

WAVE WORKSHOP #3 ON FINISHING STRONG

By Chris Palmer

christopher.n.palmer@gmail.com

www.ChrisPalmerOnline.com

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Our goal with this 3rd workshop is to discuss how villages can develop programs on aging, death, and dying.

My wife Gail and I have created the \$5,000 Finishing Strong Award in WAVE to encourage villages to develop programs in this area. The award will open in September, and submissions from villages of all sizes will be welcome.

So how do programs on aging, death, and dying get started?

Sometimes a village member will take the lead and, after consulting with colleagues, announce they are launching a shared interest group on aging, death, and dying, and the first meeting will be on such-and-such a date, etc.

That first meeting might be on a topic like hospice or a general discussion to determine what village members are interested in.

If no leader emerges, the village Board might meet and brainstorm how to get things moving. Possible questions to stimulate the discussion are:

- What does a thriving older age look like?
- How do you live a life that matters?
- What does a good death look like?
- Why is talking about death and dying taboo?
- What is the best way to find out what village members are most interested in?

Villages can discuss death and dying generally or meet to discuss a specific topic like advance directives, ethical wills, caregiving, decluttering, palliative care, death doulas, or green burial.

I can imagine villages organizing small, intimate meetings where members talk about their feelings about aging, death, and dying and have a chance to express their hopes and fears to a trusted group.

One topic is how to live well. We know living well and with a purpose increases the chance of a good death.

Village programs on living well might involve exercise classes, plant-based cooking classes, how to build friendships, volunteer opportunities, and other ideas for helping members live healthier, more active, and engaged lives.

Another topic is decluttering. You might invite a decluttering expert to help members get started. A village might consider retaining a decluttering expert to help its members. I can also imagine a village program where members meet to discuss decluttering, share their stories, and help each other.

It's essential to complete an advance directive, decide on a health care agent, and share our preferences for end-of-life care with loved ones.

An advance directive allows us to choose the type of medical care we wish to receive when we can no longer speak for ourselves and hard decisions have to be made.

Village programs to encourage members to complete advance directives might involve bringing in an expert. We've recently done that at BMAV with much success. Villages might also find they have members with expertise in completing advance directives and take advantage of that home-grown talent.

Advance directives are so important in achieving a good death that I can imagine villages using various techniques to educate and help their members with them, including workshops, outside speakers, one-on-one coaching, and handouts.

Let's talk about legacy letters, ethical wills, and memoirs. All these are ways of letting our loved ones know what is deep in our hearts. They reflect our values, wisdom, and convictions.

Possible village programs in this area include forming a shared interest group that meets regularly to discuss drafts and to help each other by sharing experiences and learning.

Perhaps a question or topic is posed for the meeting to give it some focus. A speaker may occasionally be invited, or the group could focus on a helpful essay, podcast, or YouTube video.

Another topic is caregiving. Caregivers are a neglected and exhausted group of people, usually unpaid women, who number by the millions.

Village programs might involve reaching out to members who are caregivers to see how they can be supported and what their particular needs are.

I could also see an interest group created for caregivers to share their concerns and challenges and to help each other. Outside experts and speakers on caregiving could be helpful, too.

Let's talk about palliative care, hospice, and death doulas. They can be a godsend to patients seeking help dealing with severe illnesses and other potential end-of-life issues.

Village programs might include outside experts discussing palliative care, hospice care, and death doulas. For example, a village could invite a death doula or a palliative care doctor to speak and describe what they do. A village could even consider retaining a death doula so members could quickly access them when needed.

A village can supply its members with handouts and information on palliative care, finding and selecting a hospice, and why nonprofit hospices are typically better than for-profit hospices.

Villages could also help their members pose the right questions to hospices to find out the information needed to determine whether the hospice has the same values and standards as the patient.

Let's discuss the right to die, medical-aid-in-dying, and voluntarily stopping eating and drinking. These are all ways to give patients more agency at the end of life, but they are controversial and fraught issues.

The ways of hastening death in the face of intractable and unbearable suffering include withholding or withdrawing unwanted life-sustaining treatments, voluntarily stopping eating and drinking, palliative or terminal sedation, and lethal medication, including medical-aid-in-dying.

Village programs might involve meetings to learn more about these issues, inviting outside speakers (such as someone from the Final Exit Network), sharing information and experiences, and discussing members' worries and concerns.

It's crucial in such meetings that everyone is listened to and respected because it's easy for people to have conflicting views on right-to-die laws that can lead to animosity and estrangement.

Once a person has died, the most immediate issue is what to do with the body and how to dispose of it respectfully and responsibly. The three most popular ways are immediate burial, conventional burial with embalming, and flame cremation.

Three newer and greener disposal methods are green burial, human composting (natural organic reduction), and alkaline hydrolysis (water cremation). Green burial uses a biodegradable casket or shroud, no embalming, and no cement liner or vault.

On green burials, village programs might include a field trip to a nearby green burial ground like Serenity Ridge in Baltimore or Reflection Park in Silver Spring.

Other program ideas are in-person discussions over coffee or wine, outside speakers, why embalming is best avoided, watching a pertinent video together and discussing it, and finding and selecting green burial grounds.

Other village programs might include inviting a funeral home director to talk to members about their services and how much they cost. A village could invite experts to speak about conservation burial, conventional burial, embalming, flame cremation, alkaline hydrolysis, human composting, and home funerals.

Villages could also arrange visits to a few funeral homes so members can talk to the funeral director, assess their level of comfort with them, and do some preplanning—in other words, help members shop around.

