

Saying Goodbye to Sheila



Dhyan Atkinson

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I WILL NEVER FORGET how Julie would tell her dog Sheila, “Dhyan is coming!” and Sheila would go sit by the door and wait for me to arrive. Sheila loved unconditionally. She had no defenses to cut back the intensity of her love and make it cooler, more polite, less dramatic. When she loved you, “the tail wagged the dog.” It was wonderful to be loved by Sheila. I will also not forget how Sheila taught us all something about being ill without complaint, loving the people who took care of her, dying with a great deal of grace and dignity, and with the joy in her eyes of being surrounded by her friends.

May we all be so fortunate as to have such a loving and compassionate death.

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Preserving Memories

Charlotte, NC

With the exception of Dhyan's own name, names in the following text have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved.

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To all the dear friends
who loved Sheila and
came to say farewell



Preface

heila was not just Julie's dog. She was also a friend to all of Julie's friends. I would call Julie before coming to visit and I would hear her confidentially whispering to Sheila, "Dhyan is on her way." There would be a clatter of dog claws on the wood floor in the background and Julie would tell me, "Sheila is at the door! She's watching out the window for you to arrive!" No matter how long it took me to drive over, Sheila would still be waiting at the door.

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It was no small thing to be welcomed by Sheila. She was a sleek Siberian Husky mix with the temperament of a loving and excitable small child. You always had to hug Sheila first and then you got the chance to hug Julie. Julie, who was certifiably nuts over her dog, would just stand there beaming while Sheila romped and barked and danced and did everything in her sixty-pound power to let you know how absolutely delighted she was to see you.

The last year of Sheila's life was painful for all of us. Her body was riddled with cancer, and Julie was devastated at the thought of losing her best friend. Because we live in Boulder where there are all kinds of alternative medical treatments, even for

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dogs, Julie and Sheila's life became filled with appointments: acupuncture, dog massage, nutrition counseling, vet visits, hydration and chemotherapy. Julie spared no expense in her efforts to cure Sheila, or barring that, to make her as comfortable as was humanly possible. And still, even on her worst days, Sheila was at the door whenever company was expected, waiting to give each beloved person her full and undivided love and attention.



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The moon was full and just setting over the mountains when I awoke early that Saturday morning in February. The light from the moon was clear, placid, and shining so beautifully on the snow that I got up and took a walk. When I returned, the phone rang. It was my friend Julie. She was in tears but bravely told me “it was time” and the vet was coming at noon to put her beloved dog, Sheila, down. Sheila’s long struggle with cancer had come at last to its end. I canceled my plans for the day and drove over to keep Julie company and say good-bye to my best canine friend.

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I was surprised to find Julie and Sheila in the entryway of the house. Sheila was lying near the folding closet doors, and Julie had obviously made up a bed for herself beside Sheila's sleeping pad and had spent the night there at her side. One glance at the two told most of the story. I had never seen death up close, but looking at Sheila, I instinctively knew I was seeing a Being that was dying. Funny how you just know. Julie had been crying, and the first variation in our routine was this: Julie got the first hug for a change, because Sheila was not able to bark and wiggle between us.

I knelt and put a hand gently on our old friend. She did not move, but her eyes swiveled, trying to see me. I rearranged myself

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so she could. Such eyes! It was extraordinary seeing how, although her body was already largely inert, her eyes were still full of life. I asked Julie why they were in the entryway. She said when they got home from the vet the day before that was all the farther Sheila had been able to go. She had tried to get up one time during the night but had been unable to push with her back legs.

Since I was there, Julie wanted to go take a quick shower and make a couple of phone calls. I settled beside Sheila as Julie left the room. Sheila was panting and breathing hard. She seemed exhausted. As I sat there, her eyes closed, and I thought perhaps she was going to fall asleep. I began a time of quiet prayer and meditation,

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breathing peace into the room. Sheila and I stayed together that way for about twenty minutes. As I continued to just be with her, Sheila's breathing suddenly changed. It deepened, slowed, halted, started up again, got longer and longer between breaths, and suddenly I wondered if this wasn't going to be a case of "when the family leaves for a minute, the dying one suddenly decides to die."

