



Bonus Interview: Erin Wright, End-of-Life Coach

Deb Elbaum: Welcome to *In the Right Direction* podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, I have a wonderful bonus interview episode for you. I talk with Erin Wright, the founder of Dying Well. Erin is a nurse, a former hospice worker, and now an end-of-life coach. This means that she works with individuals and their families to help them think through what a peaceful and meaningful end of life would look like. Erin and I talk about the importance of discussing death, how these conversations can ease the family members' peace of mind, and she shares a powerful story about the last moments of one of her clients. Let's dive in. Hi, Erin.

Erin Wright: Hi there.

Deb Elbaum: I am so glad you're here with me today. So, let's talk about end-of-life coaching. When you tell people this is what is purposeful for you, what's the reaction that you get?

Erin Wright: They're like- the reaction is never in the middle. It's always on polar ends, and so some people are captivated by the thought of coaching in the end-of-life arena, and other people walk as far away from me as they can possibly get, and I think that's- that's pretty much how it's been my entire career, even when I was hospice nursing. When I would tell people what I did, it, like, had the sort of same reaction. People are either very intrigued, touched, you know, feel tons of compassion and empathy when you say it, or they get very frightened by it.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, how did you first get drawn to this area?

Erin Wright: So, I'm a registered nurse, and I've been working in the end-of-life arena for about the last 25 years. And during that work, I took a train the trainer course. And as part of that course, there was a coaching module. And when we were working through that module, I just was like, "Wait, this feels like home. This feels like- this feels like what I do as a bedside nurse, and what I train other nurses to do. This feels like this is where I should be." And so, time went on. And I decided I wanted to sort of learn more about coaching. And I found the Coaches Training Institute where I studied and became a coach. And I worked for a few years with my husband, working with teams and couples and that kind of thing and had my own private clients. And then I really started to miss that kind of way that you are when you hold space for people at end of life. And so, I just decided to sort of pivot and start, you know, training and coaching in that arena, and it's been remarkable.

Deb Elbaum: Is there a story, a powerful story, from a client or experience that you might be able to share?

Erin Wright: Yeah, that's really a beautiful question. So, I'm gonna tell you a story about George. So, George was- (His name is changed for privacy, by the way.) George was an old banker from Boston, who had, in his 30s with a young family, bought a piece of land in New Hampshire and used that- and build a farmhouse and used that land as a summer property for his family. And when he retired as an older man from the banking industry, he made that his full-time home, and he was a- an avid- an avid conservationist. And so as years went on, he just kept collecting land around his land to the point where he had about 3,000 acres of land around his- his original property, and I met him when he was transferring to living in an assisted living facility, and- an assisted living facility that was multitiered so that he could be cared for right up till the end of his life.

And about a week before, I knew he was getting ready to leave, getting ready to die, I said to him, "Is there anything that you want to do? Is there anything that's left undone before you go? I want you to sort of be at peace here." And he said, "I really would like to go to my farm, Erin, but I can't." And I said, "Well, what do you mean, you can't?" And he said, "Well, I- you know, nobody can drive me with all this oxygen and all this equipment and stuff like that." And I said, "So we'll get you to the farm." And so, we made a lot of plans, and we gathered the family, and we got George up to his farmhouse, and he sat. Oh God, when I think about it, it makes me cry every time. He sat all day, sort of holding vigil, if you will, like neighbors would come in and talk about how much he meant to them. And they thanked them for whatever he did for them. He had a private conversation with each of his children. He had a private conversation with me, with his wife, with the nurse practitioner that cared for him was there too.

And at the end of the day, I said, "George it's about ready to- time to go" and I said, "Is there anything else you want to do?" And he said, "I want to go up to the height of my land." And I said, "Well, like the height height of your land?" And he said, "Yeah, but I know I can't." And I said, "Well, you can. We'll get you to the height of the land." So, his four strapping boys grabbed his wheelchair, and they pushed and, you know, got him up to the height of the land. And at the height of the land, he had built a huge barn to store all his tractors. So, he hayed this land, and he built a huge barn, and he said to his boys, "Push me over to the barn," and I'm gonna cry. I can feel it coming. And he's, you know, he was 6' 2", a big guy. He said to his boys, "Help me get up." So, they stood him up. And he leaned into the barn, and he put his mouth on the barn, and he gave the barn a kiss. And he just said, "Goodbye." And so, we're all like *blah*, but at that moment, Deb, I realized that everybody deserves an end-of-life coach.

Everybody deserves an end-of-life coach. Everybody deserves to have their wishes honored at end of life. And so, I became sort of very interested in that, at that time, and engaging other coaches to come into the arena and play with me because it can be lonely here, and people need us. I believe that. They might not even know they need us, but there's a- there's

a- there's a big- I think there's a big need out there to sort of de-medicalize death and start to re-humanize it again. Yeah.

Deb Elbaum: So, thanks for sharing that sor- story. I'm so struck by the thought of what would have happened if George had not had you as a coach and advocate to help make- to help those undone things get done?

