



Natural Transitions

Volume 8 Issue 1

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LAST WORDS:

SALLY L. FULTON is an award-winning painter and poet who teaches art in her home studio in Longmont, CO. Both the painting, "Crane Rise," and her poem, "L'Chaim" appear in her book, *My Life So Far: Breathing Lessons*, published by Mercury Heartlink, 2018, available on Amazon.

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"Angels," photograph by Karen van Vuuren

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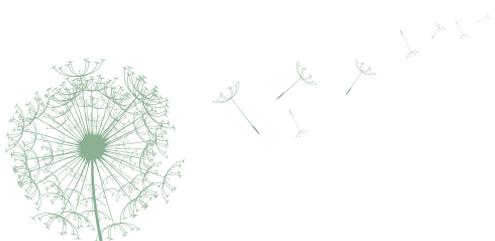
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Love Is More Powerful than Fear

by Karen van Vuuren



Karen van Vuuren

Many moons ago a group of five orthodox Christian women attended a Natural Transitions death care workshop. In our closing circle, one of these women proclaimed an intention to form a care team that would attend to the dying, deaths and after-death rituals for members of her congregation. The women positively buzzed with excitement at the prospect of creating this in-house service. They envisioned the team as predominantly female in composition, and would call themselves “The Women in White,” garbed in alabaster attire, in aprons they would sew themselves. They would be a luminous, loving presence at the death

bed, in the parlor or in the sacred space of their church, where the body of the departed would “lie in honor.”

I was enthralled by the vision of these orthodox Christian women. Their priest, it turned out, was not. When I checked in with them weeks later to learn more about “The Women in White,” I heard they had ditched their plan to so selflessly serve their congregants. Liability and the prospect of “doing something wrong” had nipped this beautiful offering in the bud.

Certainly, fear can get in the way of many good works. But I also believe we are hampered by conventions that cramp our capacity to respond creatively to life’s most challenging scenarios. It takes imagination and courage to sweep aside conventions that do not serve us. When I heard how Sara Havens’ orthodox Christian church in Utah had ministered to and cared for their deceased community members and bereaved families, it gladdened my heart.

Some faith communities have pastoral care teams that support the dying and their families. Megory Anderson—educator, theologian, and founder of

the Sacred Dying Institute, who died in February of this year—worked closely with church communities to promote pastoral care of the dying. Her Sacred Dying Vigil Program empowered and supported church members to create effective teams for the delivery of end-of-life pastoral care. The institute was particularly successful with Christian faith communities that already offered Stephen Ministry. (Stephen Ministries is a not-for-profit Christian education organization founded in 1975 that provides pastoral care training.) In the wake of Anderson’s unexpected death, the Sacred Dying Institute is currently evaluating how to continue its founder’s work.

This issue of NTM covers but a smidgeon of the vast number of faith communities and their myriad approaches to death. Nevertheless, we hope you will enjoy reading about the new and old approaches to death care in certain Jewish circles, the basics of ancient Zoroastrian practices, the simple way in which the Baha’i honor their dead, and about Sara Haven’s orthodox Christian community, a shining example of how love is more powerful than fear. 🌟



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- Acceptance of death, loss and grief as a natural part of life

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- To share holistic approaches to end of life
- To provide a forum for end-of-life caregivers and educators

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The Way of the Vulture and a Simple Return to the Earth

by Mary Reilly-McNellan

As a recovering groupie and longtime fan of the '70s rock group, Queen, I was excited to see the film *Bohemian Rhapsody* earlier this year. The movie detailed the band's meteoric rise to superstardom, largely due to their extraordinarily gifted singer, Freddie Mercury. Now deceased, Mercury was a Zoroastrian by faith—a religion unfamiliar to me. While few specifics about the religion were included in the film, Mercury's father, an Indian, repeated the phrase, "Good thoughts, good words, good deeds," and I became curious about the faith's origins, beliefs, and practices—particularly those relating to death.

