

## **Avoid the top five regrets of the dying**

*Helena Dolny recounts her transformative 11-day retreat in California's Death Valley. Participating in "The Great Ballcourt Fast" is an experience rooted in ancient Mayan and Indigenous traditions. Dolny and fourteen others disconnected completely from technology to engage in deep self-reflection.*

My 11-day sojourn in the California desert, Death Valley, was the fourth time I've created a hard stop to take stock of my life. I've walked the Inca trail, the last 220 km of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, and a week's guided retreat in a nature reserve.

Last month's pause was more radical. It is known as the "Ballcourt Fast" and has its roots in the ancient Mayan traditions described in "Popol Vuh" as well as North American Indigenous culture as recorded by Hyemeyohsts Storm in "Seven Arrows."

Fifteen of us met in the small town of Big Pine and drove out in convoy to our designated spot. Our devices lost signal. We were to be off-grid for eleven days, with a satellite phone for emergency use.

I was in safe hands. We were ten participants, led by co-facilitators Dr Scott Erbele and Rev Cynthia Morrow and their three assistants. Scott has been a wilderness guide for 30 years, and is a physician, author, educator, and hospice counsellor. Cynthia has practiced as a psychotherapist for 30 years, as a Rites of Passage guide for 20 years, and is a Buddhist priest.

The participants' commonality is the desire to take stock, make peace with the past as part of making decisions about the future. We considered, "What no longer serves you that you wish to let go of? What do you want more of?"

We had a synopsis of Bronnie Ware's memoir, "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying." Over many years working in palliative care, Bronnie repeatedly heard dying people say:

1. I wish I had dared to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I had not worked so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish I had let myself be happier.

The programme is carefully divided into three parts: preparation, solo fast, and finally reintegration. While fasting is a common cross-cultural spiritual practice, it is not yet familiar to my young trio of Brooklyn granddaughters. They asked why I would want not to eat and only drink water for four days? I responded that I wanted uninterrupted time to think about my life more clearly, truthfully, and creatively.

The desert is an unrelenting environment: fierce sun, freezing nights, and sometimes a wind that whips your face. Ensuring we were savvy about sun protection, knew how to set up a shade tarp, and were warm enough were serious concerns. Cynthia gave me a second sleeping bag and an extra fleece. On day five, each person hiked to their solo fasting spot with their water supply. Safety precautions included a daily buddy check-in system.

"What did you do for four solo days off-grid?" I have been asked. It was a time for thinking spaciously! Each day had its theme. Day One, Decision Day, "I am ready to die," is more practical to consider tasks associated with dying. I wrote up my choice of poems and playlist and spent hours thinking about who had influenced and shaped me. I drafted a gratitude letter for my memorial service. I will be having the last word! I slept well under magnificent, celestial starry skies.

The second day's theme is "Making Right – being in right relationship with yourself and others in your world. I reviewed my constellation: family, friends, colleagues, and others. I wrote down thoughts to share, realising that my best way forward is to write letters with invitations for conversations. In my dreams, my subconscious let me know of two more people I needed to include. Such dreams! The Californian Death Valley was an ocean, millennia ago. In my dreams, I swam underwater through colourful seascapes.

Solo Fast Day Three is about taking stock of legacy and readiness to let go. It includes imagining your "death lodge," the dying room, which is a feature of Indigenous cultures the world over. Who do you want with you in your dying room, and who should not be there? You imagine that sometime during this third night, you will die, symbolically speaking.

You spend your final fourth, solo day in the "in-between." Bardo is the word used in Tibetan Buddhism as an intermediate state, the transitional period between death and rebirth. We were invited to use this liminal time to reflect on our symbolic rebirth the next morning, asking the question, "What is the momentum that calls me forth into the new life?" I did not write. I painted, letting my mind wander.

Day Nine marked our "symbolic rebirth" into the rest of our lives. We were welcomed back to the main camp with a ceremony, and a true breaking of fast awaited us. Later, we drove to a campsite near Blue Pine. During the remaining three days, we shared our stories while transitioning back to normality. Some went into town for a Wi-Fi signal, enabling calls to loved ones. Showers were possible. Pizzas and burritos appeared!

I am back in Johannesburg. This pause experience was profound for me. I feel privileged to have so many uninterrupted days for reflection. I have greater clarity about what matters most to me. My responsibility is not to squander my insights. Those top five regrets of the dying are in my line of sight on a postcard on my desk. I cannot undo my past, but I am the designer of my future. I do not want to arrive at the end of my life with those regrets. I need to make some changes!