specifically created gardens at the homes of people inflicted with AIDS. Their compassionate outreach insured that the terminally ill can still have a heartfelt connection with Nature in their own backyard.

### **The Creation of an Altar**

The creation of an altar is very important to a sanctuary setting. The value of an altar for an ill or dying person is especially beneficial for them and family members or visitors as well. Although there can be several types of altars (for example, one strictly for religious communion, or one celebrating Nature, etc.), I strongly encourage a holistic one that celebrates all aspects of a person's relationship to life. Therefore, it may contain family pictures and mementos, perhaps spiritually symbolic items and pictures, objects from Nature, candles, incense, inspirational sayings and quotes, a vase of flowers, and the like. Let this altar be alive with celebration, remembrance, hope, and gratitude. Allow it to be added to and changed as much as desired. Refer to it in conversation with the individual, point things out and let them fondle and touch various items. Encourage the individuals to sit before it, if possible, and to

take care of it themselves. Lastly, help them to embrace its deep spiritual significance by encouraging them to pray or meditate before it.

Locate an altar in a place that can be easily seen and accessed. Indeed, consider making it the focal point of a sanctuary room (rather than the sickbed)! You will be amazed at the powerful effect an altar has on people, therefore give its creation much thought and energy.

### **CREATE SANCTUARY FOR YOURSELF AFTER THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE**

It is fulfilling, as Forrest has shared, to create a sanctuary for a loved one who is ill or approaching death. However, it may well be equally important to create such a space for yourself as you face their death and move through the grieving process. When I was twenty-three, my partner Tom was killed in a tragic car accident, just two days before we were to leave on a long trip. Being young and inexperienced with life, I was totally unprepared for the intense pain and loneliness I felt over the ensuing months. But I intuitively used my deep grief as a springboard for intense spiritual growth.

After the funeral, I decided to take our planned trip anyway and briefly traveled with a mutual woman friend until I was courageous enough to continue alone. I wasn't the best of company in the first couple months, and in those days I thought little of being a woman hitchhiking alone through Mexico. I lived and ate simply and healthfully, spent a lot of time in Nature, and simply sat with my pain without trying to push it away. The beautiful places I visited and the kind people I met inspired me deeply. Once back in Aspen, Colorado, where I lived at the time of Tom's death, I moved to a beautiful, secluded ranch in the mountains — a place that I knew would be a true healing sanctuary for me. The peace and quiet and the opportunity to plant my very first garden were very enticing. That garden became a testimony for my life.

Upon my return to Aspen, I also needed a creative challenge to pour my energy into, so I wrote a successful grant, which funded a summer photography program. I loved teaching and I met some very special people. I worked four days a week and generally spent the other three days backpacking alone in the mountains. I became lean and strong, and slowly my confidence and optimism began to return. Learning how to garden was an incredible joy, but I also found that just sitting quietly or lying in the

hammock surrounded by Nature gave me deep solace. I cried a lot, read a few inspiring books, did tai chi, wrote, chronicled my dreams, and slowly healed. It took me about nine months, but I learned so much. Most of all I had a new sense of spiritual awakening and a clear realization that quality relationships with others were a priority. Giving love, receiving love, being open to the beauty of people wherever I went — these things became essential to my well-being. Tom's death was by far the most difficult challenge of my life, but it also helped to make me the person I am today, and for that I am most grateful.

Be really good to yourself as you attempt to heal from the death of a loved one. Dive into all aspects of honoring your own sacredness. Strive to find meaning in your life, but don't push so hard that you distract yourself from the grief work and healing time that you require. Pretending you are okay when inside you feel devastated won't help the pain to go away. Spend the alone time you need to process your feelings, but also seek the support and solace of dear friends who understand what you're going through. They can help so much. Let Nature soothe your wounded spirit, and above all, create sanctuary around you that will nurture and enfold your soul and gracefully absorb your sadness. Life's goodness *will* return and your expanding breadth and depth as a human being will inspire those around you and carry you forward on this remarkable journey called life.

