



# **The Spirit of Caring:**

**A Volunteer  
Education Resource**

## **Module 7: Death and Dying**

**Developed by:  
Provincial Spiritual Health Care Management Network**

## Module 7 – Session Guide

### Death and Dying

Overview/outline:

TIME	ACTIVITY	RESOURCE	COMMENT
30 min	Beliefs on death. Discussion of our own beliefs and others beliefs.	Pages 2-6 Appendix 1 Medicine Wheel Appendix 2 Multi-Faith Questions 1 – 3 page 6	It is important for all participants to feel safe and comfortable in answering the questions. No one should feel that the answer/s given are wrong.
15 min	First encounter with death. Childhood memories/impressions	Page 7 Questions: 1 - 3	This is to get in touch with first experiences re death.
15 min	Break Time		
35 min	Group activity - Make list on board or newspaper of things that are feared when sick and dying. First group of discussion questions. Then discuss the four remaining questions re fear.	Page 8 Questions	This can be done in one large group or split into smaller groups then share answers to the whole.
25 min	Read Stephen Jenkinson excerpt. Discuss Read over Rex Weybury article. Discussion.	Appendix 3 – Rex Weybury article.	This section deals with the actual person. Their needs, their wants. How we can help.

# Death and Dying

Clare Edwards

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Have a greater understanding about different beliefs held on the subject of death.
2. Look at their own mortality, their fears, their beliefs.
3. Gain insight from a dying person's perspective
4. Feel more comfortable in discussing death with others.

## Preamble

For most people the very idea of death or dying is the furthest thing from their minds and is impossible for them to even think about for themselves or their loved ones. It conjures up an uncontrollable fear and they will push any thought of it away, never to be discussed or mentioned.

You cannot work effectively with those who are dying if you have not thought about your own mortality and that of others and are comfortable in talking about it. In this time together we will discuss death and dying, the fears, the frustrations, the spiritual anguish. How do we journey alongside another? How do we become a grief walker?

*My Lord God,*

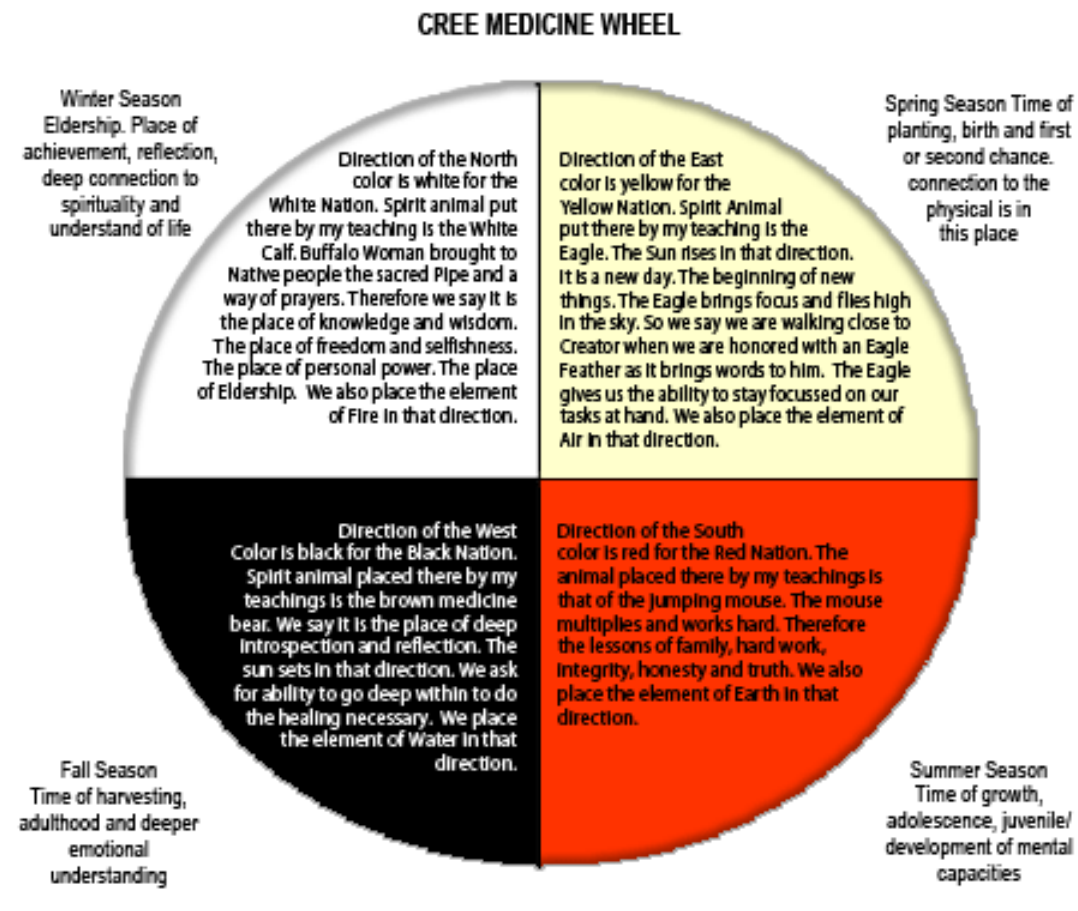
*I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Thomas Merton  
Thoughts In Solitude  
Abbey of Gethsemane

