

Discovering a New Approach to Death by Judie Donaldson

Ever since Carquinez Village was a mere light bulb of an idea, I have been studying—well, maybe that's too grand a term—let's say I've been exploring what is being written about aging today. You know, about you and me, and others like us. About our lives. We're a popular demographic today because there are so many of us. Lots of people from lots of different fields are writing about us. I've read about our health, our happiness, our minds, our memories, our relationships, our loneliness, our longevity, our diets, our sleep habits, our values, our beliefs, and more. I've bought books, collected articles, listened to podcasts, and watched movies and YouTube videos. But there is one aspect of aging I haven't studied at all. Can you guess what it is? Death. That's right, death. I've been so busy being cool that I didn't even realize I had ignored it.

However, fortuitously, I received an email from a friend that changed this—and changed me. My friend, Cathy, wrote to tell me about a course she had taken in case it might interest me. The course is entitled, "Best Life. Best Death." I knew instantly I was interested. I laughed at myself because I felt I had suddenly become a "new age" convert, a person who believes in the magic of synchronicity as a major life force. In other words, someone who would believe that Cathy's email had mysteriously landed in my lap exactly when I needed it.

I know I have been like many Americans who don't go out of their way to discuss death. If asked, I typically offered that I didn't know what would transpire when I died, but I was open to the idea that there might be "something" after death. And that was essentially the beginning and end of the subject for me. Thanks to "Best Life. Best Death." my relationship with death has completely changed. Let me tell you a little about my experience.

A woman in Boulder, Colorado, taught the course. She represented the point of view of an organization called "The Conscious Dying Institute." The Institute contends that our societal attitude toward death commonly results in a diminished quality of life for those proceeding through the dying process. The mission of the Institute is to combat this reality by restoring death to its sacred place in the beauty and mystery of life. The course was a product of this vision and intention to honor the dying process.

Now for the class. There were nine of us in the class. Seven were older adults, one of whom was dying of cancer. Then there were two young people in their '30s who had recently suffered the tragic loss of a close friend. It was humbling to be in the class with three people for whom death was so near. I learned from them at every juncture.

As the title suggests, "Best Life. Best Death.", is grounded in two concepts. First, let me introduce the idea of "best life." Then I'll talk about "best death." Each week we had assignments designed to assess whether we were living our lives in complete accord with our values and desires. In other words, were we living our "best life?" If not, we identified changes that would move us closer to this ideal—and this is where the rubber hits the road—and set action steps in motion to implement the changes. Conceptually, this purpose and process made sense to me, and each week I inevitably found myself identifying ways in which I could get closer to my "best life." This outcome alone was a meaningful and valuable benefit of the course.

Let me move to the second half of the course purpose, "best death." Each week in class, we would watch a film, listen to a TED talk, read a poem, or explore death in some other way. As we focused on death in different ways, it quickly became natural. It was as though I was saying to myself, "What's the big deal?" It was such a relief to be discussing death in the same way I discuss other issues—as an everyday topic of conversation. My attitude toward death morphed into curiosity and a sense of possibility. This sure beats discomfort and avoidance!

But the mission of the Institute goes far beyond enabling people to feel comfortable discussing death. One of its goals is to allow people to experience a conscious death. A conscious death is defined as a death guided by the wishes and priorities of the dying person who has been intentional about defining them. The Institute believes that viewing death as a sacred rite of passage can create an end-of-life legacy for all those present with the dying person.

A conscious death can take a myriad of forms. It could be a hospital death in the ICU with family members surrounding the patient or a home death with a drumming circle, candles, and music. It might include the recording of ocean sounds and a series of poems or the recitation of favorite scriptures. The Conscious Dying Institute can provide a trained end-of-life doula or coach to help ensure the patient's wishes are honored in the best possible manner.

I am the last surviving member of my nuclear family, and, oh, how often I have thought about the deaths of my mother, father, and sister during this course. I regret we didn't know then about the concept of a conscious death. From my perspective, the conscious dying process has multiple benefits. In addition to the fact that it provides a nurturing and meaningful death for the dying person, in particular, I like its element of giving. I love giving in general and feel that the conscious dying process is a final gift we can give to others—by inviting them to share our last wishes. I haven't crafted my conscious death process yet, but I will within the next few weeks. Then I'll place it in my "When I Die" file and take a big, deep breath! Questions or comments? Email judiedonaldson1@gmail.com.