

# Final Pose, A Practice in Dying

## Film Discussion Guide



## Final Pose, A Practice In Dying

The award-winning short documentary, *Final Pose, A Practice in Dying*, embraces the decision by a beloved yoga instructor, diagnosed with a terminal cancer, to openly discuss her dying. Through a series of interviews, the film captures Myra Lani Fisher talking about life and death as she reflects on letting go of one practice, her yoga, while taking on another—her dying. The documentary provides an intimate and provocative account of how this yoga teacher allows dying to instruct her final living.

Director - Karin Mellberg | Producer - Ryan Suffern  
Editors - Nick Loud, Ryan Suffern | Composer - Paul Pilot  
Executive Producers - Karin Mellberg, Cathy Louise Broda



# + Sparking Dialogue

## A Last Wish

Community and intimate screenings of *Final Pose* honor a last wish of Myra's—her hope that through sharing her story, she would help to spark dialogue, the kind of dialogue she almost missed having because she thought talking about her dying would make her “the spreader of doom,” make everyone uncomfortable, and sad, including herself. Even more isolating, Myra was navigating the unmentionable—a controversial end-of-life choice afforded to her by her state of residence, Oregon: her right, as a terminal patient, to hasten her time of death.

Myra's voice—honest, vulnerable, curious, courageous, and at times humorous—joins a growing number of brave voices collectively inspiring our country to engage in the long taboo conversations about death and dying. The film is inspiring communities and loved ones to gather, reflect, and shift the paradigm from relative silence about death and dying, to conversation about it.

*Final Pose* is offered at no charge for intimate viewing and is available for community and educational screenings by donation. This discussion guide is offered as a tool to help spark dialogue.



*“My passing should have been a quiet affair, a non-event.”*  
-Myra

## Project Background

*Final Pose* is a story born out of a larger story. And a story that Myra often said “should not have happened. My passing should have been a quiet affair, a non-event.” In a last letter to close friends and loved ones, Myra admitted, “We certainly turned that approach on its head, didn’t we? I am pleased with our efforts.”

Having not known what would become of her interviews captured on video, Myra was speaking about having been pleased with the journey itself, pleased that “the camera as witness” helped make her journey with a terminal cancer a “shared experience for many, an unexpected exploration personally, and a celebration of both dying and living.”

### Myra’s Friends & Fellow Yogis Rally

This “shared experience” began long before the camera was turned on. It started with a community of friends, fellow yogis and loved ones in Myra’s hometown of Sisters, Oregon, and in her yoga communities of Central Oregon, Hawaii and beyond.

This community was not willing to let Myra’s death become the non-event Myra so believed it should. They collectively coaxed her out from behind that idea, and supported Myra on many levels—from the moment of diagnosis, until her passing. They joined her at doctor’s appointments, and for chemo sessions; they helped shave her head, and shop for scarves; they researched treatment options, and helped Myra seek second and third opinions. Friends created Myra’s CaringBridge web page that allowed Myra to experiment with sharing

her experiences in a private online forum with friends from all over the world. In turn, she would receive posts of encouragement from these friends. This community near and far joined Myra online to play her favorite game of scrabble with her, at all hours of the night. And when Myra was able, together they hiked, shared meals, movies, and latest great reads.

### Myra and Karin Meet For Coffee

This was the context of community, of courage, and open hearts that *Final Pose* Director Karin Mellberg discovered in the summer of 2013, when she first sat down with Myra to talk about a storytelling project she was working on—one that a mutual friend thought was important the two of them discuss. And so they did, over coffee at Myra’s favorite Sisters Coffee House.

At the time, Karin was a casual acquaintance of Myra’s. They really didn’t know much about each other. And, Myra didn’t know what challenges she would be facing, nor how long she might have left. Despite the unknowns, Myra graciously said yes to experimenting with Karin on this project—a project intending to connect patients with rare diseases, globally, so that they could share and learn from each other, share their “clinical trials of one” as Myra called it, so all would “not be for naught,” so that valuable learning about rare illnesses would not be lost to private conversations between patient and doctors.

“Maybe I leave this little bit of something, that others add to,” Myra told Karin, “and before you know it, it snowballs into something really meaningful.”