## The Journey begins

From the moment of our conception we begin our life journey. Whether our journey is short or long our natural instinct is to live. Every fiber of our being will strive for life. But there are two things for certain in this life – death and taxes!

The various sections of the Medicine Wheel have the beginning and the end together, new life (birth) and death. (Appendix 1).



The four seasons of the year, Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, can be related to our lives.

- Spring – new birth, growth
- Summer – fully grown, in our prime
- Autumn – accomplished all we set out to do and be
- Winter – aging, health deteriorating, at our life journeys end, dying.

There are many religions that teach about other lives when we have finished this one. (Appendix 2)

**Baha'i Faith** – An individual's essence or reality is spiritual, not physical; the body is seen as the throne of the soul, worthy to be treated with honor and respect even though it may be dead. After physical death, the soul continues to progress; it proceeds on to the next stage of existence, closer to God, free of physical limitations

**Buddhism** – follows the basic tenet that rebirth is an existing reality. Death is regarded as the actual time of movement from one life to another. All rituals at death are aimed at promoting an auspicious human rebirth in the next life, as well as preventing lower forms of rebirth taking place, such as rebirth into one of the hell realms, the hungry ghost realm or the animal realm.

**Christianity** – Basic belief of all Christian denominations - Jesus Christ's followers share in his victory over death and in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

**Christadelphians** – Death is the complete cessation of life. There is no conscious existence in death. Those who die in faith await the return of Christ and resurrection from the sleep of death.

**Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists in Canada** – Since most Unitarians and Universalists see human life as part of the natural world, they tend not to believe in an afterlife. It would be very unusual to find a Unitarian or Universalist who believed in any kind of a heaven or hell outside of earthly experience.

**Judaism** – believe that every human being is composed of a soul (an inner spiritual essence), as well as a corporeal component (the body). When death occurs both the soul and the body return from whence they came; the soul returns to the Almighty in heaven and the body returns to the dust of the earth.

**Hare Krishna** – We are not these bodies, but eternal spirit souls, part and parcel of God (Krishna). Right now we are engaged in a material body, which has a beginning and an end. We however, do not die. When one body wears down and dies, we pass on to another body. If we have become fully conscious of Krishna, we do not acquire another material body, but go to the spiritual world, where we reassume our original spiritual form free from birth, death, old age and disease and engage directly in the eternal and ever blissful pastimes of the Lord.

**Hindu** – The atmosphere around the dying person must be peaceful. The last thoughts or words are of God, ensuring rebirth to a higher form.

**Islam** – Humans consist of a body and a soul or inner-self (Al-Rouh or Al-Nafs). The soul has the ingredients to be both good and bad, and it is up to man to direct it either way. At the moment of death the soul separates from the body. The soul feels God’s rewards or punishments, and is kept in a transitional state (Barzakh) until the Day of Judgment, the Day of Resurrection.

**Jainism** – Jainists believe in rebirth, by which one’s soul lives again and again, through many lives in different bodies.

**Jehovah Witnesses** – When an individual dies, he or she ceases to exist, and there is only unconsciousness. For the wicked, this will be permanent. After Armageddon however, Jehovah God will raise all faithful Witnesses to live in his new, perfect world.

**Mormon** – The church teaches that all individuals will be resurrected, and will attain the degree of glory in heaven for which they were qualified while living in mortality, while those who never heard of Jesus Christ in mortality will be taught Christ’s Plan of Salvation in the “spirit prison” described by the Apostle Peter in his First Epistle, chapter 3.