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest examples of monotheism (belief in one god) and was founded by the Persian prophet Zoroaster nearly 4000 years ago. Zoroaster was a philosopher, poet, mathematician, naturalist and environmentalist. He is believed to have experienced a miraculous visit by an angel who led him to *Ahura Mazda*—the "one, true God," source of all goodness and creator of all living things. Believers pray to Ahura Mazda, follow the sacred scripture of the *Avesta* (particularly the *Ghathas*: 17 hymns that are considered to be the Prophet Zoroaster's direct words) and seek to follow the "good thoughts, good words, good deeds" code of ethics echoed by Mercury's father in *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the Persian Empire, ultimately becoming one of the most powerful faiths in the world. The religion spread to India by the 10th century, when a group of Zoroastrians fled persecution from Muslims in Persia (now Iran) sometime between the 7th and 10th

centuries. These immigrants—including Freddie Mercury's ancestors—became known as Parsis. While keeping their faith intact, Parsis subsequently adopted Indian customs, culture and language. Migration, forced conversions and centuries of oppression have significantly diminished the faith's worldwide population to fewer than 200,000 today, with the majority of Parsis residing in India. Approximately 3000 to 5000 Zoroastrians live in the United States.

Fire is an essential part of the Zoroastrian worship ceremonies because it is believed to be a pure and perfect representation of God's light and wisdom. Large silver urns are filled with sandalwood for the holy fire, and during fire temple ceremonies, prayers are recited and bells are rung to signify the driving away of evil thoughts, words and deeds. Fire is also the most commonly used means of disposal following death for most Zoroastrians; indeed, Freddie Mercury was cremated in the tradition of his family's Zoroastrian faith following his death in 1991.

The Zoroastrian faith centers on the opposition between the forces of evil, which are embodied by *Angra Mainyu* (destructive spirit), and the forces of good, represented by *Spenta Mainyu* (good spirit). All the evils of world, including suffering and death, are believed to be the work of Angra Mainyu, while everything created by God is considered to be pure and is treated with love and respect—including the natural world. Because death is believed to be the work of the evil Angra Mainyu, deceased bodies are considered to be impure and a potential source of pollution to the earth.

For this reason, members of the faith do not commonly practice burial. Many Zoroastrians today opt for cremation following death, but this has not always been the case. To demonstrate their reverence for the earth and to hasten decomposition, the practice of "sky burials" was initiated nearly 3000 years ago as an ecologically-friendly alternative to cremation.

In the Zoroastrian tradition of sky burial, the body was placed on circular, raised structures called *dakhmas*, or "Towers of Silence," where they were exposed to sunlight, the elements and vultures. The practice was considered to be a clean death, as it prevented putrefaction—vultures and other birds of prey could reduce a body to bones in just a few hours. "We consider this to be practical and utilitarian," stated Dr. Kaykhosrow Hooshmand-Parsi, a Colorado Zoroastrian. "Bodies defile the ground, and in Persia, it was a way to prevent grave robbing or desecration."

Today, there are few Towers of Silence remaining, although two cylindrical hilltop towers still overlook the ancient city of Yazd in Iran. While the tradition has been prohibited since the 1970s, for many years the deceased were hauled to the top of the Yazd towers and arranged in particular ways according to custom and whether male, female or child. Feasting birds made quick work of stripping the bodies of flesh, muscle and organs. The remaining bleached and weakened bones were then placed in a central pit, where they continued to break down.

While Yazd's Towers of Silence are now indeed silent, Parsi Zoroastrians still practice sky burial in Mumbai, India. The ritual has become increasingly restricted, however, in part due to

a dramatic decrease in the vulture population. As a result, Mumbai Zoroastrians have been exploring such alternatives as using solar concentrators to provide the high temperatures required for decomposition, and even establishing vulture sanctuaries to increase the bird populations required to sustain the practice.

Elsewhere, this practice is no longer observed. Instead, the body is placed on a metal stretcher and buried in a cement box to protect the earth. Or, like Freddie Mercury, Zoroastrians may opt for cremation by fire—the faith's eternal source of purity, light, warmth and power. The practice also fulfills a central tenet of the faith—to perform good deeds—by preventing additional pollution of the earth by their bodies.

