Words at the Threshold

by Lisa Smartt

What Our Final Conversations Tell Us

One day, if not today, you will sit at the bedside of someone you love and have a final conversation. That conversation will invite you into a unique territory — the one that exists between living and dying. You may hear words expressing a desire for forgiveness, reconciliation, or the fulfillment of last requests. You may hear phrases that confuse you, like “The circles say it’s time to complete the cycle.” There may be references to things you do not see or understand, such as “The white butterflies are coming out of your mouth. They are beautiful.”

Or “If you have passed the quiz. You have passed the quiz, haven’t you?” Your beloved may describe being visited by deceased family members, angels, or animals or speak of viewing lush landscapes, where in reality there are only white hospital walls. Trains, boats, or buses and tales of new travels may

appear in the speech of the person who is dying. Your family member or friend may also speak of being afraid and seek your comfort as well as your guidance: “I am stuck here between two countries. I am here but I want to be there.” Your beloved may whisper in your ear, “Help me,” or, “I am daring to die.” And as you listen closely, it may be a conversation that changes not only how you think about dying but also how you think about living. *Words at the Threshold* is an investigation into the remarkable things people say at the end of life. Over a period of four years, I collected accounts and transcripts from health-care providers, friends, and family members of the dying who generously shared what they had witnessed. Through the Final Words Project, its website, Facebook, and email, I gathered data across the United States and Canada while also conducting interviews in person and by phone. I gathered over fifteen hundred English utterances, which ranged from single words to complete sentences, from those who were a few hours to a few weeks from dying.

While I considered the use of digital recorders at the bedsides of the dying to capture final utterances, the sacred and private nature of those

last days made this both ethically and logistically untenable. So, I decided to turn to those who had been at the bedside — loved ones and health-care providers — and ask them to share transcriptions, interviews, and recollections. I also interviewed professionals in the fields of linguistics, psychology, palliative medicine, and neuroscience to gain greater insight into terminal illness and cognitive and psychological processes. Participants included the dying individuals I heard or observed directly, family members and friends who shared transcriptions and accounts, and experts in the field who shared their observations.

I organized the language samples and accounts by linguistic features and themes. Many of the patterns that emerged were present also in the observations of health-care professionals and experts I interviewed. As I learned of these patterns, I shared them with families, friends, and hospice personnel with the aim of offering tools and insight that could guide their communications with the dying. I am not a medical expert — my training is in linguistics — so I approach the study of death and dying through the lens of language.

This inquiry was inspired by what I heard and saw in the three weeks my father spent dying from complications related to radiation therapy for prostate cancer. As I sat with him, it was as if a portal had opened — and I discovered a new language, one rich with metaphor and nonsense that spilled from my father's lips. As I transcribed his words from between the worlds, I witnessed a remarkable transformation.

My father was a cigar-chomping New Yorker whose definition of the Divine was corned beef on rye with slaw on the side and a cold glass of cream soda. He placed his faith in Lucky Sam in the fifth race and in his beloved wife of fifty-four years, Susan. "This is it," my dad would say when asked about his spiritual life. "Good food, love, and the ponies." My father savored life's pleasures and was both a skeptic and a rationalist. "We are all headed for the same afterlife, six feet under."

So when he started talking about seeing and hearing angels in his last weeks of life, I was stunned. How was it that my father, a skeptic, would accurately predict the timing of his own death with these words: "Enough...enough...the

angels say enough... only three days left...”? From the moment he left the hospital after deciding to come home to die, I was struck by his language. Compelled by my linguistics training, I grabbed pencil and paper and tracked his final utterances as if I were a visitor in a foreign country. For indeed, I was.

Words at the Threshold documents my research into this new territory. This inquiry began with my father’s language and, within four years, became a collection of hundreds of utterances analyzedfor their linguistic patterns and themes. The words I collected were much like my father’s: sometimes confusing, often metaphoric, frequently nonsensical, and always intriguing. I have come to understand that the language patterns and themes that at first stunned me in my father’s speech are actually common in the speech of others as they approach the end of life.

The First Final Words

The first example of this form of speech occurred when my father’s speaking initially began to shift — less than a month before his very unexpected death. On a January night, my father walked out

the front door wearing only his underwear and strolled down a busy avenue. When the police found him sitting at an intersection, trembling with cold, he explained, “Tonight is the big exhibition, and I am bringing boxes to my wife’s art gallery for the show. Do you know where the big exhibition is going to be?” They helped my father up from the curb and shook their heads with pity as they led the seventy-seven-year-old to an ambulance. There were no boxes in his hands. There was no art exhibition.

