

Fond farewell

To write “A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying,” Donna M. Authers drew on the lessons she learned that have helped her defeat her own fears of death and loss.

By [David A. Maurer](#)

Published: January 4, 2009

[» 0 Comments](#) | [Post a Comment](#)

Donna M. Authers had been doing dishes in the kitchen when her terminally ill mother called to her from the living room and matter-of-factly announced that she thought her death was near.

The ailing woman calmly said she felt as though she were separating from her body. At times it seemed as if only half of her was in the earthly realm.

Within days the mother was gone. Authers grieved, but she says it was a good grief resulting from her coming to grips with the understanding that death is not an evil thing, but the inevitable conclusion of life.

The Albemarle County woman describes her awakening to this reality in her recently released book, “A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying.” She also shares the intimate experience of caring for her mother during her final days.

Authers’ ability to face death head-on is all the more remarkable given how the idea of death had gripped her with a near-paralyzing terror for a good part of her life. The terrifying irreversibility of death first imprinted on her 2-year-old mind in early 1945, when her father, who was serving with the Army in the Philippines, was killed in action.

Authers’ mother remarried and soon gave birth to a baby girl. Tragically, the infant was less than a year old when it died of spinal meningitis on the author’s fifth birthday.

In quick succession Authers’ grandfather and then a favorite uncle died unexpectedly. When her aunt died at the age of 38, it reinforced her awareness that death could strike down anyone at any time.

“I spent most of my adult life fearing death and certainly the dying process,” said Authers, who will be discussing her book and signing copies at the New Dominion Bookshop on Charlottesville’s Downtown Mall at 12:15 p.m. Thursday.



“It wasn’t until my grandmother’s death when I was in my 40s that I began to have a different perspective. She had called me to speak about her views of life and death because her children wouldn’t talk to her about dying.

“Isn’t that amazing that she could talk to her granddaughter, but her children were so close to her they couldn’t bear the thought of discussing her leaving. She really wanted to talk, and I found that to be true in so many situations.

“So my hope is that the book helps open the dialog among family members. Once you accept the reality of death and get your affairs in order, you then can enjoy life without it hanging over your head.”

For many years Authers has served as a volunteer caregiver through the Stephen Ministry. The international organization works through local churches, several of which are in the Charlottesville area, to train congregation members to be an extension of pastoral care.

Volunteers are matched one-on-one with a person going through some type of personal crisis. The crisis can take many forms, but often has to do with health or some sort of grieving situation.

Authers also works with Hospice of the Piedmont. It was this national organization that helped her care for her mother and made the mother’s last weeks as comfortable as possible.

“People are typically afraid to even say the word ‘hospice,’ because they view it as giving up,” said Authers, who moved to the area from New York four years ago with her husband, Roger. “When, in fact, hospice is for the living, which is the title of one of the chapters in my book.

“It’s designed to help a patient and their family maintain the quality of life they have left. I learned recently that people who are in hospice care early, as soon as they know they have an incurable condition, actually often live longer than people who don’t get hospice care.

“We have a wonderful hospice here in Charlottesville, and others are available in most communities across the country.”

Authers said one of the reasons she undertook the daunting task of writing her first book was to honor those who gave her the privilege of being with them when they took the step into the hereafter. She also wanted to alleviate fear of dying by sharing what she has learned about the process through firsthand experience.

“When a person gets closer to death, they do start to withdraw,” said Authers, who, before retiring in 1993, worked in sales and management for 30 years, mostly with the IBM Corp. “Things that were once important are no longer so.

“My mother stopped watching the news and reading newspapers, which is very common. She said she had to prepare herself and wanted to fill her mind with as many good, happy and peaceful thoughts as she could.

“Dave is another person I write about in the book. He felt as though he was being scrubbed, cleansed and prepared for the best journey of his life. He was anticipating something wonderful, and who knows what kind of visions, dreams or whatever he was experiencing, but he had absolutely no fear.”

That’s not to say the dynamics of dying will be tidy and neat even if all the right steps are taken. Authers’ honest reconstruction of her mother’s final days graphically demonstrates how ongoing life can complicate things.

