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On Healthy Death & Dying: The Shamanic Tradition and the Practice of a Death Doula

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Abstract

Death is as natural as living, breathing and ... yes, dying. From the perspective of traditional healers, death is viewed as a faithful companion, walking by your side since your birth. It is inherent within everything you do every day from the mundane to the transpersonal, whether you are paying attention to this process or not. This article discusses mainstream Western views of death, followed by teachings from the Egyptian, Tibetan and Celtic Books of the Dead and what these Wisdom Traditions have to offer as a way of dying well and therefore living well in the modern world. It then explains what a death doula does in the Shamanic Tradition and how to bring the Wisdom of Death into a healing practice.

Key words: death, doula, death doula, shamanism, dying

Death and dying

Death is as natural as living, breathing and... yes, dying. Physiologically, we all experience it daily as our cells die in order for our organs to be regenerated. Why then do we in the West spend so much time and energy denying it, fighting it, going to war with it or trying to avoid it?

This article is an exploration about death and dying from the perspective of traditional healers. It is not intended to be scholarly research to prove a thesis. For the authors, death is viewed as a faithful companion, walking by our side since our birth. It is inherent within everything we do, every day – from the mundane to the transpersonal, whether we pay attention to this process or not.

In this article, we will first discuss mainstream Western views of death, followed by ancient Wisdom teachings and what they have to offer as ways of living well in the modern world. We then share what a death doula does in the Shamanic Tradition and how you can bring the Wisdom of Death into your own personal life and professional caregiving practice.

Mainstream western death vs. wisdom tradition death

Symbolically, the western mind has been long familiar with death. Common symbols of death are the Grim Reaper and the angel of death. Many try to 'cheat' death of its prey, as if death was a bogey-man roaming the streets stalking them, coming to claim their soul; something they feel they must avoid at all cost.

This personification or 'archetype' of death is clear to see in modern imagery in books, movies and graphic novels. The particular image of the Grim Reaper, is still prevalent in the modern movies such as Monty Python's "The Meaning of Life;" in graphic novels like Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series in science fiction, as in Terry Pratchett's "Disc World" series, and we also had the great television series about 'reapers,' in "Dead Like Me."

Despite its 'negative' connotations, however, the very facelessness of the Grim Reaper symbolizes the unknown realm to which one journeys when one dies; that ultimate mysterious journey that we all face at the end of our life. It is the most mysterious experience one can go through in life. Traditionally, healers believe it behoves us to prepare for it well and to understand it more fully, even though the human mind (or Ego) dislikes such transpersonal mysteries.

Despite this dislike, both within us and around us, we are in the process of the cycle of life and death every day. In Nature, the cycle is evident when you watch the change of seasons – spring brings in new life, which summer nourishes to maturity, and then autumn brings in dying back or dormancy and death, in order to make space for winter to conceive the new possibilities of life which arrive in the spring. Then the cycle starts all over again.

In Traditions that value Wisdom, this is the knowledge of the process of Life, of which Death is a part. According to these Wisdom Traditions, in order for humans to know how to live well, one is expected to spend time in one's life learning how to go with these processes and ultimately learn how to die in a conscious way.

Traditional healers believe that death is not walking with you to scare you but rather, it is waiting for you to acknowledge its presence and befriend it, to recognize it as an ally rather than an enemy. An ally is a friend that helps you. It does not destructively take something away from you out of revenge.

Is it really a surprise that people no longer know how to live well – given that we do not teach this understanding of the 'Cycle of Life' anymore in our culture, and therefore we are not challenged or helped to face death proactively? Neither can people understand why it is necessary to learn how to die. And who can still see the relationships between disease and maintaining our state of denial and inflated fear of the end?

Many people today believe that to live well means to acquire as much 'stuff' as possible before they die. This is a direct consequence of having set aside their awareness of death as a natural process of life; having then developed a fear of death; having developed many ways to deny the constant presence of death as a part of life; and then ignoring that 'you can't take it with you when you go.'

Ancient wisdom meets the modern mind

Nowadays, in many spiritual communities there is talk of new energies and consciousnesses being

made available to us in order to live better and engage more fully in life through our soul. While this is true, within the Shamanic worldview, these energies cannot be brought through and grounded into reality as life-enhancing consciousnesses upon the foundation of the current western mind, which is one of denial and avoidance of death.

