

Releasing the Past in the Death Lodge

By Ron Pevny

Endings and Beginnings—Keys to Conscious Elderhood

The journey into a conscious elderhood is one that very much involves recognizing and dealing with both dying and living, ending and beginning. It is a journey of recognition of these powerful dynamics as intimately woven together while we concurrently prepare for two endings and two beginnings. Both physical death and the passage into conscious elderhood are, for the psyche, a death to an old way of being. And they are both doorways into new chapters in life's journey of growth. One of the core tenets of conscious or spiritual eldering (two names for the same transformative inner work) is that

the work that prepares us to be at peace as we leave this life is the same work that prepares us to become conscious elders. It is the work of healing our past and leaving behind our self-identification with our previous life stage so that we can move without encumbrance into the mysterious next chapter that awaits us.

When we reflect on our mortality and the passage from this life to whatever comes next, most everyone hopes to die in peace. We want to be able to feel that our lives have been well-lived, that we have done our best to use our gifts, that we have loved and been loved, and that we can let go of this life with grace and without regret. Yet, so many people do not die this way. Colleagues, friends and participants in our Choosing Conscious Elderhood retreats who work with hospice all say that, generally speaking, those who die the most peaceful deaths are those who come to their deathbeds unburdened by a lifetime's accumulation of resentments, regrets, dysfunctional relationships, unhealed grief and closed hearts. Besides manifesting as emotional turmoil, such unfinished business often results in prolonged physical agony and clutching to a life that feels incomplete and unfulfilled. An important aspect of the work of hospice spiritual directors is to help dying people deal with some of their unfinished business so that they can let go of this life with hearts that are more open to love and peace.

Healing the Past, Completing Unfinished Business

While the conceptions of what comes after this life vary greatly among the world's spiritual traditions, they are unified in their belief that what we carry internally to our deathbeds is critical to what we experience thereafter. In various traditions, heaven and hell are not places but, rather, magnified reflections of our inner state at the time of death. Whether we die with peaceful, loving hearts or conflicted, closed hearts very much determines our experience when we are without a body. And, according to those traditions that include reincarnation, the extent to which we have healed the past plays a key role in determining our experience when next we inhabit a body.

Doing the inner work of examining and healing our past helps us to complete unfinished business that ties up our energy, closes our hearts and dims our vision as we enter our elder chapters. This work also helps us to keep current internally so that we are ready whenever death calls. I know that when I had my first encounter with my mortality several years ago, I became acutely aware of healing that needed to be done and legacy stories that needed to be shared with my loved ones. Yet, I felt too weak, ill, fearful and emotionally drained to do any inner work at all. It was all I could do to hang on and keep the myriad of strong emotions that swept over me from turning into overwhelm. That experience taught me the importance of keeping current in my inner work in an ongoing way so that I can shine my light brightly in my elder years and be ready for leaving this life whenever that time comes.

The Death Lodge Tradition

Here, I would like to describe one of the most powerful practices I know for bringing together various aspects of the inner work of healing the past. This practice is called The Death Lodge. Because the work of this practice feels so very freeing and enlivening, some of our retreat participants prefer to also call it The Life Lodge. Choose whatever name you prefer. I'll use the term Death Lodge because the work done there is the work of dying to the past to open the door to life in the future.

I first learned about the Death Lodge many years ago from my teachers Steven Foster and Meredith Little, the pioneers in the modern rite of passage movement. In their book on vision questing, *The Roaring of the Sacred River*, they describe

the Death Lodge as “a little house away from the village where people go when they want to tell everyone they are ready to die.” (#1) Foster and Little attribute the Death Lodge concept to the Cheyenne tribe of the Native Americans of the Plains. To begin to understand the power of this practice, imagine you are an indigenous person who has grown old and weary of this life and knows your death is near. You attend to those practical matters that need to be done at the end of your life such as passing on your belongings. Then you leave village life behind to enter a special place, the Death Lodge, where you will focus on reviewing your life, repairing or completing your relationships, and preparing to move from this life into the mystery beyond.

