

DYING, DEATH, AND BEREAVEMENT

*And this is the Comfort of the Good,
That the Grave cannot hold them,
And that they live as soon as they die
For Death is no more
Than a turning of us over from time to eternity.
Death, then, being the way and condition of life,
We cannot love to live,
if we cannot bear to die.
They that love beyond the world,
cannot be separated by it.
Death cannot kill what never dies.
Nor can Spirits ever be divided
That love and live in the same Divine Principle,
The Root and Record of their Friendship.
Death is but crossing the world, as friends do the
seas, they live in one another still.*

William Penn, 1693

*For every thing there is a season, and a time to every
matter under heaven. A time to be born, and a time
to die, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that
which is planted . . .*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 NRSV

*I have been now about 13 weeks in this violent ill-
ness, some say there is noe cure, let it be as pleases
God I am content, the sting of death hath been re-
moved from me many years ago, Glory to God
who gives Faith and victory. . . .*

Robert Barrow to his wife Margaret, 1697

*Quakers do have something very special to offer the
dying and the bereaved, namely that we are at home
in silence. Not only are we thoroughly used to it and
unembarrassed by it, but we know something about*

sharing it, encountering others in its depths and, above all, letting ourselves be used in it . . . People so often talk of someone “getting over” a death. How could you ever fully get over a deep loss? Life has been changed profoundly and irrevocably. You don’t get over sorrow; you work your way right to the centre of it.

Diana Lampen, 1979

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39 KJV

Preparing for Death

Death is part of life. It takes some experience with death to persuade us that our own death or the death of a dear one may happen any day of our lives. This realization teaches us that each day of life is precious and revises our sense of what is valuable in life. Each individual is responsible for preparing for death; members of the meeting community can aid each other in this preparation.

The following is a guide. What individuals and meetings do comes from within. The individual’s preparation for diminished competency and/or death includes practical measures. These may be the making and maintenance of wills, including plans for minor children and other dependents, living wills, do-not-resuscitate directives, and durable powers of attorney for financial and medical decisions. The meeting can be of help by providing information on the current legal status and need for these documents and on how they can speak for the individual when the individual can no longer speak. Another preparation for death is writing instructions for disposal of the body and for a memorial service or funeral. These instructions go to the family and the meeting. The meeting’s concept of family will be determined by relationships, not limited by legal or social attitudes.

We encourage Friends to think about what our own death means and how the death of dear ones affects us. Reading, pondering our own experiences, and sharing experiences of death help us grow to meet the challenges of death. Contemplation of death in the light of our spiritual understanding can illuminate all other aspects of dying. It is hoped that the individual and the meeting work together to learn about this view of death. The most powerful gift we can give to each other is to listen. Truly exercising our souls in this seeking will benefit ourselves and others at all times and particularly at the time of our own dying and the dying of our loved ones. Spiritual support for those who are dying is a difficult and rewarding task for each of us and for the meeting.

As Death Approaches

Each death is unique, just as each person is unique, and requires an appropriate response from the meeting. Listening is a fundamental part of this response. The focus of the meeting is on the dying person, the immediate family, and the wider family as needed. It is also a time to pay special attention to the needs of children. Sudden death or prolonged dying are extremes. Each entails its own challenges. As death approaches a member of the meeting community, the meeting gives physical, emotional, and spiritual support to the dying Friend and the family. In consultation with the family, the care and counsel committee (oversight) and the worship and ministry committee may organize a support committee with one key person designated to coordinate the meeting's loving concern. The meeting needs to continue to support the family's wishes, which may be difficult to accept. Whether the death is sudden or prolonged, it is important to offer to do specific tasks such as help with food, housework, laundry, care of children, and hospitality for people visiting from a distance. In the case of sudden death, people may not be able to cope with the routine of life because they are in shock and time is needed to integrate the loss. In the case of illness, people have many new tasks and may become overwhelmed by the usual ones.

Guided by the Spirit, the meeting can offer spiritual and emotional support to the Friend and family during the dying process,

helping them to cope with pain and stress. The committees' support can include exploring spiritual disciplines, forming a spiritual friends group, finding a counselor, contacting hospice, and forming a clearness committee to help with decisions if a Friend's capacities become diminished. The meeting is sensitive to the increased need for assistance and counsels with the family about solutions such as adjusting to home care, locating suitable nursing facilities, deciding whether to prolong life, and completing legal matters. In dealing with the health care system of today, patients need advocates to look after their interests. The meeting can be helpful in providing them. All is done with sensitivity to the family's needs. Because the dying process may take a long time, the caregiver and the patient may become isolated from the community and the meeting. They need respite and help to stay in touch. The meeting can offer to gather for worship in the home. The meeting can help everyone, especially family members who are at a distance or not closely involved, by sharing practical household tasks, listening to reminiscences, and giving news of the dying person.

