A caregiver’s roadmap
By Suzie Daggett

At almost 91, mom died of old age at home. Without a defining illness, she did not qualify for hospice care. We were alone floating on an island of ignorance and confusion. Mom was my neighbor for over 27 years and I became her champion for the last chapter of her life/death continuum.

At first, I was an emotional, reluctant, impatient and unskilled caregiver. Rather than quietly caring, I bulldozed my way around her needs. Mom knew me well and her desire to transition to the ‘Other Side’ with me as the ringleader taught me patience, compassion, love and kindness.

Once I got over the initial bump of slowing my life so I could show up for mom, my impatient intensity simmered down. Once mom finished her roller coaster ride of “I’m ready to go”/“I’m not ready”, everything changed. I put together a caring team and tools to love, support, and honor her.

Mom’s transition from wellness to death was quick. We had five weeks of tears, laughter, prayers, intimate communication, sharing, jabs, confusion, exhaustion, sadness, processing, grief, and other emotions married to the pending death of a loved one. To deal with mom’s life ending and the changes coming my way, I wrote nightly. I recorded insights gained and simple everyday milestones as I grieved the impending passing of mom, a champion of a good life and honorable death.

I am not an expert on death and dying, just an observer of my situation as you will be with yours. Perhaps what I have learned can be of help to you:
Know what your elder wants for their last moments. Mom wanted little to no pain; to be as peaceful as possible; no medical intervention; to be home for her transition and to pass with ease.

Get important paperwork finalized, including a DNR (do not resuscitate) or Advanced Care Directive signed by her doctor. Hang it on the fridge. Fill out paperwork at the local mortuary. Check that the will and trust are up to date. If you are the care provider, have a durable power of attorney and be added on all legal accounts.

Organize caregivers. With five caregivers coming at different times we used a continuously filled out daily time-line to note mom’s food, mood, sleep patterns, bowels, medications, weakness, alertness and other factors of value.

What I learned

- The elder’s need for forgiveness (themselves or others) may come into play at the end. Consider calling a spiritual counselor.
- Permission to pass is important. Grant it with grace. Allow them to go when the time is right.
- Their soul/spirit may be very anxious to depart yet the ego/body will hold on slowing the letting go process.
- Be present to the needs, desires, and wants of your loved one. This is not about you. Honor their process.
- Dying is a natural process. Allow death to flow and shift. Be gentle as you discuss your loved one’s passing with your family.
- Be as prepared as you can. Ask experts and friends who have walked in your shoes for practical advice.
- Search out and find excellent caregivers. Most communities have support systems or a caregiver network.
- As the primary caregiver take time for yourself. You cannot help when you are depleted.
- Most of all: be kind to yourself. The death of a dear one is life changing. If you need to cry, cry; if you feel sad, drop into your
sadness; if you need to grieve for a year or longer, grieve; if you feel free, know your elder is also free; if you feel out of sync, know at some point, you will cycle back to your norm; if you find your spirit upended, know you are supported by the love surrounding you in ways you may not see or understand. Take your time, breath and be as present as you can in this moment of change. I wish you comfort and peace on your journey.

Suzie is an award-winning author of The Pink Door ~ Moms' Journey to the Other Side, as well as the author of From Ego to Soul ~ Discover what your Soul needs and what your Ego wants; and PEARLS ~ 52 Contemplative Insights. Suzie.daggett@gmail.com or www.suziedaggett.com