Traditional spiritual philosophies and their associated practices for living, and therefore dying, are timeless and still applicable because the human animal has not changed that much over the millennia.

No matter the culture, their time or their challenges, these traditional perspectives have withstood the attempts of modern civilization to deny and suppress them. They are being reclaimed because many of us realize that we need them and they are absolutely essential to our survival. By applying this ancient wisdom to our lives today, we can come to live in the moment, that most basic common recommendation from all spiritual paths, of which Global Shamanism is one.

Death, viewed from a wisdom tradition or 'wise' perspective, is really the embodiment of the process of change. Our old cultural fears must be rooted out of each and every one of us so that the seeds of the new consciousnesses may germinate in healthy psychological soil, take root and flower, and so bring forth collective transformation.

This is the traditional relationship of death to life, with death's true purpose in life being to enable healthy and natural change to occur. This teaching is what every people's original shamanic spiritual traditions taught their communities.

All indigenous cultures, as for example the First Nations, the Celts, the Mayans and others maintained this understanding of the natural order and taught it to their communities. In this article, we briefly discuss texts from the Ancient Egyptians, the Tibetan Buddhists, as well as those of the revived Celtic Tradition.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead (a.k.a. The Book of Coming Forth by Day)

Much of the research shows that the ancient Egyptians believed in a kind of everlasting life. They knew there was more to life and death than what they could see and experience in their physical bodies and they believed that life continued no matter what happened to the physical body or the mind. Therefore, one needed to ensure the survival of the Soul. They believed the actions they took in their daily lives would affect the afterlife and beyond and their goal was to live a good life in the present in order to continue to live a good life in the hereafter. Because of this, it was considered crucial to know the pathways to walk.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead was written in order to share the wisdom of the environment so as to become wise travelers in life and in death. According to this book, at the time of death, in the first stage of the afterlife, your heart was weighed on one side of The Scale of Justice (the scale later became the symbol of Justice, and the Babylonian astrological house of Libra, the archetype of The Judge) against a feather on the other side; as in, how heavy is your heart – an honest heart being lighter/of the light, than a lying one.

In the west, this Egyptian process of being judged at death has gotten turned into punishment and the graveyard where Egyptian criminals were buried, *Hel*, has become the Biblical Hell.

Within the Egyptian framework, however, somehow the understanding of the eternal life of the Soul, particularly its journey on the other side and eventual rebirth into this realm, became very literal. Mummification came to the fore so that those returning had a body to which to return. Over time, within the Egyptian practices, it appears they lost the idea that the soul would have to take on a new form, i.e. a new body, upon rebirth.

I know in my heart that I have gained power over my emotions, I have gained power over my arms, I have gained power over my legs, and I have gained the power to do what pleases my spirit. My soul, therefore, shall not be imprisoned in my body and I shall enter the netherworld in peace and come forth in peace.

- Ramses Seleem

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

Buddhism has a lot of Wisdom to share about living and dying well. Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, maintained the teachings of its indigenous Shamanic roots as Buddhism developed. Regarding life, they speak of 'impermanence', or the Wisdom of releasing attachments to anything in, or of, the earth realm.

Tibetan Buddhist practitioners meditate on their impermanence daily in order to have the various layers of their being stay aware of the eventual mortality of their physical form. This practice also is an opportunity to bring to the forefront of the mind any beliefs or fears that one has about death which need to be altered in order to free oneself to have a good life and, therefore, a good death. In their view, a good death is important since your experience of death will greatly affect your afterlife and your next life to come.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is also a kind of map, so to speak, that illustrates the journey of the Soul after death. It is usually studied during a person's life in preparation to die. It is read to a dying person in order to remind them of what their journey is going to be like after death and how to navigate through the different *Bardos*, or various levels that Souls must pass through until they reach their final destination in the afterlife.

It is crucial to be mindful of death – to contemplate that you will not remain long in this life. If you are not aware of death, you will fail to take advantage of this special human life that you have already attained. It is meaningful since, based on it, important effects can be accomplished.

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The Celtic Book of the Dead

In the Celtic Tradition, death did not have to be experienced as a dark and threatening event but rather a natural process of life. The Celts believed that our mundane or observable reality co-existed alongside two other invisible realms. The spiritual realm, called the Otherworld, and the Land of the Dead, or the Underworld. Both of these are close by and accessible to all. For instance, it was common for a Celt to commune with a dead relative in dreams or visions due to proximity to life in the mundane realm.

