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**Health Journal** / By Tara Parker-Pope

## Lessons on Dying: Essential Books To Help Understand Life's Last Moments

**W**HILE MANY PEOPLE actively seek out information about staying healthy, most of us remain reluctant to learn more about death.

But learning about and talking about death is an essential part of our health education. My own personal knowledge gap in this area was painfully evident when I recently faced the terminal illness of my 62-year-old mother. While I knew quite a lot about disease, treatments and how to find the best medical advice, I realized I didn't have a clue about how life ends.

Over the past few months, I've embarked on a crash course of sorts on death. Before and after the death of my mother, I sought out books that explained the physical act of dying, as well as books about hope, loss and grief. Some of the most helpful books were aimed at explaining death to children.

In hindsight, I wish I'd done it all sooner. I realize I could have been a far greater comfort to my mother, my family and even myself had I availed myself of this knowledge in happier times. Here's a look at the books that I found the most useful.

■ **"How We Die"** by Sherwin B. Nuland

In this award-winning book, Dr. Nuland frankly describes the dying process for six different diseases, including heart disease and cancer, the two most common killers.

Dr. Nuland, a Yale surgical professor, says a lack of understanding about the dying process is a modern phenomenon. In the

past, generations lived together in the same home, where children were born and grandparents died, so death was something everybody witnessed throughout their lives. Today, most people live separately—often several states away—from older relatives, and many people still die in hospital wards or nursing homes, out of sight.

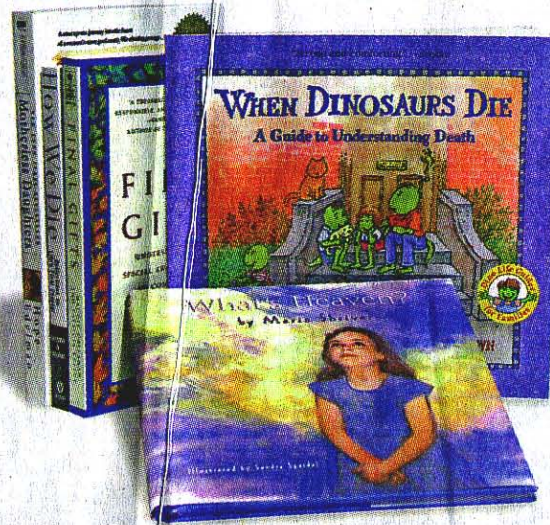
"We try to hide death," Dr. Nuland says. "There's a good reason we don't know much about it."

Each chapter includes historical information as well as anecdotal tales from Dr. Nuland's own patients. The stories of the dying include insight into the patients and their families as well as straightforward—and sometimes unpleasant—descriptions of life's final moments. For me, it was essential reading. No one ever is prepared for the death of a loved one, but the information outlined in this book gave me enormous reassurance as I witnessed death firsthand.

"By the time death comes, the whole family has been radically altered and everyone has suffered," says Dr. Nuland. "People are unprepared for the realities and biology of the dying process, and that's precisely why I wrote the book."

■ **"Final Gifts"** by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley

This book is aimed at helping the reader understand the "special awareness, needs and communications of the dying." It was written by two hospice nurses who have been at the bedside of numerous terminally ill patients and



Offering both personal comfort and practical advice, books on death also can help explain life's end to children.

mother at any age. It captures not only the incalculable feeling of loss you experience when a mother dies, but also the sense of isolation and permanence that comes with death.

This is a sad book, but for me, it was also therapeutic and oddly reassuring to know that the pain of losing your mother never really goes away.

■ **"What's Heaven?"** By Maria Shriver

Ms. Shriver wrote this book based on conversations she had with her then six-year-old daughter when her great-grandmother died.

It is a book aimed at children, but I read it alone first as I was looking for ways to talk about death with my own child. It is poignant and sweet and a powerful reminder that the simple act of talking about death is the first step in coping with it.

■ **"When Dinosaurs Die"** by Laurie Rasky Brown and Marc Brown

When I first saw this children's book, illustrated almost like a comic strip, I didn't think it was what I was looking for. But my own child was immediately drawn to it and wanted to read it.

Before this book, I had tried unsuccessfully to talk to my daughter about death, but she refused. This book provided me with the first real opportunity to talk with her at length about her own feelings about her grandmother's death. It explained different customs and beliefs about death as well as the confusion and fear the death of a loved one causes.

their families. It describes "nearing death awareness," the sometimes puzzling changes that occur as a person nears death. In the final days and hours of life, dying people often make statements or gestures that don't make sense and seem to indicate confusion. But this book makes a strong case that we need to listen closely to the dying because they are far more aware and in control of the dying process than most of us realize. This book is comforting, but it is also a practical guide for dealing with death. Reading it after my mother's death helped me make sense of the experience.

■ **"Motherless Daughters"** by Hope Edelman

Although this book is primarily about women who lost mothers during childhood or in their teens, it resonates with women who lose their

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