The Baha'i Faith—from the Bab to Baha'u'llah

Like Zoroastrianism, the Baha'i faith began in Persia. And like Zoroastrians, practicing Baha'is endured Muslim persecution and even execution. The Baha'i faith, however, is a much more recent phenomenon. In 1844, a young Persian merchant named Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad declared that his mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a manifestation of God who would usher in a new global era of peace and unity. Known as “the Bab” (meaning “the Gate” in Arabic), Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad was seen as a threat to orthodox Islam, and he was ultimately arrested and executed in 1850. His dispirited followers turned to Mirza Husayn-Ali, who in 1863 affirmed that he was indeed the foretold prophet and leader who would carry on the work of the Bab. Taking the name *Baha'u'llah*, (meaning “Glory of God”), Mirza Husayn-Ali would become the founder of the Baha'i religion, promoting universal peace and unity among all nations, races and religions. A prolific writer, Baha'u'llah authored thousands of letters, tablets and books that offered

a compelling vision of a better world. His teachings advocate for a universal religion based upon the inner spirit of one God, the unity of humanity, equality of men and women, elimination of prejudice, and the harmony of science and religion.



Like the Bab, Baha'u'llah was also seen as a threat to the existing political and religious establishment. He was imprisoned and exiled for much of his life, and following his death in 1892, Baha'u'llah's son, Abbas Effendi, and later his great grandson, Shoghi Effendi, assumed his mantle of leadership. Shoghi Effendi died in 1957 without naming a successor, and today the approximately six million members of the Baha'i faith are guided by the Universal House of Justice, a legislative body based in Haifa, Israel that is comprised of nine men elected every five years.

The Baha'i community shares the common goal of refining one's inner character and serving humankind. Baha'is are called to live their faith daily by doing good here and now, and conducting themselves in accordance with the Baha'u'llah's teachings. The faith places great importance on the relationship with God, but not on religious ritual: There are no professional priests or clergy, no official sacraments, and local Baha'i communities practice their faith in regular meetings for worship and socialization. These are usually held in homes and include Baha'i scriptural readings, prayers and discussions of religious topics. Daily prayer, observing nine holy days each year, fasting for 19 days, and making a

pilgrimage to the Bab's shrine in Haifa and to the houses where the Baha'u'llah resided are Baha'i practices that strengthen their faith.

Baha'u'llah's writings covered nearly every aspect of life and death. In his *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Most Holy Book), Baha'u'llah shared his teachings regarding death and treatment of the body. Annette Donner, a practicing Baha'i since 1976, shared information about her faith and its burial and death practices. “Baha'is see death as a joyous transition from this world into the next,” says Donner. “The body goes back to dust, but

the soul continues to progress in the spiritual world of God.” Bodies are usually washed by loved ones, wrapped in a shroud of silk, cotton, or linen, and placed in a simple hardwood coffin. A burial ring inscribed with a traditional Baha'i prayer is placed on the finger of deceased persons aged 15 years or older, which is considered the age of maturity by the faith. Per Baha'u'llah's teachings, bodies must be buried in a location that is within one hour's travel of the place of death, via any mode of transportation—perhaps on foot, or by plane, train, or automobile. “In the time of Baha'u'llah, it was on the back of a donkey,” noted Donner. “The whole idea is that we want to treat this body with great respect—it's the temple of our soul at the time that we are living on this earth.” For this reason, cremation and embalming are not encouraged, unless required by law at the place of death. Baha'is also believe that these practices deprive the earth of the natural cycle of decomposition.

Baha'i funeral services are usually held in a home or graveside, or at a cemetery chapel within two or three days following death; the body is placed in the ground facing east toward the shrine of Baha'u'llah in Haifa. This is also the location of the world's only designated Baha'i cemetery, but because most deaths occur beyond the one-hour travel requirement, most burials occur in local

cemeteries. Grave markers are usually simple, and sometimes engraved with the traditional Baha'i nine-pointed star or a quote from Baha'u'llah.

Sadly, most of the Baha'i cemeteries that existed in Iran have been desecrated, demolished or built over. Headstones and marble coverings were removed and later sold at auctions, and all identification marks on the grave markers were obliterated. Thankfully, Baha'is elsewhere are able to carry out their burial traditions without fear of retribution.

May it ever be so. 🌱



Mary Reilly-McNellan has been a volunteer editorial assistant with NTM for the past seven

years. Her interest in environmental conservation has led to a new-found passion for promoting green burial, and she is currently working with a local team of volunteers to bring this sustainable tradition to Boulder.

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My Dance with Jewish Death Rituals

by Reena Lazar

Three years ago, I parked my car in the lot next to Vancouver's largest Orthodox synagogue. This wasn't a building I frequented, so it took some time to figure out which door would lead me to the office of the synagogue's cemetery board.