### The Unexpected Takes Form

Myra helped Karin experiment with templates and content for patient stories: maybe it would include blog postings, supporting photos or a few sixty-second video clips. As Myra began to give voice to her own patient experience, their exploration became much more, and quickly found form as the short documentary *Final Pose*.



## Sharing Experiences

During one of their early interview sessions, Karin asked Myra, “What’s the most important thing you would want someone, walking in similar shoes, to know about this journey?”

Myra said this to Karin: “Share your experience. I’ve come to know so many people at a different level. And our friendship is so much more special, and our painful moments were painful but they were painful in a really wonderful memorable way. I know that some of my friends when they remember me, that might be the thing they hold most precious -- the stuff that we shared at a level that we never would have otherwise.”

### Myra’s Story

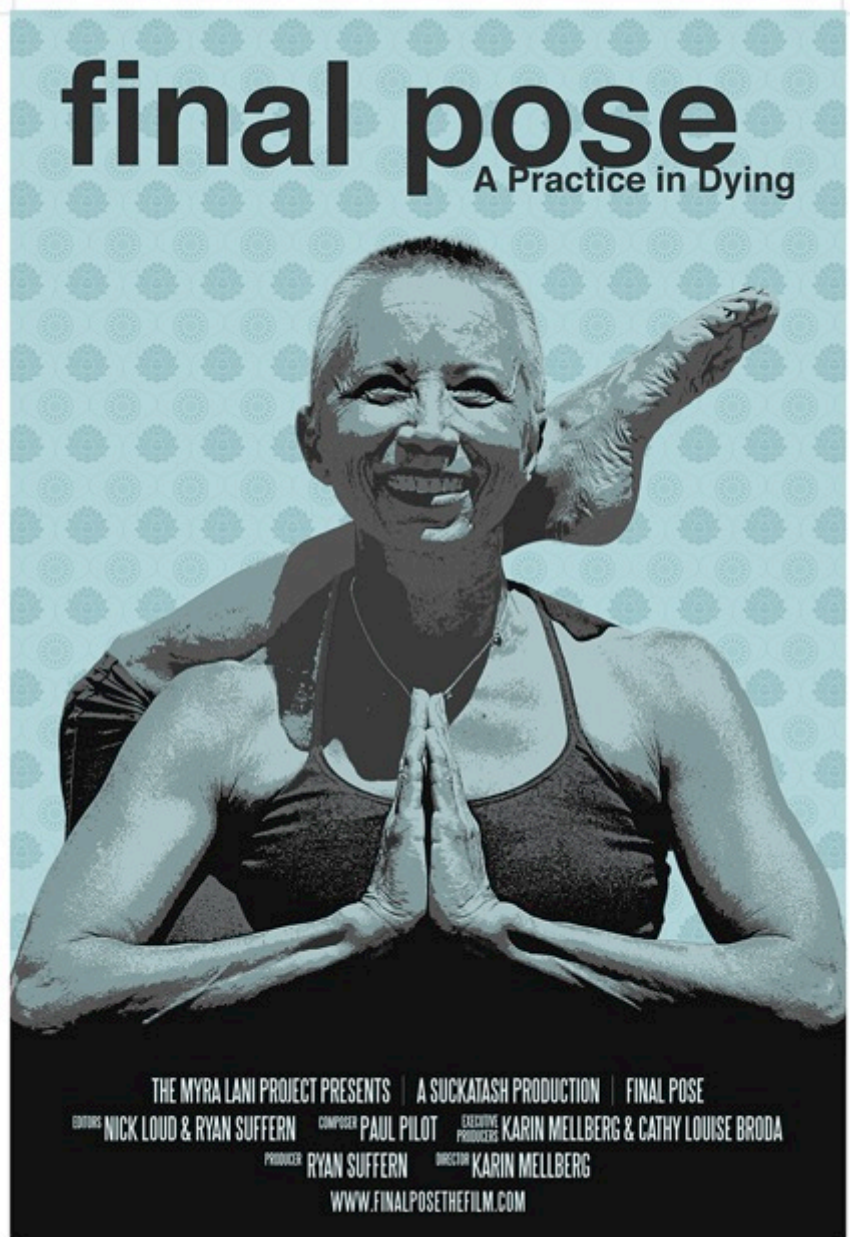
Myra was born November 1949 in Honolulu, Hawaii. After receiving a degree in fashion from University of Hawaii, she left Oahu for the fashion markets of New York and Los Angeles. Seeking a new opportunity, she then headed to Boulder, Colorado, to manage her own export business. In her late forties, while in Colorado, Myra began running marathons. At age fifty-three, after running affected her knees, Myra turned to yoga, traveled to India to study Ashtanga Yoga, receiving training from founder Sri. K. Pattabhi Jois, R. Sharath Jois, and David Swenson. In 2003, Myra brought her passion for yoga to small-town Sisters, Oregon where she settled to help her sister care for their aging father. Myra continued workshops with renowned yoga teachers. In 2008 she began to study in Honolulu with Ashtanga Yoga teacher Cathy Louise Broda, owner of Purple Yoga Hawaii. In the years that followed, Cathy Louise became Myra’s primary yoga teacher, and Myra developed an important community in Hawaii as she reconnected with what she called her “first home”, and the “healing and nurturing powers” of the island. Myra’s biggest joy: sharing her second career with a growing community of yogis in Central Oregon and Hawaii.

