

Secrets of Life and Death

films about death and transformation

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Originally trained as a sociologist, I wrote my doctoral thesis about the mental shifts and behavior adjustments people make when facing drastic life changes. Producing the film series, *Secrets of Life and Death* has taken me deeper into this exploration with its spotlight on death, the ultimate life-change. My vision for this film series, however, is far more than a scholarly exercise. It is about providing people with both the opportunity and courage to explore a subject that is usually feared and avoided.

The impetus for this film project arises out of my personal experience with the deaths of my parents, barely six months apart. I returned to my family home in New Jersey, full of glorious notions about the mystery and sacredness of dying. I was met with the blare of a radio, the smell of urine, family bickering and paralyzing emotional demands. I tried talking to my mother about what she was going through as she succumbed to the ravages of metastatic breast cancer. I quickly realized that she was more interested in finishing up her projects than in exploring any inner journey of the spirit. My father, dying from Alzheimer's, was inaccessible. I was confused and regretful. I blamed it on American culture, my parents' upbringing and my own lack of experience. I set out to make a film that would help change the way people thought about death.

I interviewed people who were open to the more mystical sides of dying. Inevitably, I was exposed to death in all its aspects, the nitty-gritty of a failing body along with the sublimity of the divine. These two sides of death, the sacred and the profane, ended up taking my film and me to a deeper and truer vision of the process of dying and its meaning for life

In the mid-1980's, I started what has become a 25 year "post-doctorate" of sorts with a Sufi master from Baghdad (which continues to this day). This association has had a profound effect on my filmmaking as well as my life work. Stylistically my approach is a joining of the story-weaving of Sufi tales with the documentary form. It is not the usual sort of fly-on-the-wall reportage about the topic. My mission is to open people up to the extraordinary opportunity of this experience we call death. It is a once-in-a-lifetime event offering once-in-a-lifetime chances to learn about one's self and existence. Enter into the films and you get an infusion of what it is like to face death with open eyes and what it's like when you don't. Multi-layered with stories within stories, the films take you on a journey through loss, missed opportunities, regret, and ultimately redemption.

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Film Summaries

Facing Death...with open eyes

Filmmaker Dr. Peticolas turns the camera on herself and four wise souls to uncover profound truths about life and death. Robin, newly divorced, ready to set her San Francisco world on fire in her forties, is struck out-of-the-blue by a rare disease. She nearly dies and the illness can kill her at any time. Tighe, young, beautiful and living in the Castro, tests positive for the Virus. He tries the new drugs, the new therapies, all the new Yoga positions, but after eight years, he decides that's enough. Rick, noted author of books on Zen Buddhism and editor of the San Francisco publication *Yoga Journal*, is diagnosed with lung cancer; he loses his freedom, his health, his looks, and finally his work. Where does that leave his beliefs? National public speaker, author of *Be Here Now*, and modern pioneer of conscious dying, Ram Dass is put to the test when a stroke damages the speech center of his brain and leaves him partially paralyzed.

Their four stories are woven together in a lyrical tapestry of words, images and music, evoking loss, confusion, anger, and despair, and at last, discovery. Ram Dass desperately reaches out to his dead teacher, saying "Graceful, life is graceful! So, what about the stroke?" An answer comes back to him: "Stroke is grace." All four must make a perceptual shift to find their own answer to this conundrum, to find the grace, the gifts of death.

Caring for Dying: the art of being present

Up against her own sense of failure with caring for her dying parents, the filmmaker takes us on her search for people who might have found success. Marcia is just getting to know Rick Fields when he is diagnosed with lung cancer. Although he warns her off, she refuses to abandon him. They struggle through their new relationship while one of them readies to die. Both Christine's mother and stepfather are dying, but she can only care for one of them. The stepfather is placed in a board and care nearby. It's a delicate balance of life, death and love. In one long, exhausting night, Frank Ostaseski, founder of Zen Hospice, learns he is more than just "Mr. Hospice." Better than a primer for success, the film is a recipe for forgiveness.

