


THE LETTING GO

MYSTIFIED BY DEATH, A POET CONFRONTED HER FEAR BY GETTING CLOSE TO STRANGERS AT THE END OF THEIR LIVES. **by Bonnie Rose Marcus, as told to Jennifer Bleyer**



 **LIFE ITSELF** Marcus with her late friend, Marvin.

I GREW UP in a wonderful, caring, loving Jewish family. Yet we never talked about death. As a young girl, I used to crawl down to the bottom of my bed at night and try to imagine what it was like to be dead, to not be here. It was scary. My first real experience with death was when my grandfather—my mother’s father—died in his sleep at the age of 65. I came home from school and the breakfast dishes were still on the table, which was unusual. My paternal grandmother was there, and she said, “Oh, your mother went to visit her father. He’s in the hospital.” They didn’t tell me right away what had happened. Like a lot of people, we just didn’t speak about death.

It wasn’t until I was older and searching spiritually that I began to find avenues to explore and really look at death. When I was 44, I read *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, by Sogyal Rinpoche. It opened my eyes to facing death and understanding that life and death are part of a whole—insights I had always wanted to hear and had never found anywhere else. I started to meditate and became a Buddhist practitioner. Part of the practice was to reflect every day on death and impermanence. I realized then that I hadn’t experienced a lot of death in my life—both of my parents and, at that time, three of my grandparents were still alive. I wanted to be face-to-face with death. Not just on

a theoretical or intellectual level but a level of *What is this like? What is this about?*

I trained to become a hospice volunteer, also known as a “doula for the dying.” The doula concept comes from the birth movement—it’s someone who assists a woman through the birthing process. In the case of the dying, it’s about being there for people through their passage to death. There’s nothing you’re actually doing. It’s more about being truly present with a person in that period, because a lot of people find it difficult to even be with friends or family who are sick or dying. It’s about listening with an open heart and without judgment. As a volunteer, you

visit patients regularly until they die. I started off going to see people at hospital hospice units and then in hospice care at home. It was challenging at first, but I soon found that all of my own little worries and anxieties completely dissolved when I was with someone. It was actually a liberating feeling.

The first person I visited was Dotie, whom I saw once a week for almost a year. She told me all about her life—the meaningful parts, the disappointments. I visited another woman, Sylvia, for about six months. All she wanted to do was play cards, so I would sit in her kitchen and we’d play casino and drink tea for hours, and this became our connection. A man

I visited, Dr. Sing, was a dentist who used to do a lot of free dental work in Harlem around the time of Martin Luther King Jr. He kept saying, "I wish I had done more—if only I had known!" I think he meant that if only he had known that life is so short and death could come at any time, he would have helped even more people. And he had helped thousands.

I recently visited a man named Marvin for over a year. Although he had stomach cancer, Marvin was especially positive and open and loving. We would sit next to each other on his couch and hold hands, and he would tell me about his travels around the world. We would also watch movies and cry together during the sad parts. Marvin had a lot of friends who would visit, and there was always a feeling of love and caring up until the very end of his life. A few hours before he died, his husband, Michael, invited everyone to come tell Marvin how much they loved him, and he held up the phone for people who were out of town. Marvin knew he was going to die, but he always said he'd had a wonderful life.

It is important for people who are dying to reflect on what gave their life meaning. When patients express regret, anger, or guilt, I may gently encourage them to remember what they're most proud of in their life, to help them realize their life's value. What I've learned is that people are so much more than their dying. That's why accompanying them through death is not completely depressing, as some may imagine. Rather, it is intimately inspiring. You share people's life, their heart, their beauty, as well as the progression of their disease and closeness to death. I've witnessed that a good death is about having time to actually think about it before it happens, to remember your life in all its fullness, and to say good-bye to the ones you love. Many people believe that if they don't think about their death, then it's not really going to happen. Then they're in shock when they get there. I've seen this

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with some I visit. All of a sudden, they're 89 and dying and saying, *What's going on?* We don't accept the process, and that can bring a lot of suffering. It's not easy getting older, so to have the extra weight of a culture that doesn't prepare for or talk about death makes it that much harder.

Thinking about death can actually give more meaning to life and help you set your priorities. You can ask yourself, How do I want my life to be? How do I want to spend my time? Do I want to perpetuate my judgmentalism or bad moods? I think if we really accepted death and saw it as part of a process, maybe we'd be kinder and more generous and forgiving.

Everyone I've visited has left a deep imprint on me. I'm not in their shoes yet, but I will be. That's the thing about being with the dying—you can't think, *Oh, this is never going to happen to me.* Doing this helps me prepare for my own death, spiritually and mentally. I can't say that my fear has completely disappeared or that I've eradicated that feeling of *Wait a minute, I want more time!* But it's part of my preparation to see death and know that it's going to happen. I'm more open to it now. I have tools and teachings and models to emulate. I have memories of people dying when I've seen death's transformative aspect. I know that there's freedom in the letting go.

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