In the Death Lodge you remember the important events dynamics and people of your life. Situations may look very different from the perspective of your approaching death than they did at the time they happened. You reflect on how you have used your gifts. You acknowledge your strengths and weaknesses, and forgive yourself for the harm you have done to others. You explore your relationship with the Great Spirit throughout your life and now at this point of nearing your passage into the great unknown. Then, when the time feels right, you invite those in your village who have played important roles in your life to come visit you, one at a time. This is the time for bringing your relationships to completion. You and each of your visitors do whatever needs to be done so that your relationship feels complete, with no unfinished business. From the perspective of being about to die, the dynamics of these relationships may appear quite different than previously. You thank and honor each other for the role you have played in each other’s lives, and you say goodbye. Once this work is complete, you are at peace with your life, your community, and your God and are ready to move into the world of spirit.

The Death Lodge Practice as A Rite of Passage

We obviously live in a very different world than the indigenous societies where the death that happens at life’s major passages is acknowledged and honored as part of the cycle of life and is consciously prepared for. Our modern world has few, if any, true rites of passage that require a conscious death to our old sense of self as a prerequisite for moving into life’s next stage. However, deep inside each of us is an indigenous self that remembers that nature’s cycles of life and death, with death being necessary for new life, are also the cycles of our lives. Conscious

eldering is very much a process of becoming conscious of these rhythms as they operate in us, making way for the birth of new possibility when we begin to leave mid-life adulthood. I believe that one reason the Death Lodge practice resonates so deeply with our retreat participants is that it's imagery taps into that indigenous knowing in each of us about how to align ourselves with the cycle of life and death.

The following is my recommendation for how you can employ the Death Lodge as work to support your passage into a conscious elderhood. By doing so, you will also keep your inner work up-to-date as you draw ever nearer to life's final passage. First, be aware that Death Lodge work is not something you do one time and then it's complete. It is best viewed as a practice that you periodically revisit as part of your commitment to your inner growth. I encourage you to view Death Lodge work as a sacred ritual done with care and intention. If possible, do it outside in a natural place, as this will serve to align you with nature's cycles. Give yourself enough time to do focused inner work without distraction. Ideally, find a small area that has the feel of an enclosed little house or lodge, such as a spot in a grove of trees or a cave-like space amid rocks or under overhanging bushes, Before you enter, offer a prayer or state an intention that the sacred, however you name it, be with you supporting and guiding your work. You might bless and purify your Lodge with incense or bring in some flowers. Be sure to bring along your journal and perhaps an object that you consider sacred. This work is most profound if you approach it imagining, as best you can, that you have only a few weeks left to live and that you are indeed preparing to die. You never know. That may indeed be the case.

Once inside your Death Lodge, be quiet and wait to see what type of life completion/life healing work feels most alive for you. Are you aware of a painful experience that needs to be examined, felt more deeply, and reframed so you can understand how it contributed, or can now contribute to your growth? Are there regrets that disempower you and diminish your sense of self worth and the worth of your life? If so, how can you change the way you relate to these regrets? Are there experiences of joy or accomplishment you want to spend time reliving, and perhaps reviewing to remember your strengths and gifts? What is the state of your relationship with the Spirit (however you name it) that is your source and

essence? You might want to spend time focused on gratitude for all of the incredible journey that is your life.

For many people, the most important work of the Death Lodge involves bringing healing and completion to relationships. In your Lodge you have the opportunity to spend time, in spirit, with people who have been significant in your life. What needs to be said to bring completion and, if needed, healing to these relationships? What needs to be forgiven, and are you willing to do so? What contribution has the other made to your life and growth that needs to be acknowledged? How can you best honor the other before you say goodbye?

Who to Invite for Relationship Completion

There are several different possibilities for who you can invite into your Death Lodge (and sometimes you may find that some of these knock at the door without an invitation, making it clear that they belong there.)