The not-for-profit society there was a true community undertaking (excuse the pun). Even though the orthodox synagogue managed the organization, almost all the synagogues in the urban area—representing varying denominations within Judaism—cooperated. The *chevra kadisha* (groups of volunteer men and women who purify and prepare the deceased for burial) included members from across the local Jewish community.

The cemetery board offered complete after-death services to members of the Jewish community. When a death occurred, this group transferred the deceased to its place of shelter, arranged for the deceased to be “watched,” then ritually purified the body and prepared it for burial. The package included the price of the plot in one of the Jewish sections of a local cemetery or the cost to ship the deceased to a final resting place in another country or region.

There was only one option for the casket and shroud. Whether the deceased individual was the city's most prominent philanthropist or a homeless person, he or she would be wrapped in the same type of white shroud and buried in the same type of simple pine box, complete with holes in the bottom to hasten decomposition.

At the time of my meeting with the Board's executive director, I had just completed a home funeral training weekend workshop, was deep into my 12-week BEyond Yonder Virtual School for Community Deathcaring, and was planning to launch a new, end-of-life planning and education business under

the name Willow. I began that path after my friend—and now business partner, Michelle Pante—inspired me with her passion for green burial and do-it-yourself deathcare. I was excited about all the death care choices I had discovered and wanted to learn how I could incorporate those practices within a Jewish framework. The information I expected to gather from this meeting at the synagogue would be specifically about my personal funeral plans, but it would also help the Jewish people I expected to serve through my new business.

I entered the office eager to learn how the cemetery board might accommodate my requests to do things a little differently. For example, could my friends and family carry out the Jewish purification ritual (*tahara*) in my home? If the *chevra kadisha* performed the *tahara*, did I have to be buried in a Jewish cemetery or could I choose a plot somewhere else that was perhaps more green and less segregated?

Although I've since come to understand and respect why the Board offers a specific, rigid package of services to the Jews who want them, I left the office that day three years ago disappointed that they would not accommodate my final wishes that were based on my core values.

Departure Directions

At Willow, Michelle and I help mostly healthy people explore the reality of their mortality by offering tools, programs and education around end-of-life planning.

In one of our core curriculums called Departure Directions, we guide people to write instructions or guidelines—based on their values, beliefs and priorities—for how they wish to be cared for and remembered after they die. It's

a planning tool that can provide either specific or general guidance about what one wants and doesn't want to happen to oneself after death, and what choices should be left to others. It includes how the body will be cared for and by whom, how it will be laid to rest, who is to be involved, and what rituals, if any, will be carried out.

As I began writing this article, my own Departure Directions is an incomplete and disorganized draft. It would not be of much help to my family members if I were to die suddenly because no one would be able to decipher what I want.

Making Sense of Life and Death

Before helping people with this or any other pragmatic preparation for their inevitable death, at Willow we encourage folks to do foundational work around making sense of life and death to help ensure that all their choices, tasks and actions reflect their values and priorities. We have developed seven tools to help with that, some of which are also included in our Departure Directions curriculum:

Core Values: Core values that guide our lives are the same values to guide our death and dying; identifying these values is helpful in the foundational work of planning for death, as well as giving us an opportunity to examine if we are living our life accordingly. For example, my core values—ecological sustainability, self-expression, connection and purpose—are guiding my Departure Directions.

Learning from the Past: This foundational tool focuses on how we have been impacted by end-of-life rituals that we've attended or in which we have participated. When my Jewish atheist parents died more than 16 years ago, they chose not to follow Jewish

death customs. They were cremated and wanted no funeral or other Jewish rituals. This choice left me without a precious space to mourn my losses with my siblings and my community. I knew then that I wanted to do it differently when my time came.

I can't think or write about how I want to be cared for after I die without referencing my Jewish upbringing. Despite my parents' choice for end-of-life care, they raised me with a strong Jewish identity. They sent me to Hebrew school in our hometown of Montreal and to Jewish summer camps. As a young adult I was interested in Judaism and became a member of a Jewish-Renewal spiritual community in my new home in Vancouver.

