

Facing Death . . . with open eyes

STUDY GUIDE

www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com

In *Facing Death . . . with open eyes* the filmmaker seeks to understand the process of dying after the loss of her parents. She interviews four people who are wonderfully candid about their experiences -- from confronting life-threatening illness and searching for cures, to struggles with intense emotions and dealing with others, to that final search for meaning and peace of mind.

As the filmmaker discovers in the film, there is no answer to death except in the experiencing of it. Yet we still might want to find out as much as we can. The film and the dialogue it stimulates, offer an opportunity to do that, to discover how we feel about death and to learn from the experience of others. By increasing our exposure to the subject, it is possible that we may become a little more comfortable, a little more open and maybe a little less afraid the next time death comes to the door.

Advantages of Group Viewing and Discussion.

Sharing our stories about death can be informative and healing. The process of describing our thought and feeling to others can help bring them into focus and clarity and gives us practice talking about a difficult subject. We can also learn how others have handled similar situations, what worked, what did not, and find reassurance and affirmation in the discovery of common emotions, reactions and behavior.

Possible Group Contexts.

Family and/or friends; church or community groups, retirement communities and senior centers, support groups for life-threatening illnesses, hospice and bereavement groups, academic classes on: aging, life passages, death, end-of-life; hospice nursing, and palliative medicine.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND THEIR USE

The instructions and questions listed below are offered as suggestions. Each group should feel free to experiment and discover what works best for its own process.

1. After viewing the film wait a few minutes in silence to gather your thoughts and observe your reaction.
2. Write down (optional but encouraged) or mentally review your experience while watching the film
3. Share with the whole group
4. If the group is larger than ten people, divide into pairs or threesomes to share. Set a time limit of about ten to fifteen minutes. Let one person from each pair or threesome briefly summarize to the larger group, what was said and learned.

5. Open the group to general discussion or use some of the questions and exercises listed below.

Discussion Questions:

Feelings about dying:

- What thoughts, feelings or memories do you have after watching the film?
- Do you have any concerns or fears about dying?
- How would you prefer to die? If instead of you, it was someone you loved, would you prefer them to die the same way?

Beliefs about dying

[EXERCISE: Draw a picture or write a detailed description of what you believe happens after you die. Share this as you answer the following questions.]

- What do YOU believe happens to you after you die?
- What life experiences have influenced your beliefs about death?
- Have your beliefs about death changed much over the course of your life? If yes, in what way?

Ready to Die

[EXERCISE: Write your own obituary as if you had died today and share it with the group. Describe anything you learned from the exercise]

- Can you think of any ways in which you might be better prepared for dying whenever and however it comes?
- If you were told you only had six months to live, and you had the energy, what are some of the things you would like to do or complete before you die?
- If you had only one day to live, what would you do? If you had only one hour? One minute?
- Death can come at any moment through an accident or an unexpected health crisis. How might you live your life with more consciousness about this possibility?

Attachments of Life

[EXERCISE 1: Draw pictures or gather photos of what you will miss when you die.]

[EXERCISE 2: Write a letter to the person you love the most, saying what you will miss about him/her.]

- What are some of the attachments you will have to give up when you die?

[EXERCISE 3: Divide group in pairs and bind the eyes, arms and feet of one, let the other guide the first around the room. How does it feel to be dependent on the help of another?]

- Think back to all the times you have been sick and dependent on others for help. What does this tell you about how you would handle dependency for your most basic needs?

Helping Death

- Is there a right time to stop fighting an illness and focus on dying? Might that be different for medical providers, caregivers, patients? Why?
- When would you call in hospice?
- What are your thoughts on helping death, e.g. turning off life-support equipment, withholding antibiotics, providing death-hastening drugs.
- What are your views on the legalization of assisted suicide?

After Death

[SUGGESTED READING: “The Heart’s Code” by Paul Pearsall, Ph.D]

- What are your feeling about organ donation?
- Do you have any wishes regarding the disposition of your body after you die?
- Do you have any wishes regarding a funeral or memorial service arrangements?

[EXERCISE: Write a list of directives for your body and memorial service