- You can become aware of others who are alive, with whom healing needs to happen, and with whom a face-to-face conversation is possible if you make the effort. You can use the Death Lodge to practice what you will say to them and to make the commitment to try your best to meet with them in person.
- You can invite others who are alive but with whom a face-to-face meeting is an impossibility for whatever reasons. Picturing them in your Lodge with you, and imagine yourself talking to their spirits—to the best in them—saying what you need to say and hearing their response. Using your journal for such conversations can help make this process more tangible. The Gestalt process of moving back and forth from one seat to another is also helpful for some people.
- You can invite people who have died with whom you have never had or made the opportunity to share what's in your heart. Does grief need to be expressed? Anger? Gratitude? Forgiveness? A request for forgiveness? Again, speak to their spirit and imagine what that wise, loving essence in them has to say to you. If you cannot connect with a sense of what their spirit has to say, only remembering their personality selves which may have been hurtful to you, that's OK. Speak the truth of your heart, doing your best to recognize and honor their role in your growth while acknowledging the pain they may have caused you.

- For many people, the most important and difficult Death Lodge work is the work of forgiving and honoring themselves. Or, to be more precise, those parts of themselves that have made errors and poor decision, have hurt others, are weak, are imperfect. Nothing is more disempowering than resenting parts of ourselves. Nothing closes our hearts and fills us with conflict more than self hatred. Here we have the opportunity to forgive these parts of ourselves for their weakness and to thank them for what they have taught us about our shadows and our values. From the perspective of our conscious, aware selves we can dialogue with and extend love to these parts of us (using our journal can be very helpful) with the goal of re-owning disowned aspects of ourselves. The more we do so, the more whole we become.

A Hospice-Derived Template for Death Lodge Practice

The hospice tradition has identified five pieces of unfinished business that are important for people seeking peace and wholeness as they approach the end of their lives. These can serve as a useful template for the relationship completion work we do in our Death Lodges.

- Asking for forgiveness from those we have offended
- Forgiving those we need to forgive
- Expressing gratitude toward those who have made a difference in our lives, whether this impact brought happiness or pain at the time
- Expressing affection
- Saying goodbye

In addition, my dear friend and mentor Wes Burwell, a long-time hospice spiritual director with whom I co-created the Choosing Conscious Elderhood retreats over several years, adds a sixth: Blessing those who have made a difference in our lives. I believe the blessings help to consciously invite the spiritual dimension to this work.

Death Lodge work is not easy. It requires us to face our mortality and to uncover and deal with difficult dynamics in ourselves and our relationships with others. It is work that is very easily postponed with the rationale that we'll do it later when we are really old and death seems nearer and more tangible. I encourage you to

remember these two facts: You don't know when death is near. And, the more of this work you do as you age, the more alive, vibrant, inspired and peaceful you will be in life's elder chapters. The inner work of conscious eldering plays a critical role in determining whether you become merely old, or a passionate and ever growing conscious elder. For many people the Death Lodge is a deeply healing practice for weaving together various strands of this inner work, so that each day is, to use a powerful Native American image, a good day to die. And in so doing, we clear the way for the new beginnings that are possible for us.

Retreat Participant's Healing Experience

I have been privileged to hear from retreat participants many stories about their use of the Death Lodge, on retreat and as a regular practice in their lives. I'd like to close by sharing the deeply transformative Death Lodge experience of Anette, as related in her own words.

There was a moment in time that excruciatingly split my life into the "before" and "after"—a recalibration of time that set that moment as the moment relative to which all prior and subsequent events are now remembered. The zero on my X-axis of time. June 17, 1999.

The phone rang. A voice said, "Molly has shot herself." She had been at her father's house. In a blur of events I found myself at the emergency room hearing a physician say the words. She is dead. She was 15. She was brilliant, beautiful, happy, precious, and so very loved by so many people. So loved by me. A moment of drama over a boy, an argument with her father, an available loaded pistol, and she gave up every sweetly anticipated experience of growing into adulthood on this earth.

My son, my living daughter and I lived in a stunned and painful silence, patient and tolerant of each other's process in grief, absorbing our new reality. A woman from the funeral home brought me a small velvet bag with Molly's jewelry: a watch that I had bought her, a silver butterfly pendant on a chain (the symbol of her closest girlfriends), and silver earrings. She had worn these when she died. The velvet bag held these precious objects. I held it for many months.

Four years later, around Thanksgiving, I began to feel human, and my son and I remarked that we were smiling.