### **SETTINGS THAT HEAL, STIMULATE, AND MEMORIALIZE**

There are some very special ways to memorialize a loved one after their death. Making such an effort is a creative and meaningful way to grieve the loss of a dear one while ennobling their memory in a practical and aesthetic way.

Forrest and I had the opportunity a few years ago to create a small outdoor sanctuary space at a ninety-acre community as a memorial to three community members who had died. It was located in a shady forest glen at the confluence of three paths. We used natural materials such as rock from the land, curved fir limbs, and ferns dug from the woods. Within the open framed structure, a simple homemade bench faced an altar upon which were placed objects that honored the lives of those who had died. Feathers and a wind chime were hung from the roof beams to stimulate the spirit of the place. A peace pole in four languages was eventually erected there during a special dedication ceremony. We were told that this sanctuary has had a profound effect on the community. It has become a place that absorbs and soothes grief and upset emotions, providing solace from other of life's challenges as well. Most

important, it has encouraged community members and visitors alike to prioritize the space and time to reflect on their deep feelings rather than to bury or dismiss these feelings as undeserving of attention.

We also created a memorial meditation garden at Cortesia in honor of our beloved friend Harriet, who had been killed in a car accident in India. Because Harriet was such a deeply peaceful person, we wanted this secluded, shadier part of our garden to embody the same feeling of serenity. Forrest enclosed the area with natural fir limb fences and a trellis, all connected by two arched entrances. I then chose flowers in colors of soothing pinks, lavenders, and deep purple, planted amidst gentle ferns and a ground cover of baby tears, beneath the canopy of a delicate weeping birch tree and tall firs to the north. In this way we intuitively created a special atmosphere that invites the visitor to sit on the small bench and contemplate. On the fence behind the bench is an art piece made by a man who died soon after its creation — his testimony of devotion for the woman he loved. His artistry and life are also memorialized in this place. Over the years, the energy in this little sacred wayside has continued to deepen.

A special setting that holds the sacredness of a human or animal is further empowered by regular visitation. The Meditation Garden at Elvis Presley's Grace Mansion doesn't just commemorate a popular rock star. Millions of visitors have brought to it both adoration and reverence, investing in what each person's soul silently yearns for: beauty amidst the world and Nature. Recently, construction began on a five-acre rose garden being created in Albans, a London suburb, in honor of the late Princess Diana. It is part of the larger planned fifty-acre Royal National Rose Garden, which will include gardens honoring Queen Elizabeth II and the Queen Mother Elizabeth. Ken Grapes, the director of the Royal National Rose Society, which is creating the garden, says Diana's garden "will be a place of peace and tranquility where people of all ages can remember a much-loved figure. It will be the people's garden for the people's princess." Of course, one of the best and most touching examples of a memorial setting as a sanctuary can be found at the Viet Nam War Memorial in the Constitution Gardens in Washington DC. The wall that contains the names of all those who died in the war has become a worldwide mecca. Many have attested to the poignant power of standing in front of this great testimony to human suffering and courage, experiencing both tremendous grief and healing.

Sometimes, a community experiences unexpected loss that necessitates the immediate creation of sanctuary. A few years ago, nearby Thurston High School hit national headlines when a student went on a shooting rampage, killing his parents and other high school youth. The immediate outpouring of stunned grief and anger found partial relief in the creation of a two-block long sanctuary fence on the edge of a grassy commons. Upon this fence, thousands of community members attached flowers,

mementos, drawings, written prayers and thoughts, even stuffed animals. There were also many sympathetic letters sent from around the country, especially from students in other schools.

Sonji and I visited the setting soon after the killings. I have perhaps never felt such total absorption in collective grief, nor experienced anything so beautiful as this temporary memorial. As we walked slowly along it, we were touched equally by the expressions of confusion, compassion, hope, anger, despair, support, and deep pain, for our own reactions were multi-faceted as well. We felt people's sincerity and desire to understand, to reach out, and to find collective healing. For many, just seeing and viscerally experiencing this massive and varied response to the atrocity, gave voice and credence to their own complex emotions and initiated the therapeutic process. In such situations, there is much comfort to be found in shared grieving.

