

# Evelyn's Story of Graceful Surrender

Guided Imagery and End-of-Life Issues

## Leslie Davenport, MFT

**M**ost seasoned hospital nurses would affirm the old adage that people die the way they live. If they have been fighters in life, they often push back on the dying process. A person who has cultivated acceptance brings that quality into the last phase of living.

Yet it is not always that simple. Knowledge of impending death typically amplifies psychological and spiritual concerns. A frequently occurring end-of-life concern can be seen by introducing you to Evelyn, who finds resolution through guided imagery. Dying itself is not the issue for her, but she struggles to resolve relationship ties as part of letting go. And she discovers a surprising gift in the process.

Evelyn, an independent, educated woman, expresses herself with a tough refinement—a Katharine Hepburn elegance. There is quiet power to her presence, unassuming yet with tangible authority rising from her life experiences. Living independently at eighty-seven, she has just arranged hospice care for herself on the advice of her physician.

She shares the characteristic of many in her generation, preferring to keep her medical details private. The stiffness in her walk and her pinched brow tell me that she is in physical pain. Evelyn displays a transparency I have witnessed in many people toward the end of their lives. Blue rivers of veins are visible beneath sheer, papery skin. And at times, her spirit flairs so brightly that I lose track of what she is saying.

"I'm ready to go," she announces in a simple, matter-of-fact way. "Somehow I knew how to be born, and I'm confident that I know how to leave."

It will not surprise me if Evelyn's wish to release her body with simple surrender

and natural timing come to pass. And yet one concern weighs heavily on her. She has found guided imagery to be a helpful tool to her over the years, and she asks if we can explore her issue using imagery.

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She worries about her grandson, Matt. At twenty-seven years old, he remains the "lost child" in the family. He has struggled with addiction and has not established a solid career direction or stable relationship. Evelyn has been a safe confidant for him, and she fears the impact of her declining availability. She has been a source of strength that may have helped him stay out of trouble. We begin the imagery session.

Relaxed, with eyes closed, she describes the scene that emerges in her mind's eye. "I'm in a forest glen with deep shades of green. It's lush, carpeted with ferns and full of filtered sunlight. The air is comfortably warm, and very moist. It feels like late morning, maybe 11:00. I'm resting on a fallen branch that makes a natural bench. I hear a stream nearby, the occasional sound of insects and rustling leaves. It feels feminine somehow, and safe. It's very nourishing."

I encourage her to take time and enjoy the nourishing qualities. We pause together in silence.

"Just breathing the air feels like food. The entire forest is breathing with me." The nourishment from this place seems to ease her pain and her body softens.

I ask her if this is a good time to focus on her grandson, Matt. She agrees. "Allow an image to form for your relationship with Matt," I say. In response, she feels a pull to explore a path through the trees and see where it leads.

"I'm entering a clearing, and there are two trees in the opening—a large redwood and a young seedling." She focuses on the smaller tree. "This tree has had some branches broken off, and the trunk is a little crooked, but it's really vital, healthy." Sensing the connection to Matt, she smiles with relief. I invite her to say more about what brings a smile to her face.

"I know he's OK. I trust that." Her voice is clear and strong.

"What about the larger tree?" I inquire. Although nothing is visible in her demeanor, I feel her internal eyes moving to the other tree. This subtle attunement to Evelyn's internal state feels similar to experiencing someone's eyes on the back of my head before turning to look in their direction.

"There is a majestic presence," she pauses before continuing, "a deep silence coming from the redwood." Her voice sounds deeper, more resonant, as she speaks.

I encourage her to get acquainted with this powerful tree. "What else do you notice about this tree?" I ask.

"The tree is female, and she instructs me to look around at the field and forest. The message is something like, 'Look how things are being tended.' It reminds me of a scriptural passage I haven't thought about in years but I've always loved: 'Consider the lilies of the fields, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto

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you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

Somehow her face looks more radiant, as though the sunlight from this meadow were seeping through her skin.

She continues, “The redwood is telling me that Nature is the gardener. The trees have what they need—sunlight, water, earth, and air to thrive. The support for life and growth is abundant. There is no lack of what’s needed. No tree or plant relies on another completely, or on an isolated element. The nourishment flows in from everywhere.”

