

On another perfect summer day in Los Angeles, six of us gathered for a day-long workshop led by Kathleen Bowen, coordinator for the Center for Biography and Social Art. Something deep within had called each one of us to this workshop entitled *The Long Goodbye: Choosing How We Face Death*. We never know what will arise when seekers gather in circle, and I, for one, have learned to approach this work with no expectation other than knowing the Mystery will have its way; I believe the expectation from the other side, if you will, is that participants (seekers) arrive with open minds and open hearts. We did, and we were not disappointed.

The somewhat remote hinterlands of Topanga Canyon in the Santa Monica mountains provided an ideal backdrop to delve into a difficult topic that is often ignored, neglected, disregarded, or even actively shunned. The fear among many is, of course, if we mention “death” we are inviting it in. And yet, it is all around us, all the time, and inevitable. So here we were, six women—seven counting Kathleen—with the courage and spirit to talk about the reality we all live with.

Under Kathleen’s gentle, focused guidance, we began by presencing someone who was approaching death or had died: four mothers, two fathers, and my maternal grandmother. These loved ones became the fulcrum for the day’s exploration and, I felt, acted like internal guides. After going around the circle sharing our names and theirs, and what makes our hearts sing, we created a nature mandala with leaves, twigs, stones, flowers, pieces borrowed from the land.

We then were invited to pick a landscape postcard, or rather, to allow it to pick us. The further invitation was then to practice deep listening—to become a vessel for the words of our dyad partner, to listen without commentary or judgment as she shared the meaning the card held for her and why she was drawn to it. This exercise is strangely liberating, for both parties. As the listener, I can bask in the connection to the other without feeling any need to come up with a witty retort, advice, a similar experience, or guilt if I don’t; it is a golden opportunity for me to receive a gift freely given. As the speaker, I feel free to express what is normally held close because I feel safe in our connection. As we speak our truth, and it is received unconditionally, we can begin to unearth our authentic selves. There are so many inherent gifts in this deceptively simple exercise!

The day continued with pastel drawings out on the terrace. We were asked to remember and draw a time we encountered death. Stories ranged from the sorrowful to the philosophical, each story as different as the women sharing them, and each voice sounding a necessary note in our song of goodbye. After lunch and some necessary levity to lighten the mood, we dove right back in with a writing exercise. Kathleen invited us to each pick three pieces from the nature mandala, write brief descriptions for each, and then circle six of the descriptive words or phrases. These words became the basis for a poem beginning “I am...” We read our individual poems aloud, and then combined all the first lines into a glorious collective poem, joining together the essence of all of us present.

We then partnered up for another opportunity to practice deep listening—after all, mastery of anything takes practice. This time, the sharing was centered around the two questions, “Tell me what death means to you” and “Tell me what comes up for you around death.” Also, instead of a short three-minute share each, we took turns sharing for five minutes each, three times, for a total of fifteen minutes! At first, this seemed impossible. I started us out, speaking of loss and finality; and I began weeping. Taking turns, we touched on aging, sorrow, quality of life and end-of-life choices, on memory and legacy, Alzheimers, life support and advanced directives, on death-in-life and fear, and on living a vital, vibrant life right here and now. By the third time around, I felt lighter, like a burden had been lifted. As I spoke and listened in turn, I could feel something shift within me, and I noticed that what I shared became less personal; I felt something opening up to encompass the universal. And I could see a similar process taking place for my partner. Whew... and, we could have gone on another hour. A well-deserved tea break followed!

For our final exercise, we created a triptychon, a three-paneled drawing. In the center we drew simple stick figures to represent a moment when we went above and beyond what we thought we could do. When this picture was complete, from it we allowed another memory, connected or not, to arise and arrive on the paper, and then a third time. Again we were invited to share, and again deep insights bubbled up from the depths. When we create space for the Mystery, there is no telling what gifts we'll find.

By the end of the day, we felt closer in some ways to each other than to people we've known for years. This type of deep sharing, especially around a “taboo” subject like death, can bring about a sense of deep connection and understanding, to another and to our own Self. How much good could come to pass if deep listening were practiced in schools, in offices, in families? We discover that, though our stories may vary wildly in their contents, we share the same underlying emotional needs: for love, security, happiness. And as we heal ourselves, as we face our shadow, others have permission to do the same. I admit, I arrived at the workshop in a bit of a funk from personal circumstances, and somewhat shaken from my drive negotiating hairpin turns and steep canyon roads (yes, I live in the flatlands), but I left feeling light and revitalized. Bringing what is suppressed or feared out of the shadow will do that! Sharing our stories is a vital part of that process. I left knowing I was meant to be here, in this circle, on this path, pursuing biography work. May our stories live on long after we do.