There is also something inherently comforting and healing about experiencing sanctuary in Nature. Hence, it seems natural to primarily use these types of examples when describing people's efforts to memorialize the death of loved ones. Forrest once helped a grieving mother in a grocery store, who confided in him her sustained grief over the previous eight years since her son's death. Forrest suggested she create a little space on the deck of her condominium, and plant it with his favorite boyhood flowers. Another woman wrote our sanctuary project, describing this same strategy for the loss of her son. Everyday, she explains, through the nurturing and tender, observant care of these potted plants, she has found a way to accept her son's death, celebrate the beauty of his life through his favorite flowers, and increase her level of compassion for others experiencing difficult life situations. In yet another example, a woman wrote about how she and her neighbors planted a tree in an unused parkway of their neighborhood cul-de-sac to honor her husband's sudden passing. The tree has inspired the addition of a couple benches and flowerbeds cared for by the neighborhood children. On summer evenings, this sanctuary spot is a favorite point of destination for neighbors of all ages to heartfully connect.

Today, almost every community has support groups and services for people who have experienced loss or are involved with the life and care of a severely ill person. For example, a new area of music study, music thanatology, has recently emerged to understand and offer the therapeutic benefits of music to the ill and dying. Soothing and inspiring music, especially from string instruments like the harp, guitar, cello or violin, certainly has to rank with Nature as a key sanctuary strategy. Locally, a group of volunteer harpists called Acchord, goes to hospitals, assisted living centers, and hospice care facilities to play peacefully at a person's bedside. Similar efforts are spreading throughout North America.

In Wheaton, Maryland, social worker Celia Ryan initiated a support strategy that has benefited many. Her approach, called GriefWalk, came suddenly one day ten years after the loss of her son. She

explains: “I had envied people who seemed to find the ‘right’ closure on a part of their grief (be it a scholarship, a new direction, a donation, a tree planting, etc.), but nothing ever seemed to be right for me. Now it came to me clearly and powerfully . . . a GriefWalk! That is how I will honor my son, my grief, my survival, *and* I can share it with others. What a gift! I know that, whatever this walk means for any other person, I walk for Andrew and for all of my loved ones, and when I have come to the end, so it is with this decade of my loss.”

In November 1999, the first GriefWalk was conducted at Brookside Gardens, a 50-acre formal garden filled with tranquil settings in Montgomery County, Maryland. The self-guided walk provided participants with an opportunity to thoughtfully walk through their grief or remembrance by strolling through areas and spending time for reflection, meditation, and prayer. At the Japanese teahouse they were invited to dip some water from a container and pour the water into the pond as a symbol of letting go of pain, sorrow, hurt, anger, whatever, or just to symbolize the stream of life and tears that have been or need to be shed. One participant wrote: “I came here to grieve my parent, but I found myself lost in the sorrow about something else instead. It must have been important to me, although I didn’t recognize it.” Another wrote, relating to the empty rose garden where only the memory of the flowers was present: “Grieving people give off the perfume of courage.” This GriefWalk concept has captured our own imagination here at Cortesia. Within the year, we are planning to open our healing gardens, woods, and marvelous sunsets once a month for a similar type of ritual.

Healing gardens are the natural extension of sanctuary in a garden setting. The ancients recognized Nature’s healing powers by retreating to sacred springs and mountains when they were injured or ill. The Egyptians and Greeks built labyrinths for walking meditations, the Persians made paradise gardens, and by the Middle Ages, cloistered gardens with flowering trees and water fountains soothed the sick. In later centuries, monasteries that were used as hospitals offered shady courtyards and airy rooms with views of greenery. But with the development of surgery, radiation therapy, and the miracle drugs of the 20th century, hospitals turned from Nature to machines, laboratories and surgical wings.