There are rich, long pauses between the sentences, a slow rhythm with these images and messages. As a way of integrating these images with her initial question, I ask her to tell me if this place seems related to her concerns about Matt.

“Oh, yes,” she replies. “It’s a message that Matt is taken care of. How can he not be, with the friends, family, and unexpected gifts from life he will discover? There is a natural cycle of things that come and go. Perhaps my departure will open new possibilities for him that would not be available otherwise. It has been wonderful to grow near each other, but he doesn’t need me.” She speaks this perspective without any sense of personal diminishment. There is no devaluing of the special relationship the two of them have enjoyed, just a simple acknowledgment that the understanding of how life goes on is so much bigger than she had considered.

“There’s so much life here,” she continues. She takes in long slow breaths, as if breathing in that nourishment again. “And death too. If I really look, I see that there are leaves turning brown and dry, and new buds forming, and fully matured plants in the height of their life cycle. It is all so beautiful—the bud, the flower, the bare branch.”

I ask Evelyn if there is anything else waiting to be explored in the imagery, and she lets me know it feels complete. As we come out of the session, a sense of peace and relief surrounds Evelyn. She also looks tired.

She closes her eyes for a moment and somehow she looks astonishingly beautiful

to me. There is an expansive feeling in my chest that often arises when I see a particularly beautiful sunset.

We sit quietly for a few more moments. The sunlight seems brighter in the patches on the floor, and I notice the breeze in the leaves outside the window. I gather my things and walk slowly toward the door. On a table is a bouquet of peonies beginning to fade, with some stems folded at odd angles in the vase and a few petals scattered on the tabletop.

As if on cue, one more petal falls off the stem. She turns to me, her eyes bright, and whispers, “That’s how I want to go.” *sfm*

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### *Going Home*

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to assist in making these resolutions occur. For those dying, this process of “wrapping up” what is past empowers their movement forward.

In Angelina’s case, the ease of transition is dependent on knowing that loved ones will be all right once her death has occurred. Reassurance about how survivors will cope, when offered honestly and directly, frees the dying person to move ahead in the process. This type of open discussion also encourages friends and family to prepare themselves for the transition.

Rachael is eighty-seven and, although she has never been a wealthy woman, her life has been rich. A widow, she has three adult children and twelve grandchildren who love her deeply. She has spent a lifetime caring for her family and, through faithful church work, others. She is dying. True to her Depression-era childhood, her final wishes reflect her lifelong work ethic: that her financial debts be paid. Her last wish requires the cooperation of family members who honor her wish and carry it through.

Persons in transition frequently express

concern around physical matters. Many want to die in their home, where they are most familiar and comfortable, surrounded by loved ones as well as the physical reminders of a life well lived—of those they love and those who love them. If this is not possible, being surrounded by familiar objects—a favorite pillow, pictures, or a piece of furniture, may ease the way.

George, fifty-three, whose illness had compromised his mobility for years, asked that, upon his death, all the windows be opened so that his newly released spirit would be able to move freely, without barriers.

Special rituals—a certain hymn, a special meal, a poem—mark and enhance the approach of death while connecting the patient with loved ones who are close by, as well as those who cannot be physically present. These rituals serve to acknowledge the process as it is taking place, while providing an atmosphere of control, calm, and peace.

Ed, eighty-nine, is a child of what has been called the “Greatest Generation.” The husband, father, professional, and veteran has lived a long and full life. He has provided for his family financially and now what he wants most is to leave a legacy that reflects and honors his life. To that end, he has instructed that a substantial gift be made to the music program of his alma mater, establishing a scholarship fund for young musicians in his name.

Issues of legacy are more than financial. An individual who is leaving this life wants to acknowledge and embrace a life lived fully and needs to know that he will be remembered. David, sixty-three, instructed that after his cremation, he wished to be taken on a drive through neighborhoods where he was happiest, finishing his physical journey with an inurnment and life celebration where friends and loved ones could toast his life and his passing. Those who lend support by embracing the rituals of these transitional journeys with their loved ones are blessed with the legacy of increased awareness. There is pride in having honored the journey of their loved ones and having demystified the process for themselves. *sfm*

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