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Consultants Corner

**Chrysalis Room: Creating Sacred Space for the Dying**

By Loretta S. Downs, MA

Death is a spiritual experience that now occurs for 75 percent of us in a healthcare institution rather than in the comfort of our own homes. Like birth, modern medical practice has taken death into venues where skilled medical care is close at hand.

This is understandable. The science of medicine and the technology that supports it, along with modern chemistry have delayed death and increased the human lifespan to almost 80 years--twice what it was just a century ago. We now survive mortal bodily injury and we recover from diseases and conditions that used to kill us quickly. We so often return from the edge of death that is it no wonder that we won't accept death until it has come and gone.



This denial of death has resulted in a median length of stay in hospice care that is now only 20 days, with hospice

providers grieving the growing numbers of patients who die the day they are admitted. This is not long enough to address the needs of the dying or those who care for them. Consequently, our loved ones often leave us suddenly--even after long battles with chronic illness--with everyone unprepared.

We have to do better.

Like birth, death is a natural part of life, a sacred transition that is meant to occur and meant to be shared with those who love and care for us. We have an innate desire to be there when a loved one dies. It is in being with dying that we learn how to die, and the death experience of a loved one stays with the survivors for the rest of their lives. So how can we not talk about the quality of death as we so fervently talk about the quality of life?

For the last 25 years I have shared the end-of-life experience with friends, family, hospice patients and nursing home residents along with the loved ones and professionals who attend them through death. They taught me the importance of keeping vigil, the value of just being there, the privilege of being present for the dying. No one can *be there* if we are not willing to acknowledge the dying process and the imminence of death, and provide the private space to support it, to share it, to

experience it—to keep sacred vigil on sacred ground.

### **Stage of Transformation**

That is the purpose of a Chrysalis Room, which I named for the stage of stillness in which a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. My mother died in the first Chrysalis Room. She was a 93-year old hospice patient. She lived in a nursing home for six years, the Fairmont Care Center in Chicago, whose compassionate administration agreed with my request to provide a Chrysalis Room for its residents.

When I was told that my mother was dying, I began to prepare. The message was sent out so that family members could choose to come and sit vigil with her, or create a vigil wherever they were. Comfort was the order prescribed for her care, with the goal of supporting her and her family through her death. We did this in a space that accommodated our needs for privacy, peace, and community, aware that every minute shared would be remembered.

The Chrysalis Room was far away from the noisy nursing station and even though a hospital bed was in the center of it, it felt like a home. The room is light and spacious enough for many people to fill its soft armchairs and sofa. Snacks and beverages were brought in. We played healing music CDs. We were bathed in soft, soothing light from table and floor lamps. A bed was set up for me; folding chairs waited for other loved ones. We gathered around her, accepting her imminent death, with our presence supporting her through it.



Nurses and aides came to do their tender work. I could sense their silent prayers as they softly laid a hand on my mother's, or swept a wisp of hair back from her forehead, or gently slipped an ice chip between her lips. We held each other and some would weep in my arms over missing their own mother or father's death.

Mother's grandchildren and great-grandchildren came and filled the room with youthful energy. We sat on her bed and talked about how much she meant to us--and told stories about her life while we memorized the feel of her linen skin and the silk of her fine hair. Friends brought offerings of food and flowers and their presence. We laughed and cried for eight days of living in the Chrysalis Room, with my mother dying in the center of it.

### **Last Moments**

The sun was just rising when I awoke and went to her side. She opened her eyes and looked straight into mine and I knew she was leaving me. Through a waterfall of tears I said, “I know you have to leave now. I love you. Thank you.” I moved to get in bed next to her but she frowned, stopping me. I sat close against the bed, put one arm around her and held her hand in the other as she closed her eyes and left me, as peacefully as I could ever have hoped for.

Merely moments later my sister arrived, then my best of friends and the hospice aide who was working on her own birthday. Together we bathed and dressed my mother in the light of the new day with the dignity and honor worthy of a queen. Residents and staff came to say goodbye and covered her with the petals from flowers in vases around the room. We felt that we were participating in something truly divine.

It is time that we regard the process of dying in the way we have come to regard the process of giving birth. We prepare for birth. We offer choices. We teach classes on how to give birth. We train midwives and doulas to provide non-medical support. We share birth with those we love so no one is born alone. We address the physical pain. We cherish the experience despite the necessary unpleasantness that comes with it. We design comfortable birthing rooms that feel like home in the hospitals where birth occurs.

### **Final Gifts**

The final gifts of quiet, private vigil—reminiscence, reconciliation, and

unconditional love—are opened when we attend to the dying with the hope of providing a good death. Although it is a common description, I don’t know if there is such a thing as a *good* death. But I do know that a *supported* death is a good way to die. Death teaches us what is most important in life. It teaches us about time, about love and forgiveness, about letting go and healing, about starting over again, and about leaving. Those of us who have the privilege of supporting the death of a loved one, even in spirit from miles away, have less fear of death as a result.

The end of life is a part of life that we all must experience with our loved ones before we ourselves die. We can make that experience a positive one for everyone involved. Let’s honor death the way we honor birth. Let’s create a private, sacred space in the places where we die, and let no one die alone, as no one is born alone.



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