By the time I was a young adult in Montreal, I had been to a handful of Jewish funerals—those of my grandparents and friends. The Jewish way of death and dying as provided by the staff of the privately-owned Jewish funeral home in Montreal was my only experience. I knew nothing about what happened to the deceased from the moment of death until arrival at the funeral home in a sometimes-elaborate container. The funerals took place one or two days after the death. The casket was always present, but never open. The official mourners (spouse, siblings, parents or children of the deceased) sat up front close to the casket. A rabbi led the service, full of blessings and other liturgy, and several other people gave eulogies and other offerings. With no flowers present in the sanctuary, the ambiance was somber. Emotions were raw, reflecting the very new reality of the death that had just occurred.

After the service we followed the hearse in a convoy to a Jewish section in one of the cemeteries, often quite a long distance from the funeral chapel. I remember feeling moved when other



Cemetery in Tel Aviv 2018

drivers honked their horns to say, “I see you and I’m sorry for your loss.” And then these otherwise aggressive drivers would do their best to let our long convoy stay together. I loved the special attention we received for such a significant event.

As I walked to the designated burial spot, I was captivated by the familiar-sounding names on the gravestones and wondered who was below and what were their stories. I imagined the sorrow of those who had visited the graves and left little stones as evidence that they still remembered their loved ones. I felt comforted to be surrounded by other Jewish people, and at the same time I felt unease at being in a segregated district of the park.

After another short service at the graveside, we watched the casket being lowered into the deep hole. In my memory of those burials, only the official mourners picked up the shovels to begin filling the grave. Once they completed their ritual, it was understood that the cemetery staff would fill in the rest of the grave.

My experience with Jewish deaths where I live now, in Vancouver, is a little different. Jewish funerals take place either at the Jewish cemetery chapel, at the graveside, or occasionally in other venues. Everyone present at the graveside can participate in shoveling earth over the casket until the pile has been depleted (or at least until the casket is no longer visible). It’s only here in Vancouver that I’ve taken part in this most visceral final-goodbye ritual, and, no matter what my relation is to the deceased, it feels like the appropriate thing to do.

After the burial we head to the home of one of the mourners to accompany them as they began sitting *shiva*. For seven days, the mourners sit on low chairs and spend time with their grief as visitors come and go. Eating delicious food generously provided by the visitors as we sit together and tell stories of the deceased is also part of the ritual.

Freedom to Choose: Our “Factors that Shape our Choices” tool asks the following question: How do the attitudes and values about after-death care, body

disposition and goodbye rituals held by your family and culture affect your own?

Unlike many others, I am free to choose my own goodbye rituals (including ceremonies and final disposition) without worrying about approval from my family members and friends. My adult siblings are Jewish atheists and have no strong preference for how I will be cared for after I die. My teenage daughter also describes herself as a Jewish atheist, perhaps as a nod to me and to her father, a non-Jewish dad from a formerly communist country. She doesn't have strong ideas around death rituals and recently told me that she would support whatever was important to me.

The next questions in this tool are: Which cultural traditions of your family, community and/or ancestors are important to you? What do you value about them and why? Which traditions do not reflect your core values and why? What kind of rituals and/or ceremonies would reflect your core values?

Having articulated my core values and reflected on traditions that were important to me, I felt that I had to choose between one or the other for my Departure Directions. Since that meeting with the executive director of the Jewish cemetery board, my spiritual/cultural/religious background, which on one hand has brought me such comfort and joy, was now preventing me from seeing the light. I knew I was stuck. I couldn't make progress until I reconciled how my Jewish spiritual beliefs and the cultural and religious traditions of my community and ancestors would mesh with the community and family-based death care I was planning for myself.

Know Your Choices: This foundational work was like my compass. I knew where I wanted to go but didn't know how to get there. So the next steps for me were to learn about my options while connecting with other Jews with similar values.

The first opening was when I connected with a woman who had served on the local *chevra kadisha* for many years. As she was not committed to only one Jewish way to do death, she said she

would be honored to lead a *tahara* at my home if I were to die before her.

More recently, I took part in a five-session course offered at my Jewish-Renewal synagogue that covers the history of the *chevra kadisha*, the holy task of *tahara*, and the meaning of *tahor* (purity). The instructor shared her experience of 30 years of service with the *chevra kadisha*. We looked at the prayers said during and after the *tahara*, the history of the ritual and the concept of the soul in Jewish spirituality. While I didn't relate to all the liturgy, there was something about this ancient ritual that appealed to me.

