

When life's ALMOST OVER

New book on dying
is inspirational, upbeat

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Family Matters

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In an exceptional volume called *Butterfly Blessings: A Little Book About Dying*, Calgary author Claire Scott says exactly what we don't expect to hear about dying.

- "Being born is hard work and so is dying. It can't be done for us. The key is knowing when to move in closer and when to give people much-needed space."
- "Dying people with little precious life left help me sort out my wants from my needs. What would be really important if I had a week to live?"
- Dying people can be funny when you least expect it. They'll say things like "I don't mind death – it's the dying that's killing me!" It seems that when all the frills and extras in life are gone, (patients) are able to enjoy some heavy-duty laughs at last."

It's this offbeat approach to the process of dying – really the process of living — that separates Scott's slim, soulful treasure from all the other works on dying, death, loss and bereavement. It's really about dying and living, says the 60-year-old palliative care nurse, one-time nun and mother of three.

"It's a little book and it's do-able for people. It tweaks the subject without being heavy-handed."

Because sooner or later, like it or not, we will all have to deal with the death of someone we care about, she offers.

"Dying is intense for patients," Scott cautions, "but it can be almost unbearable for their loved ones."

Disconnected as we are from a tribal community where giving birth, living and dying were a never-ending cycle, witnessed by all, we have to read about dying to begin to understand what we need to know.

To that end, Scott winnowed through the hundreds of stories of patients she has tended over a dozen years to create "composite characters in real events."

It is a gentle way – with short, manageable chapters for those stressful times when you might pick up this book – to understand how dying is individual and unpredictable.

Things don't happen as expected, she says.

"Even when death has been accepted as the probable outcome, there are times when patients don't die. Out-of-towners must return home. Medical conditions stabilize and patients are discharged. Long-buried feelings erupt under stressful conditions."

She tells her own painful but inspirational story of family estrangement during the time of her mother's dying and the philosophical perspective she soon adopted.

It helps families to know that just being there for granny, gramps or mom is all that's needed, ever. "Laugh, read a short story, play music, give a long foot rub, look at photos, give an angel pin, watch a video."

Families are the dying person's support system no matter how together or fractured the family may be, says Scott, who now leads workshops on the subject.

"...as your loved ones lie dying, gently place your hand over their hearts and tell them you love them, you will miss them in your life, that they have made an important contribution and you release them into the light."

Butterfly Blessings, now in its second printing, is included in the palliative care curriculum at the University of Calgary, Brandon University and University of Ottawa.

For Scott, it has launched a new career in public speaking and a second book on how to publish your own book, *Dare to Dream: A Survival Guide for Self-Publishers*.

Fulfilling dreams is part of the dying process, says Scott, who volunteers at a local hospice and serves as program co-ordinator in a geriatric nursing care attendant program.

After a dozen years in palliative care, Scott is convinced her calling is to nudge the living and dying to squeeze every last dribble of juice out of their lives.

In an upcoming workshop offered at Grace Women's Health Resources in the city's northwest, Scott will share her experiences working for hundreds of terminally ill patients, offering her inspiring and humorous stories.

"The idea is to diminish your fear of dying and put life back into living," she says of the workshop agenda.

"It's upbeat, really. It starts upbeat and ends upbeat."

As should life.