As her breathing roughened and began to rattle deep in her throat, I prepared to call Julie, who was now on the phone in the next room. But just before I would have called out, Sheila suddenly took a quick, deep breath, her eyes popped open, she raised her head, and began panting again. She seemed distressed, so I took her face in my hands and looked deeply

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into her eyes. I told her what a fine dog she was, that I was right there, and that Julie was coming right back.

When Julie returned, I moved over so she could sit where Sheila could easily see her. Julie laid a hand gently on Sheila, stroking her fur and talking to her. We started what was to be our last hour of just the three of us together. Although she was mostly at rest, Sheila would struggle from time to time. Each time, Julie would touch her and tell her again: “It is okay for you to go now, Sheila. You don’t have to work so hard anymore. Just let go and relax.”

Sometime later I also began talking to Sheila, telling her what was going to hap-

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pen. I told her how at noon, her friend Dr. Dan was going to come and he would give her a shot that would help her get out of her body, which was not functioning well anymore. I told her Julie and I would take her body to CSU where she had been many times before, and the doctors there were going to do an autopsy to find out what had happened in her body with all the treatments she had had. I told her that with what they learned they would be able to help other dogs who were sick, and that this was a good thing. I told her she would not have to stay with her body while this was happening, she could go free. I told her that after the autopsy, they would take her body and burn it. I told her Julie would bring her ashes home, and how there was a place she had always loved behind the

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house on the hillside where her ashes would be buried.

Since this was the time of morning when Sheila had always gone outside, Julie and I were concerned that her struggles meant she needed to relieve herself but couldn't get up to go out. We tried to tell Sheila it was okay to just let go, but she was such a well housebroken dog that to the end she did not pee in the house. I wanted Julie to be prepared, though, so I reminded her that after Dr. Dan put Sheila to sleep her bladder and bowels would probably let go. I didn't want Julie to be surprised or disconcerted later, but just to expect this natural occurrence.

A few minutes later, our friend Lydia

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arrived. Together we sat for the next hour with Sheila and Julie, during which time Sheila continued to raise her head and pant, and continued to look at each one of us again and again. Lydia's strong, calm, presence was like a cornerstone, and I felt as if we were sitting in meditation together, as we have so many times before. Our friend Louise was next to arrive. A tender-hearted soul, Louise became a special support for Julie, holding her and crying with her as they gazed at our friend, so obviously dying.

A little before eleven o'clock I went to get Jeannie, and just after we got back Sam arrived. We were now six together. It seemed so beautiful to me that as each person arrived, the circle of those who were

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already there opened up, and each person came up to Sheila and had a few moments with her alone. Every person put his or her hands on Sheila, stroking her, petting and loving her, and Sheila looked into the eyes of each one, really taking in the new person's presence and their love. In fact, as time went by, Sheila became happier and happier with each new person's arrival. She was happy to be surrounded by so many of her friends.

Jeannie had taken a place behind Sheila and had her hand over Sheila's heart. She kept telling Sheila softly that it was okay to relax into the process of dying. She told her, "You are doing a beautiful job, Sheila. We are right here with

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you and we will be here to take care of Julie. You don't have to worry about her." Regardless of whether Sheila literally understood these words, they seemed to make it easier for her to become more calm and to breathe a little easier.

