

Deathing: Reclaiming the Art of Dying in a Unitary Paradigm

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Abstract: The energy of language is instrumental to navigating phenomena in a unitary caring paradigm. Tensing the noun “death” into a verb “deathing” holds space for consciously living the experience of dying. Supported by personal reflective narrative, the authors explore the transformative nature of deathing. Through a lens of caring science, the ancient art of doula-ing emerges to invite a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. Reclaiming and deepening the definition of deathing enhances the understanding of the death doula role and creates space for new language and possibilities among nurses and death workers within communities of care.

Keywords: Watson; Caritas; presence; sacred; dignity

Introduction

At a time in history when planet Earth and its human inhabitants seem more and more divided and disconnected, an ever-expanding understanding of humanity’s role in unfolding events awakens us to the knowledge that we exist as beings in a connected universe—a unitary paradigm. As media platforms across the globe offer constant reminders that this world, our beautiful planet, is cloaked in grief, pain, and loss (Weller, 2015), nursing theorist Jean Watson asks if “perhaps the pandemic of 2020 serves as a living metaphor … There is nothing that is separate. We are all One with Nature, the universe and all living things” (Watson, 2024, p. 5). In the spirit of this unitary consciousness, the authors revisit, explore, and reclaim

the concept of *deathing* as the art of dying. Through the lens of Watson’s Unitary Caring Science (Watson, 2024), this article explores the concept of *deathing* as a creative, transformative, unitary process (Biley, 2019; Malinski, 2012) and examines how nurses may deepen their understanding of deathing, thus reawakening them to their own grief and that of others. Wrapped in the consciousness and language of caring science, the authors propose that by incorporating and returning to silenced, ancestral wisdom healing practices, the art of *doula-ing* may give voice and support in building communities of care in which nurses can navigate the sacred healing spaces of deathing. Being in a one-to-one relationship with the dying and those they love, death doulas offer the gift of authentic presence,

shepherding families into safe space in each unfolding moment, toward the last breath and beyond.

Deathering as the Art of Dying

The art of dying is the art of living. From the process of birthing, the two are the mysterious, miraculous unfolding oneness, that is life itself (Rosa et al., 2019).

We work within the great circle of life-death-rebirth. This reality recognizes that we all share this common task of facing our humanity at a deep level, both personally and professionally. What we do is not without consequences, in that one way or another we are contributing to and co-participating with the web of life. (Watson, 2021, p. 230)

As the craft of dying consciously, deathering was first described by Foos-Graber (1989) as an actionable state of awareness and presence manifesting into the last breath, the “death moment” (p. 18). A mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected (Rinpoche, 1992), deathering is “our birthright” (Foos-Graber, 1989, p. 5) and an invitation for the death companion to hold kindness and dignity to ease the way at the moment of transition. Expanding Foos-Graber’s definition, when viewed from a unitary caring perspective, deathering is not a human experience fixed in space and time, but an ever-unfolding and evolving patterning of “energyspirit” (Phillips, 2017) in the sacred circle of life and death (Watson, 2021). Unifying “energy and spirit as a whole that transcends the idea of parts” (Phillips, 2017, p. 223), the concept of “energy-spirit” moves beyond given moments at the end of life and rises above physical, human boundaries and understanding. In deathering, “as we expand our awareness, we reconcile all differences.” With a consciousness of wholeness and connection, the “no-boundary,” or “pandimensional” (Watson, 2024, p. 58), nature of deathering invites surrender to the sacred and the unknown.

Toward a Caritas Language of Deathering

The Western struggle to understand what happens in death assumes that mind, body, spirit, and soul are separate and dislocated from one another, and yet “in reality there is no separation, only interpretation and unity” (Halifax, 2008, p. xviii). Beyond the notion of mind-body-spirit,

Phillips (2017) proposed the concept of “energy-spirit … the phenomenon that holds the universe and humans together as a unified whole” (p. 223). However, in this definition of what it means to be unitary human beings, Phillips also presents a conundrum. How can the limitations of language explain the whole “without breaking it down into parts to understand its unitary nature” (p. 223)? Nursing theorist Martha Rogers cautioned: “when you begin to split humans into pieces you are not studying people” (Rogers, 1990, p. 383). Facing this indomitable problem, Watson’s Unitary Caring Science holds the perspective of wholeness and that “being human involves relation, connection and unity with self, others, Mother Earth and the cosmos” (Watson, 2018, p. 142). Flowing from a world view of oneness comes the ethical base and framework for the universal and eternal values of humanity and of nursing (Watson, 2018). Offering a language of caring that reclaims the universal ethics and values of shared humanity, Watson’s caring science upholds the tenets of the Caritas Processes. With conscious intention and authentic presence, the language of nurture, balance, forgiveness, care, compassion, and dignity moves beyond the verbal to become embodied energy that goes “beyond the moment, beyond itself” (Watson, 2024, p. 63).

