



FIND YOUR * CALLING

MIDWIFING

THE SOUL

BY WINTER ROSS

Original Collage © Laura Carl.

The practical, emotional, and spiritual support of end-of-life doulas can make the transition process more meaningful for the dying and their loved ones.

Alua Arthur presents herself on the TEDx stage looking the opposite of the Grim Reaper. She is resplendent in a bright orange ensemble, her glittering jewelry and beribboned heels a metaphor for the ecstatic side of life. The subject of her talk—living in the present, dying well, and midwifing the dying as her life purpose—is serious. She describes the conditions she hopes for at her own good death, concluding with a joke, “And if I die with a bra on, I’m coming back to haunt everybody.”

With the recent demand for holistic care, the rise of the Good Death Movement, and the Covid pandemic, the role of the death doula has grown into an appreciated and respected profession.

Doula (feminine) and *doulos* (masculine) are the Greek words for *slave*. In many cultures, the burden of midwifery, childcare, and tending to the sick and dying often fell to female domestic servants. Although the word *doula* was adopted in the 1970s, not long after the hospice movement began, some contemporary practitioners would like to see the term change because of this link to slavery.



Original Collage © Laura Carl.

But no matter the name, those who assist and specialize in aiding the dying have been with us for thousands of years. They may be called a death walker, thana-doula, sacred passage doula, end-of-life specialist, dying guide, or soul midwife.

End-of-life doulas may work closely with hospice or hospitals, offering nonmedical palliative care. They often help with end-of-life documents or counsel family members. In an era of increasing social isolation, those without adult children, a partner, or a close circle of friends benefit greatly from the companionship and help of an end-of-life guide. Doulas may initiate legacy projects with clients, such as organizing photographs and memoirs. Some use

sound, touch, aromatherapy, meditation, or guidance through journaling. Others include funeral planning, ceremonies, or afterdeath services. All provide nonmedical, practical, emotional, and spiritual support for the passage from life to death.

Rose Gordon of Circles of Compassionate Care in Taos, New Mexico, has been a grief counselor, doula, and trainer for 30 years. She was the director for Being with Dying, a program at Upaya Zen Center, as well as serving prison and homeless populations. She's also spoken at many professional conferences.

As she assisted a dying friend in 1989, she had an intuitive realization: *I was meant for this*. As someone outside her friend's family system, she discovered she had the perspective and natural ability to smooth the way for everyone. She is inspired by the words of Dame Cicely Saunders, an early pioneer of hospice in England, who asserted that "the way we give care can touch the hidden places in people." Gordon describes the fundamental skills of an end-of-life doula using the acronym PEACE, standing for presence, equanimity, appreciation, compassion, and ethical engagement.

"I believe our care for the dying calls on qualities that demonstrate respect for the sacred, though not somber, territory we enter in our relationships with the dying," she explains.

ARE DEATH DOULAS LICENSED?

There are no licensing or certification requirements for end-of-life guides in the United States. Death doulas don't work in a medical capacity. But due to the skills, knowledge, and intimate emotional contact required for the role, training is essential. Even indigenous or culturally mentored individuals would benefit from learning the laws and ethics surrounding end-of-life considerations

HOW ARE END-OF-LIFE DOULAS TRAINED?

In the past, those who took on the role of death doula probably apprenticed much like birth coaches and midwives did. Now, many organizations, private educators, and schools offer training online and in person. They teach standards of practice, require proficiency exams, and award their own certifications. Philosophies vary, including the pragmatic, the academic, and the experiential.

For example, Going with Grace, the organization founded by Alua Arthur, teaches practical skills. Prospective doulas learn to develop capable business practices, work holistically in conjunction with medical teams, help with bureaucratic decisions, and design alternative funerals.

The University of Vermont issues certifications for death doulas. The university offers classes in a theoretical vein, such as Introduction to the Grief Continuum, Understanding the Patient/Client Experience, Ethics and Essentials, and Death Practice and Belief Systems.

