

The Importance of Vigils

By Montevia Buffon

Why Vigils Matter

A vigil is more than sitting at the bedside—it is a ritual of presence. In cultures across the world, vigils mark moments of transition. At the end of life, a vigil offers the dying comfort and dignity, while giving families a way to express love, support, and belonging. Studies in hospice care note that people who receive this kind of intentional presence experience less fear, and their families carry fewer regrets after death.

Beyond Waiting: A Sacred Pause

To 'keep vigil' is not passive. It is an act of devotion. It says to the dying: You are not alone. You are still seen. You still matter. The atmosphere of a vigil helps calm both body and spirit, transforming ordinary hours into sacred time. Whether quiet or filled with music, whether shared by many or kept by one, a vigil slows time long enough for love to be fully expressed.

Personal Preferences and Cultural Expressions

No two vigils are alike. Some people want silence and candlelight; others want stories, laughter, or favorite songs. Cultural traditions may shape the vigil—Catholics may desire Last Rites, Buddhists may invite chanting, Indigenous communities may use drums or sacred herbs. The role of the doula or caregiver is to help families discover what feels right for their loved one.

The Vigil's Impact on Families

Families often feel powerless when a loved one is dying. The vigil gives them a role—arranging objects, choosing music, reading letters, or simply sitting in stillness. These acts channel grief into action, helping relatives cope with loss. Research shows that families who participate in vigil planning report greater peace and a sense of closure.

Conclusion

A vigil is not just an end—it is a bridge. It honors the life that has been lived, eases the journey of dying, and gives those left behind a place to begin their mourning with love rather than regret. When approached with care, a vigil becomes a gift: the gift of presence, reverence, and belonging.

References

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