Writing in 1970, Martha Rogers argued: “the universe does not flow around man (*sic*). It flows through him (*sic*)” (1970, p. 49). Half a century later, what was once deemed unfathomable, and in many circles dismissed as irrelevant to the profession of nursing, a language of caring has reemerged from the margins to become clearer to all. Beyond a deepened understanding of nursing as a discipline, “caritas consciousness” (Watson, 2018, p. 51) is the embodied language of universal, human values and is thus reflected in the art of deathering.

Wall Kimmerer (2013) described language as “the dwelling place of ideas … a prism through which to see the world” (p. 258) and yet, at the same time, language can partition and sanction what is permissible and silence the invisible. Ushering in a language of deathering holds space for difficult conversations and fresh perspectives on dying, love, and loss. For example, a language of deathering holds space to embrace unresolved wounds to the soul and find the words to say *thank you, I love you, please forgive me, and I forgive you* (Byock, 2014). Death, bereavement, and

grief comprise the language that is often used to describe the intense human suffering and pain encountered at the end of life. And yet when viewed from the personal experience of the dying and the grieving, it soon becomes clear that this vocabulary is as inadequate as it is misunderstood.

Compartmentalizing the experience divides and distracts from the whole, thus birthing a space of separation and splitting of the life-death energy flow. As Northrup described, “understanding of time passing that is embedded in a reductionist view of people … restricts meaning to linear, one-way flow language focusing only on past, present, and future divisions in time” (2002, p. 318). For example, an accepted Western view of bereavement is that at some point the mourner will move on and one day find or achieve a state of being called *closure*. In contrast, in a unitary rhythm of grieving-dying, “as the human form is dissolving” (Jonas-Simpson, 2010, p. 196), death does not end a relationship; rather, it shifts from “loving in presence to loving in absence” (Malinski, 2012, p. 242) as bonds continually pattern and weave themselves into the forever evolving story of the universe.

Reflecting upon her experience of grief after the death of her husband, Biley shared how “part of me died with him but love stays. I will never be the same” (2019, p. 146). In other words, the dying grieves and the living die in the unitary pattern of deathing. We are “forever changed” (Malinski, 2012). Through a unitary caring science lens, the energyspirit of deathing is the forever unfolding, transcending consciousness that is the art of dying. The rhythm of deathing holds space for a deeper understanding of the cyclical patterns that birth the human experience. Joy, sorrow, grief, love, and loss in an all-at-once, flowing dance of transitioning energy. Doulas and nurses co-create a collective space in which energy flows and is set free. In other words, the inferred static state of the noun “death” is replaced by the action of “tensing” the inaction of death into the vibrant, ever-living verb “deathing.”

Doula-Ing: A Return to an Ancient Way of Knowing

As “knowledge of the sciences and ancient wisdoms are converging” (Perkins, 2019, p. 540), we are invited to remember that all is connected across space and time—all is matter and all matters in a unitary paradigm. Inspired by the sage elders of a bygone era, the emerging field of death doulas transcends the present and walks us back into

the old-world ways of knowing, creating intimacy, physicality, and presence. Alongside the dying, the deathing energy field is repatterned into soulful, sacred spaces.

Biley (2019) reminds us that, within three generations, death has birthed almost a new phenomenon as the beginning and the end of life, and in many instances has been robbed of meaningful ritual, oftentimes shrouded, and propped to the periphery of society. Nurses are often not given the time and tools to hold space for deathing; however, with the renaissance of the *old*, death doulas rekindle traditional ways of knowing by cocreating space and actively befriending death, loss, and grief alongside the dying and those they love. Death doulas are companions at the bedside as the “laboring begins … using their inner vision to read energy fields and perform energy healing” (Warner, 2013, p. 84). Being alongside the dying, the natural rhythm of deathing nurtures the untangling of fear and darkness into intimacy and light. This sacred space invites “refuge, a shelter in which to develop insights about what is happening both outside us and within our minds and hearts” (Halifax, 2008, p. 9). The ripple of energy within this space reverberates from soul to soul as deathing impends, and the circle of the nurse, death doula, the dying, and the community present becomes united in preparation for the final release—upon the final breath.