The two invisible worlds were open to everyone, not only to the shaman-priests/priestesses. However, the shamans did learn more mastery in 'spirit walking,' which is the act of visiting the other realms on behalf of the community.

In addition, the Celtic peoples had 'immram', or otherworldly stories, to illustrate the journey of a Soul and to give instruction of how to live through the challenges that it faced, whether in life or in death, i.e. on their way to the 'Blessed Isles.' These stories were the kind of tales that held many layers of meaning and offered relevant Wisdom no matter how many times they were read. The stories were considered to hold the tradition's 'true knowledge.'

The function of the immram is to teach the craft of dying, to pilot the departing Soul over a sea of perils and wonders. But it can also be a method of exploring better ways of living so that, by overcoming perils, the Soul may be rekindled and attuned to its true purpose.

- Caitlin Matthews

Commonalities between the traditions

The Ancient Egyptian, Tibetan Buddhist and Celtic Traditions had little, if any, communication with each other. Yet all of them spoke about learning how to die and all of them structured initiations into adulthood that included facing death, so that one was empowered to live well – as what we might now call a psychological adult.

The various books explain how to maneuver in life and in death, since both are worthy journeys that all people must undertake. Life and death are in fact at opposite ends of the spectrum.

Another common thread that is useful for modern people, from the traditional perspective, is the opportunity to conceive of death as a passage to the other side, to the Blessed Isles, to the Land of the Dead, or to think of it as the afterlife. These traditions and many other, similar ones imply that life does indeed go on after physical death.

In the West, the Christian tradition has been the dominant paradigm, according to which, humans only have one physical life. However as we can see from the texts, many other traditions believe in some form of reincarnation. The truth is that no tradition can claim to know for sure, and this mystery is actually part of the value that death teaches us about the cycles of life to which we all belong.

Little deaths

As modern day traditional healers, the authors have both experienced and seen the living proof of what happens when one surrenders to the timeless truth of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. It does indeed offer us freedom from a level of struggle that is only kept alive through the fear of dying, or indeed, letting go of anything, in the western ego/mind/personality.

To us, the process of life is one of growth and in order to grow there must be change. For example, a seed changes from a dormant state to a germinating state that sprouts and then grows into the leafy phase. This young plant then continues to grow and change, or mature, until it flowers and creates a new seed that reproduces itself. After this process, it is essentially moving towards its physical end, or its 'big death.' However, along the way, the seed has 'died' to become

the sprout and the flower has 'died' to become to seed. In other words, in order to make way for each of these new changes or new growths to occur, some other parts must first die.

These changes apply equally to the human life cycle as we move from birth to infancy, to adolescence, to adulthood, to mid-life, to old age and then to our own 'big deaths.'

In the modern West, one of the most noticeable and therefore potentially problematic changes is between childhood and adolescence. In our culture entering adolescence is most often an unconscious and therefore disturbing rite of passage. It would appear that this is in large part due to our western denial of death.

In order to go from child to adolescent, a person must experience not only the physical death of the child-self through the physical changes of puberty, but they must also undergo the psychological death of the child-self, which can be seen archetypally as the loss of the childhood illusions. One of these disillusionments is about facing their own mortality and that death will happen to them. They must also accept how to take on their life, that life may not be so easy, all wonderful all the time, and that they will have to take on the huge responsibility of providing for themselves and possibly for a family of their own.

Traditionally, youth would be initiated into adulthood through a rite of passage ceremony that would have them face and process these issues of mortality and allow them to release their childhood consciously.

In modern western society there is little of this type of conscious support available to youth. Yet those same changes are occurring. What we see is many young people not being able to face the 'little death' of their child-self and to let go of the associated illusions. As a result, many youth engage in life-threatening behaviors, playing on the edge of living and dying. Some youth will literalize this letting go, or 'dying' process by committing suicide, or by choosing to numb their distress with unhealthy substances, or by idealizing death and becoming obsessed with it.