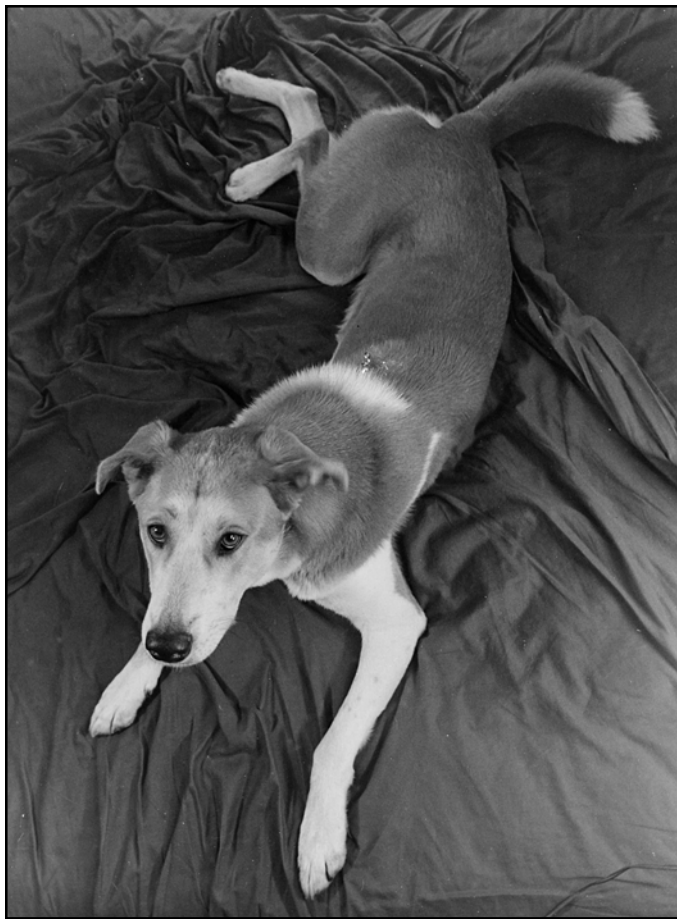
About eleven thirty, two things happened. The first was that Sheila made an unexpected effort and sat right up. With Jeannie's leg behind to help support her, she sat right up and began to pant happily at the circle of her friends. The second thing was that Susan arrived. She too entered the circle and came right up to Sheila, to pat her and say hello, but she also had a gift for Sheila. We had talked a little earlier about whether to offer Sheila any breakfast or not

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and had decided not to. She had had some beef the night before, but otherwise, she had been refusing food and had seemed somewhat angry to even have it offered. When Susan opened a little container of lox, which had always been one of Sheila's favorite treats, her ears cocked forward, her nose sniffed the air, and her head tilted with interest. Susan offered her a tidbit, and she ate it from Susan's fingers with evident relish. She ate about half of the lox, drank some water, ate the rest of the lox, and drank a last little bit of water.

For a moment, seeing those ears come forward and watching her eat her treat, she looked so like the Sheila we had known for such a long time: interested, energetic,

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happy, interactive, and alive. She looked around the circle as if she was so pleased to have everyone there. Julie commented affectionately, “Sheila always loves being in the center of the circle.” We remembered all the times we had been together when Sheila had wriggled her way into the very center of the circle. It seemed so right that here she was, dying in the center of a circle, where she had always loved to be. Watching her sitting up, I was fooled for just a moment into thinking maybe she was going to rally, but within a few minutes of finishing the lox, that last burst of energy faded. She lay back down, closed her eyes as if exhausted, and suddenly transformed back into a dying dog. That was about eleven forty-five. We got a call from Dan and Laura

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(Sheila's vet and his wife) saying they were on their way.

When we first gathered, people were talkative, reminiscing about Sheila and telling stories about her; but now as the circle was complete and it got closer to her death, everyone settled down into a silent process of sending Sheila off and providing emotional support to Julie.

A little after twelve noon, Dr. Dan and Laura arrived. From the moment they entered the house they fit themselves into the circle. Just as everyone had before her, Laura came up to Sheila, and with tears running down her face, she told Sheila what a good dog she was, patting and loving her one

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more time. In the meantime, Dan crouched down on his heels, making himself part of the circle and not rushing to pull out the syringe. After awhile he reached into Sheila's groin gently to feel for her pulse, but Sheila was very tender there and for the first time she whimpered. Dan felt for a minute and then said, "Yes, this is the right thing. She has very little blood pressure and she is probably in pain." I hadn't really realized there was still a small corner of doubt left inside me, but it is an odd thing how quickly the mind gets used to a situation. Sheila seemed so alert in her eyes, watching everyone and everything even when she couldn't easily move her head anymore. She kept searching the room with interest to see what was happening, partici-

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pating in the presence of the group of people who had come to be with her and interacting with them. I had already become accustomed to her “living” at this level. But when the vet said, “Yes, she has very little blood pressure,” it rang home in yet another way how despite everything else, Sheila was really dying.

