

HOSPICE: GATEWAYS OF LIFE AND DEATH

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*Birth and death are but gateways – for the strands of our eternal lives
that stretch forth into this world to learn, grow, and experience.*

*At those gateways, we honor the cycles of life.
Without death there would be no new life; no compost
out of which new richness emerges; no return on the work of spirit.*

*Celebrate endings as well as beginnings.
In loss we feel the fullness of the gift we've held.
Pain is a measure of past love and connection – now transformed.*

Death is an essential part of the cycles of life. It is the gateway between the material and energetic planes of existence. It is the place where we often feel most deeply our bonds with people and things that suddenly are no longer part of our material world.

Only when we acknowledge the wonder and value of death can we see how we have shunned it in every aspect of our culture. We can begin to see how honoring and celebrating it can bring greater richness to our lives and communities. Our buildings become richer and more mellow under the patina of time and aging. Our gardens and landscapes begin to honor the full cycles of life, blossoming and fruiting, ripening, aging, death, and rebirth. We begin to give proper prominence and design to hospices, memorial chapels, and other facilities that deal with death. We learn to create them as gateway structures

– places where we can reflect, summate, say our farewells, grieve, and honor the losses, the gains, and the lives of both the living and the dead. We give proper place and settings to the rituals of departure.

Here are some preliminary thoughts on how the design of hospice facilities be deepened and enriched to affirm and empower those making the transition and their caregivers, give proper honor to the role of death, and (where acknowledged) affirm the continuity of life in the energetic realms:

◀ * *HEALING PLACES*: One obvious element is to create a healing place for caregivers, family, and the dying themselves. At the Hospice House in Sarasota, Florida, families of hospice residents discovered a wonderful oak tree forgotten at the edge of the site, surrounded by construction debris, broken glass and trash. After clearing the debris from around the tree and placing benches under its outspread branches, a wonderful place emerged. The space under the branches of the tree conveys different wordless messages to each person of the cycles of life and death, the different dimensions of time, the healing power of nature, of the awe of Creation of which we are part. But to each person it gives healing – absorbing grief, honoring life *and death*, giving nourishment to the soul.



Entering a hospice, we might be faced with a door exiting out the other side, which we can't open, to a path, which we can't take . . . into a garden untrodden by living footsteps.

How can we gently but powerfully acknowledge a place of dying for what it is; honor the cycles of life and death; and affirm what lies beyond?



* *HOSPICE DESIGN:*
Hospice is about love and caring . . . but most distinctly about dying. How can we make that clearly apparent in hospice design? Tongue-in-cheek, I once said hospice should be designed as a giant concrete gateway, with the word "death" carved over it, and hospice rooms as a shelter on the doorstep. But what about hospice on the edge of a river, the setting sun, a boat waiting to carry the deceased across the water . . . ?

* *HOSPICE LOCATION:* Hospices, like most things related to death in our culture, are often "invisibly" located, so that our attention is not drawn to them. Location so that our attention *is* drawn to them, in right context and meaning, can add immense power to the act of dying and make it a gift to the community as well as the individual and family.

Location immersed in the complex web of nature can help reconnect our individual and cultural ties with the rest of Creation, and give deeper context to both life and death. Location in conjunction with a birthing center can allow the closeness of those crossing in and out of our material world to become gifts to each other and to the rest of us. Location in the center of our communities can keep the cycles of life in our attention and make easy the visiting with and honoring of those dying. Location in connection with crematories, cemeteries, etc. can link our dealings with our "remains" with the process of dying. Each community and its traditions are different, as are the combination of location factors which will best serve them.

* *WORDS OF POWER AND WISDOM:* How about a library of quotations . . . ones we can choose from to place in our room to focus our meditations. Where we can add our own words of wisdom to leave for others?

* *GARDENS*: Gardens can be a vital element of hospice, giving focus to meditation, to celebrating the profusion and joy of Creation, of finding completion in our lives, of sharing grief, finding meaning and solace. The concentric circles from a single water drop falling into the ocean . . . Stump sprouts showing the death of an old tree transforming into compost creating new richness for new life . . .



