

What Birth Teaches Us about Death

by Leslie Ludka, CNM, MSN

I have always thought of birth and death as polar opposites. During birth, a new person joins us in the world. In death, a person who existed ceases to live. What could be more different than that?

But, in reality, these two events have many parallels. Ask any midwife who has sat vigil at the bedside of a birthing mother and also sat vigil at the bedside of a dying loved one.

One of my closest friends, my former husband, died recently of throat cancer. We met in our twenties and were together for 18 years until our journeys went in different directions. The marriage failed, but our friendship flourished for more than 30 years. We have a daughter together.

He was the third dear family member whose death I sat vigil over in the past 18 months. My younger brother and my mother also passed away last year.

The vigiling process can include any or all of the following: devotional watching; being a calm presence; sitting together; talking

and listening; sharing silence; healing touch; and honoring requested rituals.

Sound familiar? The fact is, many midwives turn to careers in end-of-life care at retirement. Our well-honed skill set of shepherding women during birth is beneficial in death.

When patients ask whom to choose for labor support, most of us would advise a woman to choose someone who loves her—someone she trusts to keep her confidences, someone who is focused on her and her journey and will stay until she has reached her destination. Hospice literature describes similar qualities needed for the person sitting vigil and adds: “No negative thoughts in the room. Focus on the emotions of the person, not your own. Do not be afraid. Have faith in the process.”

Historically, close family and friends gather to offer their presence and support in attendance at birth and at death. As we quietly focus on the needs of the central person and one another, we

wait. In death, we wait for the last breath; we wait for the heart to stop beating. In birth, we wait for that first breath.

Birth and death quite literally define our existence. We track them in our world population banks. We interrupt television programming to announce the death of a famous person. Photos of celebrity babies make the front page of the tabloids. As a little girl, I would sit next to my grandmother each night while she read the evening newspaper. First she would turn to something she called the “Irish Sports Page” (the obituaries). Next she would scan the birth notices. Only then would she turn to the headlines. We lived in a small, close-knit town, and in her way, she was honoring both the deaths and births of those she knew.

Last year, my mother was in the end stages of dying on the same day that my daughter was in early labor with my first grandchild. I stayed with my mother holding her hand until my daughter was admitted to the birth center. Before leaving my mother’s side that morning, I leaned to kiss her frail and comatose figure and whispered, “Please look out for your great-granddaughter along the way and please help with her passage.”

I caught my granddaughter that afternoon. When my daughter saw my tears, she thought they were tears of joy. But in truth, they were tears of relief and gratitude. I was relieved that my daughter had completed her journey to motherhood and grateful that my mother had given us a beautiful, healthy new life as she was leaving us.

Soon after, when my mother slipped peacefully away from us, I did not cry tears of sadness. Again, I cried tears of relief and gratitude, relief that she was finally able to rest and gratitude that a little piece of her would live on in another generation. One family member transitioned into life as the other transitioned out of life—remarkably similar journeys at the opposite ends of the spectrum.

As midwives, we have chosen to focus our careers on the beginning of life, but in truth most of us have also unexpectedly become experts in the end of life as well. 

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