

## **Transitioning From Life**

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A couple of weeks ago I was completing a contract for a resident that moved into our retirement community. There's a section in the contract that says "Friends House strongly encourages residents to have funeral and burial plans." When I reviewed this section of the contract, Bob looked at me and with a sheepish expression on his face and said that he guesses he doesn't want to think about dying so he hasn't put any plans together yet. Bob and his wife are both in their 80s.

We often assume that as we age, we are getting closer to dying, we should think more about our death and plan for it. Clearly, this is not so. But why should an 80-year-old be more prepared for death than someone much younger? How many of us know how close or how far our death will be? Not planning for my death at 51 doesn't mean that I will think about planning for it at 80. Unless I have a life-altering event, chances are greater that I won't.

Only because I've had personal life experiences with death; in my work with older adults, a resident's suicide, my father's death and have been witness to the many ways that give or don't give opportunity to the ritual of death and the allowance of grieving, do I come to this firm belief that I hold — death is a holy experience, one to give deep thought and preparation for, and needs to be given the great consideration that it is due.

In training staff to give care to our residents with dementia and Alzheimer's, we teach them that the progression in the decline is the same as the

birth cycle. Why should the approach and preparation for death not be considered in the same way, as part of our cycle of life? In birth we consider and prepare for so many things. Our families are often intimately involved. The experience is blessed event.

To think about and consider our death feels self-centered and for those of us that do everything we can not to appear too egotistical, thinking about oneself in this way may not feel comfortable. When I put myself front and center and consider how sad the world will be without me, I want to minimize that and say I'm not that important and really, what did I do in my life anyway? This is maybe my Amish/Mennonite background coming out!

The fact is, our death is going to be a big event. We live in community. Our families and friends will need and want to grieve their loss. The ceremony of saying good-bye is very important.

It wasn't until much later in my life that I really came to appreciate the traditions that were part of my family's cultural experience. In my father's death, there were many ways that we had active participation in his dying and his funeral and burial, which is all part of the ritual of letting go. We gave time for several days for family and friends to visit and view his body. Friends brought us food and cared for us. His brothers dug his grave. We took turns shoveling the dirt until he was fully buried.

In contrast, most of the residents who have died at Friends House, have a memorial service sometimes weeks or months after the death. There is nothing that happens after the death to give consideration or to honor the person that

passed. My director of maintenance died on a Sunday in late January. Everyone was at work the next day, Monday, as though nothing significant had happened. I was out of town and it wasn't until I came back to the community that I found many of the people that had worked with Jim for the last 25 years in a kind of emotional vise. They didn't have a way of expressing their grief — they hadn't been given permission to stop, to express their feelings and to think about him and our loss. There was a memorial service three weeks later, but by that time, it felt a little past the actual death event. I find this custom to have a missing step in giving a way to honor death after it occurs, to stop my normal routine for just a little while, to acknowledge and to grieve after the event has taken place. Life isn't going to on as normal, someone that was important, a person that was among us, has died.

As you may be able to tell, I have a lot of feelings and opinions about death, the planning for, the emotional preparation, the traditions and rituals associated with how we transition from life. I hope that I what I said today gives you a little nudge to consider your own death. It may not feel natural to think along these lines, but I suggest that the process can lead one on a spiritual journey.