**Native Spiritual Traditions** – The after-life is a world of peace.

**Rastafari** – Rastafari don’t like the word ‘death’. They believe that how we live – our actions toward other human beings – defines who we are, and that if we live righteously we have everlasting life. There are a series of transitions after leaving this plane of existence.

**Sikhism** – believe in the spirit’s rebirth into a new life, until one achieves final salvation.

**Wiccan Church of Canada** – Contemporary: Many gods and goddesses are spirits of excellence in all activities and ancient cultures.

- Norse: The life of the deceased determines the home of the God to which he or she will go.
- Greco-Roman: Several afterlife realms, some of which are resting places before reincarnation.
- Egyptian: The physical body lives again in an afterlife.
- Celtic: Life force is dispersed to realms of earth, sea and sky as the body decomposes.

**Zoroastrianism** – Belief in the immortality of the soul. Belief in the concept of divine judgment and the state of the soul in Heaven or Hell depending on the choice made between the good and the evil in life.<sup>1</sup>

As you can see, there are many different beliefs and we are all influenced by our families, our community, our country and our own experiences and that of other's. Every individual has their own unique life story, and every person should therefore be treated with respect.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you believe regarding death?
2. What is your greatest fear surrounding death?
3. What is your greatest fear about dying?

### **Our own experience with Death**

Life is some thing of which we know a lot about. Death and what lies beyond on the other hand we cannot know about until it happens to us. We all know that it is inevitable and most of us from our childhood have seen a dead animal. As a child my first pet that died was a goldfish that I found floating on the top of the goldfish bowl.



<sup>1</sup> Multifaith Information Manual 4<sup>th</sup> Edition

My second encounter was when I got up for school one morning and found our pet budgie lying on the bottom of the cage. In both cases the pet was removed by my mom and disposed of somehow, I don't know what she did with either but, I have a sneaking suspicion the fish was thrown down the toilet and the bird disposed of in the backyard. No explanations were given in either case. "It's dead," and "Leave it alone, I'll get rid of it" were the only things said. All I knew for sure was that in both instances neither was moving, or breathing. (Leader - Give own example of childhood encounter with dead animal.)

Discussion Question:

1. As a child did you ever encounter a dead animal?
2. What emotions did you feel?
3. How did your parent/s explain the death to you?

## FEARS

Fear is a natural and rational response to danger, or to the unknown, and all of us have experienced it. When sick and dying there can be many things that we are fearful of.

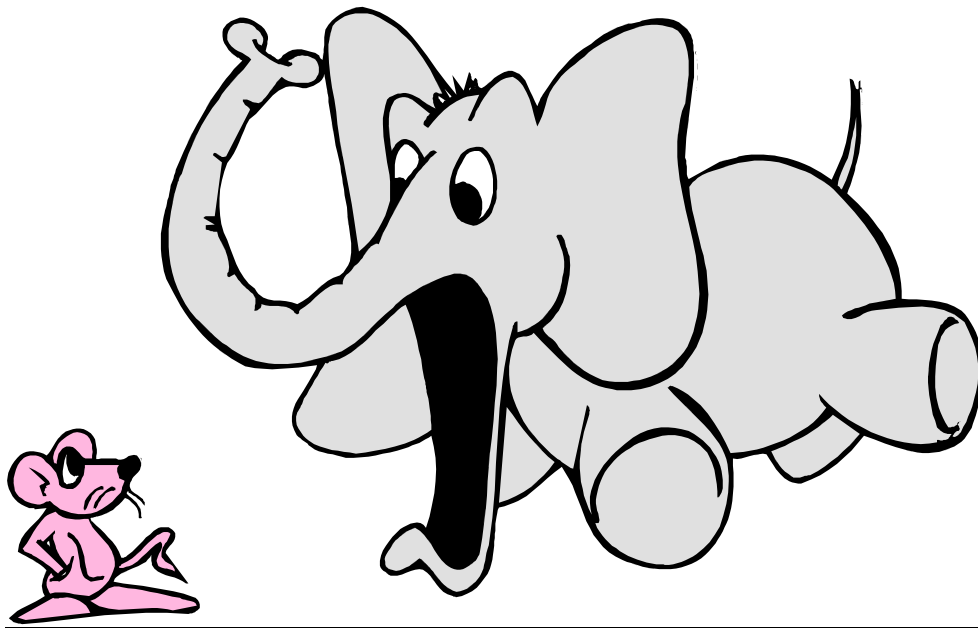




### Group work

1. First - list the things that are feared when sick and dying.
2. Then - working through the list what fears can be easily relieved and how?
3. Finally - what fears challenge you and your belief system?

