



Facing Death

... with open eyes

exploration guide

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Secrets of Life and Death Film Series

INTRODUCTION

We live in a society that makes it difficult to talk straightforwardly about death. It is as though we believe the mere mention of the word “death” will invite its occurrence. Because death is so taboo, it is often never brought up at all. As a result, important information is never shared and personal preferences regarding death and saying goodbye are never addressed.

In *Facing Death . . . with open eyes* the filmmaker recalls her own reaction to her parents’ dying -- being stunned by the emotional impact, not knowing how to handle what they were going through, feeling totally unprepared. Her experience is not unique. If we never discuss death, we will always be unprepared.

The documentary, *Facing Death . . . with open eyes* was made to encourage self reflection and dialogue on the subject of dying. In the film, the stories of four people are followed as they honestly and courageously describe their journeys -- from confronting illness and searching for cures, to struggling with independence and dealing with others, to their final search for meaning and peace of mind. You are encouraged to watch with an open heart. Discover what resonates for you in their stories. Allow the words and images to seep inside and be absorbed. Like a time-release capsule, memories from the film will bubble up, at the right time.

The primary purpose of this exploration guide is to provide specific questions for opening up the subject of death and facilitating discussion with family and friends about dying. Sharing personal stories about death, even the death of a pet, can be useful. By describing your thoughts and feeling to another, you bring them into focus and clarity. Fears and concerns can be discussed and strategies and solutions explored.

GETTING STARTED

1. After viewing the film take a few minutes to gather your thoughts. Notice what comes up for you. This can be done in silence or with gentle music playing in the background. The music under the menu on the DVD can be used for this purpose.
2. Write down any thoughts and feelings that arose while watching the film. It is helpful to write your feelings down before discussing them with others so that they are pure and uninfluenced by the experiences of other

Some questions to consider:

- What words or images in the film affected you the most? Why?
- Did you recall any memories while viewing the film? What were they? What feelings do they evoke?
- What are your first-hand experiences with death? Can be someone close or far, an animal as well as human. What were these encounters with death like? How did you feel about them? Did you learn anything?

GROUP AND PARTNER DISCUSSION

1. Share your thoughts with a partner or family group
2. Try to stretch your comfort zone a little in what you share. This is an opportunity to explore and verbalize things you might have been afraid to address.
3. Stick with your feelings and “I” statements. Death can be a volatile subject and illness can challenge your ability to stay clear and non-judgmental. This is a time for sharing, not confrontation.
4. The person listening should practice compassionate listening. Helpful tips
 - a. Seek understanding by listening with your whole being – your ears, eyes and heart.
 - b. Give the speaker psychological space to express and explore their feelings without feeling threatened, defensive or having to fight for their point of view. Don’t evaluate or judge what is being said.
 - c. Pay attention to nonverbal expressions – tone of voice, the pace, the different levels of communication.
 - d. Sense the meanings within what is being said but don’t try to interpret. Gently reflect back what you heard.
 - e. Don’t try to problem solve. Sometime a person just needs to be heard.
5. Have compassion for each other.
6. Allow each person at least 5 minutes to share. Set a timer to make sure everyone gets a turn to speak.

MORE QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Use any of the questions or exercises listed below to continue the discussion. Give yourself time to consider each question and your answer before sharing with a partner.

1. Current Beliefs About Death:

Beliefs can have a huge impact on the way we deal with death. In the film, Tighe is able to view his impending death as a whole new journey; Robin expresses an attitude of open curiosity even at the edge of death; Rick becomes more serious about his spiritual practice; and Ram Dass is able to find the “grace” in his stroke.

EXERCISE: Draw a picture, make a collage, write a poem or compose a song expressing what you believe happens when you die. Hang it up where you can see and revise it as needed. Share it with a friend and use it to help answer the following questions.

- What do you believe happens to you when you die? Does your belief bring you comfort or discomfort when thinking about dying?
- What religious or spiritual beliefs were you taught as a child regarding death?
- What life experiences have influenced your current beliefs about death?

2. Medical Considerations for the End of Life

Although Rick has lung cancer and a prognosis of only a few months, he survives for five years with a combination of western medicine and Chinese herbs. He continued to actively pursue new treatments right up until his death. In contrast, Tighe decides after eight years of fighting HIV to stop taking his meds and check into hospice.

- How do you feel about each of their choices?
- Discuss your views about medical choices that prolong life or assist death, e.g, use or refusal of life-support equipment, intravenous feeding, tracheotomies, antibiotics, palliative sedation, doctor assisted suicide?

EXERCISE 1: Do you have an Advanced Medical Directive? If yes, review it and see if it needs an update. If no, make a commitment to get it done.

- Brainstorm a list of ideal characteristics of your healthcare agent

EXERCISE 2: Does your state use a Physician's Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment (POLST)? Become informed. Check out <http://www.polst.org/> If you have been diagnosed with a life expectancy of 1 year or less, and your state has adopted POLST, make an appointment with your physician to create a POLST. While Advanced Medical Directives might be ignored by medical personnel, a POLST must be followed.

3 Life Review

Robin's first attack of pancreatitis came completely out of the blue and it nearly killed her. She was in the hospital for six months. During her second attack she lived moment to moment paying close attention to each exhale knowing that it might be her last. Because there is no cure for her condition, only careful maintenance, she is aware that she still might go at any time. This, of course, is true for any of us, but we tend to forget that reality. Cancer and other life-threatening illness are wake up calls, calling cards from death that remind us that life is temporary and that we have a limited amount of time. We can use this awareness to our advantage by being prepared for any eventuality.