Erin Wright: Yeah, so people die with undone things done all the time, right, and when that happens, families suffer because they can't- they can't make things happen. And my experience is people don't have as easy a death, you know? Wherever they go after the- It can be easy, and it can be very difficult, and my experience is when people do their work, what I consider their work, dying is easier.

Deb Elbaum: And tell me a little bit about the effect on the surviving family members.

Erin Wright: The effect of having those wishes honored?

Deb Elbaum: Right, right. Having- because I'm guessing you incorporate them somehow with your work? Do they-

Erin Wright: Yeah, as long as the client that I'm working with wants them incorporated, they're incorporated. Actually, oftentimes what happens is I start out working with a client, and as they do their work, it becomes apparent to families oftentimes that they actually have work to do around this too. And so oftentimes, I'll end up working with the family as well. Does that make sense?

Deb Elbaum: Mhm.

Erin Wright: Like, they're like, "Oh Erin, like, come over here and have, like, a family meeting with us" or, you know, yeah. So, let me get back to your question. Your question was about the impact on the family.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, I'm curious because- What do they say to you after about what was most helpful or most powerful for them?

Erin Wright: You know, I think this is where my- my background in nursing can help, which is understanding that this family, no matter how smooth and expected this end of life is, is in crisis. And so to- for me to have eyes that I always say see around corners, so I can see what's going to happen before it actually happens and prevent a further crisis. So, to be able to say to them, "This is going to happen next, and this is perfectly normal." So that every time they see something new in their dying person, they don't think it's another crisis. I think that's one of the biggest impacts that I can have.

Deb Elbaum: That peace of mind for everyone, the reassurance.

Erin Wright: The other thing that I really, like, you know, death is so, like... There's no other place in the world, I think, when you're bearing witness to someone dying, there's no other place in the world where you can actually, like, witness that vulnerability in somebody, and, like, create a space with them that is both sacred and safe, right? Can people think of death as being safe, but you as a coach, me as a coach, I get to create a safe space for that, a container to hold it without judgment. And, for me, the most important thing is without an agenda. Coaches- As coaches, we don't have an agenda for our client, and so whatever's coming up we just hold. And family members aren't always ready to do that for my clients, right? They have their own agenda. They want them to eat. They want them to get better. They want them to get out of bed. I have no agenda; we're just going to create safe and sacred space, so.

Deb Elbaum: When you were sharing the story of George is a really powerful question that you shared is "What is undone? What's left undone?" and I'm thinking about how hard it might be for people like me and other people to ask our loves- our loved ones who are dying big questions like that. If we- if there's a question you might suggest that people ask their loved ones who are nearing end of life, what might that be?

Erin Wright: Such a great question. It's twofold for me. If possible, I think it's great for families to acknowledge what's real. And so "Hey, mom, dad, grandma, grandpa. Looks like things are coming to an end really soon." And then hold space for whatever. Because they know. They know. They often won't talk about it because they don't want to hurt their families, but they- Like, it's such a gift to actually talk about it and sort of open up that space. And then once you acknowledge what's happening, there's a question of like, "How do you want the rest of this to look? What can I do for you?" And that question, I think, is so empowering, right? "How do you, person who's dying (mom, dad, grandpa, grandma), how do you want the rest of that to look?" Not "How do I want the rest of it to look?" How do you want it to look, and it's empowering because it gives them an opportunity to sort of get in that dream space and say, "Oh, I want my grandkids around me. I want my dog around me, right?" I wanted- Somebody asked me the other day, "Can you pick me up a bottle of Dewar's." They wanted to be able to have a Scotch. They hadn't had one in a year. So, whatever is important to them, you know? So how do you want that to look?

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, because it's true, so much of our lives are being intentional about our lives, and so why wouldn't we bring this intentionality to the end of our life? Although it can be really hard. I think that denial, you know, when I think about- In my family, when my father-in-law passed away and how my husband is one of three brothers, and one brother had a really hard time accepting it. From where I sat, it looked like he was in denial, "Oh, I think he's gonna get up and get better," when the rest of everyone was saying, "This is it."

Erin Wright: Yeah. I think though the- the really important thing for me in this work is to help people feel empowered, right? I always say there's- there's no shortage of really, really, really well-intentioned physicians, lawyers, attorneys, you know, accountants that will sort of make your death that profession for the time being, and it's not medical. We're all going to do it. It's not medical. It's not- It doesn't have anything to do with the law. There are

pieces, I think, that all of those professions play, and there's a real need, in my humble opinion, to sort of turn it back over to the person that's got to do that work and help them however that looks for them, help them do it their way. And I think as coaches, that's what we do. We help people do whatever it is that they're embarking upon their way, getting in touch with their values, you know, processing- processing stuff that has gone on over the course of their lifetime, you know, giving them a space to sort of talk about regrets, relive proud moments, you know, and even sometimes talk about what they want for their legacy, and prepare for that, so.

Deb Elbaum: I can tell this is such a calling for you. It's so clear. How do people come to you? Who do you work with, and how do they find you?