Let's discuss ways to commemorate and celebrate a person's life after they have died. The primary purpose of a funeral or memorial service is to honor the deceased and comfort the living.

Village programs might include creating a new shared interest group to encourage members to celebrate transitions and rites of passage, including death.

Life celebrations could be simple, secular ceremonies and rituals that village members create and conduct themselves to build community, camaraderie, and a sense of belonging.

Let's turn to grief and mourning, which is often incredibly and unbearably painful. Coming to terms with death and the end of life can be intense and challenging.

Village programs in this area might involve inviting grief experts to talk about the topic, members meeting to share their stories, and an active program to reach out to grieving members.

Let me mention a few things I've done at our village that have helped our Aging Well group thrive in case they might be helpful to you.

I started the Aging Well SIG (shared interest group) in February 2017, over six years ago.

I called it the Aging, Death, and Dying SIG, but after a couple of years, the Board suggested the name might be off-putting to potential new members (because of the words "death and dying"), so we changed the name to the Aging Well SIG. We made no change to our goals or programming.

For the first three years, the Aging Well group met monthly at my house. I invited outside speakers to talk about advance directives, decluttering, hospice care, keeping fit, death doulas, how to be a superager, reinventing retirement, cremation versus green burials, leaving a legacy, finding meaning in old age, dying with dignity, and many other topics relating to aging well and end-of-life issues.

The meetings were well attended, and the Aging Well SIG soon became the most popular group in our village.

To encourage people to attend, I would spend four or five hours writing personal emails to all our members, warmly inviting them to attend. I'm sure this individual attention helped to bolster the audience numbers.

Another thing my wife Gail and I did was to offer hot cider, wine, and small eats to people who came. This helped to give the event a social and fun atmosphere. People enjoyed coming to the meetings at our house because they were enjoyable.

To build community spirit, I sent out a weekly e-newsletter to village members about aging, dying, and death, with quotes from scientists, authors, and poets, as well as germane humorous material.

This newsletter has evolved into a monthly newsletter to members in which I promote the upcoming Aging Well meeting, reflect on some aspect of death and dying, and include a carefully curated selection of humorous cartoons relating to aging, death, and dying. (Let me know if you want to be on my email list.)

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, we began to meet by Zoom. Instead of having outside speakers, I decided to pose questions to the group so we could get to know each other better. The questions included:

- What are the most important lessons you learned from your parents or grandparents?
- What are the best ways to age successfully?
- What advice would you give the next generation about dealing with old age?
- What are some of your most unusual life experiences?
- When do you feel most alive?
- What are your most treasured memories?

Typically well over 30 members would participate in these discussions. I asked people to write down their answers before the meeting because this significantly increased the quality of the discussions.

After each meeting, I collected and edited all the contributions and created a report (usually over ten pages long) that I shared with everyone in the village so that even those who couldn't attend the meetings could enjoy what people wrote and said.

About two years ago, I refocused the Aging Well SIG on end-of-life issues. I sent an email to village members, and here is an excerpt:

This email might be the most unusual invitation you've received from another village member.

I would be honored if you would join me and engage in a conversation about death and dying and, more specifically, how to achieve a good death.

This will not be a morbid conversation but a very human one where we consider what we want, both in life and during its closure.

The reason to have this conversation is simple: our lives will be better, and so will the lives of our loved ones.

Our reluctance to talk about death and dying can cause us all manner of pain. Moreover, the denial of death leads us to postpone doing things we know we need to do.

We'll consider and discuss questions like:

- What are the elements of a good death?
- What would an ideal end of life be for you?
- What are some of the tasks we might consider completing before dying?

Since sending that email, we've held meetings on the dying and deaths of our loved ones, how to age well, how to write an ethical will, the Final Exit Network, advance directives, green burials, death cleaning, death doulas, planning a funeral, hospice, how to lead a meaningful and successful life, how to write a memoir, and many other topics.

There are lots of other ideas that I haven't tried yet, including holding a Death Café, hosting a Death Dinner, creating a "Before-I-Die" digital wall, and creating a multigenerational project (hat tip to Fran Lorenzi, a member of The Village in Howard).

Another idea I haven't tried yet is watching and discussing films, such as *A Man Called Otto*, starring Tom Hanks (about aging and retirement), or the 1993 film *The Shadowlands*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger (about the pain of grief).

Village programs on death and dying need not be morbid or gloomy. On the contrary, such conversations and activities can be joyful and fun.

Village groups on aging, death, and dying are invaluable because of the learning that occurs about how to achieve a good death and because it helps village members get to know each other and bond.

The mood and tone of the meetings are typically upbeat and fun. There is much camaraderie and humor.

Death and dying village groups are as much about community and connection as they are about death and dying.

By coming together in regular meetings where members discuss important matters, members make a genuine connection with others and create a sense of meaning, togetherness, and community.

Such a development truly exemplifies the mission of the village movement.

I will post the following supplementary materials, along with the recording of workshop #3, on the WAVE website:

1. Transcript of Workshop #3 (this document)

2. Transcript of Workshop #2 (given on May 4, 2023)
3. Transcript of Workshop #1 (given on March 14, 2023)
4. Handout: Creating an Aging Well group in BMAV
5. Green burial handout
6. Advance directive handout
7. Hospice handout
8. Three examples of death and dying letters from Chris
9. Legacy letter handout
10. Three examples of legacy letters and ethical wills from Chris
11. Example of my monthly letter to the Aging Well group