Gordon suggests assisting at a local hospice, before or after formal training, because volunteering allows someone to know

if this specialized field is really for them. “Being with somebody when they’re dying can be so liminal, so numinous an experience that people are just really taken away by it, but that doesn’t mean they know how to do the work,” she says. “Hospice gives someone considering this a realistic view of death without being consumed by the experience.”

Gordon adds, “I don’t believe there’s an outside expert in being with dying. The people we see are the experts in their own death. We bring information and knowledge when appropriate, but I’m also following their lead—what matters to them. How do they want this time of their life to feel? What are they concerned about? What best supports them? What brings them a bit of joy?”

HOW ARE DEATH DOULAS PAID?

In America, health insurance and Medicare don’t cover end-of-life doula services. Sometimes, hospice will support doulas through grants, scholarships, and private donations. Some organizations provide pro bono work for incarcerated people, the homeless, or veterans. However, it’s usually the client or family who bears the expense.

Independent practitioners may offer clients a sliding scale or negotiate a flat fee based on specific services or needs. Death doulas are paid between \$25 and \$100 an hour, depending on whether they work for an organization or are self-employed. The average annual salary in the United States is about \$49,000.

WHAT ABOUT CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS?

It is worth noting that death doulas, although working with a dying person’s spiritual concerns, never promote their own religious beliefs. They are sensitive to their clients’ cultures, rituals, ancestral traditions, and worldviews.

“We don’t have to know everybody else’s culture,” says Gordon, “but if you go in slowly, with appreciation and humility, and you pay attention, you can be with people in the way that suits them best. What we’re bringing is our human care and concern, and that’s the place we all meet. We are all born, and we all die.”

WHAT CAN CLIENTS EXPECT?

Those seeking the services of a death doula will want to research options to find a good fit. Along with word-of-mouth recommendations, the National End-of-Life Doula Alliance (nedalliance.org) and the International End-of-Life Doula Association (inelda.org) are good places to start.

There is no average amount of time a doula spends with clients. Everyone’s requirements vary. Visits to a dying person may be several times a week. Counseling with an individual family member may last a couple of hours. A presence during the death may last all day. Gordon can usually ascertain a family’s needs within a free half-hour consultation. She then provides an

outline, price, and custom contract, cocreating a plan with the dying and their loved ones.

An adult son spoke of his 90-year-old father’s journey as an end-of-life guide supported them: “The lessons and insights continue to unfold. My dad and I didn’t have a particularly close relationship, and I never felt as if I could connect with him at the deeper levels my heart really craved. The counselor we were lucky to have access to encouraged me to share with him thoughts and feelings I may have been holding back, thinking not to upset him in our last few days together, but sharing those deepened our connection even more, and I am very grateful.”

In attending her father-in-law’s death, a client of Gordon’s writes: “It was a unique experience, one that I was honored to be a part of. Our end-of-life doula helped us spiritually prepare for the transition and hold space for it. Among many things, she counseled us to understand that during those few weeks, he would be retreating from this world—and that it was natural. Her counsel helped us codesign a process that made the experience much more than simply life transitioning to death. She encouraged us to make it a celebration of relationship. Her presence helped him fully articulate what he wanted. As he transitioned, the doula stood behind his head and read him the most moving spiritual blessing, honoring what he’s given and how his entering and exiting this world fit the patterns of the natural world. It was one of the most beautiful, poetic pieces of writing I’ve ever heard. And it was personal—written for him specifically, based off her experience of him and of all of us during the process.”

Psychotherapist Mona Silkwood speaks of her partner’s passing: “Our guide held us both with great tenderness and care. Her consistent, calm, respectful way of being with us engendered deep trust, which was so necessary for us to do the work that was before us. I am forever grateful that she was there for us in our greatest hour of need.”

HONORING THE SACRED JOURNEY

Gordon’s mission with Circles of Compassionate Care is to “reclaim our legacy of working with the dying. As end-of-life doulas, we can do that by developing a calm, stable presence, fearlessness, and compassion, along with an abiding warmth and appreciation for the triumphs in the dying person’s life.”

Death doulas support people through what is probably the most intense and intimate time in their lives. They are changing the way society deals with death by encouraging open conversations about what was once taboo, changing the way we die, and therefore the way we live. ☮