In May 2012, at age sixty-two, Myra received the diagnosis of a rare form of anal cancer, stage four, which had metastasized to her lungs and liver. At best, she was given several years. As her cancer progressed, Myra found strength and serenity in her yoga practice, in her role as yoga teacher, and in community.



## Film Synopsis

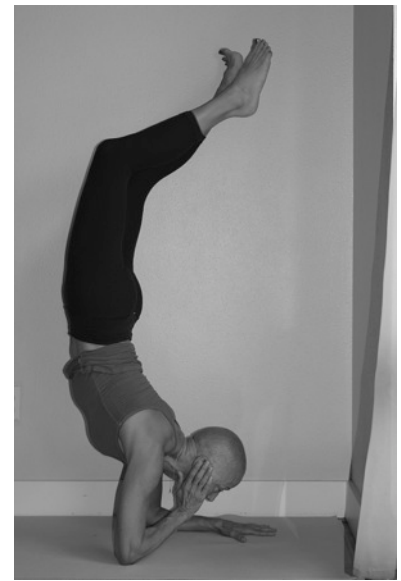
Central to the film is Myra's decision to focus her "full energy" on her approaching death, and to master (like she would any hard yoga pose) the increasing levels of surrender and letting go that this ultimate pose, her "final pose," would demand. To meet the challenges of progressing cancer, and navigate levels of acceptance, Myra reflects on her ego-existence, fears and hopes. She examines her interactions with loved ones, and the world. With death as her unrelenting teacher, Myra gains new insights that re-orient her sense of self, as well as her relationship to others. As a resident of Oregon, this yogi also navigates a controversial end of life choice: her legal right, as a terminal patient, to hasten her time of death. While Myra's physical decline accelerates, and the pain intensifies, her courage expands, allowing her to meet the moment of her death with a certain readiness.





# Facilitating Conversations

90% of us believe it is important to have end of life conversations, and yet only 30% of us have actually had those conversations. Source: The Conversation Project



## Guiding A Discussion

Communities, or loved ones, gathering together to talk openly about the dying process is not common in our western culture.

This discussion guide is offered as a tool to help facilitate conversations about *Final Pose*.

*Final Pose* screenings inspire heartfelt discussion, spark diverse perspectives, and trigger deep emotions. For larger screenings consider inviting a skilled facilitator to guide a discussion. Panel speakers can be helpful in guiding conversations as well. Consider preparing a list of local resources to share with those requesting more information.

## Creating Space For Reflection

After watching the film, and prior to beginning a conversation, you may want to allow time for reflection. At a community screening this is a great opportunity to offer a brief 10-15 minute musical interlude, or lead a short yoga or meditation session. You can also pose a general question, and give people some time to reflect and jot down their thoughts.

### General Discussion Questions

Myra often commented that it was the “sharing of her experience with friends and loved ones” that made her last years “some of the happiest, and really, really meaningful.”