There are also irrational fears where there is no visible threat or danger. Phobias are in this category.

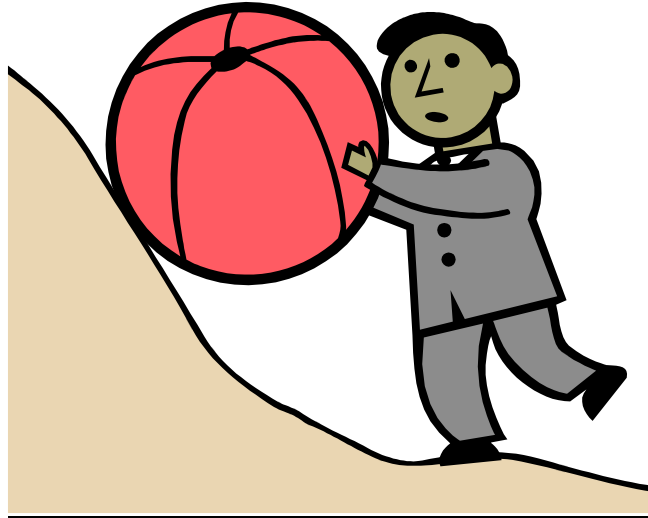


### Discussion Questions:

1. Early on dying people tend to focus their fears on their body, on what can happen there. Why is that?
2. How are those kinds of fears reflected in the things they talk with their doctor about?
3. How are those fears led by talking with doctors and therapists?
4. When your focus is on the body, on the disease process and what it does, how does that influence your ideas about what dying is, and what it means, and what it does to you, and what you should be doing?

**Frustrations**

How many of us have felt like this guy?



Or this one?



When faced with death there are many things that can make us feel overwhelmed, facing an uphill battle, or just plain **ANGRY**. A lot of it has to do with the fears and decisions that have to be made. Sometimes it may be that the dying person feels that they are not being heard and that they have no control over any situation.

Stephen Jenkinson in his work book entitled How It All Could Be writes:

*“If you wrestle an angel, you will grow muscle. There’s no doubt of that. You will also hurt in places you didn’t know you had. No doubt of that either. And you will lose, by the normal calculus of trying to engineer the life you’re sure you deserve. It will not come out as you had planned, wrestling angels. Your plans are usually the first casualty of the match. But here is the great secret of it: you will be able to boast of your defeat. You will be able to stand in the wreckage of what used to be your certainty, your creed, your way of doing life’s business, and you can tell wild, true stories of how it all came to ruin. Whatever is left standing – and there is always something left standing when you wrestle angels – is the thing that was true about you and about your life all along, as faithful a companion as the earth that will one day cradle you again. Finding someone to tell, who will stay still long enough to listen and might understand, well, that is a human struggle.”<sup>2</sup>*

### How do we help someone dealing with their sickness leading to death?

See appendix 3



<sup>2</sup> Page 2 “How It All Could Be” – Stephen Jenkinson, Orphan Wisdom - [contact@orphanwisdom.com](mailto:contact@orphanwisdom.com) or [www.orphanwisdom.com](http://www.orphanwisdom.com)

## **What Does Someone Dying Need?**

by Rex Winsbury (Also in handout form as Appendix 4)

When you get ill and are told you are going to die soon, needs come crowding in on you, jostling for scarce time and (often) scarce energies. So they in turn create their own need, a need for people and places to help you answer your needs. New needs then spring up as you begin to grasp the imperatives of dying.

**“I was declared to be dying and did not. I experienced the needs and the challenges, and lived to reflect on them.”**

My position is odd - not unique, but privileged. I was declared to be dying, and did not. I experienced the needs and the challenges, and lived to reflect on them afterwards. A temporary reprieve, of unknowable duration. Those needs and challenges have not gone away, but I can now look at them with some benefit of hindsight. So I could sum up the needs of one person diagnosed as close to death, me, as being:

- The need to “settle up” with the people that I felt close to, so as to die in peace, with them and with myself.
- The need to have someone to “stand in” for me, to do what I could not do when I became helpless or consigned to the grave.
- The need for places and organizations that I could turn to for practical information.
- The need for someone to guide me, or go with me, round this new and unfamiliar domain of “the terminal state” - not necessarily the same someone for every sector of it.

