

CHAPTER 1

Death Work Is Life Work

After all those afternoons wandering All Saints Cemetery whispering names off headstones, I thought I understood something about death. I thought I had the vibe down: quiet, peaceful, earthy. I thought death would always feel like grass under my shoes, cool stone under my fingers, some mysterious hush that didn't need to be feared.

But nothing, I mean nothing, prepares you for the first time death shows up in front of you not carved in stone, not tucked neatly under the ground, but happening right there in a bed only a few feet away from where you're standing. Nothing prepares you for the moment death stops being a concept and becomes a person you've grown to care about.

I was a new nurse in a long-term-care facility, still figuring out where everything lived in the supply closet and how to clock in without messing it up. And like most new nurses, I had latched onto a couple of favorite residents right away. We're not supposed to have favorites. . .but we all do.

One of mine was a man with developmental disabilities who met me at the nurses' station every single morning. Every day. Same time. Same smile. He didn't have any living family, no visitors, no one calling to check on him. The staff was the only family he had left, and we loved him the way family loves you, with softness, with humor, with candy bars slipped into his hands when no one was looking.

That morning, the nurses station felt off before I even got my coat off. He wasn't there.

I felt it immediately, that weird internal shift when something is wrong and your body knows before your brain does. I asked where he was.

A co-worker shrugged and said, "He's actively dying."

That phrase meant nothing to me at the time. No one had taught me what "active dying" looks like or what it even means. It wasn't part of orientation. No one sat down and said, *Here's what happens to a human body when it's nearing the end, and here's how to support them*. I was learning by fire.

I went straight to his room. He was lying in bed, eyes open, terrified. Not uncomfortable, terrified. He kept saying he was scared. He kept calling out for help in this panicked, pleading voice, and my heart just dropped. I held his hand and tried to reassure him, but I was new and barely holding it together myself.

This wasn't the peaceful, gentle death I'd imagined. This wasn't the quiet cemetery from my childhood. This was raw fear.

I went to the seasoned nurse on staff and asked what to do. She told me, without even looking up from her charting, "Call hospice and keep it moving. You've got 42 other patients today."

Her tone wasn't cruel. It was. . .normal. It was the routine. It was the system.

I called hospice. In my mind, I pictured someone arriving to sit with him. Someone who would take his hand, lower their voice, be the calm presence he needed. But the hospice nurse, kind as she was, had a full schedule, too. She adjusted his medications, made recommendations, and had to leave for her next patient.

And so, it was just. . .us. A facility full of good people with no time.

The rest of that day, I skipped lunch and used every spare minute I had to sit beside him, even if it was just for 60 seconds at a time. I'd run meds down the hall and then slip back in. Chart for a moment

and then slip back in. I held his hand and told him he wasn't alone even though, deep down, I knew he mostly was.

He died on the twelfth hour of my shift.

I wasn't in the room. I was down the hall doing CPR on another resident. The alarms were blaring, people yelling orders, gloves snapping, the whole chaotic ballet of healthcare, and, meanwhile, my sweet morning greeter took his last breath alone in the dark.

I remember standing in the hallway afterward, leaning against the wall, just. . .stunned. Heartbroken. Angry in a way I didn't have words for yet. Not angry at anyone in particular angry at the system that left no time for compassion. Angry that dying people had become tasks instead of humans. Angry that he had cried for help and the best we could offer him was "I'll be right back."

In that moment, I understood something nobody had ever taught me in nursing school:

We are failing people at the end of their lives. Not because we don't care, but because the system doesn't allow us to show it.

I didn't have the language for it yet. I didn't know the word *doula*. I didn't know anything about holistic end-of-life support. I just knew something was broken, and I couldn't unsee it.

That experience became the crack that let all the light in. It pulled me into death work long before I even realized I was heading there.

Since then, I've sat beside hundreds of dying people. I've heard their last words, their regrets, their whispered truths. And over and over, the themes repeat:

"I wish I hadn't worked so much."

"I wish I'd let myself be happy."

"I wish I'd said what I needed to say."

That's when it hit me, hard and permanently:

Death work isn't really about dying. It's about living.

When you sit that close to the end, you stop pretending you have all the time in the world. You wake up. You start paying attention. You start feeling your life again, not sleepwalking through it.

Death has a way of slapping the nonsense right out of you.

What matters starts to matter more.

What doesn't matter drops away.

And that's why this work matters.

That's why *this book* matters.

Because when you accept that life is temporary, you finally start living on purpose.

The Misunderstanding of Death Work

Most people think death work is about dying. It's not.