Research has shown that sick and elderly people who were able to view trees and sky recovered faster — with fewer painkillers and complaints — than those left staring at brick walls. Numerous studies have also shown reductions in blood pressure, anxiety, pain and other symptoms of stress when patients were offered just a videotape or a photograph of a natural scene. We recently learned about the Alzheimer’s Garden Project of the American Landscape Society of America — a series of nine gardens throughout the United States designed to accommodate those with Alzheimer’s disease (and others, of course). Interior designer Elizabeth Brawley and landscape architect Jack Carman have teamed up to

create safe outdoor environments that will encourage Alzheimer's patients to experience Nature. All too often such people experience increasing isolation and sensory deprivation. These gardens are carefully designed to serve people whose advanced dementia causes them to easily become confused and wander off. Alzheimer's patients are also prone to put things in their mouth, become fearful of shadows, or to become confused if given too many choices. Their vision may be limited as well.

To meet the above criteria, these unique gardens are designed with only one entrance, one circular path instead of a network of paths, many benches, non-toxic plants, and raised-beds to lean on that are full of bright flowers and interesting fuzzy leaves to touch. The benches are placed well away from the trees so the shadows of the swaying branches won't appear threatening. A restroom is located nearby, and the parking area is safely away from busy traffic.

The response to this concept has been overwhelmingly positive. The first "memory garden" opened in July 1999, in a half-acre park in Macon, Georgia. The project's director, Mary Gatti, said, "So far, it's been hugely successful because everyone from the community uses it. It's not just for people with Alzheimer's, but it does provide them with a sanctuary." Other gardens in the project have been completed in Oklahoma City, Muskegon, Mich., Hastings, Minn., and New York City.

### **CREATING SANCTUARY FOR A DYING PET**

One of the training grounds for learning how to accept and understand death is the experience one has when a beloved pet dies. Some of us probably remember the occurrence of such an event in our childhood. When I was five, the neighbor lady ran over my beautiful white kitten Snowball one morning as she drove off to work. We found Snowball dead an hour or two later. I was devastated and cried hysterically, but no one comforted me. I watched, horrified, as one of my sisters picked up the body and threw it into the garbage can. Then everyone went in for breakfast. No one ever mentioned the incident again. A few kind words, a burial ritual, respect for my tremendous sense of loss — these would have gone a long way to alleviating my grief.

Four or five years later, I found my parakeet, Twinkle, dead in its cage. I had inadvertently forgotten to fill the water dish. I quickly refilled the water and tried to revive the bird, but to no avail. Word quickly spread around the neighborhood, "Tricia killed her bird!" I felt so ashamed. After those two experiences with death, I refused to have a pet again for almost thirty years. The trauma associated with caring for and becoming attached to an animal was too great. Again, adults can really help children to

understand death and the complex emotions it stirs up. Talking about it in practical and spiritual ways is important, often helping to alleviate blame and guilt. Because my pain and confusion about death were not addressed as a child, I had much healing to do later.

However, in the past fifteen years we have had several rabbits and cats for pets, a little mouse, and even a sick calf that lived in our front meadow for six months. By now, all the animals have died except for two newer cats, so I have had to learn to embrace this dying process and to honor each pet. We usually create some sort of sanctuary space for a sick pet, keeping it close by without infringing on its need for privacy. In this sense, it isn't so different than a person who is dying. We make a little bed on the couch if it is cold outside, or on our covered porch. Sometimes we even set up a little altar. We know the pet doesn't understand this, but it's our human way of honoring and beautifying the dying process. Children like to participate in such a ritual and generally seem to know exactly which objects they wish to select for the altar. Sometimes they will draw a special picture or write a poem that expresses their special feelings for that pet.