**Q:** What was it like for you to have Myra share her dying process and intimate thoughts, through this medium of documentary film?

**Q:** If you could ask Myra a single question, what would you ask her?

**Q:** What would you have wanted Myra to talk more about?

**Q:** Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

**Q:** What does the film inspire you to explore personally, or take action on, regarding both dying, and living?

# Film Themes For Deeper Discussion

To support deeper exploration of the film's themes through panel discussions, community Q&A sessions, or in weekly film discussion groups, the following *Final Pose* themes and questions are offered as guidance. You are encouraged to explore themes that most resonate with your audience, and to customize

## PART ONE - Terminal Diagnosis & Death's Certainty

In the beginning of the film, we meet Myra teaching a yoga class, and learn about her cancer journey, and terminal diagnosis. In a first interview, Myra talks about how hard it is the day she finds out "western medicine isn't working", and she has "one drug after another not work."

Myra's diagnosis of a rare cancer, her unsuccessful chemo and radiation treatments, and her decision to "walk away" from last heroics, intensifies the certainty of death for Myra.

This truth of the immediacy of her death motivates Myra to ask the question, "How do I let go, and not just become the person who has nothing left, you're just SOL?" (SOL, the acronym for "shit out of luck")

**Q:** What can you imagine you would choose should you be confronted with a terminal diagnosis as Myra was, and a choice between 'last-ditch treatment', or 'walking away?'

**Q:** What does Myra's question, "How do I let go, and not just become the person who has nothing left, you're just SOL?" elicit in you?

## PART TWO - Exploring Suffering, Ego & Acceptance

In part two of the film, we meet Myra in a series of intimate interviews. Myra is focused on finding "new levels of acceptance," engaging in new types of self assessment, and learning how to make "good decisions" for herself, as required by the challenges arising from accelerating disease progression, and her increasing commitment to let each precious moment teach her how to live her ending well.

Myra shares examples of how she must come to terms with the pain and growth of cancer tumors, "aggressively misshaping your body"; her deteriorating physical capacities and loss of her yoga practice; her ego-self, attached to the way things were, and as she says with humor, an ego "so strong, it's worse than trying to kill cockroaches."

**Q:** What does Myra's reflections on ego trigger in you? Have you had an experience where you have 'witnessed' the strength of your ego around body image, as Myra did, when she was conflicted about putting on a swimsuit?

Myra also shares her insights gained from the "last letters" she decides to write to loved ones and friends, "where I sit down at 3, 4, 5, in the morning and you just think about what you want to say that you never said, that you never had the courage to say." Her letter writing process is "changing the way my brain thought about that person, that incident, that whatever...it's been incredibly enlightening for me."

**Q:** What does Myra's writing of last letters prompt in you? If you were to write last letters, who might you write to, and what might you want to say that you "never said, that you never had the courage to say?"

**Q:** Although Myra jokes that she can write these letters and the recipients “can’t argue back at me, I can cut and run,” she did share many of the letters while she was still alive. With whom might you want to share the things “you never had the courage to say” now, while you still have the chance?

### **PART THREE – Finding The Sweet Spot**

In the ending sequence of the film, we meet Myra in her bedroom. Now under hospice care, we learn Myra’s pain has become unmanageable, making it difficult for her to get out of bed, and requiring ever-increasing doses of pain medication and opiates. In the midst of intense pain and loss of physical strength, Myra strives hard to stay in the moment, connect with her truth, and her readiness to “walk out the door.”

**Q:** Myra mentions she needs to find completion with last tasks, and “get a little bit more in tune with just me and the world.” What does this phrase elicit in you? Have you personally given thought, or taken action, to create readiness to “walk out the door” with feelings of ease, and resolution?

**Q:** Myra makes her final statement of the film, with a slight smile: “I’ve reached that sweet spot.” What does Myra’s final statement elicit in you?

The film’s ending title card tells us that Myra died as she wished, surrounded by loved ones. She didn’t die alone, behind closed doors, as initially she thought she should. Dying at home, as one wishes, is rare in our western culture: 70% of people say they wish to die at home, and yet 70% of us die in hospitals, nursing homes, or long-term care facilities. (CDC data, 2005)

**Q:** What are your last wishes for your own death? Have you taken the legal and end-of-life planning steps necessary to improve your chances of having your last wishes honored?