When people hear "death doula," they picture someone sitting vigil, whispering final goodbyes, or lighting candles beside a body. They imagine grief and sorrow, maybe even something morbid or spooky. What they don't realize is that death work isn't about the end at all; it's about everything that leads up to it.

It's about how we live, how we love, how we let go.

In healthcare, we're taught that death is a failure. The language alone exposes the culture:

"Expired."

"Coded."

"We lost them."

"Body ready for transport."

We rush to clear the room, cover the body, reset the bed.

Efficiency over humanity.

Checklists over presence.

Silence filled with tasks because stillness feels like failure.

But that first death showed me something else entirely.

That man didn't need another medication adjustment.

He didn't need another order set.

He needed someone to look him in the eye and say, "You're not alone."

But the system had no place for that.

That's why death doulas exist.

It's not that healthcare workers don't care; they care deeply. It's that they're trapped in a model that treats *dying as a problem to fix instead of a process to honor*. Nurses, doctors, and aides were trained to fight death tooth and nail but not to walk beside it.

Death doulas exist because no one should die scared and alone. No one should be so busy keeping people alive that they forget to help them die well.

Death isn't only medical work. It's mostly human work.

And we've misunderstood that for far too long.

As doulas, our job isn't to save lives, it's to hold them. To create a sacred pause in a world that doesn't like to stop. To remind people that there's beauty even in the hardest goodbyes.

It's the art of staying when everyone else is rushing away.

When I say, "Death work is life work," this is what I mean. The closer you get to death, the more clearly you see life. The more you witness loss, the more fiercely you love.

We don't fix death.

We witness it.

We don't avoid grief.

We make space for it.

We don't run.

We stay.

And in the staying, we learn what it means to be fully, deeply human.

What Death Work Teaches Us About Living

Death work teaches you gratitude in its rawest, least-Instagrammable form. Not the cute "gratitude journal" kind, the gritty kind. The kind where you wake up, take a breath, stretch your legs under the blankets, and think, *Damn, I get another day? Another shot?*

Because when you sit at enough bedsides, when you've heard enough last breaths, enough final confessions, enough whispered regrets, you start to understand something most people spend their whole lives trying not to think about:

None of this is guaranteed.

Not tomorrow.

Not the next hour.

Not even the next minute.

And once you let that truth settle into your bones, you stop wasting your time pretending you're promised a "later." You stop saving joy for the weekend. You stop waiting for the "right moment" to rest or apologize or tell someone you love them. You stop filling your life with things that don't matter because you finally understand, in the deepest way, that your time *is* your life.

That kind of awareness changes everything about the way you show up in the world. You parent differently. You love differently. You listen differently. You stop talking just to fill the silence and start respecting stillness as its own kind of medicine. You learn that presence, real, honest, undistracted presence is the most powerful gift you can ever offer another human being.

Over and over, death has shown me that while it takes from us, the people we love, moments we weren't ready to lose, chapters we weren't done living, it also *reveals*. It reveals what mattered most. It reveals the people who were worth our time and the ones who never deserved our exhaustion. It reveals how much of our lives we spend chasing things that never deserved our energy. Death is the great truth teller. It doesn't just strip life away; it strips life *down*, leaving only what's real.

It reminds us that the goal was never to live forever.

The goal is to live *fully*.

That's the irony of being a death doula. The closer you get to death, the more alive you become. The more time you spend with people

who are dying, the more you realize how much of life you've been sleepwalking through. You start savoring the slow mornings. You linger longer in hugs. You notice the way your kid's hair smells when they climb into your lap. You say *no* more often. You say *yes* more intentionally. You stop apologizing for wanting a life that feels good.

And slowly, quietly, beautifully, you realize something else:

Death isn't the opposite of life; it's part of it.

It's the mirror every one of us will face someday.

When it finally turns toward you, the only question it will ask is:

What did you do with the time you had?

WHY IT MATTERS/THE INVITATION INTO THE WORK

Death work matters because somewhere along the way, our culture forgot what dying really is. We've turned it into a medical emergency, a problem to be solved, a failure to be prevented. We've tucked death into back rooms and hushed conversations and sterile hallways that smell like antiseptic instead of love. We've sanitized grief, rushed funerals, and conditioned people to think death is something shameful or frightening, something we don't talk about until we're forced to.

And in all that avoidance, we've lost something essential.

When we avoid death, we avoid truth.

And when we avoid truth, we stop living honestly.

That is why this work matters.

Death doulas bring humanity back to dying, and with it, bring meaning back to living.

We remind people that love still exists in the last hours. That forgiveness is still possible, that reconciliation can still happen, that a person can take their final breath feeling held instead of abandoned. We show families that presence is the most powerful medicine, and that silence, when shared with intention, can be holy.