I have also spent many hours holding dying pets and doing Reiki or Therapeutic Touch on them to ease their suffering. I don't do this expecting to save their life, but purely to comfort. We believe that animals should be allowed to die a natural death. I know this is somewhat controversial, but we are not likely to rush off to the vet at the least sign of trouble. Our friends often report that all the heroics — surgeries, expensive vet bills, medications, and the like — still could not save their geriatric pet's life. Instead, they only bought a brief extension of time. It is important that each person makes his/her own decision on behalf of ailing pets, and then participates in a heartfelt, conscious way in the dying process. We believe that a burial ceremony is also important as an act of honoring and completion.

When our fifteen-year-old cat Indra was diagnosed with advanced cancer, the vet wanted to put her to sleep immediately. I had a strong intuition not to go along with this, so I brought Indra back home and made a bed for her under the rocking chair near the heater, a place where she was fond of lying. She stopped eating and drinking. No amount of encouragement could change her mind on this matter, so we knew she was preparing to die. What we were not expecting, however, was how long it would take her to actually die. On the seventh day, she drank for the first time, went outside, and proceeded to lie in the sun in each of her favorite spots on our multi-level deck, as if she were saying goodbye. Then she went back under the rocking chair. This same behavior occurred for our last cat, Pearly, about twelve hours before she died. But Indra continued to hang on.

On day nine, I saw that her eyes were now glazed over, yet as the vet had predicted, her strong heart was keeping her going. I felt her agitation so I gently did Reiki on her head, and she calmed down.

When she changed position, I was able to Reiki her little heart, which still felt amazingly vital. As I tenderly stroked her, I whispered, “Heart, it’s time to stop beating. Indra is very tired. God is calling her back, and she is ready to go. Her life is complete, and now it’s time to *stop*.” I didn’t feel at all strange speaking this way. It felt very natural. I told Indra how much we all loved her, and a moment later, she stretched out luxuriously, gave a funny little shudder, and died, with my hand still on her heart. It was not an easy dying to watch, but I felt clearly that we had done the right thing.

In the shady green meadow in front of the house, our weatherworn statue of Saint Francis watches benevolently over the little graves of all our beloved pets who have passed on, each marked with a large rock. This area, at the base of a huge fir tree, is planted with wildflowers. We have learned from our pets about patience and unconditional love. It has helped us to better emulate these qualities in our own human relationships. We also feel comforted in knowing that we played a conscious part in our pets’ deaths without taking away from their animal nature. Hopefully we did the right thing.

Our dear friend Hanna had a little dachshund named Abe-chan who became her inseparable companion after the death of her parents. This remarkable dog even traveled back and forth with her each year between her homes in the U.S. and Japan. Abe-chan became Hanna’s family and accompanied her on many a camping adventure or painting foray, riding in a small, padded wicker basket. The two of them spent many a happy hour here at Cortesia while Hanna painted in our garden. That beloved dog may well have been one of the most painted of pets! She finally died in Japan this spring, after a long illness. To honor her beloved companion, Hanna wrote a touching account of the final days leading up to her death. She wanted to share the story with her special friends in Eugene, so she had a friend help her to translate it into English. Once she was back in the States, she planned a little memorial service and celebration exactly one hundred days after the death, according to Japanese tradition. Sonji and I were among the guests. We created a beautiful alter with flowers and photos of Abe-chan. Then we lit candles. I read Hanna’s story about Abe-chan to the group. It was very touching, and most of us cried. Following this, we spread her dog’s ashes in a special place in Hanna’s garden and planted flowers and a beautiful white hydrangea bush over the grave. We sang a song and said prayers for the well being of her little soul. Then we shared a meal.

Far from being silly or over-sentimental, I feel that this ritual embraced and comforted Hanna in her sadness, allowing her to come to a sense of completion with this long and meaningful phase of her life. Such occasions are important rites of passage. They keep the hearts of all involved open to embrace the power of community to help ease the grief of death with loving support and joyful remembering. Here is

an excerpt from Hanna's story. It describes the cremation of Abe-chan, which, according to Japanese tradition, is the time when a good soul goes to heaven.