Dying

At the time of death, we do our best to give comfort. One way to do this is to help the dying let go. This may include reminding the person of how well he or she has taken care of affairs for their loved ones. We may need to help take care of some unfinished business or help a person with communication. Some may need permission to die, to be reassured that family and friends remaining will be all right. The simple act of being present with the dying person can give comfort. We can also encourage the family to think about whether they might want to stay in the room with the person for a while after the death, and help arrange to make this possible, especially if the setting is an institution such as a nursing home or hospital. The book *Final Gifts* by M. Callanan and P. Kelley, listed under "reference and advice to monthly meetings" at the end of this chapter, gives more examples of these needs.

Arrangements After Death

No meeting member should slip away unremembered and

unmourned. Celebrating a person's life at the end is part of our relationship with that person. The meeting may offer the bereaved family guidance with choices for care of the remains, interment, or scattering of ashes. If there is no family, the meeting is ready to do this service for the deceased Friend. A memorial meeting is the normal witness to the life of the Friend; it is usually arranged by the worship and ministry committee after visiting with the family and listening with sensitivity to their needs. There may also be a brief meeting of farewell at the time of the scattering of the ashes or interment. A memorial meeting is a meeting for worship celebrating a life that held meaning for us. As always in Quaker affairs, simplicity is a guide. Sometimes a brief biography of the deceased Friend is read and/or distributed at the memorial meeting as a keepsake. If a number of non-Friends will be present, an oral and/or written explanation of a meeting for worship should be given. It may be appropriate for refreshments to be provided after the memorial meeting so that there is an environment for informal exchanges. Comparative strangers may ask the meeting to hold a memorial meeting for a family member. It is up to each monthly meeting to make this decision. The meeting should be sensitive to the needs and wishes of parents and family in cases of loss in early infancy or through miscarriage, abortion, or stillbirth. The family may want a memorial meeting.

The death is recorded in the minutes of the monthly meeting, and the yearly meeting is notified. A memorial minute may be prepared for the records of the monthly meeting and forwarded to the yearly meeting. Quaker periodicals may be notified. The death is recorded on the membership papers of the deceased as well as the membership record of the meeting.

Adjustments After Death

The meeting offers help, listening, and clearness assistance to the bereaved in facing life anew and adapting to the new circumstances. Members of the meeting community support and acknowledge the grieving process. Counsel may be offered with regard to living arrangements and financial matters. The meeting is mindful

of ways to keep the bereaved active in the meeting community and the other communities in their lives. A grieving person living alone may want a companion in the house for a short while. Answering the telephone for a grieving person or family may be an important service. The meeting may be needed to notify a prepared list of relatives and friends. Physical, emotional, and spiritual support may be needed for some time. When a difficult relationship is ended by death, there may be feelings of joy, release, and ambivalence. Let us be sensitive to the process, which will be different depending on who has died: parent, child, spouse, partner, or friend. The family is likely to be mourning for at least a year or much more. Remember that children need help with mourning. The meeting must understand that there will be periods of renewal of mourning, especially around significant dates. Each Friend should be guided by the Spirit and the needs of the grieving person.

A variety of factors may complicate and prolong grieving. There may be feelings of guilt. Survivors may not have resolved some issues of relationship with the deceased. The death may not have been anticipated, such as suicide. Some person(s) may have been responsible for the death or feel that they were.

“Sudden [or violent] death can bring an overwhelming shock. The survivors are left with a great sense of the precariousness of existence; the experience can be shattering, a permanent alteration of life. Some are broken by it completely, and in the desire to help, it is well to be aware of this possibility.

Diana Lampen, 1979

In any time of grieving, the meeting can offer remembering and understanding. We are much better able to assist others in the dying and grieving process if we have explored and been open to our own feelings about death.

Dear Friends, cherish each other, celebrate life, celebrate its beginning and its end.

Diana Lampen, 1979

Responsibilities of the Meeting

Carried Out by the Worship and Ministry Committee and the Care and Counsel Committee (Overseers):

- Providing opportunities for members to prepare for death.
- Supporting the dying person and the person's family during dying and after death.
- Arranging a memorial meeting.
- For a Friend with no family: caring for remains (disposal of body), memorial meeting, and completing arrangements of worldly affairs.
- Supporting the bereaved in their grief.