Every person deserves to die feeling seen and cared for. Every family deserves guidance through the storm. And every community deserves to remember how to show up for one another in times of loss, not with fear but with tenderness.

This is the work.

And this is where **you** come in.

When a death doula walks into a space, confident, compassionate, unafraid, the room shifts. Fear softens. Shoulders drop. People breathe again. They realize, often for the first time, “Oh. We’re allowed to talk about this. We’re allowed to feel this. We’re allowed to do this differently.”

That’s how the narrative changes, one conversation at a time, one bedside at a time, one brave human willing to speak the truth out loud.

Right now, most people remember the death of a loved one through a lens of panic: chaotic rooms, unanswered questions, fear hanging in the air like a second oxygen. Everyone rushing, everyone scared, everyone guessing. It becomes a traumatic memory because no one ever taught them another way.

But with a death doula in the picture, the entire story unfolds differently.

Instead of chaos, there is calm.

Instead of confusion, there is clarity.

Instead of loneliness, there is presence.

Families remember the beauty of the death plan their loved one created. They remember how they honored final wishes with reverence. They remember the peace of knowing what to do, how to do it, and why it mattered. They remember feeling connected. Supported. Held.

They don’t just remember the moment of death; they remember the way it *felt*.

The warmth.

The intimacy.

The sacredness.

That is the power of this work.

We cannot stop death, but we can change the way people experience it and that changes everything.

Being a death doula isn't just a role you play. It's a calling. It asks you to show up with your whole heart, your intuition, and your humanity intact. It asks you to be comfortable in the places others avoid. It asks you to witness the softest, scariest, most honest moments of a person's life and hold space for them exactly as they are.

You don't need to have all the answers.

You just need to be willing to be there.

If you're reading this book, you're here for a reason. Something in you already knows that this work is sacred. Something in you is ready to unlearn the fear and step closer to the truth. Something in you wants to be part of changing the way we die and in doing so, changing the way we live.

So here is my invitation to you:

Step closer.

Learn what it means to labor out of life with grace, dignity, and humanity.

Let this work soften you where the world has hardened you.

Let it strengthen you where grief has made you small.

Let it rearrange you. Let it grow you. Let it wake you up.

Because when you commit to death work, you're not just helping people die, you're helping the living remember how to live.

And every time you do that, you're rewriting the story the world tells about death, one family, one bedside, one sacred goodbye at a time.

REFLECTION: SITTING WITH YOUR DYING SELF

Before you move into the next chapter, I want you to do something that might feel a little strange at first, but I promise you, it will change the way you move through this book, and maybe even the way you move through your life.

I want you to sit with your dying self.

Not in a morbid way, not in a fearful way, in a deeply human way. In a way that lets you meet the wisest, softest, most honest version of you.

Find a quiet place if you can. Put your phone somewhere it can't vibrate in your ear. Let the noise and the lists and the obligations fade to the edges. Take a breath long enough to feel your ribs move. Then take another.

Now imagine yourself at the very end of your life.

Old.

Wise.

Soft around the edges.

Someone who has lived, loved, grieved, rested, and risen more times than you can count.

Picture that version of you looking back at the person you are right now, the one holding this book, curious enough and brave enough to be here.

And ask her:

Would my dying self be at peace with how I'm spending my days?

Would she feel proud of the way I love, the way I rest, the way I show up in the world?

Would she feel that I lived with intention. . .or that I kept waiting for "later," as if later was ever guaranteed?

Let whatever answers rise to the surface. Don't push them away. Don't tidy them up. Don't judge yourself for what comes up, judgment is useless in this practice. Honesty is everything.

Just listen.

Your dying self is the version of you who no longer cares about perfection, reputation, or productivity. She cares about meaning. She cares about peace. She cares about whether you lived your life in a way that felt true to you.

Once you've listened, make one small promise to her.
Not a dramatic vow.
Not a full-life overhaul.

Just *one small thing* you'll start doing differently today.

Maybe it's slowing down while you sip your morning coffee so you actually taste it.

Maybe it's deleting a commitment you don't want to keep.

Maybe it's calling someone you love before the thought drifts away.

Maybe it's finally giving yourself permission to rest without guilt.

Death work isn't something you only do for others. It's something you practice in yourself.

It's a way of living.

A way of paying attention.

A way of remembering what matters before it becomes a regret.

The way you live your own life will become your greatest teaching tool, not just for your clients, but for your children, your friends, and every person who learns from your presence. The work starts with you. It always has.

When you're ready, turn the page.

There's so much more to learn and so much more life to live.