*“The white smoke started to pour out of the chimney. My eyes had been wet with tears since we put Abe-chan in the box. That time was the climax of Abe-chan's life, and her departure for the next world. I put my hands together and cried. As the white smoke grew, the white clouds opened up and showed us a bright blue sky. The rain was over. A wind blew from the left and slowly took the white smoke to the sky, to heaven. There was only the blue sky, the white smoke, and the green trees in my wet eyes. I felt I was standing on a sacred place. Miyoko said, “Look! Hanna! How beautiful it is, and what a spiritual dog Abe-chan is! She has gone to heaven like an angel!”*

### CREATING SANCTUARY FOR A MEANINGFUL MEMORIAL SERVICE

It's one thing to enact a ritual that honors the death of a beloved pet. This can be done easily, spontaneously, and intuitively without undue formality or concern for honoring the religious traditions of others beside yourself. Members of our family generally read a poem, speak words of appreciation for the gifts of insight we received from that pet, and, in the Egyptian tradition, place food and flowers around the body to symbolize nourishment for the soul in the beyond. Following this, we complete the burial and then just sit quietly by the grave for a while. Having this sense of closure seems very important.

It is quite another thing entirely to create a memorial service for a person who has passed away, and yet it can be an experience that is deeply moving and empowering. I read a touching account by a man whose father had died in the hospital. He was actually a funeral director himself in another town, but his father's body was taken to the nearby funeral home of a friend of his. Roy describes how he had his friend embalm the body, but that he insisted on doing everything else — not because he was a funeral director, but because he was fulfilling his *role as a son*.

Roy filled out the death certificate, notified the newspaper, the cemetery, the minister and the church where the funeral would be held, and called family and friends. In short, he did everything — because as the son it was meaningful and right for him to do these things. His mother, brother, sister, and the spouses were also very involved in the succeeding days. As they shared responsibilities, feelings, and togetherness, some of the old family closeness was renewed. Roy maintains that this also unified the family in a new way *and* truly helped them to begin the grieving process. This openness among the

family helped spawn an impromptu prayer service at the wake and elicited the sharing of some very deep feelings. They had created a true sanctuary experience that was deeply moving for all.

Before the funeral, they “tucked” Dad in and closed the casket, taking him to the church themselves. After the funeral, Roy and his brother and sister carried the casket to the grave and lowered it into the earth using straps and their own muscle power. “We closed the vault and shoveled the dirt ourselves. We closed out his life ourselves. We were fortunate to be able to do almost everything ourselves — for ourselves, for our needs, for our peace, and to get our grief work well started immediately.”

Reflecting on this powerful experience later, Roy realized that as a funeral director, he had for years been usurping the natural role of family members by performing all the tasks that related the death of a loved one. “How many sons have been left in a void...and how many sons, daughters, parents, and spouses had I delayed the grief work for because I was the functionary for everything? I had performed all the tasks while they did little.” Amazingly, Roy says his role as a funeral director completely changed at this point into that of a facilitator. He began to allow and encourage family members to be as involved in all the details of the funeral as they wanted to be.

Years ago, when I was the activity director of a retirement center, I began to notice an interesting phenomena. While a number of our residents were in fact passing away, their friends in the center were often not well enough to attend the church funeral. In fact, we usually were not even informed about the day and location of a funeral. So once the person died, their body was quickly whisked away, their room was emptied out, and no one spoke of them again. I felt this was a big mistake, so I took it upon myself to hold a memorial service at the center for each person who died there. I had no experience doing this sort of thing, but I learned. It was really just a matter of reading some inspirational passages or poetry (I practiced on Forrest), honoring the memory of the person through facilitated group reminiscing, and perhaps sharing some food. I was pleased to see how well attended these services were and how much residents wanted to participate and share feelings, especially if they had been close to the deceased. I especially wanted each resident to know that when they died, they would not be forgotten. A long life, well lived deserves to be honored and celebrated.