Reflecting on the alchemy of grief, Weller suggests that “we are remade in times of grief, broken apart and reassembled. It is hard, painful, and unbidden work” (2015, p. 1). A metaphor for the alchemy of imperfection, the Japanese practice of Kintsugi is the art of repairing broken pottery with lacquered gold or silver. As the breaks are reassembled to become part of the whole, the value of the item is in the gold. The treasure lies in brokenness. In the book *Birds Hold Our Secrets: A Nurse’s Story of Grief and Remembering*, Biley (2019) shared a story of being broken apart when, diagnosed with terminal cancer, her husband Fran took a path of conscious dying. A sensitive and spiritual man, when he was diagnosed, he said, “if we are going to do this, we are going to do it mindfully” (p. 42).

As Fran embodied the words of the philosopher Lao Tzu, “do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself” (p. 45), Biley took her place alongside

his deathing. Consciously choosing to live in the moment, Fran was open to mystery, inviting his deathing to unfold as it was destined to do. Holding space for stillness and patience as their unitary pattern of grieving-dying unfolded, a deep trust in personal intuition and soul connection emerged: "I came to know that everything that had gone before was part of the now, mere preparation to be in each moment with him" (p. xvii). Biley goes on:

Driven by intuitive, almost primal instinct, I was struck by a deep remembering and realized that in the same way I prepared for childbirth, I was preparing for death to come to us. In anticipation of the unknown, I was nesting, overwhelmed with the urgent need to create a safe and secure space for my babies, my beloved. (p. 78)

Woven into the timeless human values of dignity, knowing, compassion, and care, the journey toward Fran's transition, through grief, recovery, and beyond, was an unfolding unitary rhythm of deep love, swirling pain, tears, hope, and joy.

Toward a 21st Century Art of Dying

As the suffering and complexity of humanity vibrate across the globe, it is abundantly clear our planet is in deep peril (Rosa, 2019). In every unfolding moment, deathing surrounds us, bringing to the fore acute suffering, trauma, grief, and pain for families, loved ones, those in our care, and for ourselves. Nurses must pause and ask poignant questions, not only to *self* but to *others*, and to the community. As we work with another soul, how does the energyspirit grieve for damage done to the planet/self? How do we mourn for dreams of how life might have been? Must our grief remain hidden and neglected, or may we create spaces to "drink in the tears of the world" (Weller, 2015, p. 113), to share in the deathing of the planet/self and invite healing and wholeness? Nurses are expected to be present, informed, and responsive to the unfolding sequelae as death becomes imminent, and yet are often challenged by time, experience, and support. Blending the death doula and nurse relationship invites healing space to nurture and tend to the soulful wounds of the dying and those they love.

Rosa implores that "conscious dying empowers healers and end-of-life care providers to hold

others with love ... as they move from form to formlessness, while allowing for the personal inquiry and development into one's own death" (2019, p. 154). Historically, death was a collective experience as communities came face-to-face with the lingering realities imposed by crude and enduring disease, which created a clearance to voice deathing moving through the body. This space established the accouchement of tending to the soul with the support of *other*. Death was not an isolated event within the confines of a sterile environment, rather the frenzy of energetic resonance—the dying, the doula, the loved ones, and the community ushered the release of the soul.

Deeply personal to all, deathing is at the same time a unitary human experience. It reminds us that we are forever connected in our humanity (Watson, 2018). As we face it, in all its vulnerability and brokenness, we are invited to consider how we may walk alongside in a consciousness of compassion, dignity, and authentic caring relationships. Nurses are healers; we must pause, go deeper within, and ask ourselves how do we cope? How do we nurture a unitary consciousness of deathing? How do we learn to carry grief and not turn away? How do we build nurturing, safe places for nurses to gracefully stop and take a breath, find peace, heal, and grow?

In the milieu of uncertainty where so much has been lost, it is timely to ask how nurses are looking after themselves. In a postpandemic world filled with war, inequality, and division, what do we know now that we did not know before and how might that help inform the future? In a world engulfed in an artificial intelligence revolution, in which the galloping climate emergency connects us like never before, where and how do we belong? How can we connect and remain in the right relationships, be alongside the vulnerable and the dying, hold space for deathing, and keep our "hearts open in hell" (Wright, 2021, p. 233)? As Brown cautions, the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born, "now is the time of monsters" (2021, p. 74).

History tells us how another pandemic—the Bubonic Plague—wiped out a third to half of the population in Europe between 1347 and 1351 (Mackenzie, 2001). Regardless of societal hierarchy, leaders and healers disappeared, and communities were left to unpuzzle how to uphold deathing tradition and rituals. Stepping

in, the Roman Catholic Church initiated a series of illustrated documents, rich in symbol and metaphor of deathing, that came to be known as the *Ars Moriendi* – *The Art of Dying*. In the illuminated text, a dying man faces his humanity and contemplates his despair. Interspersed and interwoven into the images of suffering, the loving consolation of angels and compassionate humanity emerge, as “special friends” and soul companions show up at the bedside to offer comfort. The final words of the *Ars Moriendi* birth the most important message of all, which is echoed through history—that of companionship in deathing, “but alas how few are there, who, in the hour of death, faithfully assist their neighbor” (n.d., p. 18).