What can or might a hospice contain beyond facilities for sheltering and caring for the physical and emotional needs of the dying? How can the facilities themselves embody, support, and encourage various elements of our coming to the ends of our physical lives and returning to the eternal? Death is one of the transformation points in our lives where the dimension of spirit, and our acknowledging the fullness of the cycles of Creation are vital. Here are some possibilities:

* *A PLACE HONORING DYING*. Maybe this is the whole hospice . . . a place to come to rest, to be cared for and honored, find peace, prepare for an ending and a new beginning. Perhaps it is a garden in the hospice focused on the cycles of life and death. Maybe it is as simple as a few words over the door . . . something to focus and change energy of people coming into it. How can we change the location and design of hospices so that we die *in community* rather than alone . . . in our human community of friends, ancestors, descendants, our community of nature, and our community of spirit?

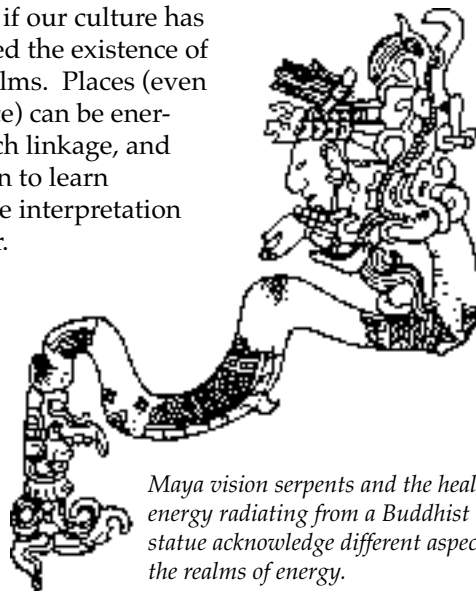
* *A PLACE TO LEAVE OUR GREATEST GIFT FOR OTHERS*. Each of us came to this life to learn and experience. What have we achieved? How can the design of a hospice help us seek insights into the often obscured gifts we've been given, to both leave *and* take the wisdom gained? Is there a place that thanks us for the gifts each has given our world?

* *A PLACE TO THANK AND BE THANKED FOR THE GIFTS WE HAVE SHARED.* Even the construction of a hospice building itself can convey this message. The contortions of an old tree, like the wrinkles and stoops of an elder, tell of the adventures and struggles of their life. There is power and beauty in both worth sharing - a value in honoring those souls given up into the making of our buildings and our lives. Here a driftwood stair handrail and a door handle made from a spruce root grown among the pebbles of a beach honor and keep intact the lives of the materials used in building. ►



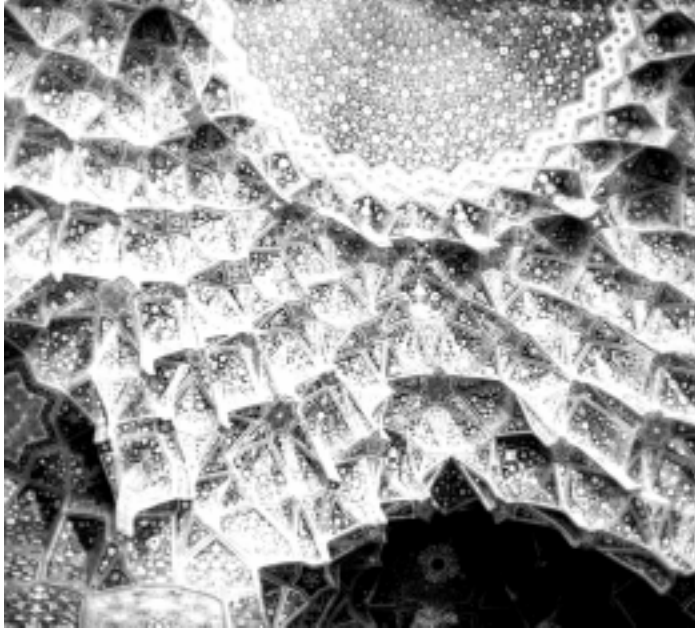
* *A PLACE OF RIGHTING BALANCES.* Can there be a place – a circle of telling stories, sharing memories, gaining and sharing perspective, giving and receiving forgiveness, summing up our lives? To ourselves, with caregivers, with the community of dying and families, with our communities?