EXERCISE 1: Write your own obituary as if you had died today. Keep it in your files and revise as needed.

EXERCISE 2: Make a list of your major life-milestones and notice which ones changed the direction of your life.

EXERCISE 3: Draw a life map of your milestones or make a photomontage of your life journey up to this point. Include any future plans. Pin it up and revise or update as needed.

- If you had six months or less to live, what would be on your bucket list? What are the more important things you would like to do or complete before you die?

4. Forgiveness

In the book *Dying Well*, Dr. Ira Byock identifies five things that need to be complete before you die: "Forgive me," "I forgive you," "Thank you," "I love you," and "Good-bye." Forgiving others and being forgiven, even if only in your heart, gives peace of mind

that is essential to dying well. It helps to tie up loose ends and open our hearts. Forgiveness is not the same as saying an injury or injustice was ok. It is letting go of the judgment, the resentment and the attachment to hurt and embracing the feeling at peace.

EXERCISE 1: Write down all your significant relationships (e.g. parents, grandparents, spouse, in-laws, siblings, children, friends, teachers, work associates, neighbors, pets) and ask yourself if you have any unfinished business with any of them, any injuries, wounds, or resentments -- anything that needs completion.

EXERCISE 2: Choose a relationship that feels unfinished or stirs emotions of anger, resentment or fear. Recall the specifics: What happened? How did you help create this situation? What did the other person do? Notice how these memories makes you feel. Are you uncomfortable? Distressed? Angry? Become aware of this feeling in your body. Notice its location, its tightness, its texture, its taste. Imagine carrying this feeling around inside you until you die. How would it impact your life?

- What do you think needs to happen to heal this relationship. What could you do? What do you need from the other person? What holds you back from taking action?

EXERCISE 3: Focus on your un-forgiven issue. Notice its effect on your heart.

Breathe into your heart and say you forgive the person for what ever action they took intentionally or unintentionally that caused you pain. See if you can soften and open your heart with your breath. Imagine the hurt healing and disappearing with each breath. Notice how it feels when the wound is gone. Do this again for yourself, forgiving your behavior in this injury.

- Is there any action you might take to heal the injury? Anything that needs to be said? Do not undertake action until you have truly forgiven in your heart. Sometimes it is not necessary to take any action other than to forgive inside.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

Dying Well, Ira Byock, MD, Berkeley Publishing, Berkeley, 1997

5. Life Legacy

While your life review is for your own completion, you life legacy is for your survivors. If you were to die in the next week, what would be your legacy? How would you be remembered by your family and friends? How would you life to be remembered?

- Think of the things that have been left to you by people who have died. Which things have meant the most to you. What things most captured who that person was for you? What could things could you leave that sum up who you are?
- Of what are you most proud of doing in your life? Set the timer for ten minutes and write about it.

EXERCISE 1: Write letter to a particular person. Write from the heart. Share your guiding values and belief, life lessons, hopes for the future, favorite memories.

EXERCISE 2: Create a pictorial family history.

EXERCISE 3: Record your life story, a specific story or a special message for someone.

6. Dying Wishes:

- What is your worst-case scenario of dying. How would you not want to die?
- What is your best-case scenario of dying. Be specific. Who would be present, what would the location look like, sound like, smell like. Would there be music? Candles? Essential oils? Soft light. Would it be dark or light? Inside or outside?
- Notice how you feel as you write down these two death scenarios?
- Discuss both scenarios with a partner.
- Are there any actions you might take to insure a best-case scenario of dying?

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Sacred Dying, Megory Anderson. Marlowe & Company, NY 2001

7 Attachments of Life

In the film, Ram Dass talks about the attachments that he had to his golf, his cello, his MG and functioning limbs -- and his process of letting them go.

EXERCISE: Write up a list of your ten most favorite possessions and decide who will get them when you die. Keep this with your records and revise as needed.

- Discuss your life attachments. What do you think will be the hardest things for you to let go?
- Dying involves a progressive letting goes: of health, a future, mobility, independence, capacity, dignity. What are the most difficult losses you have had to deal with so far? What do you most fear losing?
- How easy is it for you to ask someone for help? Are some services more difficult to request than others? What are they? Make a list of people who you think you might be able to ask for help should you need it.

8. Final Wishes

EXERCISE: Write up detailed instructions regarding what you would like done with your body after you die.

- What are your thoughts regarding the following: burial, cremation, organ donation, memorial services, headstone or memorial marker, urns, ash scattering? Do you have any religious beliefs and practices regarding death that are important to you? Write down your thoughts and give them to someone who will be able to carry out your wishes.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS:

Dying Well, Ira Byock, MD, Berkeley Publishing, Berkeley, 1997
Embrace, Release, Heal, Leigh Fortson, Sounds True, Boulder, 2011
The Grace in Dying, Kathleen Dowling Singh. Harper, San Francisco, 1998;
On Death and Dying, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Macmillian, NY, 1969
Start the Conversation, Ganga Stone, Warner Books, NY, 1996
The Last Frontier, Julia Asante, Ph.D., New World Library, CA 2012
Who Dies, Stephen and Ondrea Levine, Doubleday, NY, 1982