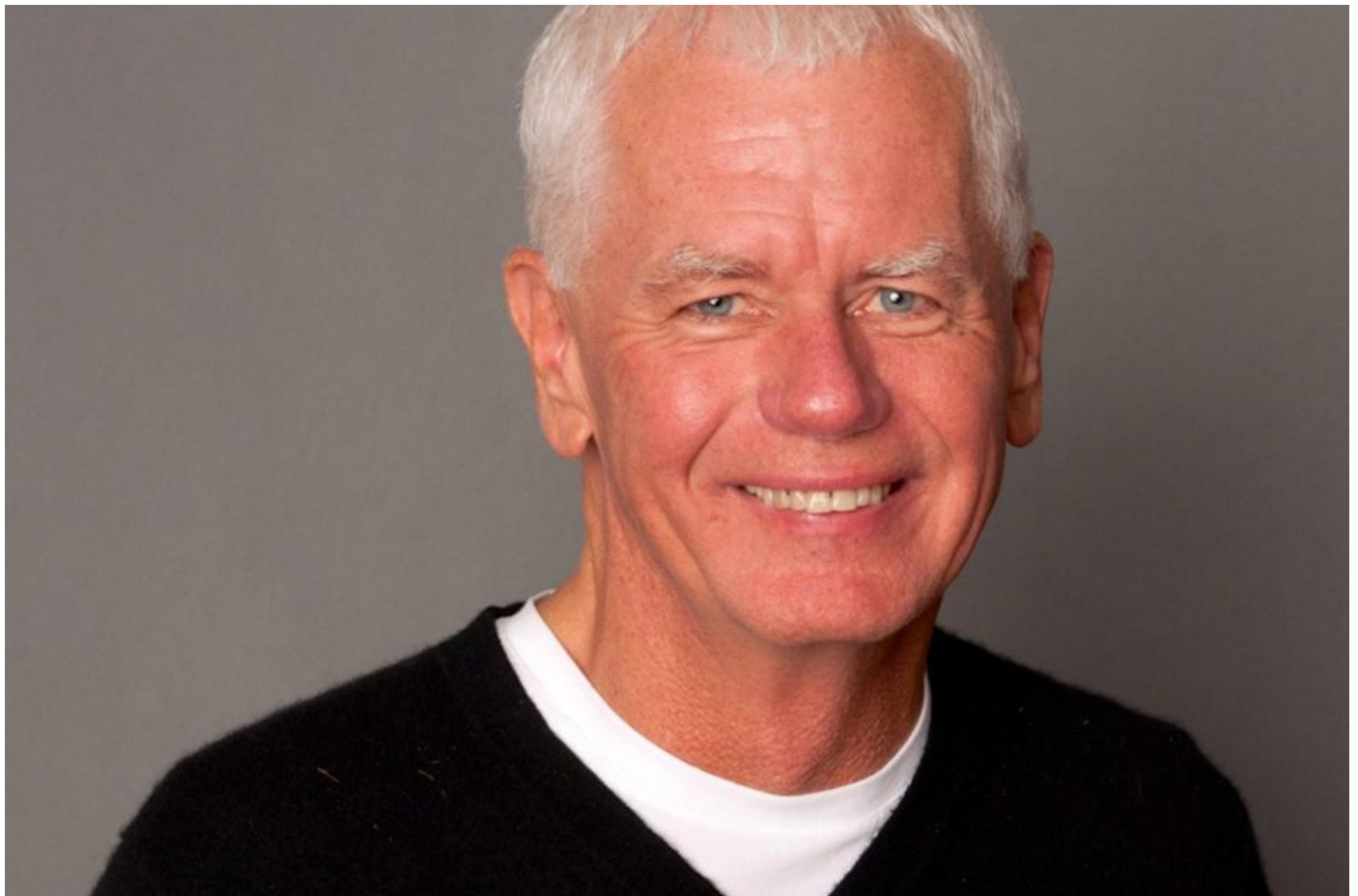


What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully

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When we hold close an awareness of dying, we come into contact with life's precarious nature. That causes us to also appreciate its preciousness. Then we don't want to waste a minute. We want to enter life fully and use it in a responsible way. Death is a good companion on the road to living well and dying without regret. – Frank Ostaseski



Frank Ostaseski

Frank Ostaseski is the founder of Zen Hospice in San Francisco. (Courtesy of

Frank Ostaseski)

As a co-founder of the [Zen Hospice Project](#) and the [Metta Institute](#), lecturer at Harvard Medical School and the Mayo Clinic, and teacher at major spiritual conferences and centers across the globe, [Frank Ostaseski](#) has risen to the forefront of the compassionate caregiving movement and facilitated a culture-wide conversation about death. *AARP* named him one of “The 50 Most Innovative People over 50.” His work has been highlighted on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and Bill Moyers’ PBS series “On Our Own Terms,” and Ostaseski has been honored by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Ostaseski has sat on the precipice of death with more than a thousand people, counseled their loved ones through grief, and trained countless clinicians, clergy, and caregivers. His new book, [The Five Invitations: Discovering How What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully](#), distills the lessons Ostaseski has gleaned from three decades of being with people at the time of dying and from a lifetime of service. Here, he shares some of those insights, as well as his path to building a career around understanding, learning from, and deepening our relationship with death and dying, his true passion.



Frank Ostaseski

*Ostaseski teaches compassionate caregiving and Buddhist meditation.
(Courtesy of Frank Ostaseski)*

When Ostaseski co-founded the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco in 1987, it was the first Buddhist hospice in America, offering a fusion of spiritual insight and practical social action. “We believed there was a natural match between the Zen practitioners who were cultivating a ‘listening heart’ through meditation practice, and those who needed to be heard—people who were dying,” Ostaseski explained. It was the height of the AIDS crisis, and he

worked with people living in terrible conditions—in rat-infested hotels or on park benches. They were alcoholics, prostitutes, and homeless people barely surviving on the margins of society.

Ostaseski said, “For some, dying was a great gift. They made reconciliations with their long-lost families, they freely expressed their love and forgiveness, or they found the kindness and acceptance they had been looking for their whole lives. Still others turned toward the wall in withdrawal and hopelessness and never came back again. All of them were my teachers.”

In 2005, Ostaseski created the Metta Institute to provide educational programs and trainings on mindful and compassionate end of life care. The faculty includes Ram Dass, Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, and other visionary leaders. The Metta Institute has established a national network of educators, advocates, and guides for those facing life-threatening illness and the individuals and systems that serve them.

When asked how he tapped into his life purpose, Ostaseski replied, “Death and I have been longtime companions. My mother died when I was a teenager and my father just a few years later. But I didn’t follow a linear path to this work; I meandered. It was a journey of continuous discovery. I had little training and no degrees save a Red Cross lifesaving certificate. I felt my way along, staying close to my intuition, trusting that listening is the most powerful way to connect, and letting my heart be broken open. These are the ways I discovered what really helps. How do we come to be where we find ourselves? Life accumulates, exposes us to opportunities for learning, and if we are lucky, we pay attention.”