Twelve years later, a colleague sent me a link to a retreat on conscious eldering, to be held at a small retreat center near Mt. Shasta. I was put off by the rude suggestion that I might be aging and that I might need to deal with it in a thoughtful way—a clear sign that I needed to go. We were to bring to the retreat significant objects from our lives to create an altar, objects that we felt identified us in some way. The thought of Molly, ever-present, kept a lump in my throat and the sorrow just slightly beneath the surface. Suicide is different from any other death. There is a stigma. It is impossible to explain, but only other parents of children who have suicided seem to understand the complexity. I took a photo of Molly.

My conscious eldering cohorts were loving, gentle, and experienced in a variety of ways, each bringing a rich perspective to life and life's cycle. I was prepared for my day of solitude and fasting on the mountain, and content as I approached my little sanctuary of solitude. The snow had melted enough to leave patches of dry earth, on which grew burgeoning wild grasses and plants pushing their way to the sun. I sprawled on my back to watch the clouds and feel the mountain. It felt safe. It was beautiful. I spoke to a bee. I explored. I came across a circle of stones that had been laid around a small pit, an indentation in the earth as if scooped out to form a bowl. This place, previously created for some sacred moment in another's life, became my Death Lodge. Shasta offered the perfect blending of death and renewal. Felled trees, rotting where they landed, created swells in the landscape, changing the flow of runoff, adjusting the topography, forever changing the landscape by their death. How perfect. The beauty and symmetry of life amidst decomposition, prepared me for my Death Lodge work.

It felt odd, speaking aloud to my deceased family members— grandparents, aunts and uncles and friends who were so dear. There were many with whom I shared this moment, saving Molly for last. I spoke to my friend, Ann, who had promised as she lay dying that she would find Molly and let me know if there was any way possible, that she was okay. In my death lodge I loved talking to her about what she had meant to me in life and in death.

Then came my friend Bob, who had shared his death from pancreatic cancer with me just nine months before. His friendship was transforming. A few months before his death, I had been seated next to him in a pew at 18 year-old Brian's memorial

service, with the strange understanding that his service would be next. Bob's remarks had been profound: "How perfect. Brian was in a perfect place in his life. Why do we get hung up in the idea that more is better?"

Bob's death a few months later was intimate and tender, filled with grace and love, as he denied fear with the words, "Why would I be afraid when I get to fall asleep, relieved of pain, and awoken staring into the eyes of my God?" I spoke to Bob in my death lodge. I thanked him for taking me with him down that path of transforming fear, as far as I could go. He gave me, in his death, the ability to see life more clearly. All those who were present for me in my Death Lodge had all felt receptive to my gratitude and amends. Now I was ready to speak to Molly.

For the first time in 12 years, I felt her presence. I spoke to her, and then with her, about my love for her, my horror at her death, and my struggle with the permanence of her choice. I wanted, yearned, for her to have lived out her life—to have survived that painful moment and to experience all that life has to offer – and to find the peace and joy that come from maturity and self-acceptance. I wanted just once more to hear the sound of her voice. I wanted her as the receptacle for immense love and devotion that had welled in my heart with no place to go for so many years. I asked forgiveness, for what I do not know. I told her that if I had hurt her, I no longer remembered having done so and wanted her to know that I had to quit trying to figure it out. She understood. I then heard Bob's words. "Why do we dwell on the thought that more is better?" Indeed. I had lived for 15 years with this precious, clever, beautiful, spontaneous, loving child in delight and yet spent almost all of the following 12 years in pain over her death rather than in awe of her life and the gift of her creation in my body and birth into my family. I felt the weight lift in an instant. Tears rolling down my cheek, I pledged to honor her by living in gratitude for her life rather than in misery over her death.

Then, a butterfly appeared from the trees and fluttered through the death lodge, encircling my head and gracing me with its beauty. As she flew away, I said, "No, come back!" and then caught myself in a smile, chuckling at my own compulsion to want more. From that day, I have loved Molly in joy more than sorrow. My tears are now of gratitude. I miss her terribly. I am so fortunate to have had her in my life.

Reference

#1 Steven Foster and Meredith Little, *The Roaring of the Sacred River* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989), p.34

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