Dan reached over and patted Sheila’s flank. He told her, “Sheila, sweetheart, I’ve done all I can for you and there is nothing more that we can do together.” We watched as he ran his hands over Sheila’s body so gently and with such an obvious knowing of this very familiar friend. And then he prepared a syringe and gave Sheila a first injection in a hip muscle to relax her.

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Around the circle, spontaneously, everyone began to take hands and the Kleenex box went round and round. Jeannie spoke for all of us when she commented, “I find that I’m feeling more relaxed as Sheila stops her struggling.”

Dan then picked up Sheila’s top back leg and very gently began trying to find the vein. He told us he was afraid he might have some trouble finding one because Sheila’s blood pressure was so low, and they had done so much blood-work and intravenous hydration over the last few weeks. Sheila didn’t like having her leg lifted; she acted as if it hurt her and she growled. Dan filled another syringe with the pinkish fluid which would take her life. He came

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around to the front of Sheila and, first, feeling very gently around her other back leg with his fingers, he tried to insert the needle into a vein. I wanted to take my eyes away but decided not to avoid facing what was happening. Still, it was distressing watching as the sharp point of the needle penetrated in under the skin of Sheila's leg again and again, as Dan gently probed and searched for the missing vein. He couldn't find a vein in this leg either so he started looking for a vein in her front top leg but, again, that vein too was collapsed and not to be found. He gave Sheila another shot of the first fluid into her chest, and she closed her eyes and seemed to fall deeply asleep. I thought, "I have seen the last of her eyes" and a wave of sorrow washed through me.

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There was no help for it, we had to turn Sheila over. Her only good leg was under her, and Dan had looked for all the other veins and couldn't find them. Reluctantly, he told us we would have to turn her. Sheila was too close to the closet door to turn her easily. Gently we pulled her away from the door using the pad under her. Then Dan gathered her back legs together, and since I had been sitting behind Julie all this time supporting her and keeping my hands on her back as she cradled Sheila and wept, I came forward and offered to turn her from the front. As we began to turn her over, Sheila cried out, growled, and came right back fully awake. It was such a sad thing to happen. For just a moment there was bewilderment in her eyes as if she was asking,

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“Why are you doing this? It hurts me!” She expressed her pain by snarling, and Julie put her hands around Sheila’s muzzle to keep her from snapping. It broke our hearts but it was over pretty quickly and we got her turned. In the meantime, those who were in the circle around the central figures spontaneously stood and now remained standing. As Dan inserted the needle into the vein he finally was able to find, they all reached out as one person to their neighbors and took hands.

Julie was holding and cradling Sheila, crying, and telling her over and over what a good dog she was, that it was almost over now, and we wouldn’t have to turn her again. I was supporting Julie and couldn’t stand or take someone’s hand, so Susan next

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to me placed her foot gently over mine to keep me connected with the circle. I looked up and I saw the half circle of friends standing around Dan and Julie and Sheila. They were all holding hands. I had a quick impression of a half circle of tall candles burning around us. Jeannie later told me she was reminded of people gathered in a semi-circle around a sacred altar. Laura was assisting Dan, holding Sheila's leg tightly to make the vein come up. I saw the needle slip in, this time there was a quick spurt of blood into the syringe, and then the plunger went down and the pink fluid went traveling into Sheila's veins.

