

MEMENTO MORI

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE ICCFA

FEBRUARY 2023



the Death Sherpa

*Why Doulas Are Becoming
Increasingly Popular
in Deathcare*

INSIDE:

**A Prelude to the 2024 Elections
Industry Trendspotting for 2023
Baby Boomers Are Selling Out
Robust eCommerce: A Must-Have**

A BRIDGE

Between Hospice and the Grave



The Role of the End-of-Life Doula

by Susan Cushing

THEY SAY WE COME INTO THIS LIFE alone and depart the same way. An empty phrase, perhaps, but not entirely true. Ideally, we enter this world assisted by loving arms waiting to cherish and celebrate our arrival. And, except in tragic circumstances, we typically are surrounded by people who love and care for us when we leave. Most of us have no idea when that departure date might be; but for the terminally ill, that appointment is set on our emotional calendar. Not the exact date, perhaps, but there is the certainty that it is imminent.

In the early 1960s, hospice care came into play, a bridge between this life and the next. Yet, while helpful and a step in the right direction, it was not ideal for everyone. Just as some people opt for midwives, home births and birth doulas, hospice might feel too institutional for many souls. Also, because hospice is typically associated with medical care, there remained a gap.

Loved ones are often too absorbed with dealing with their loss or simply the day-to-day mechanics of caring for the dying. Fear of saying the wrong thing or discomfort with the subject of death, these topics are often avoided or even forbidden, leaving the departing soul hungry to express preferences or final wishes.

Then, slowly, quietly, almost miraculously, something else appeared on the horizon. Full of compassion and thoughtfully trained, end-of-life doulas eased in to fill that supremely unique role. More than just caretakers or hand-holders, these angels of mercy enter the lives of the dying and help them take those all-important last steps into the next life.

But who are these angels of mercy? What prompts them to take on such a somber and potentially depressing role? We were fortunate to meet four of these missionaries of hope and love who generously shared their stories.

Vanessa Johnston, Nicole Matarazzo, Victoria Wiley, and Sara Aumann have all joined the ranks of what can only be described as one of the most selfless, caring, and spiritual callings we mere mortals can claim.

Each has their own story and reasons for wanting to embark on such an amazing journey. Of course, they do share some commonalities. They have suffered the pain of losing loved ones. They have hearts so full of love and compassion they eagerly share with and guide complete strangers as they take their final journey.

Perhaps most importantly, they all belong to the National End-of-Life Doula Association (NELDA). To quote from the website of this amazing organization, "Dying isn't a medical event. It is a human one."

Meet Vanessa Johnston

"I've always been comfortable with the uncomfortable," says Vanessa, who entered the world of end-of-life doulas almost inadvertently.

Formerly a high school English teacher, Vanessa describes herself as someone drawn to those going through transitions and someone who enjoys a robust appreciation for stories.

Although teaching had been a rewarding experience, in 2015, Vanessa was herself in transition, seeking another career path to follow. At that juncture, either by happy coincidence or perhaps fate, a friend of a friend sought her out for a very special assignment.

"At the time, they said they were looking for an assistant," she says, "that's the term they used." In fact, the



VANESSA JOHNSTON is an End-of-Life Doula in Denver. She trained with the International End-of-Life Doula Association (INELDA) in 2017 and formed Denver EOL Doula, LLC the following year. Her passion is to help those who are dying experience more agency and empowerment, while also providing support for their loved ones. She co-founded the nonprofit Colorado End-of-Life Collaborative in 2020 and currently serves as Vice-President, Membership. www.coeolcollaborative.org. She also co-hosts monthly Death Cafes and volunteers with hospice.

role they were asking Vanessa to take on was caring for a gentleman who had been given his life deadline.

"I was quick to explain that I had no medical training at all; however, if they were looking for someone to serve as a compassionate companion then I could do that," she says. "I was with that gentleman for two-and-a-half years, and it was during that time that I came across the term end-of-life doula. I thought, 'Ah, that's what I've been doing!'"

Naturally, she was anxious to learn more about this newly discovered title and what it encompassed. The more she learned, the more apparent it became that it is what she was born to do.

Vanessa eagerly submerged herself in her newfound destiny, augmenting her instinctual talents and skills with structured training. Soon, her business was formed, and clients seemed to miraculously find her.

In truth, there wasn't really anything miraculous about this influx of patrons, for Vanessa's reputation for empathy and sincere interest in the life stories of others served as a magnet to those whose expiration date had been set.

