

Summaries: End of Life Interviews

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Introduction:

Elena Díaz Björkquist and Gail Bornfield partnered this End of Life project to video-interview members from the women's writing collective, Sowing the Seeds, about end of life issues. A list of questions was developed. Seven Comadres from Sowing the Seeds were interviewed. As the interviews progressed, other questions arose to clarify or expand a response. As an outcome of this project, Mrs. Björkquist will provide a video which will be available to the public. Dr. Bornfield is providing a written summary of each of the interviews.

The End of Life Project looks at the individual beliefs and practices utilized in everyday life to cope with death and grief. The interviews document these practices for the seven women in this project. It demonstrates both similarities and differences across individuals related to the experience of death and grief. It serves to engage the community in reflection and dialogue on end of life experiences. Lessons learned are offered by each of the participants to serve as a point of reflection for those passing through these experiences.

The questions developed were intended to give the participant as much space as possible for the development of their thoughts related to the subject. Each of the women focused on some questions more than others which was expected and permitted. The following are the questions used for the interviews.

Interview Questions for EOL Project:

1. Introduction – What is your name? Where are you from? How long have you lived in Tucson? How do you identify yourself ethnically?
2. Short explanation of EOL Project
3. Have you experienced the death of someone close to you?
4. Tell us about that death.
5. Tell us about your experience with grief related to death.
6. Tell us how you think of the afterlife and what it holds for us.
7. What do you expect for yourself related to death?
8. Tell us about the rituals around death in your family traditions. (funeral, objects, religion)
9. What is the legacy that you want to leave behind?
10. How do you want to be remembered?
11. From your experience, what are the lessons you have learned related to the end of life?

Each interview summary reflects the thoughts of the interviewee related to end of life issues. The women's identities will be kept to first name for the sake of privacy.

Geneva

Geneva was born in Safford, Arizona where she grew up and attended Eastern Arizona College. She has lived in Tucson for the past 15 years. She considers herself to be Chicano.

During 2007, Geneva's brother and his two sons passed away. Each of them died unexpectedly. Her brother, Tony, died on St. Patrick's Day. Jacob who was only 20 years old passed away in May followed in September by Justin who was just a year younger.

For Geneva, it was the worst year of her life. The funerals were each held in the Catholic tradition followed by a celebration of life with family and friends. She spoke at two of the funerals sharing poems that she had written. To get through the heartbreak, she took two deep breaths, held her emotions deep inside, and tried to keep composure as she shared memories of each. The poems continue to remind her of the love and bond she felt for each of them.

Geneva experienced each death differently. When her father passed away, he was in a great deal of pain. She was relieved at his passing, because his suffering had ended. Prior to his death, he shared with her mother that he was ready to go. Her mother scolded him but understood. She has a sense that he watches over the family now.

With her brother, it was different. He died suddenly, unexpectedly. It was a deep sadness, because she wanted more for him. She wanted him to be able to realize some of his dreams.

When her nephews passed, she asked 'why'. What happened to these beautiful young men who had so much of their lives left to live? She had dreams for them. They had dreams for themselves. But, she feels that they are all together now.

She is Catholic, and her faith brings her peace. She knows that she will see them again at some point. It's a circle of life. There is a baby girl joining the family very soon.

Her mother is her pillar of faith. Her way of healing is to pray the rosary, praying for healing, for others, and faith in God. Whenever anyone in the family is hurt or sick, someone is there to help. She serves as a role model for retaining strength through powerful losses. She believes in moving on and staying positive.

Geneva has learned that there is a sense of dignity in death. She believes that each person should be honored for their contributions, their talents and their wisdom which they shared with others during their lifetime. She also noted that just as you think the grief has passed, a reminder occurs which brings it all back. When that happens, she remembers their love and the many joyful moments.

Rosalie

Rosalie was born in Jerome, Arizona, grew up and later worked in Yuma, attended the University of Arizona, and retired to Tucson with her husband, Tommy. She is an American of Mexican descent.

Death has touched Rosalie four times throughout her lifetime. She shared that each death touches one differently. Each person grieves in their own way. With her mother, Rosalie experienced grief with gratefulness. Her mother had late stage cancer and was in a great deal of pain. Rosalie was grateful to have her suffering end, but she grieved her loss.

When her father passed, she grieved in a different way. They had been estranged for a period of many years following her mother's death. She and her father had been close while she was growing up. Her feelings of grief at his death were related to the loss of the closeness they once shared as well as the lost time that could have been shared.