It was actually over so fast that I was surprised. I didn't know Sheila would die so

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quickly once Dan found the vein, and I felt somewhat startled. One moment Sheila was still there and the next moment she was gone. Dan took a stethoscope and listened for her heart. When he sat back on his heels, took off the stethoscope and put it into his black bag, we knew it was really over. Our beloved Sheila was gone.

Spontaneously, any places where the circle had not been connected now joined. Laura stood up and stepped back into the circle. Jeannie reached down and took Dan's hand. Dan placed his other hand on Sheila, who was touched on the other side by Julie, and we were one circle. Julie looked at Jeannie and asked her to say a few words, and Jeannie began to say a blessing and a

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prayer. “We give gratitude to you, Sheila, for being a part of our lives and letting us be a part of yours, and for all the teachings and lessons you’ve brought to us. We are sending you off on your voyage with our blessing. It is with Breath that you entered this life and it is with Breath that you leave this life. Would that all Beings could be encircled by Love such as this as they leave. We pray that one day all Beings are able to experience such love as they die.”

In the hour or so after Sheila’s death, I learned it takes awhile for one’s whole body and mind to register that death has occurred. Somehow, in a place where life was just happening, life no longer is. The seamless fabric of life is torn and mended in

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exactly the same moment. I felt like I knew Sheila was gone, but somehow it still took awhile for the knowledge to sink all the way in. I found I was holding my breath as I watched her body, looking for the smallest sign of remaining life. I watched as a tremor passed through her lip. As I stroked her body, I felt for the slightest pulse, the slightest movement or life, and when there was none, it felt unbelievably strange.

Her bladder and bowels let go, and Dan took a trash bag he had brought and we carefully lifted Sheila's rear end, towel and all, and slid the bag over her as if she were in a sleeping bag. Then, Dan, Sam and I—her impromptu pall bearers—lifted the fleece she was lying on, and together we carried her out

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to the back of Julie's SUV. Sheila's body was heavy. I suddenly understood the meaning of the phrase "dead weight." It seemed amazing that a body which is dead could seem so much harder to move than the same body which, just a few minutes ago, was still alive. Even when so much of her body was not functioning, was dying, in fact, and inert, there was still such a difference between the way Sheila had been just a few moments before and the way her body was now. When we got her settled in the van, Sam, who has loved Sheila so much and dog-sat with her so many times when Julie traveled, suddenly leaned over to embrace her body and just wept.

Laura and Dan and I were still standing at the back of the car. As I said good-bye to

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Laura, who still had tears rolling down her face, she said, “You know, we have to assist with death all the time, but Sheila and Julie were something special.” Dan said, “This was a remarkable experience. I feel it was such good fortune and an honor to be involved. The people who were here this morning made this an absolutely incredible experience compared to what we are used to seeing.” I told them, “Julie used to tell me how she would bring Sheila to your clinic and how Sheila would wag her tail and be so happy. I have never known a dog to be happy when she came to a vet’s office. She was very lucky to have you for her vet.”

We hugged each other, meeting and saying good-bye at the same moment. Then

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the two of them left. Lydia and Louise left. Sam took a walk around the lake, “one last time for Sheila.” Jeannie and Susan went out and cut a little baggie of fur from Sheila’s body for Julie and then left. Julie called the University Vet Clinic and told them we were on our way, but we suddenly found that we were very hungry, which is not unusual in these circumstances, so we had a sandwich together before we left. It felt odd to not have Sheila there asking for a bite.

The drive to the vet school was uneventful. I noticed as we backed down the driveway how Sheila’s body rocked with the movement of the car like a bowl full of gelatin. Julie rode in the back of the car with Sheila all the way north. When we got

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to the University, Julie went into the clinic to arrange for Sheila's body to be turned over to the waiting vet students. I sat in the back of the opened van with Sheila, stroking her and feeling for the last time that velvety softness of her ear. I realized I was still watching for her breath and wondered how long it takes for the habit of watching for someone's breathing to wear off. I opened one of her eyes and looked into an eye that had lost all its life. It made me wonder what it is that enlivens an eye and how can it make such a tremendous difference when life is gone. Even a glass eye would have looked more "real." I lifted a corner of Sheila's lip and looked. Her jaws were already in rigor mortis and clenched around the lifelessness of her tongue. I

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reached around to hug her one last time, but her body was not Sheila's body any more. This body was cold and already stiff. The spark of her life was gone, but I patted her all the same and just in case her spirit was nearby I told her again what a good dog she had been and how much she had been loved, that she was free now to go where she would, and that it was all right.