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The Heart of Grieving

This film is about the arduous, at times ecstatic, process of grieving death. Feeling limited by her own cultural upbringing during the deaths of her parents, filmmaker, Dr. Michelle Peticolas, seeks a more open and creative approach to loss. With the San Francisco Day of the Dead as a visual backdrop, she shares the stories of four people who inspire her: Dan, a no-nonsense guy who gets caught up in the mystery of his wife's dying; Marcia, a spiritually-guided newly-wed and widow; Gladys, the compassionate church-friend of an HIV positive man abandoned by his family; and Geoff, an only-son coping with the double loss of his mother to cancer and his father to suicide. From diagnosis to death to mourning, the film explores the heart and soul of grief.

Healing Loss, Helping Others

In her quest to understand death, the filmmaker seeks the wisdom of people who work with the dying and receives unexpected lessons about living. A chaplain, a doctor and a musician tell stories about transforming suffering and loss into blessings.

Growing up on a farm in Springfield, Kentucky, Betty experiences a lot of losses: two babies, her young husband, many surgeries and lots of divorces. On the verge of taking her own life after still another surgery, she has a last ditch conversation with God and discovers that there is a purpose to her life. She just needs to find out what that purpose is. Brad, a hardworking and successful young doctor, receives an excellerated course in suffering when a devastating career move leaves him without work, his self-esteem, and finally his family. A two-year emotional journey through despair gives him first-hand understanding about the challenges of his patients which changes the direction of his work. A close brush with death from throat cancer frightens Kellen, a rising musical star, into abandoning her career even though her voice was saved in surgery. By helping first her father-in-law and then her father to die, she is able to reconnect to her music in a more profound and satisfying way.

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FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Michelle Peticolas, **Producer/Director**

Michelle is filmmaker with a Ph.D. in Sociology from Indiana University. She worked with an award-winning New York documentary production company, Claypoint Productions, on several films including *The Creative Spark*, one of a four-part series on dreaming for the Discover Channel and *On the Trail of Dracula* for National Geographic Explorer. In New York City and later in San Francisco, she produced and hosted a popular half-hour cable series, *On the Edge*, exploring the mind, body, spirit connection. Since the deaths of her parents, she has been working on a four-part film series, *Secrets of Life and Death*, which focuses on death as an impetus for personal and spiritual change. The films have the stamp of her twenty-plus years with a Sufi Master from Baghdad. She has been screening them in workshops throughout the Bay Area and presented them at conferences for the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization and the California Hospice Association. As an outgrowth of her film work, she currently teaches seminars on end-of-life at JFK University and leads a bereavement group at Sutter VNA and Hospice in Emeryville.

Robert Mohr, **Director of Photography**

Robert began his training at the Famous Photographer School, guided by such notable faculty as Avedon, Beattie, Eisenstadt, Halsman, Penn, and Stern. After a stint as a camera operator at KHET PBS 11 in Honolulu and working with the local commercial photographers, he moved to San Francisco to get into motion pictures. He wears a variety of hats including producer, director, director of photography, lighting director and still photographer. He has worked on projects for Airstream Pictures, Commonwealth Club, Computer History Museum, Contrast Productions, Cornerstone Productions, Directors Guild of America, Fox Pictures' *X-Men 3*, National Television Academy Santa Fe Productions' *They Came to America* (PBS), and Summertime Films' *Her Best Move*.

Elaine G. Trotter, **On Line Editor**

After fifteen year serving as an online editor and instructor for Bay Area Video Coalition in San Francisco, Elaine started her own company, Invision Production in 1985. She specializes in editing, color correction and DVD authoring and has worked with well-known performing arts and cultural organizations and independent producers throughout the Bay Area. Her credits include: Ballet Afsaneh's performance DVD; *Edison's 100th Birthday* for the Smithsonian Institute; *In the Mind's Eye* for an installation at NY MOMA and other museums; KQED's (PBS station) weekly magazine *Womentime and Company*, a seven-part KQED documentary series with Ram Dass and Steven and Andrea Levine and the award-winning documentary short, *Let's Face It*.

Elise Lebec, **Composer**

Elise Lebec is sound designer and composer for documentary films and an accomplished singer and songwriter. She has worked on both documentary and narrative shorts and features. The short *My Mother Said*, which she finished this year, has been accepted at numerous film festivals around the country including Tribeca. Her very first film collaboration, *Americanizing Shelly*

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was a Hollywood release accepted to Sundance 2007. Other accomplishments include three films commissioned by the Red Cross of Latin America. Her music albums are: *Tabith Plays Billich*, *Back to Innocence*, and *Possible Dreams*, which ranked #14 on the New Age Charts for over 8 weeks.