### **Finances**

I was lucky in having, already, an expert professional financial adviser who, as it turned out, could talk about death as a human being as well as help me plan for it as a financial consultant. I had also had the benefit, before my diagnosis, of talks with a psychotherapist, who had taught me something about the inner and outer processes of reconciliation.

### **Settling up emotional accounts**

Settling up emotional accounts means going to those people who have been hurt by you, betrayed by you, misled by you, and not just asking forgiveness (because that is to perpetuate the desire to control the outcome by laying down what the outcome is going to be) but asking them to tell you how the hurt may be healed.

Once you have opened that door to them, given them that permission, you cannot control what will then happen. People will react in surprising, sometimes offensive, sometimes heart-stirring ways - but almost always in ways of their own choosing, which is the key to the success of this exercise.

### **The role of advocate**

If you are ill, maybe in pain, perhaps drugged, perhaps even on life-support, someone needs to represent you to the doctors and nurses, the medical profession, to say what you would have said if you had been able, about your treatment, about where you want to live your last days and die, and what treatment you would (if you could) accept or refuse. This is about life-support; about pain; about dying with dignity; about relating your death to those who care about you. I have a partner who would have played, and will play, that role with determination.

### **Drawing up an ethical will**

An ethical (as well as a financial) will is a key document to have at life's frontier post. In an ethical will, you can say how and where you want to die, and in what medical circumstances. An ethical will help the person who "stands in" for you to argue the case with the doctors, and maybe the lawyers. It can say what sort of funeral you want. It can (if not done separately) give your last messages to those who matter to you. So here there are three stages. The first is to recognize the need for such a will. The second is to find advice on how to write one. The third is the most difficult - to actually write it. I dithered for months, afraid of the decisions implied in the clauses of an ethical will. But again, once done, it was a relief.

### **The funeral**

Someone, if I have not done it already, needs to make my funeral arrangements, in accordance with the advice in my will, but subject always to the law of the land. Not everyone can cope with these last practicalities, which is why undertakers make a good living by applying a fixed ritual, and fixed price, to death. Some people care more than others about these post-mortem rituals, and how to redesign them in your own image. I myself care little, except to avoid more than basic expenses. Keep me from an expensive coffin.

### **One-stop-shop**

I needed a place where I could go, there and then, if I fell ill again, if I began to die, confident that I would be known, understood, cared for, well advised medically, and listened to: somewhere I trusted, and where I would be treated as a full human being. There is a peace in knowing that there is such a place to go, if and when ... and that there is someone who will take you there.

## **Need to know**

You need somewhere to turn to for basic information. Ignorance is the worst enemy. Some prefer ignorance, say it is bliss. It is not. Ignorance is the ultimate fright, the primal fear. Better to know what you are up against, know all there is to know about your illness, its treatments, the odds, the therapies, what others have done and said and suffered. But where is that place? Not everyone knows, or bothers to tell you. Just like a second opinion, knowledge can also be scary.

I spent a terrified afternoon in a bookshop, looking up the medical statistics about survival rates for people with my specific form of cancer. You cannot, must not wish that sort of knowledge on people who cannot cope with it. On the other hand, for those who grasp the power of knowledge, knowing the statistics can liberate you from the tyranny of being just a statistic.

## **A safe place to talk**

Family and friends are often reluctant to face up to illness and death: even if they are not, their experience is not your experience, cannot be. So you may need, as I did, somewhere to go where you can talk, where it is safe to expose your inmost fears and terrors, your hopes and vulnerability. A group of people with similar vulnerabilities can provide that safe place, and be a powerful haven in which to bring out repressed feelings. They can support and share. But where is that group, and is it really safe? There are lists of support groups, but you may need help to get to one, even if there is one near enough.

Finding no cancer support group in my area, I started one. It has become a haven, both for me and for some dozens of others. I am sad that more people do not come to it.

## **Physical well-being**

When your body is in danger, you need to do what you can to restore it, to prolong its utility, to seek to repair that wholeness that has been compromised by illness. Being diagnosed as terminally ill, does not always or necessarily mean that your physical activity has ceased, or cannot be prolonged. It is not too late. But where can you go to learn to repair what is damaged? Once again, this quest presupposes the will to do it, the same willingness that is inherent in many other felt needs, the willingness to plan for the future while knowing that you may not be there to see it.