They came for her body with a gurney and lifted her onto some pieces of fleece. I saw as her feet caught on the doorway as they pushed her in on the cart, but she wasn't there to feel any pain. There was a little boy with his mother in the waiting room, and his eyes went very wide as he saw Sheila's body. "What happened?" he

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asked in a loud piping voice. “What happened, Mommy?”

I turned to him and said through tears and a sudden lump rising in my throat. “She was very old and sick.” Then I had to stop speaking for a moment, because it was hard to get words past the lump in my throat. When I could speak again I added, “You know, she died with all her friends around her.”

He had that clarity children can sometimes have. He looked at me and said, “Her friends must feel pretty bad.”

I told him, “Yes, we do. We will miss her.”

Yes. We will miss Sheila, who certainly

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was a guardian angel to her friend Julie, and who took part in so many things involving our community of friends. She had that very special place in our lives that only a dog could fill. I will not forget how Julie would tell her, “Dhyan is coming!” and Sheila would go sit by the door and wait for me to arrive. Sheila loved unconditionally. She had no defenses to cut down the intensity of her love and make it cooler, more polite, less dramatic. When she loved you, “the tail wagged the dog” and it was a wonderful thing to be loved by Sheila. I will not forget how she taught us all something about being ill without complaint, loving the people who took care of her, and dying with a great deal of grace

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and dignity, with the joy in her eyes of being surrounded by her friends.

May we all be so fortunate as to have such a loving and compassionate death.

Afterword

WHEN I ASK MYSELF what kind of death I hope for, I know I want one like Sheila's. I would like to be compassionately cared for by people I love. I would like to die at home amongst my family and friends. Sheila was fortunate because the people she knew and loved had prepared themselves for death and dying. There wasn't a lot of confusion about what needed to be done or needless chatter to avoid the seriousness of the situation. The people who accompanied Sheila to death's door allowed their deep

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feelings to happen and supported one another through the grieving that was naturally a part of the process. They knew how to be present and be of service to the two most involved: Sheila and Julie.

Death is a part of living but so many of us go through life without ever having seen it or been present at a death. The same is true of birth. Ours is unfortunately a culture where we rarely learn how to be with these most important rites of passage before we find ourselves in the midst of them. Still, if we think of how we would most like to be treated on our own deathbed, it is possible to draw from our innate empathy for one another and our human compassion in order to be

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present for those we love at the time of their dying and death—even if it is the first death at which we have ever been present.

It is also good to remember that we have the opportunity to prepare for death in advance. Our community of friends had the advantage of sitting together in meditation for many years and participating in retreats together before Sheila's death. Most of us had attended a workshop in which we learned about what happens physically during the dying process; read from the death literature of many religious traditions, mystics and poets; contemplated our own death and dying, and composed a will and a living will; and prepared for the inevitable death of our loved ones. Not

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only were we able to be with Sheila but over the years we have lovingly accompanied several of our dear, dear friends through the process of terminal cancer.

We don't have to be afraid that by preparing ourselves for death we bring it toward us, nor is it "morbid" to prepare. There is a depth and beauty that comes to life, moment-by-moment, when we remember death. It is easier to set our priorities straight and to cherish each other and the gift of living when we remember death will come to all of us. I hope by telling the story of Sheila's death, more people will prepare themselves for this inevitable event so that when death comes to your household or your community of

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friends you can greet it as something sacred;
embrace the moment with a clear, open,
and compassionate mind; and hold one
another lovingly through the process.

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