From that course I learned that there would be nothing to prevent my family and friends being with me for 12 to 24 hours before the *chevra kadisha* would perform *tahara*. This addressed my wish for a home vigil as well as my inclination for a traditional Jewish *tahara* service.

But if the local cemetery board were to manage my *tahara*, I would be required to be buried at one of the Jewish cemeteries. That would preclude me from fulfilling my vision of being buried at Mountain View Cemetery—the municipally-owned and operated green cemetery—where their grave reuse policy would allow me to share my grave with family members for many generations. I was starting to feel like one of those restaurant patrons who request so many alterations to their order that it no longer resembles any item on the menu!

I was elated to learn from a guest teacher, a member of the men's *chevra kadisha*, that Jewish rituals vary dramatically in different communities and that “progressive” *chevra kadisha* groups around North America are finding ways to be responsive to different and changing needs. This opened the door for me to ask our rabbi more questions: What is possible and what would she do and not do? I was excited to learn that she supports more responsive and flexible practices than those carried out by our local cemetery board. I may even help her to create an alternative *chevra kadisha* that would accommodate wishes like mine.

Our rabbi also encouraged me to learn more from the Gamliel Institute, a center for study, training and advocacy concerning Jewish end-of-life practices. The Institute is a project of Kavod V'Nichum (Honor and Comfort), an organization that provides assistance, training and resources about Jewish death and bereavement practices for *chevra kadisha* groups and bereavement committees in synagogues and communities throughout the US and Canada.

Most people don't know their options or where to go to explore further. It's up to us to explore, learn, declare and make it happen. We can pick and choose. We get to say!

Completing My Departure Directions

I know how I want to be cared for after I die. Hallelujah! What was fuzzy is now clear. In my Jewish-ish way, I will embrace the ancestral rituals that resonate with me while also incorporating a progressive and responsive approach to my death care that reflects my values.

Even more important is how that same knowing has shown up in other parts in my life. Through my exploratory process, I have discovered that consciousness and spirituality, which I'm drawn to in other traditions, is alive and well in Judaism, and I'm called into action to explore that even further.

My process has been an eye-opening examination of all that is important at the end of life, and therefore all that is important here and now. End-of-life planning remains the most powerful tool I know to guide me to live and love fully. 🌟

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Holy Friends—The Jewish Way of Death

by Holly Blue Hawkins

The day started out like a typical Friday morning: I woke up early with the impossible litany of must-do's already running rampant in my head. Each time I sat down to meditate and take a couple of cleansing breaths, the phone rang with something else demanding my time and mind space. Then Sandra called. Sandra only calls for one thing: a *tahara*, at noon, today, before Shabbat. A 90-ish matriarch in the community had died peacefully in her sleep last night. The announcement of her passing was not yet out on the congregational email...noon today. Oh... kay.

I began to triage the calendar, jettisoned most of the urgent items into next week and reached into the closet to pull out the *tahara* clothes I wear for nothing else, always ready for moments just like this. I grabbed flower essence spray and a thermos of tea to ground myself after the ceremony before driving home, downed a light snack to tide me over and headed for the mortuary where our *chevra kadisha* has been performing *tahara* for decades.

Taharah is the Hebrew word for “cleanse,” but to someone familiar with the work of the *chevra kadisha* (“sacred society” or “holy friends”), *tahara* means the Jewish ritual of prayerfully bathing, dressing and casketing a body, a practice that has been part of the Jewish tradition for nearly 2000 years. Although the typical answer to the question, “What is a *chevra kadisha*?” is usually “That’s the Jewish Burial Society,” the role of a *chevra kadisha* encompasses far more than washing and praying over a body before laying it to rest. It is a sacred community that by its very existence embodies many fundamental Jewish values, quietly, and often behind the scenes.

Background

There is a story in the Talmud (tractate *Moed Katan*) that exemplifies how Jewish values influenced decision-making during the early rabbinic period in the first centuries of the Common Era (CE). According to the story, at that time funerals for the wealthy, like many conventional funerals today, were so lavish that “this caused the poor to be embarrassed.” It was therefore decided that everyone should be treated in the same manner, so the common people could care for their dead with dignity.