"For me, as a former English teacher, it's always about the stories," she says with an uplifting energy not usually associated with death. "What I do is help people create the ending of their own life story. Naturally, I can't take away the sorrow and loss that comes with a loved one dying, but what I can do is give them the tools to be empowered before that event happens.

There are so many seemingly small things that really no one, often even the dying, don't realize should be identified and decided. "So much of what I do is helping return that free agency to the dying," Vanessa continues. "Of course, this looks different in every instance depending upon medical restrictions such as life support or even dementia. But so much has been already taken away from them, I strive to return some semblance of agency, allowing them to dictate specifics about their last days and even what is to transpire upon their death."

Vanessa speaks of choices such as who should be in the room in those final hours, what scents and ambience do they wish to have as they pass, and even if there are particular sounds, music, etc., that would be most peaceful.

“That’s what I am doing in my mind,” she says, “creating that sacred space, honoring the ending of that story.”

So great is Vanessa’s passion for this work that in 2020, she co-founded the Colorado End of Life Collaborative. This all-volunteer, nonprofit organization’s goal is to bring visibility to end-of-life doula work as well as to work collaboratively with other end-of-life service providers.

“I believe that everyone serving as an end-of-life conduit is not only helping each individual family, but also serving to educate and enlighten our very death phobic Western society.”

Meet Nicole Matarazzo

“My initiation to the death and dying world arrived in the mid-1990s,” says Nicole Matarazzo. “I was a childhood specialist working in pediatrics as a Child Life Specialist tending to children dying of AIDS and cancer.” She also spent some time working with marrow transplant patients “where many of those I was assigned to were dying. They were children as well.”

“I have to admit I wasn’t expecting to be so involved with so much death.” Nicole recounts, “I mean there was an expectation that some patients would die, but I didn’t anticipate it being at such a magnitude.”

Moving out of that area to something that wasn’t quite so intense, Nicole found herself teaching and then studying massage therapy. She worked in this field for several years before she began her family. After

experiencing home births with her own children, Nicole began assisting friends.

“When I was in my late 20s, I had my first child; that opened the door to the experience of birthing a baby at home,” she recalls. “In the comfort of my own home, with a nurse midwife, the birth of my first child was an experience of pure awe and wonder. I was a little bit of a pioneer at that time, bringing something old back to the present. I considered myself incredibly fortunate to be assisting friends while bringing new life into the world.”

Nicole sees a comparison between life and death. “Though it might sound incongruous, as I watched my child take her first breath, that experience was very similar to holding all those children taking their last breath as a Child Life Specialist,” she recalls. “The

sacred and silent space as the mystery of life and death makes itself known. There is a very brief moment of time when all is silent and still as the mystery of life and death are revealed.”

As a Death Midwife, Nicole feels just as fortunate to support individuals in preparation for the end of their lives alongside their loved ones. Nicole describes the feeling of bringing life into the world and ushering life out as “utter awe of what lives outside of us, what lives beyond us, and that exposure to the mystery.”

Then, about eight years ago, a very dear friend asked her to walk her through the end of her life. “She was diagnosed with terminal cancer,” says Nicole, “and I felt incredibly privileged to walk beside her, caring for her in her most vulnerable and intimate moments. Her daughter and I shared that role and I learned so many things about the heart and soul during that experience. She is the reason I became a Death Midwife.”

A natural question for anyone serving in such a capacity is, “How does it affect you? Does it cause sadness or even depression?”



NICOLE MATARAZZO, CMT, www.endoflifepathways.com, is a Certified Death Midwife (End-of-Life Doula). Nicole’s poised and compassionate spirit as a Death Midwife offers a sense of peace to adults, children and families facing a time that often feels overwhelming and uncertain. Nicole considers it an honor to be called to the sacred space of dying, and brings a tender heart to the vulnerability that illness and death bring. She began her work as a Child Life Specialist tending to the psychosocial and emotional needs of children dying of AIDS and cancer. She is a Certified Massage Therapist as well as a Heart Math and Comfort Touch Practitioner. Nicole is dedicated to her own healing, meditation and spiritual practice, which creates the strong foundation from which she serves her clients. As a Certified Death Midwife, Nicole is reminded of how unique and precious each of us is and that our body, mind and soul deserve the most loving presence and care, especially at the end of life. She can be reached at nmatarazzo4@gmail.com.