Today, there seems to be many variations on memorial services. When our dear friend Harriet died, I stepped forward to coordinate the memorial service, which I knew would be a significant community event. Harriet was so well loved that there was no shortage of help, as others offered to participate in one aspect of the funeral or another. We all wanted it to be just right. We held a ceremony in her garden for those of us who had been closest to Harriet. First we weeded and afterward we hung prayers from ribbons in the trees. Then we had a poetry reading/ meditation/ sharing circle in her living room, where

many of us had gathered often over the years. People were given the opportunity to speak about how Harriet was special to them. We cooked some of her favorite foods and shared them together.

At the actual memorial service, held at a local church, some two hundred people came together. We had a Hawaiian singer sing songs that Harriet had loved, and Forrest played beautiful guitar music. This event was a bit more formal, with a diversity of speakers and a huge vegetarian potluck at the end. It was probably the most moving memorial service I have attended. For months after, I heard appreciative comments from those who were there. And yes, it very much helped initiate and support the considerable grief work that a number of us had to do. Harriet's children, who had chosen to have little to do with their mother in recent years, were also helped considerably. Through her many close friends, they gained a new perspective of this remarkable woman whom they seemed to understand so little about.

Hopefully, you will be inspired to participate in a similar heartfelt way in creating a personalized memorial service for one of your loved ones. If it seems appropriate and an opportunity presents itself, why not ask the person who is dying what type of funeral they might like. At the very least you can find out what their favorite songs and writings are, or determine what theme or type of event seems to best depict their unique personality and contributions to life. They may have strong feelings or very creative ideas on the subject. Why trivialize or minimize their death or allow a perfect stranger to try to articulate what can really only be said and done by those who knew the deceased and loved them.

The more personalized and sincere a memorial service or funeral is, the more satisfying and real it is to those who must remain behind and process their grief. Even when it is painful or traumatic, death has its own stark beauty and poignancy. In many cultures it is seen as an event to celebrate — the celebration of a good life and hopefully a good death. And who knows? It might just be the last celebration the deceased will ever attend! So make it a good one, for your enjoyment and theirs.

### **SARAH'S FINAL MONTHS: A TESTIMONY TO SANCTUARY**

When our dear friend Sarah was diagnosed, at age seventy-seven, with highly advanced lung cancer, she and her husband immediately decided to visit her large extended family in Texas. This was an ambitious trip to leave the comfort and safety of their lovely home in a small Oregon town for ten days of constant movement and change. But Sarah knew she had some important work to do to heal her relationships with her children and several other family members.

As friends who wished to deeply support Sarah, Forrest and I guessed that this might also be the appropriate time to assemble some of her special Eugene friends for a celebration in her honor. So the night before their plane flight, we gathered at Cortesia for what turned out to be a remarkable evening of love, laughter, beautiful live music, delicious food, and heartfelt sharing. It was a joyful occasion, as the memorable photographs of that evening portray. And later, Sarah and Jerry remembered it as one of the highlights of her final two months of life. It set a positive stage for completion and gave the message that we were one hundred percent with them in this challenging process *and* that we weren't going to sit around and cry but rather make the best of her remaining time on this earth.

During her dying process, in spite of the great challenges of her rapidly escalating deterioration and the difficulty with balancing her pain medications, Sarah kept as busy and active as possible. After her trip, where she did indeed complete her affairs with family members as much as possible, she returned to Oregon. Here she got all her affairs in order, even while she continued to do her needlepoint work, write letters, have short visits with friends, spend time in their sanctuary garden, and drink in the precious rituals of the day that she and Jerry had been enjoying for years. They even dressed up and went dancing several times, as was their passion. All of this was made possible because Sarah chose to die at home, under the watchful and loving supervision of the local Hospice, where she herself had long been a volunteer nurse.

As her condition quickly declined, the medication was intensified, but the effort was made to keep Sarah pain-free and yet lucid as much of the time as possible — a challenge that Jerry did remarkably well in embracing. There were difficult times too, when Sarah's pain outstripped the current scope of her medicine. Then she could become fearful, angry, or demanding in ways that were sometimes hard to take. But she had made a clear and informed choice from the beginning not to try heroics to sustain her life. Her illness was too far progressed to consider chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and the like, so she could focus instead on the quality of her remaining time.

