

# Nearing the End of Life :

## A Guide for Relatives and Friends of the Dying (6)

By Sue Brayne  
and Dr Peter Fenwick

The Life Enlightenment Charity Foundation Limited hereby acknowledges the kind authorization, with a written permission, by the two authors to publish their following two publications in our English and Chinese bilingual magazine "Life Enlightenment" for a wider circulation to the general public, namely:

- (1) *Nearing the End of Life: A Guide for Relatives and Friends of the Dying*;
- (2) *End-of-Life Experiences: A Guide for Carers of the Dying*.

### Short Introduction of Both Authors

**Sue Brayne** MA, Post Grad Dip Couns, PGCE



Sue Brayne originally qualified as a State Registered Nurse. She went onto train as a **Life, Death, and Transition Facilitator** with the Elizabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation. After completing an **MA in the Rhetoric and Rituals of Death** in 2001, Sue began working with Dr Peter Fenwick as a Honorary Researcher into end-of-life experiences. She has several academic papers published on end-of-life experiences and provides educational workshops for carers, relatives and friends on the dying experience and spiritual aspects of the end-of-life care. Sue is also a psychotherapist, specializing in **trauma and bereavement work**, and is a trained **Further Education** teacher.

## Dr Peter Fenwick BA (Cantab), MBBChir (Cantab), FRCPsych



Dr Peter Fenwick is a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and has worked mainly in the field of **neuropsychiatry and epilepsy**. He has held Consultant posts at St Thomas's Hospital, the Westminster Hospital and for many years at the Maudsley Hospital and Kings College Institute of Psychiatry, the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, and now at the Department of Neuropsychiatry at Southampton University. Currently, he is the Honorary Clinical Consultant neurophysiologist at Broadmoor Hospital, and Honorary Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Psychiatry, University of Southampton, UK. He has a long standing interest in End-of-Life Experiences (ELEs), as well as in Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), and featured in the first UK documentary film shown on NDEs in 1987. He is now leading a multi-disciplinary project, researching End-of-Life Experiences and their importance for the dying and the bereaved.

## WHEN DEATH HAPPENS

### Denise's Story

I knew that my father was going to die that day and decided to leave him alone with my mother.

I had no problem leaving him as he had told me he was 'ready to go', wasn't frightened and very calm. We spent a lot of time talking while I nursed him, and without actually saying it, we had said our goodbyes.

I wandered around until I just felt that he had died, returning home to find he had indeed died 20 minutes before. I felt mixed emotions of relief, as he was no longer suffering and fearful.

I had not seen a dead body before. I stood nervously, with my back to the wall, at a distance, plucking up the courage to approach.

It was then I felt the pressure of hands on my shoulders and a voice whispering in my ear 'I'm OK'. This was followed by the **overwhelming sensation** of a very strong force moving far away with immense speed.

I knew it was my father. Any fear I had I felt melted away. It gave me the strength to deal with the duties associated with death. Much later I realised this experience had removed my fear of dying.

In medical terms the dying process is viewed as a biological closing down of the body's systems. It is difficult to know during this process when the person's consciousness dies. However, the moment of **death** can be experienced in many ways. It **can be an intensely spiritual encounter**. Alternatively, it may feel rather prosaic. The essence of the person has gone, leaving behind a body that can seem like an empty envelope.

You may feel grief. You may feel numb. You may feel relief. It may feel like an anti-climax — especially in a hospital or institution, where nursing staff may be coming in and out to deal with necessary practicalities.

If it's what you want, staff may also leave you alone for a while with the body — and that can be both reassuring and sometimes unexpectedly peaceful.

Sometimes, those present report less immediately physical experiences.

Carers and relatives may talk of seeing vapours leaving or hovering over the body. Others have described loving light filling the room or a sudden change in room temperature. Or there may be a heaviness in the air which takes time to clear. Or there may be other strange phenomena.

Relatives and friends who were not there may experience 'seeing' or sensing the dead person and knowing the exact time of death before they are officially informed. These 'visitations' are usually comforting and reassuring, and never forgotten.



## WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT TO FEEL IMMEDIATELY AFTER

It's not unusual after someone has died, especially when you were present at the time, to feel disconnected from people, places or things. It can feel as if you are in a dream, or looking at life through frosted glass. This can be especially difficult when you are thrown into the intensity of making funeral arrangements.

It can be hard to explain how you are feeling, especially to those who have never witnessed a death. But feeling strange or disconnected from reality is understandable when we have watched someone die. Life will never be the same again. It can't be when we have witnessed something as profound as this.

You may feel you don't know what to do with yourself. You can find yourself aimlessly wandering around, feeling lost and alone and deeply questioning everything in your life.

Over the following weeks and months, for some there may be emotional and spiritual rawness that throws up feelings of anger as well as of grief. For others, it can be truly liberating. We only really know what we need to deal with as we go through our grieving process.

### Sue's Story

When my mother died I experienced something 'leave' with her last breath. It was for me quite a spiritual encounter. For several days after I also felt something intangible but very real leave me. Yet at the same time I experienced a sense of my mother's essence settling into me. It felt uncomfortable and disconcerting, and it was a couple of weeks before I felt 'me' again. In the longer term, I realized I had absorbed something of my mother's spirit, and that continues to live within me.

It was different with my father who died seven years later. At the moments of his death it felt to me more like a switching off than something actually leaving his body. I then realized that the moment of death happens in different ways.

The feelings I subsequently experienced were the same when my mother died, only sharply intensified. It was hard to accept I no longer had parents. Even though I have a family of my own, I felt alone and as if I was no longer attached to anything – made more poignant when clearing the home they had shared for over thirty-five years. Much of this ended up in plastic bins bags with a charity shop. I think that was the saddest part – and the awareness that this will happen to me too one day.

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