Further, without the traditional ways, many of the adults of our culture do not see the incredible losses to the adolescent at the change into adulthood, even though they went through these challenges themselves. In fact, many people will go through their changes physically but will not make the full psychological shift into adulthood because they have not faced their own ultimate mortality. The opportunity of facing one's mortality is that it is the great leveller of the schema of entitlement or false pride in oneself and fear of the unknown in general, and of death in particular. As well, this process triggers and challenges one's control issues – realizing that both immediately and ultimately one does not have complete control over one's life. If these realizations come to consciousness, one has a chance to work them out.

By not enabling this process of change through accepted cultural rituals and rites for passage from one stage of life to another, we have many adults who behave psychologically as children (or teenagers at best) when they are faced with challenges in their life. As well, they are not educated on how to let go of the past so as to be able to psychologically continue to mature as they age. And then how do we end up with any wise Elders, who would be valued by the young instead of shuffled off to old age homes?

In western tradition, 'wisdom' is always associated with the capacity to let go of the past, which is the mastery of the little deaths along the way in life. This capacity is meant to be taught to younger generations so that they use their time in life wisely. In reality, life affords us many opportunities to learn 'how to die.' It is woven into the fabric of life and is easily observable as it repeats itself

continuously; some common examples of this are: transitions from one school to another, house moves, job promotion, job loss, marriage, divorce, the birth of a baby and the loss of physical independence as a person advances in age. Change, the little death, is a natural part of life.

In our culture, instead of being engaged in this way, most people's initiation to death comes through the sudden tragic loss of a loved one, which they are very often ill prepared to deal with.

To illustrate this point, we can examine the mainstream cultural responses to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001. As Canadians, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, we watched Americans attempting to understand why they were targeted. There were several people who could not, or would not, go anywhere immediately afterwards because they were too afraid to do so. It seemed that for many of those grown adults it had not occurred to them that they, or their countrymen, could die suddenly and/or tragically. It was as if they had felt immune to any kind of very real and disturbing deaths. For these people, 9/11 was a collective wake-up call about death. To us as traditional healers, this manifestation illustrates the collective denial previously discussed.

Another example of not knowing about death as a part of life occurs for many people when a significant relationship ends. Most people, by adulthood, will be confronted with the loss of at least one significant person. However, because they haven't learned to grieve their losses from other little deaths they are not practiced at grieving. Then when they lose a mate, a good friend, or another loved one, some say that 'they can't get over it'.

In our healing tradition, we look at grieving as a process that you go through every time there is a change. Grieving is in fact the way we let go of the past. The grieving we speak of allows us to get to the point where we are able to say goodbye and therefore the grieving process ceases. When we say goodbye in truth, there is a release of the attachment on the energetic level which frees all those involved in the relationship. This freedom creates the space for new opportunities to show up in one's life, otherwise known as 'rebirth'.

By mid-life, if one has not been practicing this process of letting go, new opportunities seem to become less and less and frequent. This is often followed by the 'mid-life crisis', experienced as a very serious dynamic between life and death as a very big problem instead of simply one more change of many in a life.

To traditional healers the only way you can be living in the moment is if you have let go of the attachments to your past. The practice of change and the grieving that goes along with it while we live prepares us to more easily let go of our life when we reach the end of it. And there are so many changes or losses to grieve over the course of a life that one can get very adept at change, or what we call, 'dying into life.'

If you become an adept, when you reach the end of your life you are then well practiced and knowledgeable in how this process of letting go of your past experiences works for you. You have learned how to die. By then, it is a natural part of your life to let go and your physical death becomes one more surrendering process that can be a loving and transformative experience for all involved, instead of a painful struggle to hold on to a life that you do not have anymore.

Those practitioners whose speciality is teaching people how to die well can be called 'death doulas'. Many people have heard the term birth doula, which is a woman who supports another woman during the birthing process of her baby, hence, the transition into life. Death doulas are associated with the end of life, the transition into death and some of them are shamans.

Shamanism

Shamanism encompasses both a spiritual philosophy and a lifetime of study and practice. Traditionally, the shaman is a bridge between the spiritual dimensions and the physical ones; between heaven and earth; spirit and matter. In monotheistic Traditions, this role is supposed to be served by a Priest or Priestess.

