

Thanksgiving Wisdom

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The Thanksgiving after my mother died, I sat at the dinner table and looked around at a dozen of my loved ones ranging 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, 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 ones who would be responsible for handling the massive amount of details following my demise.

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 machines? Do they know *my* wishes?

When I got home, I set Valentine's Day as a deadline to complete the paperwork required to formalize my end-of-life wishes, feeling more thankful for everyone in my life.

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. Including my loved ones in death planning has brought us closer together.

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.

Sincerely,
Loretta Downs
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