But now, at the point of terminal diagnosis, more than ever, your need is to nurture your physical well-being by any means, to make the most of what you have left. But how: exercise, diet? What exercise, what diet? Where is the place to discover this,

and to do it? Probably, a conventional gymnasium is useless at this stage: hospitals are little use. Where can an ill person go to improve his or her physique? There are places, and which of them is a matter of knowing, and of choice, and the will.

I myself found great healing power, as well as physical exercise, in walking or jogging on Hampstead Heath, London, and in Chinese Qi Gong classes - both of these activities combine movement and meditation.

### **Guides and other special people**

In addition to the financial and emotional advisers described earlier, I needed:

1. Someone or somewhere to talk about death.
2. Someone to tell me I am still beautiful.
3. Someone who would help to restore my hope, within the context of realism about my situation.
4. Someone to forewarn me and teach me about the stress of my illness upon others.
5. Someone to recognize and encourage the emergence of that new, alternative person that might never have been born without that illness and diagnosis: someone who will teach me to understand the power of the ill person, both over him/herself and over others - a power to be used wisely and humanely, for it can be, if misused, a tyranny, both over oneself and over others.

### **Epitaph**

Having feared death all my life, now that I am confronted with it, I no longer fear it, only that the period leading up to death (a period whose duration, trickily, I do not know) will have been a waste. Had I during my life feared death as little as I do now, I would have dared more and better things. Only slowly is the power conferred by loss of that fear, growing upon me. Partly, this is because I am afraid of that loss of fear. Where will it take me? My final need is to find out that last truth. That is one need that, I suspect, no one else can help with.



**Appendix 1 – Aboriginal Medicine Wheel**

**Cree Medicine Wheel**

Winter Season Eldership  
Place of Achievement  
Reflection Deep  
connection to  
spirituality and  
understanding of life

Spring Season – Time of  
planning, birth and first  
and second chances.  
Connection to the  
physical in is this place.

Direction of the north color is white for the White Nation. Spirit animal put there by my teaching is the White Calf Buffalo Woman brought to Native people the sacred Pipe and a way of prayers. Therefore we say it is the place of knowledge and wisdom. The place of freedom and selfishness. The place of personal power. The place of Eldership. We also place the element of Fire in that direction

Direction of the East color is yellow for the Yellow Nation. Spirit Animal put there by my teaching is the eagle. The Sun rises in that direction. It is a new day. The beginning of new things. The eagle brings focus and flies high in the sky. So we can say we are walking close to the Creator when we are honored with an Eagle Feather as it brings words to him. The Eagle gives us the ability to stay focused on our task at hand. We also place the element of Air in that direction

Direction of the West Color is Black for the Black Nation. Spirit Animal place there by my teachings is the brown medicine bear. We say it is the place of deep introspection and reflection. The sun sets in that direction. We ask for ability to go deep within to do the healing necessary. We place the element of Water in that direction.

Direction of the South color is red for the Red Nation. The animal placed there by my teaching is that of the jumping mouse. The mouse multiplies and works hard; therefore the lessons of family, hard work, integrity, honesty and truth. We also place the element of Earth in that direction

Fall Season, Time of  
harvesting,  
adulthood and  
deeper emotional  
understanding

Summer Season, Time of  
Growth, Adolescence,  
juvenile development of  
mental capacities



## **Appendix 2**

Multifaith Information Manual, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition – Ontario Multifaith Council:

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**Buddhism** – follows the basic tenet that rebirth is an existing reality. Death is regarded as the actual time of movement from one life to another. All rituals at death are aimed at promoting an auspicious human rebirth in the next life, as well as preventing lower forms of rebirth taking place, such as rebirth into one of the hell realms, the hungry ghost realm or the animal realm. (page 16)

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Appendix 3



## **Appendix 4**

### **What Does Someone Dying Need?**

by Rex Winsbury

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An ethical (as well as a financial) will is a key document to have at life's frontier post. In an ethical will, you can say how and where you want to die, and in what medical circumstances. An ethical will help the person who "stands in" for you to argue the case with the doctors, and maybe the lawyers. It can say what sort of funeral you want. It can (if not done separately) give your last messages to those who matter to you. So here there are three stages. The first is to recognize the need for such a will. The second is to find advice on how to write one. The third is the most difficult - to actually write it. I dithered for months, afraid of the decisions implied in the clauses of an ethical will. But again, once done, it was a relief.