### **PART FOUR – Yoga & Savasana (Corpse Pose)**

The film’s title, *Final Pose*, was inspired by the yoga pose, Savasana, also know as Corpse Pose. This pose is the finishing pose of most yoga practices. It gives yoga students the opportunity to carefully arrange one’s body, to lie flat on the floor, on the back, and to still the mind, settle the gaze inward, calm the breath and integrate the practice. Savasana is intended to help develop awareness of impermanence. A yoga practice, in general, helps students develop the capacity to watch feelings, thoughts, sensations, emotions, pains, and insights and everything else come and go. It shows students flux as a continuous pattern, inviting them to embrace the changing forms of life.

The insight of impermanence connects us to a truth that is the taproot of a healthy, mindful life. In the context of conversations about life and death, these insights, commonly developed through practices like yoga, or meditation, help us to navigate the more esoteric questions of our existence.

**Q:** How did you observe Myra’s yoga practice influencing her ‘dying practice’? Do you have experience with yoga, or other mind-body practices that help you develop deeper insights about impermanence and change?



## PART FIVE - Oregon's Death With Dignity Act

Midway through the film, Myra alludes to a choice she is considering, with regard to how and when she might die: “Something’s going to happen, is it going to be that my heart’s working too hard to continue supporting my body? Am I going to have a stroke? Or, these other things that are not my liver could become the problem—there’s no more square footage? I blow up when I’m walking down the street? But then, then there’s the option that I choose, I choose that it’s time.”

As a resident of Oregon, and a terminally ill patient, Myra is alluding to a precarious and rare end-of-life choice that she has the legal right to consider: to hasten her time of death. We learn at the end of the film, that two days after her last video interview, Myra does end her own life through Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act, using a self-administered lethal medication.

**Q:** What was your reaction when you read that Myra had asserted her right to die, and to control the moment of her death?

Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act (DWDA), enacted in late 1997, allows terminally-ill adult Oregonians to obtain and use prescriptions from their physicians for self-administered, lethal doses of medications. Since the law was passed in 1997, a total of 1,327 people have had DWDA prescriptions written and 859 patients have died from ingesting medications prescribed under the DWDA. In 2013, the year Myra died, she was one of 121 Oregonians who had DWDA prescriptions written, and only one of 73 who died from ingesting those prescribed medications. Prior to being diagnosed with terminal cancer, Myra did not know this Oregon law existed. She had not been a resident when the law was passed. It was a difficult decision and complicated legal process for Myra to navigate. She felt compelled to navigate much of the process on her own given the law’s continued controversy. At the time of Myra’s death, Oregon, Washington, Montana and Vermont were the only states authorizing medical aid in dying.

Myra never could have imagined that *Final Pose* would have its Fall 2014 film festival premiere at the same time the movement for end-of-life choice was being catapulted into mainstream conversation due to the very public journey of Brittany Maynard. Ms. Maynard was the 29-year-old woman dying of brain cancer, who moved, with her family, from her home in California to establish residency in Oregon and gain access to aid in dying.

That year, polls by Gallup and Harris showed that 69 to 74 percent of people believed terminally ill adults should have access to medical means to bring about a peaceful death.

**Q:** What are your beliefs regarding the rights of terminally ill adults having access to medical means to bring about a peaceful death?

## IN CLOSING - Myra’s ‘Food For Thought’

Myra had a ritual of sharing a quote with her students at the end of yoga class. She called it “food for thought.” At the end of one of her yoga classes just a few months before her death, Myra shared this quote:

*“In the end you have to allow the (yoga) pose to do you, to happen in and for and through you, rather than you doing it. If it feels elegant and dignified, it is a solid pose.”*

**Q:** What would it take for you to achieve your ‘final pose’ - the pose that feels most elegant, and dignified, and true to you?



# Namaste



Thank you for joining the conversation.  
Thank you, Myra, for sharing your voice.  
Thank you to our generous project supporters.

For more information or to drop us a line, please visit [www.karinmellberg.com](http://www.karinmellberg.com)

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