Erin Wright: So, lots of times, it's word of mouth. Lately, I've been hosting webinars. I started hosting webinars for other coaches when COVID hit because I was- Back in March, in the process of doing, like, a New England, East Coast tour, I created a full day retreat, and we were on tour doing this thing. And when COVID had it, we couldn't, obviously, go do this full day retreat with people, and so I said to my partner at the time, "Andy, we need to pivot this to an online version." And so, we tried a little one-and-a-half-hour webinar and called coaches to it. I'm gonna get to the answer of your question, I promise. And we called coaches to it. And it's an introduction to- It's called Dying Well for Coaches, and it's an introduction to what it's like to hold space for somebody at end of life. And you really get in touch in that hour and a half with your own death, and what's- get clear on what's important to you there. And so lately, because I've been doing those webinars, I'm getting a lot of referrals from other coaches. I think I'm- In non-COVID times I was hosting a death cafe. Do you know what a death cafe is?

Deb Elbaum: No. Tell- Tell me.

Erin Wright: So, death cafe was started probably about 18-20 years ago in England, and basically the premise is that you call people to come with you somewhere (I host mine at the library) call people to come have coffee with you and talk about death. So, I put a little ad in the paper, the library gives me the space for free. And I was like, "Let's just see what happens. I'm gonna call people to see." And, like, 20 people showed up that first night, like, 20 people in this tiny little community showed up. And so that's how people find me too. "Oh, Erin, right, yeah, she's- she's like the death lady. She's the one you want to talk to you if you got death issues." And so- And then hospices will sometimes make referrals if- if they feel like there's more work to be done than what they're- what they're ready to do or have time to do. Yeah. Yeah. I have a death doula that sometimes will make referrals to me. So, there's just, you know, there's- there's lots of ways to find me. Yeah. Other coaches, word of mouth, death cafe.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, and you have a business that you founded called Dying Well.

Erin Wright: Yeah, so Dying Well was- is basically that retreat business. So, I was involved in a leadership program, a yearlong leadership program, and as part of that program, we had

to create with another person something that we wanted to have impact in the world about. And so, Andy, my partner at the time, and I created this full day retreat for laypeople to come to and be in a full day conversation about what it means to die well, and they ultimately would leave with - similar to a birthing plan - they would leave with a death plan. And the death plan is much different than your advance directives, right, because there's other people that take care of those things. These were very sensory kind of death plan, like the same way you would make a birthing plan. What do, you know, what do you want your blankets to feel like? Who do you want in the room? Are there certain smells that you want around you?

And so, yeah, and so we did these- Oh god, we probably did 15 between Florida and Maine, of these retreats, and they were so well received, and I still get messages from people like about them adding to their death plan, but we had to stop because of COVID. So- so the plan is right now we're doing- we're doing the one-and-a-half-hour webinars. We're planning a full day webinar, like, a full day retreat online. We're gonna- Hopefully that'll go okay. And then we're working on the trainer- train- train the trainer program to call people in who want to learn how to be in this space. And I'm getting messages from doulas and other coaches that, like, they want to do it, they feel drawn to it, and they're scared, and they're not sure what to do, you know. People don't want to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing, and so I think there's a- there's another calling for me out there to create that program. So that's sort of where we're at right now.

Deb Elbaum: Wonderful. Is there a website or a web address?

Erin Wright: www.dyingwell.net

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, thank you. You- As you're talking, it strikes me that- that hopefully, we all have the gift of being intentional, and- and- and getting the opportunity to follow our death plan. And then we all know sometimes in life that there are deaths where we- that are unexpected and accidental.

Erin Wright: Absolutely.

Deb Elbaum: Do you ever do coaching around that afterwards to help people?

Erin Wright: Yes, yes. So- But I want to say something about that because this is a- this always comes up in the retreat, we do a lot of work about sort of putting people in conversation to communicate with their loved ones about what it is they want. And what people always say to me, "But Erin, like my brother got killed by a bus driver. Like, we never could prepare for it." And my- one of the thoughts that I have is that if you're in conversation, Deb, with your partner, about what you would want at end of life right now, as a healthy, vibrant woman, and you got (god forbid) hit by a bus tomorrow, the hospitals gonna call your partner or your person and say, "Hey, she just got hit by a bus. Come to the hospital." If your partner or person knows that you just wanted them by your bedside stroking your head, or you wanted your favorite wool blanket laid on top of you, they can

stop, bring the blanket, you know what I mean? Like, they can still honor your wishes. And so, we plan for all kinds of things, right? We plan for our college, kids' college tuition. We plan- We have life insurance policies. We plan for all kinds of things that we hope happen, and they may never. So, I just think, yeah, planning for this is- for me planning for this is one of those things. Yeah.

Deb Elbaum: Wow, that really- that was really helpful, and that really- that really opened my perspective on that. So, thank you. I could go on and on and on. As you can tell, I'm super curious. And- and I really, you know, thanks for doing this work, and thanks for being brave enough to- to broach these subjects and to talk about it. And it was a real pleasure. It's a real pleasure.

Erin Wright: That was a pleasure for me too. Thank you for your interest. Yeah, not a lot of people are brave enough to say, "Hey Erin, will you come talk to me for a- a half hour or so and record it?" so I appreciate your interest.

Deb Elbaum: You are welcome.