Nicole spent about a year supporting her friend during her illness and as she transitioned from this life to the next. “That moment reawakened a soulful and tender place in me, that moment of crossing the threshold from this life to another,” she shares, “the magic, the mystery, the love, the suffering that reveals itself, the connection, the sacredness, it was all so very present in that moment.

When it was over, the hospice nurse asked Nicole where she had received her training, which made her wonder how elders are dying in the community. According to the nurse, most people were passing alone and frightened.

After allowing herself time to mourn her friend’s death, she recalls wondering what her next step would be. “Colors were brighter, I was able to breathe a little deeper, things had shifted inside of me, and I’d crossed a threshold in my grieving. I felt a little more open to what could be next for me,” she explains. “It was such a profound experience.”

That day, she saw signs for an end-of-life doula training. She immediately called the number and signed up for the course two days later. Upon completing this training, receiving a certification as an End-of-Life Doula, Nicole continued to immerse herself in study with established end-of-life professionals and teachers.

“I continued to learn and grow as much as possible until I felt ready to walk through the door of someone’s home, an invitation to walk with them in preparation for their transition,” she says.

Nicole notes that there have been many iterations of her work with death and dying from her experience as a Child Life Specialist to her evolution as an end-of-life practitioner.

“I’ve been with those who are at the middle part of their lives and are dying from terminal illness,” she says. “I’ve supported teenagers, children, and elderly people through their deaths, most often alongside their loved ones. Most recently, I have supported individuals in support of advance care planning and creating end-of-life care plans. Several elderly women who didn’t feel like their adult children would be able to understand their end-of-life wishes and respectfully follow through with their wishes asked me to support them in the preparation of their planning and to initiate a connected conversation with their family members.”

A natural question for anyone serving in such a capacity is, “How does it affect you? Does it cause sadness or even depression?”

Nicole’s response is honest and thoughtful. “Anyone in this role must take responsibility for self-care. When we don’t take care of ourselves, we can’t possibly give what a family needs. I meditate every morning, take physical care of myself and frequently share stories and experiences with a group of professionals who work in end-of-life care. This sharing, of course, is with great reverence, confidentiality and privacy.”

There is no one way of caring for or assisting those on the precipice of death. According to this end-of-life doula, each situation, illness, person, and family is unique.

“We spend a lot of time in connected conversation talking about the feelings and emotions that rise, and fall, they are deeply meaningful conversations,” she explains. “These are the conversations that are often very hard for family and friends to initiate. They either don’t know how to start a hard conversation or simply don’t feel comfortable doing so. It’s my job to create a safe, trusted,



VERONICA WILEY, MBA (they, them, theirs), is the founder of Outside Rites, Ltd., and is a Death Doula, Ecotherapy Facilitator, E-RYT, YACEP. Veronica has been a certified yoga instructor for over a decade. They have both E-RYT and Continuing Education Provider credentials through Yoga Alliance. They started teaching Hot Yoga in 2012 and have added many modalities

over the years including power, sculpt, restorative, prenatal, and postpartum yoga. They have taught over 1,500 classes and facilitated over 15 Yoga Teacher Trainings throughout the years. After attending the International Yoga Festival in Rishikesh India in 2019 they returned to school to finish a Bachelor of Arts in Music. They spent their last term studying classical Hindustani music and Kathak dance - traditions that both originated in North India. Their undergraduate studies culminated in an academic thesis on Music in Modern Yoga Culture. Most recently, Veronica has completed an Outdoor Industry MBA with a capstone project focused on providing care and support for end-of-life, death, and grief by incorporating ecotherapy and movement with their skills and training as a death doula and ecotherapy facilitator. The focus on end-of-life care was inspired by the sudden illness and passing of their father in July of 2021 after witnessing resistance and aversion to conversations about death by family and medical providers. Email Veronica at nfo@outsiderites.org and visit www.outsiderites.org.

and strong foundation before we begin to peel back the different layers of concerns, fears, hurts, and curiosities so that we can discover what will lead the dying person to finding greater peace and greater ease in their lives as they move into their dying time. I’m not there to fix things, there’s nothing to be fixed. I arrive with an open heart, some tools, a sturdy foundation and experience to support during an often difficult and confusing time. Together, we discover what brings them the most comfort so that when they begin their transition, they feel loved, connected and supported.”