In a radical statement against what had become the norm, Rabban Gamliel, who, in his time could be thought of as today’s equivalent of the Chief Rabbi, insisted that his body be given a simple burial, dressed in plain attire and buried in a rough-hewn casket. His contemporary, Rav Papa, is quoted as saying that, as a result, “Nowadays people even use shrouds of cheap canvas.” Thanks to Rabban Gamliel, it became the custom for all Jews in death to be dressed the same: in simple garments without embellishments. Nearly 2000 years later, we still dress our dead in garments that reflect the decision made in the early Rabbinic Period in favor of equality in death.

Another story in *Moed Katan* documents the existence of a *chevra kadisha*. A Third Century Rabbi, Rav Hamnuna, arrived in a city and learned that someone had died. He was outraged to see the townspeople going about their daily tasks instead of stopping all normal activity to care for the dead and support the bereaved. But he was assured that “there are organizations in the city that take care of the deceased.” And so this highly regarded rabbi declared: “The rest of the people may continue their work as usual.”

Guiding Principles

Although the centerpiece of *chevra kadisha* communal responsibility is focused on honoring the dead and comforting the bereaved, its traditional role encompasses far more: caring for the sick and needy; establishing and maintaining the cemetery and even burying indigent remains at no cost; bathing, dressing, casketing, guarding and praying over the bodies of the deceased; supporting the mourners; providing meals; and maintaining a sense of decorum and continuity throughout the entire process of dying, death and bereavement.

Among the principles that guide the work of the *Chevra* are these concepts:

Bikur Cholim—Care for the Sick. The first known manual on the Jewish prayers and practices for illness, death and burial, *Ma’avar Yabok* (“Crossing the River Yabok”), was compiled by Rabbi Aaron Berechiah of Modena in 17th century Italy. This collection includes Kabbalistic teachings and practical instructions to care for the sick, as well as the process of dying and of preparing remains for burial.

Kavod HaMeit—Honoring the Dead. There is an underlying belief that we are all created *b’tselem* (in the image of) The Divine, and as such our bodies are deserving of reverence, regardless of how we may have behaved in this lifetime. Even if someone is executed for a capital offense, his or her body is deserving of the same *kavod*—the same honor—as the body of someone who lived an exemplary life.

Shmira—Guarding. Our tradition specifies that we are to watch over the body of the deceased from the time the person has breathed their last until their body is laid to rest. Historically, *waching* (Yiddish for “watching”) had

a practical function of keeping the body safe from desecration. A more expanded understanding of *shmira* is that we function like an “honor guard” watching over the body, providing a steady presence for the soul of the

departed during this confusing time of separation, and also protecting the sacred space around the dying process and the bereaved. By extension, we are protecting the tradition as well.

Confidentiality. Another aspect of *kavod hameit* and *shmira* is preserving the dignity of the deceased by surrounding the entire *tahara* process with the highest level of confidentiality. For some, this extends as far as the absolute anonymity of members of the Chevra. Unfortunately, over the centuries this level of confidentiality has caused the entire role of the *chevra kadisha* to become veiled in secrecy. On the other hand, there is a certain beauty in looking around a congregation and not knowing who cares for our beloved dead.

Nichum Aveilim—Comforting the Bereaved. There is a detailed code of conduct for supporting the bereaved and visiting a house of mourning. This includes a timetable for activities: when mourners should refrain and also when to resume, to assist them in moving through their grieving process and gently re-integrating back into society.



Carpenters



Tachrimim makers



HaMeit

21st Century Chevra Kadisha

Remarkably, after 2000 years of being torn apart by plagues, pogroms, expulsions and exile, the Jewish people have managed not only to survive but to develop a resilience, a kind of collective post-traumatic growth that is perhaps rooted in the sense of preciousness that often comes with being face-to-face with uncertainty. Those same foundational values that were established by the early sages have provided a substantial bedrock upon which we now base our core values. This includes the entire spectrum of care for our most vulnerable in their times of greatest need: the sick, dying and bereaved.

