

Opinion: Learning to die

By Margot Mifflin, New York Times

My mother taught me many things, including, in the end, how to die.

Her death went well, I told the few friends who I knew would understand my meaning: She was not in pain, she was conscious until the day before she died, she was at home, my sister and I were with her. It was a peak experience, revelatory and meaningful – something I wouldn't have traded for anything – except her life.

No one tells you how discreetly death can make its catch, or how languorously. It rolls in like a low wave: It's moving, and it's not; she's there, afloat, and she's not; it simultaneously sluices through her and tugs her in its tide for hours, until she's silently dispelled by its force.

I understand, now, why death has so often been personified in art – it's maddeningly anonymous. Sylvia Plath's Death is two people: the one who never looks up, and the one who smiles and smokes. But her suitors are too sexy and menacing to represent the remote, impassive, mundane death I witnessed. Jacques Brel's Death is a spinster, a princess and a witch – all impossible: the experience of death could never be so monumentally solitary with this crowd of enablers on the sidelines.

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