

GRACE
By Loretta Downs
Hospital Newspaper, July 2012

The Thanksgiving after my mother died, I sat at the dinner table and looked around at a dozen of my loved ones. They ranged from my 22-year-old godson, a Marine on his way to Iraq, to my 92-year-old aunt, the last living of my mother's five siblings.

As the head of the house said grace with the Serenity Prayer - "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference" - I realized that one of us at this table will be the first to die, and one will be the last.

In the next instant, I knew that I could be either. If I am the first to die, there are legal, financial and housekeeping matters I should attend to now. I want to help the loved one who would be responsible for handling the massive amount of details following my demise.

Platters and bowls began traveling around the table. I set that awareness aside for later, feeling more and more thankful for everyone in my life.

Driving home, I had another epiphany. What if I don't die immediately? What if I'm injured in an accident or have a heart attack or other trauma that leaves me in a hospital on life support? What if my loved ones have to decide whether to connect me to or disconnect me from a machine that feeds me or breathes for me? Do they know my wishes?

MAKING A START

When I got home, I called my sister and explained that I was going to formalize my end-of-life wishes. I set Valentine's Day as a deadline to complete the paperwork required. By New Year's Day, I had completed a "Five Wishes" healthcare power-of-attorney and living will form. I designated one loved one to follow my wishes and two as backups. The next time I saw them I had a conversation confirming my wishes in person, witnessed the document and gave them and my doctor a copy.

Since that Thanksgiving of 2006, I've changed my healthcare power-of-attorney three times to reflect changes in relationships. I updated my will once--adding new babies, subtracting friends-gone-by and changing charitable distributions. I took my attorney's advice to use a 100-point system to accommodate the ebbs and flows of the value of my estate. I divided the total estimated cash value into three segments: one-third to family, one-third to friends and one-third to charities. Within each third there are 100 points to be allocated. It was easy once I got started, and I know that my preparation and openness will save my loved ones a great deal of pain and suffering,

The process of facing my death has created serenity in my life. Including my loved ones in death planning has brought us closer together, and helps us accept our differences with more kindness.

IF LAST

If I am the last to die, I will need the emotional strength to support those who pass away before me. I'll need the spiritual strength to cope with the mounting losses over my own long life.

There is no deadline for my death planning. It is now my way of life. As in the Serenity Prayer, I accept that there are things I cannot change and things I can. I'm still working on the wisdom part.

Would you, too, like to achieve the serenity of end-of-life-planning? Start by accepting the fact that, one day, maybe when you least expect it, you will die. Then resolve to make the following changes in your life to reduce the sadness and suffering of your loved ones when they lose you.

1. Write it down. Prepare a healthcare power of attorney that chooses one person you trust to represent you in the event you are hospitalized and cannot speak, and a living will that clearly states your choices for artificial life support and organ donation.

With the help of an attorney, draft a financial will that preserves and distributes your money and possessions. Also helpful is an ethical will that tells your family the values you hold most dear. You can change any of these documents at any time, as long as you are mentally competent.

2. Discuss with your healthcare representative, your loved ones and your doctor the medical treatment you want if you arrive at a hospital unable to voice your choices about artificial life support.

3. Plan your funeral. Tell your loved ones how to treat your body, where to lay your remains to rest, and what you'd like to include in your memorial service.

LIFE BEFORE DYING

4. Learn how to die. If you have loved ones who are dying, support and share their journey with them. Be present for them and their caregivers.

5. Consider the quality of your death as an extension of the quality of your life. Understand "palliative care" which focuses on the pain, symptoms and stress of serious illness. If you have been diagnosed with a terminal illness, consider hospice before it's too late to help you and your caregivers through the time when comfort care and symptom management become the primary focus.

6. Practice letting go. Let go of the things in your basement, closets and cabinets that no longer serve you. Let go of the people who don't make you happy. Let go of attitudes and beliefs that cause you to suffer. Let go of your image of yourself because, one day, you must let go of everything.

7. Forge a spiritual connection to something, such as a faith community, a spiritual practice, being in nature, volunteer work that gives you peace and comfort.

8. Make younger friends. They need us as much as we need them.

9. Be grateful for the life that you share with your friends and your loved ones. The best medicine you can take is thankfulness.

10. Most important...practice saying, "I love you," "thank you," "I'm sorry," and "I forgive you," before you have to say "goodbye."

Loretta Downs is an inspirational speaker and writer on the subject of supporting positive experiences at the end of life. She is the founder of Chrysalis End-of-Life Inspirations which advocates for nursing homes and hospitals to provide private rooms for keeping vigil with the dying. She is also president of the Chicago End-of-Life Care Coalition, a Certified End-of-Life Care Practitioner and a Respecting Choices Advance Care Planning Facilitator. Contact her at www.endoflifeinspirations.com