Meet Veronica Wiley (they/them/theirs)

The newest of our four angels to join the battalion of compassionate caregivers known as End-of-Life Doulas, Veronica Wiley discovered their true destiny shortly after the death of their beloved father.

“Noticing how difficult it was for my family and my father’s friends to sit with him before he passed and the resistance to the conversations around what choices needed to be made and what options were available, I wanted to be there to help other families navigate what is often a traumatic time,” Veronica explains.

Veronica’s experience with their father’s hospitalization and

subsequent passing was not only emotionally devastating but it left Veronica at a surprising and confusing crossroads in their career path. In graduate school, studying for their MBA, Veronica was overcome with the realization that there was a greater calling.

“There’s nothing like being halfway through your master’s degree and suddenly realizing ‘I might be in the wrong program,’” Veronica quips with droll humor. “After rather deep conversations with my program director and advisor and because of the uniqueness of what was beckoning me, they helped me customize my capstone project around where I wanted to focus. That, of course, was end-of-life care.”

Veronica goes on to say that they hadn’t been aware of the term End-of-Life Doula in passing. “Until I began researching, I hadn’t realized it was an actual profession, with training,” Veronica recounts. “While looking into that and looking for ways to relate it to the Outdoor Industry, which was the focus for my program, I also started looking at ecotherapy or nature therapy to facilitate terminal patients.”

Ultimately, Veronica paved the way for a new and exciting course of study and a one-of-a-kind capstone project at Western Colorado University. As a new MBA graduate with a heart full of longing to bring peace to the dying and their families, Veronica founded Outside Rites.

The mission statement for the new endeavor clearly outlines Veronica’s passion for a heretofore unrealized dream.

“To transform perceptions and experiences of dying by facilitating conversations, activities, & practices that embrace human death as part of nature through the incorporation of death doula services, ecotherapy, and yogic teachings while promoting equitable access to quality end-of-life and death care.”

An ambitious undertaking for anyone at any age, Veronica let their heart lead the way to provide this unique and irreplaceable service to families such as their own, who are experiencing the heart-rending dilemma of how to care for the terminally ill and their loved ones.

Veronica might be the youngest and newest doula in our group, but the

historical strides they have made in bringing this fascinating profession to the forefront of our social conscience is undeniable.

“For me, this is such a fulfilling experience being able to provide support for people while they are in that transition phase,” Veronica says. “I remember when my dad was in the hospice and how little preparation we had for what was coming. Even in the conversations with doctors, there were disagreements among the various teams of doctors about what was happening. There were a couple of doctors who kept insisting, right up until four or five days before we got him on hospice, that if we just got him to a rehab facility that he would be fine.”

As Veronica knows too well, it is every family member’s desire to acknowledge, and, whenever possible, grant their loved one’s dying wishes. Whether this is an environment, the people attending, or any other request, we long to make that request a reality. With little knowledge, support or resources, this becomes increasingly difficult.

“My dad wanted to die in his own backyard,” says Veronica. “While my family and I were able to get him discharged home from the hospital, we lacked the knowledge and logistics to fully meet his wishes.”

Again, an example of the essential chasm End-of-Life Doulas fulfill and why with very little marketing or promotion this field is expanding so quickly.

“I just feel there is a lot of gap in our system,” Veronica adds, “that leaves people floundering for information, resources and support.”

Veronica’s somewhat unique background that combines yoga, ecotherapy, the arts and humanities with an MBA, provides Veronica with a rare toolbox that is both varied and deeper than most who might approach this field.

For Veronica, the role of doula is a calling and responsibility. “While the name of this role is relatively new in modern culture, it’s important to note that this role has existed in many indigenous cultures around the world by various different names for hundreds of years. Outside Rites is specifically focused on facilitating and assisting access to nature during this period of time based on studies that promote nature as a means of providing physical, emotional, and spiritual comfort at the end-of-life.”

Meet Sara Aumann

Most of us have suffered the pain of losing someone close. We understand the toll it takes on us not only emotionally but often physically as well. For Sara Aumann, this harrowing experience came like a landslide, losing not one or two, but 10 loved ones over the course of about 15 months.

There was virtually no time between each death to regroup or recover. “It was overwhelming to lose so many family members in rapid succession,” Sara says. “The most significant of these were my two brothers, my father, and grandfather.”

Having just returned from China where she had been living and working, these deaths had her reeling, and she was on a spiritual journey trying to make sense of it all.