* *A PLACE TO AFFIRM AND CONNECT WITH LIFE ON THE ENERGETIC LEVEL.* Near death, the veil seems to thin, and contact and affirmation are easier. It can be frightening, too, if our culture has seamlessly denied the existence of the energetic realms. Places (even the entire hospice) can be energized to ease such linkage, and help can be given to learn contact and share interpretation of the unfamiliar.



Maya vision serpents and the healing energy radiating from a Buddhist statue acknowledge different aspects of the realms of energy.





What can we use to create a place that connects us with the source, joy, and Oneness of all Creation?



* *A PLACE TO CONTACT ANCESTORS AND SPIRIT GUIDES.* We can create, as part of a hospice, gateways to the spirit world – places which assist connection between our world and the realms of energy where we can connect with the wisdom of our ancestors and other life. Some cultures keep the ashes of the deceased in their meeting places. Some churches place the bones of the deceased in a crypt beneath the altar. Others make special portals to the spirit realms to ease contact to the spirit world.

* *A PLACE FOR ACTIVE DYING.* In many traditions, people take personal control of their own departure from this world rather than leaving the transition to become one of pain and drugs. In yogic traditions and many tribal cultures, people learn to separate consciously from their physical bodies. In others, people choose to stop accepting nourishment when they have decided their time here is finished. Our own, through mechanisms like Oregon's Assisted Suicide law, is beginning to reacknowledge that opportunity. What qualities in a space could honor and enhance these decisions and make the process one of joy and beauty?

* *A PLACE OF ONENESS, JOY, AND ECSTASY.* A place of peace, of letting go, of experiencing the Oneness with all of Creation. In Islam, the geometry of domes in their mosques echoes both the rich development of multiplicity out of the oneness at the Center, and simultaneously the return and re-mergence into that Oneness. A luminous place to experience the joy of each moment, the wonder and beauty of each facet of Creation? A garden, again? A single flower, honored, in a room?

* *A PLACE TO LIE IN STATE.* Like in our hospitals, the bodies of those who have died are often furtively removed from hospice houses . . . at night, after the doors to other resident's rooms have been closed, through service entrances, via oversized garages to hide the hearses and their loading. Would it not be better for us, coming to a hospice, to know that our death will be visibly honored there, grieved, blessed, and shared by the community of the hospice house and the greater community? A chapel? A garden of herbs or a boat on a pond of water in which to place the body? Is it better that memorial services be held elsewhere, or should it become a vital and essential part of a place of dying?



A Finnish crematory chapel opens into the forest through a ceremonial doorway, through which the dead are carried by the living – out into the forest and back into new Creation.



* *WHAT REMAINS.* What we do with the bodies, ashes, memories, and momentos of our dead reflects powerfully our values, fears, and beliefs, and as powerfully affects the universe we dream into being around us. Do we place them directly in the earth as a gift to other life? Do we seal the bodies away from returning their gift? Do we cremate to make them vanish, or as an offering? Do we spread the ashes in the forest, or seal them in a jar? Do we expose them to the birds of prey so as not to pollute the four elements, or to return their gifts directly to other life. Do we enshrine their memories and momentos as a means of honoring and remaining in contact, or as a means of keeping later generations under their power? Our choices, and how we link them to our places of dying are vital elements that both reflect and determine our own nature and health.

A hospice does not have to contain all or any of these elements. There may be others of greater importance. Or many can be combined together. My intention here is only to give some images, and to open discussion on how the concept and experience of hospice can be enriched as we regain a fuller sense of the process of dying.

In acknowledging the constant feeding upon and giving of life to other life through death, we begin to live and offer our own lives and deaths in that spirit. Ending this one cultural silence alone begins to transform our connection with all life and to bring our own lives into deeper harmony with reality.

Plains Indian tree burial, or a memorial chapel in a Christian church each convey patterns of beliefs about our place in the dance of Creation and how we can keep contact with memories and the wisdom of those now returned to the realm of spirit.