Shamans are educated in many matters of the spirit. They are able to seek information by the shamanic technique of journeying, which is a method through which they reach an altered state of consciousness in order to access the other realms where they can receive spiritual guidance on behalf of the client or community. The original tribal peoples used this technique to bring back knowledge about the mysterious process of dying and what happened afterward in order to be of service to their community. Modern shamans honour the ancient wisdom and continue to apply these techniques to support the continuing evolution of human consciousness, both individually and collectively.

Being able to offer this service sustainably comes as a result of walking the walk of the teachings by living them in one's daily lives and by dedicating one's life to becoming a vessel for this type of relationship with spirit. This is done in-service-for-the-whole, which means that it is done in the best interest of the whole community of beings, including humans and Nature, rather than for the best interest of only one human (which is exclusive). Shamans are aided by the spirit of love as well as animal and plant allies.

Shamanism and the practice of a death doula – Debbie Charbonneau's work

My training as a death doula started in 1998 when I enlisted with Kathleen Leeson, my co-author in this article, to do an herbal apprenticeship. Through this apprenticeship I was introduced to Celtic shamanism which opened the gateway to my healing abilities. I continued my studies with Kathleen in her Traditional Healer Internship. It was at this time that my soul contract was revealed and I committed to being a death doula in the world. I then proceeded to complete my palliative care certificate at Algonquin College. My teacher and now colleague, Kathleen Leeson, continues to teach me as I become teacher of other death doulas.

As a death doula, I orient my shamanic skills to work with those who are at the end of life. A death doula holds the space for the dying process to be a very unique and intimate process. For us, it is essential to honour a person's life and death.

As a death doula, I assess the dying person and their circumstances and offer them possibilities for dealing with the process of dying. Together, we discuss what would be best for them and their families and then we decide on a plan. This can change as circumstances evolve. My training has taught me to look for the true needs which can sometimes be hidden behind people's words and actions. Some clients are very aware of what they need and others do not know exactly what they need but they realize they need help. It is part of my role to discern these needs and determine how to meet them. This is different from case to case as I am open and flexible about how to do this considering the unique being that my client is.

In my one-on-one practice, I have different types of clients. Most commonly, I meet people who are at the end of their life and want to die consciously and request my assistance in doing so. Other

clients are already in the dying process and are actually physically unconscious when their loved ones contract for my services. For an unconscious client, I connect with that person's spirit to ask permission in order to work with them and to journey on their behalf.

Other clients have lost a loved one may have difficulties in letting them go, and so I work with them to facilitate their grieving processes. I can help the relatives directly or I may also act as a medium to mediate between the living and those who have passed on – in order to create the detachment that is necessary for both beings to be fully in their current lives. This detachment does not end one's love for one another, but rather releases each to their respective realities.

Other clients I work with want to explore their beliefs and/or fears about death while they are still physically healthy. For instance, there are people whose spouses are reaching the end of their life and they have challenges about that; or people reaching their mid-life and realizing that their time is finite and want help in working through those fears. In both cases, it is easier to work their fears out while they have the energy and are not under a stressful situation because one doesn't know what the future will bring. As well, I offer educational workshops, in order to help people engage with the little deaths earlier on in their life.

There are several levels involved in this work. For those who are able, we explore what is incomplete on the physical level, such as getting their paperwork in order. On the emotional and mental levels we identify what they are still attached to so that they can begin to let go of those issues. On the energetic level, my training allows me to also create the needed detachments from past experiences or remove obstacles to a good death, if they are unable to do so via the other types of processes mentioned. Most of these processes can also be offered to clients by phone.

As a death doula, it is my work both to offer my services and to educate people that healing through death is possible and available to everyone no matter their age or state of health. For instance, a family member of a dying relative reported the following:

Sheila was locked in some battle, maybe about forgiveness — normal family stuff, anger at her mother. She had this terrible fear. It all softened, not magically, but she let go of a lot, and let nature take its course. (Debbie) did a treatment every week [for four weeks] and mom [surrendered] more [until she died peacefully].

Another client wanted to complete some unfinished business with her deceased grandmother. She had had a special connection with her grandmother during her life and now that she was deceased my client felt there were words that needed to be said in order for them both to continue on their own path. She was grateful and found great comfort in being able to have a mediated conversation with her grandmother's spirit, which released each of them from the ties that bound them.