When the responsibility of Sarah's care grew too overwhelming, Jerry would call us or other friends for emotional support, or have a Hospice worker give him some respite so he could take a long walk or go to town. Watching some one you love die at home, in front of your very eyes, is certainly not easy. We are used to hospitals and doctors taking control and telling us what to do. But as painful as it is to be fully present during this process, if the heart can remain open, there is much to be learned.

When it seemed that her time was near, Forrest and I traveled to see Sarah and Jerry. I'll never forget sitting alone in her bedroom late at night, as Sarah slept, now heavily medicated with morphine. While the soft voices of Jerry and the others receded, as they talked earnestly in the next room, I meditated and

prayed, keeping a vigil with one whom I knew must surely be living her final hours. “It’s okay to let go now, Sarah,” I whispered. “God is calling you home. We love you and we release you to Spirit.” I prayed for her soul’s freedom from the emaciated body I saw lying in front of me. Her life’s work was done, and nothing more could be accomplished.

Early the next morning Sarah quietly died. Except for Jerry, I was the last person to see her alive. I felt somehow honored to be in a small way part of her transition. And I deeply appreciated the fact that Sarah didn’t die in a cold, sterile hospital room, after some long period of being artificially kept alive with machines. She knew her time had come, and this allowed everyone else to accept it as well, walking consciously and peacefully with her, as much as is possible, to the welcoming threshold of death. Sarah died in her peaceful sanctuary with her Beloved by her side

Ten years earlier, Sarah had hiked up to Golden Falls in southern Oregon with her friend Lionel. She was so taken by its pristine beauty and power that, on the spot, she made Lionel promise that when she died he would toss her ashes into the falls. After her passing, a group of Sarah’s closest friends, her mate, and her three children set off to fulfill the promise. As we hiked up the steep trail in the rain, I think we each felt the tremendous importance to *ourselves* to fulfill Sarah’s great desire. This was what true friends do to honor the covenant of trust that has been made.

The view from the top of the falls was breathtaking, but the ceremony was very simple. It reflected that side of Sarah that was the quiet Nature-lover. Her children and her mate, Jerry, shared their grief and their love, and we bore witness. When the ashes were tossed into the water, it felt right somehow, a much more noble “burial” than to be shut in a box and buried in the cold ground. We were all deeply moved by this experience. Afterwards, cold and wet, we went to a nearby home and shared a delicious, heart-warming potluck supper.

The following day, (also by her request) friends and family held a huge dance in Sarah’s honor, since dancing was what she and Jerry loved most. She knew she didn’t want anyone moping around on her account. So this was designed to be a true community celebration and a commemoration of the sparkling personality and contagious joy that Sarah had gifted to so many people in the years we had known her. It would have been fine to just have the ceremony at the falls, but I’m glad we found a way to express her more exuberant side and to feel the joy of bonding with others.

I’ve always enjoyed weddings and special ceremonies, but I have to say that there is something very deep and soulful that takes place at a well-crafted memorial service. I am grateful that we live in a culture and time that gives us free reign in how we want to commemorate a life. I plan on having a great funeral for myself!

## FINAL THOUGHTS

One of the greatest gifts we can give to a person is the opportunity for sanctuary — the knowing that they are in a safe haven. However, safety cannot be whittled down to strict medical comfort and regard. We are all familiar with the caring yet cold feeling of medical treatment. This is why the compassionate approach of hospice care has become the treatment of choice for the severely ill or dying. But even here caring efforts can go a little deeper. We can create and proclaim sanctuary for people in the process of caring for them. The word sanctuary elicits something quite soulful, if not archetypal, from deep within. Perhaps the word itself explains it best — taking “sanctus” or that which is “sacred” and bringing it into a covenant of honor and respect. What better way to live out one’s life than to feel beloved and enfolded? What better place to be than in sanctuary!

Excerpts from forthcoming book: **Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life**. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell

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