The big exhibition my father talked about was merely an analogy — and I would soon discover that this kind of analogy was common as people neared death. He was telling those who listened to him, as he spoke a language veiled in the symbol of the art show, that a major occurrence would soon take place. For over five decades, my father schlepped boxes to my mother’s art galleries and exhibitions. Carrying boxes for her was in his blood, his cells; it was one of the metaphors of his lifetime. He used an analogy connected closely to his life, as the dying often do, to announce his death.

Using the symbols of the big art show, he was letting us know: pay attention, because something major is happening. He was get- ting ready to die. But at the time, none of us knew that this kind of figurative language is common in the words of the dying. Wedismissed my father's utterances as mere "word salad" or the result of medications he had begun taking. However, I would find out later that they were neither.

After my father passed away, I had a notebook filled with utterances that captivated and confused me. My father spoke of travels to Las Vegas, of the green dimension, of his room crowded with people unseen to me. He used repetition frequently, as well as non- referential pronouns such as the ones in these sentences: "*This* is very interesting. You know, I've never done *this* before." On my notebook pages were metaphors and nonsense, remarks so different from the lucid language that was typical of my father when he was healthy. As I looked through the pages, I noticed how the phrases reflected a full continuum from literal to figurative to nonsensical language — and I wondered if this continuum was common to us all and in any way tracked the path of consciousness

as we die.

In the days and weeks when I was grieving, I read every book I could find about communication at the end of life and after life. Little has been written about the qualities of and change in the structure of end-of-life language, though I did find a wonderful book, *Final Gifts*, by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley. Even when I searched the linguistics databases at my alma mater, University of California, Berkeley, I found little about the language of the dying.

Raymond Moody and the Final Words Project

At this time, I decided to unearth a book that had intrigued me when I was sixteen years old: *Life After Life*, by Raymond Moody, in which he coined the term *near-death experience.* I was rereading the book when my mother told me that a friend had just shared the exciting news that in a few weeks he would be teaching a class with Dr. Moody in Alabama.

"Maybe you could go and meet him!" my mother said. "I know you have so many questions."

The workshop took place in a large

stone-and-wood lodge in the Alabama hills. There were fifteen of us from all around the country who joined together to learn from Raymond Moody. His book had completely changed the conversation about death and dying back in1975, when it was published. Yet despite the mil- lions of books sold and thousands of public appearances, the person who sat before us was an unpretentious and gentle man who sipped Diet Cokes and wore tennis shoes as he shared his wisdom of four decades spent researching death,grief, and the afterlife. His spirit of inquiry deeply moved me. And then, on the fourth day of the workshop, he shared excerpts from his unpublished manuscript "Making Sense of Nonsense," which reflected forty years of investigation into language. After I returned home, he sent me a copy and I read every page closely. Days later, I announced to my husband and daughter: "I have to study with this man."

Words at the Threshold shares the discoveries I made during the years I spent working with Raymond Moody and establishing the Final Words Project.

The Nature of This Inquiry

This investigation is not formal or rigorous. That is, it does not control for medications or illness. I offer a detailed explanation — informed by hospice professionals, palliative-care researchers, and the data itself — of why controlling for medications may not be necessary in order to find valid information as we study final words. The same patterns seem to emerge whether someone is highly medicated or not medicated at all; this is also true of the patterns associated with near-death experiences. Moreover, because we are sense-making creatures, unintelligible language is often not noticed, or is completely discounted, by those who hear it. While I asked participants to transcribe or recall puzzling and nonsensical phrases, I suspect that there was language overlooked because it was meaningless to family members and health-care providers. An important part of this book focuses on unintelligible language and its emergence at the end of life, and I acknowledge that the discussion of unintelligibility presented here is likely incomplete; however, even so, enough similarities and pat- terns emerge in the data that this study qualifies as a first step in this inquiry.

Finally, those who shared their stories with me very likely were moved to chronicle and share transpersonal or positive experiences, since it is much more difficult to speak about frightening or difficult ones. For this reason, the results may be skewed in favor of more positive accounts. And yet, even with these limitations, the findings gleaned from this research offer insights into the questions that first inspired this investigation: Do consistent patterns emerge in the language of the end of life? And if so, what exactly are those patterns and how might they track the path of consciousness?

From my interviews with friends, family members, health-care providers, and researchers, it appears that in hospitals, homes, and hospices, the dying enter new states of being, and their words are a window into those states. My research of four years indicates that my father was not alone in experiencing metaphorical and non-sensical changes in language, seeing visions of angels, and making references to another dimension in his final days.

In the chapters ahead, I share with you the

compelling language I have heard and the coherency that emerges in even the most puzzling phrases. The words at the threshold suggest to me that consciousness does indeed survive, and that we ourselves can be both guides and tourists as we journey with those we love to the portal.

From Words at the Threshold *by Lisa Smartt*

a*vailable at: amazon.com* ***or***
for a signed copy send an email to: finalwordsproject@gmail.com