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Sing to Me When I Am Dying

Death doulas and the role of song in safe passage

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YOU FEEL VERY LOVED AND CARED FOR, WITH ALL THESE VOICES SINGING OVER YOU . . . IT'S QUITE POWERFUL.

“I’m going to give you a song with a story.” I closed my eyes and Wendy Luella Perkins’ beautiful voice reached me through the computer speakers. She had turned a line from a Mary Oliver poem into a meditative song, and by the time she invited me to sing the line with her, I was undeniably tearful.

I had just experienced the magic of “soulful singing,” which Perkins, a local Unitarian Universalist minister, defines as “a community singing meditation practice that connects us more deeply to ourselves, one another, and all the forces that sustain and uphold us.” She has been leading in-person soulful singing gatherings for more than twenty years and has continued the practice online through the pandemic.

Through her ministry and life, Perkins has the opportunity to bring soulful singing to people who are in the process of dying. In 2019, she co-founded Encircle: Soulful Singing at the Bedside with Aileen Stewart, a local deathcare guide (someone who assists in the dying process). Encircle — which unfortunately had to close at the beginning of the pandemic — was a group of amateur singers and deathcare workers. Its goal was to support people nearing the end of their lives by creating a holding space with song, and by offering companionship and warmth during their transition.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting with Stewart for breakfast at The Elm Café. Sitting on the couch there, she leaned in and sang quietly to me: “May you have safe passage, safe passage on your way.” She repeated it a few times, adding my name to it. I imagined being held in that song, being the recipient of it. Nothing had ever felt more natural, or more sacred.

Sue Lyon, another former Encircle member who is also an Elder at Next Church and the co-founder of Green Burial Kingston, spent some time talking to me about loving attention, about how we don’t want to wait to be on our deathbed to feel that warmth. She remembers with awe a time during a practice session when they all took turns “being the dying person” and lying down on a couch to be sung to by the rest of the group. “You feel very loved and cared for, with all these voices singing over you. It’s some-



thing really special, and it’s for you, you are the centre of what is happening. It’s quite powerful.”

Encircle’s work had to come to a halt when, as Stewart puts it, “singing became the most dangerous activity on the planet.” Before it did, though, they got to sing to Encircle member Nancy MacMillan’s mother as she was dying. Nancy MacMillan, a registered therapist, natural deathcare advocate, and writer, is working on a book titled *The Far Shore: Tending Dying, Death, and Our Ancestors*. She kindly agreed to share an excerpt from her manuscript,

in which she describes the experience of bringing song to her mother as she was dying.

Mum is in a semi-conscious state, curled up on her side like a small child — her knees drawn up, and her hands tucked under the thin flannel sheet. I ask Sher, “Will you sing something for her? Something old and familiar?” We think for a few moments, and “Away in a Manger” comes to mind. In a beautiful soprano voice, Sher quietly and slowly starts singing Mum’s favourite Christmas carol. Mum turns her head, trying to hear better. When Sher finishes, Mum whispers, “More, more.” Sher sings it again, and pauses, Mum looks rapturous, and so she goes on to sing “Silent Night.” At the end, Mum reaches her arms out, crying, “Mummy.” It was the sweetest moment, for all of us. That sweetness now becomes a pool of water in front of me. I feel myself lean over, stirring it with my own aged hand, while the currents of time swirl achingly together.

I was moved to read about this return to infancy in MacMillan’s mother, that sweetness. As Perkins justly reminded me, “Dying and being born are the two most important thresholds of human existence.” It made sense, then, that just as you might need a birth doula, you might also need a death doula.

Lyon also noted the parallel when she told me: “It is work to be born, and it is work to die.” I don’t remember my first threshold, and my last threshold is still unknown. But when it happens, I hope there is singing all around me, and I hope I feel the loving care, the sweetness.

Visit deathcarekingston.ca for more information about natural deathcare. If you’d like to learn simple songs to accompany the thresholds of life, go to [tiktok.com/@wendyluella-perkins](https://www.tiktok.com/@wendyluella-perkins), and/or contact Wendy Luella Perkins for details to join a soulful singing group: info@wendyluella-perkins.com. Green Burial Kingston will have a booth at the Skeleton Park Arts Festival where the curious can find more information.



LAURA CHAIGNON (she/her) is a queer white femme and arts worker living in the Skeleton Park neighbourhood. She was honoured and delighted to be in conversation with the four wonderful women in this article, and is forever grateful for their generosity and the work they do.