Quite ill, her grandmother came to live with Rosalie and her family. They spent nine years together during which time her grandmother was hospitalized a number of times. Rosalie loved her and cared for her daily needs. When she died, Rosalie grieved her death but also experienced a 'guilty relief'.

Her husband died in 2006. He was the love of her life. He had a heart condition with which he lived for nine years. He was hospitalized with it a number of times during those years. When he was hospitalized for what was to be the final time, she expected him to return home and continue their lives as he had before. But, this time his kidneys failed, she assumed a specialist would be called in to deal with the problem. Instead, they called hospice and sent him home. Rosalie became concerned with the cleanliness of the house and the dogs. She sought help from her daughter. When her husband got home, she expected that they would have time together to talk. That was not to be. He passed away while she was sitting on the porch talking with friends. She continues to cycle through grief. She misses him terribly.

Rosalie shared in conclusion, "When a death is expected, everybody should come together. It should then be explained that we are going to have a death. It won't be the way that you expect. Everyone grieves in their own way. Each loss is different from the others. No one grieves the same for each loss."

Joan

Joan (pronounced Joanne) was born in Henrietta, Ohio near Cleveland and will turn 96 years old very soon. It was the era of the depression. Her parents lost their home and farm, but they wanted her to have an education. Her parents took her to visit a friend in the city. She was told while they were visiting that she would be staying. Her mother told her, 'you are gonna stay here and go to school'. She stayed and graduated from high school. There was no money for college. She married and had two children.

Arriving in Tucson in 1953 to be near her younger brother, she reached her dream of living in the west. She spent a year in California but returned. She came with two young children to support and a little money that she had saved. She was now separated from her husband whom she later divorced.

Her grandmother passed away after her arrival in Tucson. She borrowed a hundred dollars to travel back to her funeral. She remembers her grandfather walking to the casket with her. After the viewing, he told her, "I love her (grandmother) as much today as ever."

Other deaths occurred over the years, but Joan was busy working two or three jobs and raising her children. She was not able to return to Ohio for any other funerals. She didn't think too much about it, because she was so busy.

Her parents donated their bodies to science upon their deaths. She has made arrangements with the University Medical School to do the same.

At one point in her life, she traveled to Russia to visit a group of people who were practicing twelfth century paganism. Across several weeks, she found them to be compassionate and kind. She remembers them with fondness. She considers herself to be a pagan.

Joan has no expectations at death of an afterlife. As an independent woman, she spent her life being curious and adventurous. She encourages others to not be afraid. She enjoyed being accepted as her own person, not someone in another's shadow. Asked about death she replied, "At death, life is over. It simply ends."

Nanette

Nanette was born in Haiti. She immigrated to the United States at the age of 10 years. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York. She and her husband moved to Tucson 17 years ago.

Losses in Nanette's life include her brother, nephew, grandmother, father and son. Each one was heartbreaking, but the loss of her son who was just starting first grade was debilitating. She considers his loss the worst thing that could happen. He was hit by a car, so she had a happy beautiful son one minute and in the next he was gone. It took two years for her to fully realize that he wouldn't be coming back.

Nanette describes a dark space covering her from which she tried to escape. This went on for a couple of years. It wasn't until she sought help from the Friends' Grief Group that she was able to escape the darkness. They provided a safe haven to cry and discuss feelings and the bottomless pit of pain. She feels that without that group, she may never have left the 'dark space'.

This experience left her in absolute fear, realizing that no one is promised time. She tries to be as positive as possible appreciating that life is precious.

Raised Catholic, she tried to be the best person she knew how to be in order to be with her son upon her own death. At this point in time, she is not sure she believes in an afterlife.

Her grandfather died in his sleep two days after he got sick. He was 95 or 100 years old. Records were not kept at the time of his birth. When Nanette was young and going to visit him, he would begin walking at five in the morning to meet her plane which arrived at noon. He would greet her, she hailed a cab, and he began walking home. When he stopped walking, she knew he was about to pass.

In Haitian tradition, the services for the deceased take three days. On the day the person dies, the wake occurs where the mourners share their good and fun memories. On day two, beginning before the burial, serious crying occurs. It settles on the mourners that the person has really died and won't be returning. Teas and coffees are held, people share moments of reflections.

On the third day, the burial is held. A funeral takes place in a Catholic church. The mourners wear black for the funeral and continue to wear it for up to a year. It is an external expression of grief. Three colors are permitted: black, white, black and white, and gray. Nanette felt good wearing black. Other people understood that she had experienced a close loss when she wore those colors.