### **The funeral**

Someone, if I have not done it already, needs to make my funeral arrangements, in accordance with the advice in my will, but subject always to the law of the land. Not everyone can cope with these last practicalities, which is why undertakers make a good living by applying a fixed ritual, and fixed price, to death. Some people care more than others about these post-mortem rituals, and how to redesign them in your own image. I myself care little, except to avoid more than basic expenses. Keep me from an expensive coffin.

### **One-stop-shop**

I needed a place where I could go, there and then, if I fell ill again, if I began to die, confident that I would be known, understood, cared for, well advised medically, and listened to: somewhere I trusted, and where I would be treated as a full human being. There is a peace in knowing that there is such a place to go, if and when ... and that there is someone who will take you there.

## **Need to know**

You need somewhere to turn to for basic information. Ignorance is the worst enemy. Some prefer ignorance, say it is bliss. It is not. Ignorance is the ultimate fright, the primal fear. Better to know what you are up against, know all there is to know about your illness, its treatments, the odds, the therapies, what others have done and said and suffered. But where is that place? Not everyone knows, or bothers to tell you. Just like a second opinion, knowledge can also be scary.

I spent a terrified afternoon in a bookshop, looking up the medical statistics about survival rates for people with my specific form of cancer. You cannot, must not wish that sort of knowledge on people who cannot cope with it. On the other hand, for those who grasp the power of knowledge, knowing the statistics can liberate you from the tyranny of being just a statistic.

## **A safe place to talk**

Family and friends are often reluctant to face up to illness and death: even if they are not, their experience is not your experience, cannot be. So you may need, as I did, somewhere to go where you can talk, where it is safe to expose your inmost fears and terrors, your hopes and vulnerability. A group of people with similar vulnerabilities can provide that safe place, and be a powerful haven in which to bring out repressed feelings. They can support and share. But where is that group, and is it really safe? There are lists of support groups, but you may need help to get to one, even if there is one near enough.

Finding no cancer support group in my area, I started one. It has become a haven, both for me and for some dozens of others. I am sad that more people do not come to it.

## **Physical well-being**

When your body is in danger, you need to do what you can to restore it, to prolong its utility, to seek to repair that wholeness that has been compromised by illness. Being diagnosed as terminally ill, does not always or necessarily mean that your physical activity has ceased, or cannot be prolonged. It is not too late. But where can you go to learn to repair what is damaged? Once again, this quest presupposes the will to do it, the same willingness that is inherent in many other felt needs, the willingness to plan for the future while knowing that you may not be there to see it.

But now, at the point of terminal diagnosis, more than ever, your need is to nurture your physical well-being by any means, to make the most of what you have left. But how: exercise, diet? What exercise, what diet? Where is the place to discover this,

and to do it? Probably, a conventional gymnasium is useless at this stage: hospitals are little use. Where can an ill person go to improve his or her physique? There are places, and which of them is a matter of knowing, and of choice, and the will.

I myself found great healing power, as well as physical exercise, in walking or jogging on Hampstead Heath, London, and in Chinese Qi Gong classes - both of these activities combine movement and meditation.

### **Guides and other special people**

In addition to the financial and emotional advisers described earlier, I needed:

6. Someone or somewhere to talk about death.
7. Someone to tell me I am still beautiful.
8. Someone who would help to restore my hope, within the context of realism about my situation.
9. Someone to forewarn me and teach me about the stress of my illness upon others.
10. Someone to recognize and encourage the emergence of that new, alternative person that might never have been born without that illness and diagnosis: someone who will teach me to understand the power of the ill person, both over him/herself and over others - a power to be used wisely and humanely, for it can be, if misused, a tyranny, both over oneself and over others.

### **Epitaph**

Having feared death all my life, now that I am confronted with it, I no longer fear it, only that the period leading up to death (a period whose duration, trickily, I do not know) will have been a waste. Had I during my life feared death as little as I do now, I would have dared more and better things. Only slowly is the power conferred by loss of that fear, growing upon me. Partly, this is because I am afraid of that loss of fear. Where will it take me? My final need is to find out that last truth. That is one need that, I suspect, no one else can help with.