“It was difficult deciding whether or not I wanted to expose myself and our family experience to the world like this,” Authers said after a thoughtful pause. “But I didn’t see any other way to answer the questions people have about the feeling part.

“How did it feel to actually go through that process, not with a stranger or a care receiver you were working with, but a family member? Did it all come together in this nice, neat little package, because I had followed all the steps?

“The answer is no. The dying process can be pretty messy, and that’s why we need support. We need to realize that receiving care can be a glorious luxury that we need to take advantage of at times like this.

“We are not meant to do it alone. And when we do do it alone, it’s often much more painful and much more difficult on every level, physically, emotionally and spiritually.”

As a member of England’s Royal Marine Commandos, the Rev. Nigel Mumford knows well the trauma that comes from seeing close friends die suddenly in combat. That, and a remarkable healing of his sister he believes came about through prayer, ultimately resulted in his dedicating his life to the ministry of healing.

Mumford has known Authers and her husband for years, and calls her new book an “amazing resource and personal story.” He thinks the work gets to the very heart of what it is that most humans don’t want to talk about, much less face.

“As humans we don’t do grieving or death well at all, and men and women grieve very differently,” said Mumford, director of Christ the King Spiritual Life Center in Greenwich, N.Y. “Most of the time women are very good at grieving, and men are hopeless, because we’re told as kids that big boys don’t cry, and that’s a crock, because we do.

“So the subject of death and dying is often just pushed aside, because it’s such a horrific subject and so painful. I think the twofold strike in Donna’s book is the fact she tells a story and then explains what she has learned from it.

“She’s also not shy about explaining her grief, which I think is very powerful. Her candid transparency of the pure expression of the grief in her soul is expressed extremely well.”

One of the many things Authers has learned from the dying is how to cut through the irrelevant minutiae of life and get to what's important. She said this alone was a gift that has changed her life.

“To sit there and listen to a dying person tell you intimate details of their lives is a privilege almost beyond words,” Authers said. “To have them talk about their regrets, joys, goals and accomplishments, and then be able to help them realize their life had value and meaning, is a profound and humbling experience.

“The best thing anyone can do for the dying is to just listen to them. Often this is called a ministry of presence. More than at any other time in a person's life this is when they need someone to listen, understand, empathize and be a sounding board as they think through alternatives to help them cope, deal or solve the situation they're in.”

Authers said family members and close friends of the dying person should be open to receiving care as well. She explained that it's often helpful to find someone outside the tight inner circle who can be a rational and nonjudgmental presence for the dying person.

“A good listener listens actively,” Authers said. “You listen and then you help the person hear what they themselves are saying by asking clarifying questions or rephrasing to help them identify what the real issue is.

“Often when we're in crisis we're in a very emotional state and you can't make rational decisions. A good listener with reflective questioning techniques can help the person identify what the issues are that they can grapple with.

“I've found that people generally react in two different ways when dealing with the dying. They will either bring meals and try to figure out what little errands and chores they can help the person with, or they will avoid the person altogether.

“They isolate themselves because they don't know what to say. My book will give people a lot of advice and ideas on what to do, say and not say to people going through a health crisis.”

Since becoming a volunteer caregiver Authers has been with many people as the final grains in their hourglass of life have dropped away. Sharing those final precious moments have given her many insights.

“My book is largely written from the perspective of the person who has already passed along the sacred walk and into the next life,” Authers said. “On their way they've shared so many lessons with me, and that's why I've felt compelled to share them with others.

“I remember asking my grandmother when she was dying why we're here. She said we're here to help each other get through it, and that life is worth living when you're living a life in service to others.

“Everybody has to come to terms with death and dying in their own way. For me it was through my grandmother’s faith and my own belief that there is an afterlife.

“My belief system and experiences have convinced me that our body is merely the house we live in, and we will live forever.”

Authors will be discussing and signing her book “A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying,” at New Dominion Bookshop at 404 E. Market St. in Charlottesville, at 12:15 p.m. Thursday. For more information on the book, visit Web site <http://www.asacredwalk.com>.