“I think I explored almost every spiritual path known,” Sara says. “I revisited the Buddhist ideology as well as many others. Then I discovered that becoming a doula seemed to embrace and combine all the things that I used to console myself through my own grief.”

Unlike the others we visited, Sara is a psychic medium, and she is quite comfortable communicating and relating to those who have crossed over and routinely helps others who are seeking answers or just comfort.

In addition, as an energy worker, Sara facilitates and empowers individuals and entire corporate teams to create their own strategic self-care. Her positive energy is both uplifting and inspirational.

“My first memory of being with death is 1987 when my grandma, Jeanne, was dying at home in the living room,” she recalls. “I would go sit on her hospital bed, stroke her thinning hair, and sing to her ... I was 3 years old. This was a foreshadowing of a much harder time to come in 2016 when I lost two brothers, my father, grandfather, and a pregnancy.”

While her services mirror those of the other gifted doulas we spoke to, Sara has these other dimensions that lend a special degree of connecting that is comforting to those on the brink of losing a loved one—a peek into what’s to come and the peace of knowing this life is only one phase of an eternal cycle.

“I have a gift of arranging space, transmuting and clearing energy, and an intuitive knowing of what’s needed in the final days,” Sara says humbly. “I consider it an honor to be in and hold this space for families. It is such an emotional time and often once there is a diagnosis, we don’t take the time to really understand and create a space for our loved ones to leave this world. Finally, I have spent the last five years in my own grief work and love working with individuals to create their own healing path.”

Becoming a doula for Sara seems to have been such a natural and logical segway given her other gifts. She is able, with complete confidence, to assure those leaving this world, as well as their loved ones, that this is far from an ending and just the beginning of an eternal plan.

Her methods are uniquely her own as she describes. “I offer end-of-life doula services, which can include life review and meaningful interviews, planning and sitting vigil for your final days, the creation of legacy projects, and early grief re-processing. I also offer private sittings as a psychic medium and energy worker.”

Beyond this one-on-one work, Sara



SARA AUMANN of Fully Human, sara@fullyhuman.us, is an end of life doula, executive coach and intuitive medium in Denver, CO. Her aim is to guide people to integrate their grief to become more fully human. She facilitates this work for individuals, families and corporate teams.

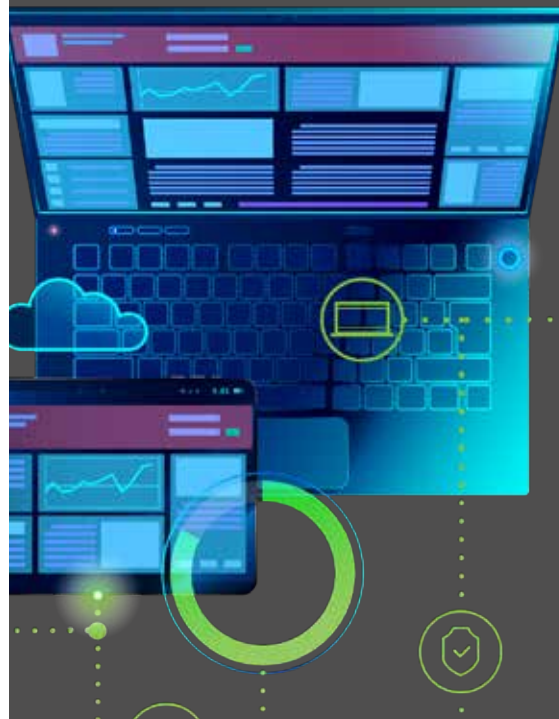
hosts her own podcast, *Because I Said Yes*, where she delves into stories of sex, death, and travel to connect you to your own inspiration for life. According to Sara, “These conversations are for anyone looking to shake off their doldrums, reawaken their dreams, and live a life they love because they said yes!”

All of the doulas we spoke to reside in Colorado, but this is a movement of hope and support that is blossoming throughout our country. Between hospice and the funeral home, there is finally a bridge—a lifeboat to a calm, peaceful surrender. ❏

Susan Cushing is a regular contributor to *Memento Mori* magazine.

Best-in-Class Cemetery Software for All Your Organization’s Needs

Software solutions exclusively engineered to increase sales and improve the efficiency of your operations



axiom-cms.com



AXIOM
POWERED BY JMT CONSULTING
EXPERTS IN CEMETERY SOFTWARE
AND MAPPING SOLUTIONS