If you lose a child and hope to have another one, Haitian tradition forbids the mother from attending the burial of the lost child. Nanette felt this practice was supportive, as she could not have emotionally handled being at the burial. She went to the gravesite the next day.

She shares that she experienced a level of guilt at her son's death, feeling she had not kept him safe. She did not experience this with the other deaths of loved ones close to her. It was hard for her to move on from her son's death. She advises those suffering from a deep loss to seek out a group of people who understand, who are there when you need them, and allow you to grieve openly.

Rosi

Rosi was born in Tucson, Arizona the daughter of a Mexican American father and Spanish immigrant mother. She has spent her life in Tucson. She earned a doctorate in Women's Studies from the University of Arizona where she now directs research projects.

She feels that death and grieving are difficult and the type of death can make it worse. She has lost a father and two brothers. Her brothers each died suddenly. She feels that a person's perception of death changes with age, and conversely that death can change a person's life forever. One can never go back to the way it was before the death. Death is forever.

One of her brothers was murdered at the age of 16. Another died from a blunt force trauma injury sustained in an accident resulting from a drunken driver. She discovered that people are generally uncomfortable with the family of someone who died as a victim of crime. They interact differently with the family. People tend not to know what to say. They lack connectedness to the events.

In her experience, all emotions are equal at the time of death, e.g. shock, grief, loss. Death can feel very wrong. Death at the hands of another shakes you to the very core of your being. It leads you to question humanity. It challenges your ability to be resilient.

She finds that the rituals of death are guided by religious practice. It is comprised of routines that have been put into place by a church or marketed by a funeral home. It is the business of death. In her experience, it provided neither comfort nor peace.

Rosi's mother is aging and ill. Her mother has preplanned and prepaid for her funeral. Rosi feels this will make it more personal, because it reflects her personality and beliefs. Her mother has selected the flowers, music, and photos to be shared.

She helps women find their voices and share their stories. Rosi believes that her own legacy lies in this work. She wishes to be remembered as respectful to others – as a person who had a sense of connectedness to others, a sense of being in the world.

Grief is private she tells us. With profound loss, there is a dark bottomless void that holds a sense of nothingness. It is easy to get lost in that void. Don't go down there, she warns. Instead, try to find meaning in your day to day life. Replace the loss with something meaningful. Who we are and what we do will continue to the very end of our own lives.

Kaitlin

Moving from southern coastal California, Kaitlin has lived in Tucson for eleven years with her husband. Her father was Mohawk and her mother was Irish. She considers herself to be of mixed ethnicity.

Kaitlin has spent her life working as a hospice nurse. As a child, she was a “sitter” which in traditional Irish culture is a person who sits with those who are dying. She has witnessed the passing of hundreds of people. She believes that with support, the end is meant with peace, relationships (positive and negative) are released, and life itself is then gracefully released. For family and friends, she finds it important to recognize death as a part of life, not holding on to the one passing but allowing them to transition peacefully.

Her father opted to die alone. It was consistent with who he was in life. He preferred to be alone and did not develop relationships with his children. He had been a difficult man whom Kaitlin worked hard not to emulate. When he passed, she found a little drawer with every card she had ever given him, each with a hand written response from him which he had chosen not to share with her. They were never sent. Her sadness at his loss centers on wishing she could have known him better.

In her Irish Catholic upbringing, the first son and first daughter are assigned to the Church. Her brother was assigned to the priesthood and she to the convent. Her brother later committed suicide. When she was 16 years old, she chose to serve in a Veteran’s Hospital. At that time, soldiers were returning from the Korean Conflict and the Viet Nam War. She witnessed a lot of death. Her early training focused on selflessness as a goal. She realized that she had to determine how much of herself could be given to others. She felt that it was not healthy to martyr oneself to a cause.

The lessons that Kaitlin has learned over time include not being dishonest about the deceased. It is healthier to simply say that the person was difficult, lived a challenging life, or tested the love of those closest. She reminds us that it is also important to keep ‘regret’ in the perspective of one’s entire life. For example, the theft of a casserole dish in youth should not form the basis of thinking of oneself as a thief.

She finds it important to discuss the process of dying and the related fears. The dying person should finish their story. Many have unfinished work. Allow them to finish. Perhaps a letter to a person lost to a conflict or argument would suffice. Allow creativity to flourish. Death is comparable to leaving your cloak by the side of the road. Once left, you will make the passage across.