For hundreds of years, the *Ars Moriendi* was an end-of-life guide to spiritual practice in the European, Christian world. Falling out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the traumas, troubles, sorrows, and joys of 21st-century life, could it be that a contemporary art of dying—a new *Ars Moriendi*—beckons? Grounded in a language of the shared values of caring and compassion, Watson’s caring science holds space to co-create an ethical framework for deathing. Honoring the sacred circle of life-death (Watson, 2021), an *Ars Moriendi* for the 21st century beckons a moral response beyond religiosity to what it means to be human (Dugdale, 2015).

Deathing: An Awakening and Connection of Oneness

Remembering who we are as a discipline is a moral imperative for nursing and a vital quest that humanity requires of the profession (Watson, 2021). Awakening to the reality that we live in a world, a quantum universe, where everything is connected and everything matters, each moment has the potential to be a moment of intention and caring (Watson, 2024). In the complexity of deathing, we are reminded that we belong in a connected universe. Newman (2008) shares that nursing holds a gift of seeing the universality of each unique encounter, and yet what we witness is a disconnection and feelings of overwhelm, exhaustion, and compassion fatigue. Wright (2021) suggests that it is in these moments we are invited more than ever to reach out and connect; for compassion is diminished when the flow of interconnectedness is forgotten, resulting in a disconnection between self and other. In these times, as the reality of deathing, the grief, and the pain of our beautiful and broken world

surrounds us, it is recognizing the sadness in our own hearts that “binds us with the world” (Weller, 2015, p. 9).

Nourishing the physical needs of the dying and facing the raw humanity of grief-stricken loved ones in deathing, how do we show up and uphold human dignity without turning away? In life’s most vulnerable moments, we connect to human suffering at its deepest level. In a repatterning energyspirit, deathing is an awakening to the wholeness of living, inviting deep listening, caring, and compassion. Nurturing spaces in deathing give permission to show up in authentic presence and the whole of our complexity without shame (Plett, 2020).

Having the capacity to hold “the tears and fears of another without being threatened or turning away, that is an act of healing and caring” (Watson, 2008, p. 102). The instinct to fix, ease, and bring comfort is inherent to healers and their way of being. So what do nurses do when things cannot be fixed? Reflecting on the art of birth doula-ing, Andrews states: “our hands are skilled in the art of touching, of catching, of wiping the brow but they also should be skilled in knowing when to do nothing at all” (2017, p. 10). As in laboring at the beginning of life, in deathing the role of the doula is to create safe and sacred space. Following the energy of stillness, death doulas uphold dignity and affirm the sanctity of our humanity in life’s most vulnerable moments. In caring relationships, power and judgment are relinquished, voices are heard, and energy is interwoven to bring equanimity and healing. In deathing, being held and heard alchemizes pain and fear to compassion and wisdom.

The Timeless Ritual of Deathing

Nursing has always held space for birth, death, and dying. It is “in our bones” (Warner, 2013). It is intuitive. Alongside another in suffering, “nursing helps sustain human dignity … helping to move toward a more humane and caring moral community and civilization” (Watson, 2018, p. 46). In authentic, caring presence, being alongside another “who is living dying (deathing) … is transpersonal and transformative- we are forever changed” (Jonas-Simpson, 2010, p. 198).

The timeless, universal values of humanity—compassion, care, dignity, integrity, and love—give voice and language to what is already known. Reclaiming and deepening Foos-Graber’s definition of deathing (1989) and offering an

understanding of the role of the death doula open the door to new language and possibilities as “we witness new patterns of Caritas unfolding in the midst of status quo” (Watson, 2024, p. 228). Deep remembered wisdom is a summon to create a vibrant, new story for nursing, a contemporary art of dying for the 21st century. In deathing, we become wisdom holders and shift toward what could be, for “it is time to transcend the current frontier of nursing knowledge to advance unitary science” (Phillips, 2017, p. 224).

Like the communities of our ancestors, a unitary understanding of deathing holds space for new and timeless rituals to care for the dead, mourn, and “tend to our sorrow” in these troubled times (Weller, 2015, p. 87). In shared humanity, the dying, the dead, the grieving, and the healers are one in “communitas” (Watson, 2018, p. 46; Weller, 2015, p. 87). Here, beyond the mask, we may face our own brokenness and vulnerability, and in safe, sacred space pause and breathe.

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