Queries for the Individual

- What influence does your attitude toward death have on your life?
- Are you able to contemplate your death and the death of those closest to you? Do you give yourself time to grieve? When others mourn, do you let your love embrace them?
- Does your final disposition of your material possessions reflect your true values?
- Are your affairs in order? Have you made and do you maintain your will? Have you included plans for minor children and other dependents? Do you have a living will, durable powers of attorney for financial and medical decisions? Have you made written instructions for disposal of your body and memorial service or funeral?
- Have you explained your preparations to those who may survive you?
- Are you ready to deal with and honor the transition process from life to death?

Queries for the Meeting and Caregivers

- Have you discussed with those close to you their preparations for dying, death, and bereavement?
- How is your meeting preparing to meet occasions of dying and bereavement?
- Are we being present in the Spirit for a dying friend, the family, and the meeting?
- Are we prepared to let go when a loved one is dying, being mindful that our need for another to resist death may come from our own needs and fears?
- In assisting a family who is facing a death or in planning for a memorial meeting, are we being tender toward the family's wishes when they do not coincide with our own?
- Are we open to thinking through the subject of life after death?
- Are you angry at God because you or a loved one is going through a terminal illness? Do you think God can handle that anger?
- Have you made arrangements for surviving pets?
- Does the meeting respect and honor each individual's way of dying?

References and Advice for Monthly Meetings

It is recommended that meetings keep on file the following references to help prepare for death or help with arrangements at the time of death:

- *Dealing Creatively with Death—Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial*, Ernest Morgan (Ed.), 1994, Zinn Communications, 35-19 215 Place, Bayside, NY 11361 (also available from most Quaker bookstores).
- *Facing Death and Finding Hope*, Christine Longaker, 1997, Doubleday.

- Pamphlet on spiritual friends, *There Is a Hunger*, by Margery Larrabee, available from Friends General Conference and Baltimore Yearly Meeting.
- *Five Wishes*, by Jim Towey, is a guide to creating a living will. Copies are free of charge and are available through the Commission on Aging with Dignity, P.O. Box 11180, Tallahassee, FL 32302-1180.
- The addresses and phone numbers of the nearest hospices, which will take care of a dying person in the home, hospital, or hospice for the last months of life and provide counseling.
- Names and addresses of memorial societies may be obtained from Continental Association of Funeral and Memorial Societies, Suite 1100, 1828 L St. N. W., Washington, D.C. 20036
- *Dear Gift of Life: A Man's Encounter with Death*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #142, by Bradford Smith, 1965.
- Information on how to give one's body to science or become an organ donor.
- The meeting can prepare itself as a community for death by organizing worship sharing, discussions, and workshops on death as a part of life, the process of grieving, sharing on "what death has meant to my life," and spiritual aspects of death. Informational and hands-on workshops could cover wills, living wills, durable powers of attorney for financial and medical matters, and "Do Not Resuscitate" orders (at time of terminal illness) over a patient's bed and on a patient's bracelet.
- All members of the meeting are asked to fill out the request forms (see www.seym.org under the Faith and Practice icon, an open book), "Requests to the monthly meeting about death or incapacity, and related matters." It may be helpful to get Friends to fill out these forms in conjunction with a workshop or worship sharing on Dying and Death.

- “Facing Death: Helping People Grieve,” Vol. III, No. 2 of *Pastoral Care Newsletter*, January 1996, Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1515 Cherry St, Philadelphia, PA 19103. To obtain copies or to subscribe, contact Jill Tafoya, at 215-241-7211 or jillt@pym.org. Also check the website www.pym.org/committee/pastoral-care-newsletter.
- *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying, Living with Death and Dying, On Death and Dying, On Children and Death*, various works by Elizabeth Kubler Ross, Collier Books.
- *Final Gifts*, Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley, 1993, Bantam Books.
- “Committed Partners’ Legal Planning: Health, Separation and Estate Planning for Florida Committed Partners.” This is a flier which can be obtained from Louis D. Putney, Esquire, at louputney@hotmail.com, 4805 S. Himes Avenue, Tampa, FL 33611, or 813-831-3376.
- “When Someone Dies in Florida.” All the legal and practical things you need to do, how to come to terms with the loss, and how to arrange your own affairs to avoid the cost of probate. By Amelia E. Pohl, Esq. Or a similar document regarding Georgia or South Carolina laws.

Information and forms for requests to the monthly meeting about death or incapacity are found on the web at www.seym.org. Click on the Faith & Practice icon (an open book) at the bottom left of the home page.