Another client's experience was with the death of their beloved pet:

We had recently acquired a ten year old Husky/Border collie mix named Willow that was destined for euthanasia if no one took her in. She was a good dog, however the family had three children under two years old and old dogs and young kids are not always a good mix. My husband and eldest daughter wanted our family to take her in. I was a bit hesitant as we already had two bichon-frise and two cats but we went to see her and instantly fell in love. We took this beautiful dog into our home and she became my daughter's best companion. We knew that the life span for large breeds was shorter than small dogs. She was already ten years old but still in good health.

After several months, we started seeing Willow age and thought it might soon be her time. Debbie had been an acquaintance for some time and we knew about her abilities to help during difficult times such as death. I invited her over to our home to see if she could "connect" with Willow. Debbie agreed that her time was near and it would not be too long before she would pass so I knew then that her quality of life was what was the most important.

On the day of Willow's death, it was early in the morning and I was getting ready for the day. I was in the kitchen when I heard a howl, just like a wolf, and I rushed over to Willow to see what was wrong. Our eyes connected, and although it was a brief moment it was a significant one, and then she was gone.

Even though I know we had extended her life I still had a heavy heart and tears of sorrow. Between sobs, I called Debbie and asked her to come over. It was a relief to know that she would be there to help us accept her death and to help Willow wherever her spirit was. The family needed to say goodbye and Debbie was willing to help. It all transpired so quickly, I was in shock and in denial that it had happened. When my daughter arrived I could see pain and guilt in her eyes and I wondered if I could have done more for her. I was angry at myself but I couldn't figure out why. I wanted to be alone in my grief as I felt ashamed that others would see how I was reacting. In the past, I had always been told: "you know, it's only a dog!" but for me she wasn't "just a dog". She was a member of our family. Debbie, in her unobtrusive way, helped to honor Willow's life.

We decided to create a funeral for Willow. Since we have a cottage in the beautiful Gatineau Hills where our family comes together regularly, we thought it was the perfect place for us to gather and offer our final goodbye.

We created a space among the trees where Willow would have her final resting place and we gathered around her. Debbie was present yet she was quiet, solemn and stayed in the background while she let our process of grieving evolve. When we got stuck or came to a roadblock, she would gently guide us on what she wanted us to do in a gentle and soft voice. At one point, she suggested that we share our feelings and bring forth memories about her - what we liked most, what we wanted to share about our dog, what we wanted to see her doing forever. This process was difficult at first but as we spoke about our memories it became easier to remember and let our feelings show.

At times, we could hear dogs howl in the surrounding area. Tears would well up now and again but I felt my heart lighten from the burden of guilt and acceptance of her death. Even though the loss of Willow was painful for us, her death was an ending and with endings there are new beginnings. This process afforded us a way to get through this transition in a supportive, loving environment.

Would I do it again? ... in a heartbeat!"

What can health practitioners do?

In Traditional Healing, all health care practitioners would have walked the walk of facing their own death. If they had not, they would have been considered unqualified to help others with any health issues. It is invariably true that some of any practitioner's clients will die while under their care, no

matter what kind of practice they are in. To be afraid of death while attempting to help others to deal with this issue is a conflict that no healer should have, since death is not the enemy, but rather another transition of being.

The avoidance of little deaths and of final deaths is found as often in conventional healthcare professionals as it is in the general public. Too often we see practitioners of all kinds pretending that everything will be fine with people who are sick or dying, when those people are usually getting that same form of reassurance – which is actually a denial of the impending death – from friends and family. In our tradition, clients should be able to rely on us to be ‘in truth’ with them. According to our tradition, the role of healers is to stay in their heart with their clients no matter what they are experiencing in their life. Sick and/or dying clients will be in need of caring professionals who will be able to stay constant and compassionate - the calm and assertive presence in the midst of the storm - who can listen to them and receive how they feel about being sick and perhaps dying without being in a state of avoidance or denial.

Because of these authentic needs, we recommend that you face your own fears fully about death – whether you are reading this article for your own needs or for the needs of your clients. Set your own affairs in order, no matter your age and explore your beliefs and traditions surrounding dying. Why not plan your own funeral? This is where the phrase ‘walking the walk’ comes into play. Find a way to process your ‘stuff’ about the end of life in order to get to a more neutral place in your own heart.

