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For 25 years I have had the privilege to companion AIDS victims, friends, family, nursing home residents and hospice patients through the end of their lives.

I have come to understand that “Death is a spiritual experience with medical implications,” as Chaplain Gwen London of Duke said.

It is socially responsible to create sacred space for the unfolding of this, the greatest of all life events, in the places in which death increasingly occurs: our nursing homes and hospitals.

Sacred spaces have common elements.

They are protected and safe from danger.

They are quiet, serene, contemplative places.

They have soft lighting.

They are spacious yet we can be close to each other and in privacy.

They are symbols of the human search for meaning in life

They are comforting.

They invite people to be there.

Candles, flowers, music, special objects often fill them for rituals and ceremonies.

Emotions are evoked within them.

Sacred spaces facilitate personal transformation.

Like the quiet, still, miraculous chrysalis stage in which the caterpillar transforms into a butterfly.

Creating sacred space for a person who is dying provides those elements to the person making his or her transition, to the loved ones who desperately want to “be there,” the professional carers who serve that person, and the community around them. It allows us to bear witness to natural death in a safe place.

A supportive environment like this becomes a sanctuary for the reverent ritual of keeping vigil with the dying. It encourages meaning making, reconciliation, completion, healing, and peace.

I am going to share a 3 minute slide show of photos taken during my mother’s last eight days of her life and the hours after her death, in the Chrysalis Room at the Fairmont Care Center where she lived the final six years of her life.

I was able to live there for the week, even to lay in bed with her. You will see her loved ones, her friends and compassionate carers serving her, touching her, being with her, comforting, and loving her to death.

The first two photos were taken on her 92nd birthday in September. The third was taken in February. The rest were taken after a stroke on April 2nd, when I admitted her to hospice care for the third time in 10 months.

She has died when you see her lying on a blue butterfly pillow. Her hospice aide bathes her body like she was a queen.

What you will see happened without a plan. It all unfolded, naturally. Notice the elements in the space that I mentioned, the interaction of the people, and the sense of holiness in the space.

[Show DVD \(go to www.endoflifeinspirations.com/presentations.htm\)](http://www.endoflifeinspirations.com/presentations.htm)

We don’t see images like this. We see images of violent death or hard death in ICUs or healthy actors made up for pretend deaths.

We can’t witness death because death occurs in institutions that don’t have the space for us to be there with our loved ones, to learn how to die by sharing the experience.

Isn’t it time we change that?