It is important to know though, that this process is ongoing throughout your life. At any time you can ask yourself these questions:

1. What beliefs about yourself, or about life, are you still holding onto?
2. Are you forty years old, or more, and still believing you are young? If so, it may well be that you haven't faced your own mortality yet.
3. How can you be working through the ‘little deaths’ in your life?
4. Take an honest inventory: are you complete with (detached from) your past hurts and regrets?

In our tradition, this is something we make the time for every year, in order to clear that particular year's losses so that they do not accumulate over time. However, it is never too late to start this process for yourself.

Normally, you can still work with clients while you are working through your own reactions to death, dying and change. Simply set your ‘stuff’ about their ‘little deaths’ aside when you are with your client. Commit to processing your reactions on your own time, preferably with a healer that you are comfortable working with. Try to recognize the ‘little deaths’ when they show up in your friends', family's and/or clients' lives and do not resist them.

As well, you must be aware of your own limitations, which also may change due to circumstances in your own life. If you are not in a position to be receptive and non-judgemental regarding your clients' end of life processes you need to take a step back and get someone else involved who is going to be able to walk with them in a supportive way.

As my teacher and co-author, Kathleen Leeson, once told me, "If nothing else challenges you in life, death will." Death is loaded with a lot of personal emotions, beliefs, and traditions that sometimes clash with each other and set off a lot of hot reactions in you and in the people around you. If you and/or your client have not been practicing ‘dying into life’ during your life then you can

be sure something will show up when death makes an appearance. Dying well, without denial, is a sign of maturity and wisdom. When you embrace the wisdom of death, you empower yourself to live authentically a life that is your own, free of fear.

In closing

We would like to leave you with a blessing from the Irish poet, John O'Donohue that illustrates the wisdom of death. He ends the poem with the mention of the Anam Cara which is, in the Celtic tradition, your soul friend or the friend of your soul; someone to whom you can divulge all your thoughts, fears, beliefs and know that you will still be held gently in their heart.

Entering Death

*I pray that you will have the blessing
Of being consoled and sure about your death.
May you know in your soul
There is no need to be afraid.
When your time comes, may you have
Every blessing and strength you need.
May there be a beautiful welcome for you
In the home you are going to.
You are not going somewhere strange,
Merely back to the home you have never left.
May you live with compassion
And transfigure everything
Negative within and about you.
When you come to die,
May it be after a long life.
May you be tranquil
Among those who care for you.
May your going be sheltered
And your welcome assured.
May your soul smile
In the embrace
Of your Anam Cara.*

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Debbie Charbonneau is a Death Doula and an End-of-Life Shaman since 2008. She is trained in holistic practices to aid and support individuals and their loved ones with death and dying processes. Her healing path and studies in traditional healing started in 1993 and she was steadfast in her pursuit to learn and apply these techniques to her own healing process.

Once she was introduced to Celtic Shamanism through a Plant Ally experience, she remembered her youthful vision to work with the dying. After taking a palliative care course, it became clear that this was where her true heart lay and so she now offers her skills to those at the end of life and those suffering from the loss of a loved one.

Her vision is to transform the existing misconceptions about Death and Dying into a Whole Making, Sustainable way of Being. www.debbiecharbonneau.ca



Kathleen Leeson RH (Registered Herbalist) is a Shamanic Healer & Clinical Herbalist who works with people to aid their healing generally and to support their maturing and attaining Wisdom, and she is also qualified to aid end of life processes. She comes naturally to Shamanism through the normal experience of 'traditional healers' by getting sick and then having to heal themselves, or 'walk the walk'. She has been on this path since the late 1980's.

Her primary relationship is to Nature and its inherent Wisdom that shows us how to live well during our time on Earth. She had already made her life's work be with

the plants as a horticulturalist before getting what is now called Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. As of now, she has been studying, working, growing, sharing, teaching, journeying & playing with the healing plants since 1982 and likes nothing better than to share the wonders hidden in the natural world with others.

Through teaching students, aiding the processes of her clients & mentoring apprentices, her own growth as an exemplary Teacher & Healer-For-Others continues to joyfully unfold.

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Debbie and Kathleen also offer Intensives exploring these themes with ancient knowledge and experiential exercises for people to engage with all of the above themes. We would love you to come to their Intensives or to bring them to your town. We are also available to work with you individually long distance. Both of us work cooperatively and are able to easily assess whose skills are most suited to your needs at any given time.

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