There is a series of paintings created in 1772 depicting the *chevra kadisha* of Prague. These illustrations are still astonishingly accurate; the activities have changed very little over the centuries. A flourishing 21st century Chevra not only performs the millennia-old ceremonies, but does so in the context of contemporary synagogue life. Integrating advances such as digital record-keeping, online education, social media and streamlined communications

position us to respond within a characteristically Jewish context to the growing trend of death awareness and the needs of an aging population of Baby Boomers.

To prepare as a community for the needs of the “Silver Tsunami,” the *chevra kadisha* is positioned to expand beyond *tahara* and *shmira*. In addition to the behind-the-scenes service of providing last acts of kindness for our beloved dead, the Chevra is uniquely qualified to provide additional services to both clergy and community. This expanded role can include community and congregational education, pre-planning assistance, cemetery management, interfacing with the mortuary and inclusion of members of a congregation in activities such as building caskets, sewing *tachrichim* (traditional garments in which the dead are dressed) and prayer leadership during the critical days and weeks following a death.

All One Chevra

Here is an example of the *chevra kadisha* network in action: When the shooting occurred at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg last October, killing 11 Jews at morning Shabbat services, the local *chevra kadisha* mobilized to create a container of sanctity around their personal and communal tragedy and care for the bodies of their own. There was also an outpouring from Chevra members nationwide in the form of practical expertise in organizing the complexity of tasks—in person and via texts and email—and in offerings of emotional and liturgical support as events unfolded. This has continued since then.

For this year’s conference, *Kavod v’Nichum*, the cross-denominational *chevra kadisha* community of North America—whose name means honor and comfort—has devoted an entire day of the conference to a reverent retrospective of the Tree of Life incident. This time has been set aside to explore what we have learned as a faith community and how to bring that awareness into our collective wisdom for future times of hardship. Also, we want to remain present as a source of solace for those

Chevra members most intensely impacted by the experience.

There is a Jewish tradition of dedicating a time of study to the memory of our beloved departed. With this understanding we recognize that an aspect of bringing *kavod* (honoring) to each experience, however painful, is learning what we can from what confronts us. *Nichum aveilim* (comforting the bereaved) extends beyond providing comfort to the family, friends and community. We also acknowledge a level of trauma that members of the Chevra may experience—particularly in situations of violent death—leaving an imprint that doesn’t go away for months, years, a lifetime.

Understandably, a community-at-large endeavors to carry on and find its own way to “new normal” after a tragedy. Along with our vow to protect the privacy of the deceased may come a veil of disenfranchised grief that can only be shared among those who understand. At such times, members of the Chevra turn to one another for comfort within their uniquely common bond.

As I meet *chevra kadisha* members from around the world, who are Jewish by faith but ethnically diverse, I have come to understand that there is only one *chevra kadisha* and that we are all part of it. Regardless of variations in how we perform the ceremonial care for the dead, what recipes may be involved in meals of consolation or other fine details, or even what language we speak, we are all one *chevra kadisha*; there is a bond you can see in the eyes, and in the shared understanding of the precious fragility of life itself.



Meeting Hall at Cheshunt

Natural Deathcare Movement

Traditional Jewish burial is inherently “green” in many ways. The casket is made of simple wood, with no metal or synthetic materials; in some settings the burial is done in shroud-only. The body is not embalmed, and non-biodegradable materials are not permitted in the casket. If possible, graves are hand-dug. Jewish cemeteries with explicitly “green” designations are springing up around North America. In the United Kingdom—where the trend toward woodland burial parks is far more widespread—the Joint Jewish Burial Society has established the first Jewish Woodland Cemetery in the UK in Cheshunt, north of London.

Although the history of each ethnic/religious group that has immigrated to North America is unique, we have encountered a common challenge to maintaining our respective death traditions: the rise of commercial mortuaries and cemeteries has contributed to a decline in family and community involvement in after-death care. Practices such as routine embalming, vaulted burial plots and lavish funerals, virtually unheard of in centuries past, have become the norm.

Among the tasks of the *chevra kadisha* are promoting cultural awareness, advance planning and coalition-building in the form of educating local hospitals, coroner’s offices, non-Jewish mortuaries



Hand-dug grave



Woodland cemetery at Cheshunt

Photos Holly Blue Hawkins

and cemeteries about how to honor, not only a Jewish individual's death, but also the Jewish deathcare tradition. And we are not alone in the desire to promote culturally diverse death awareness.

Death itself has become abnormal, secretive and the purview of professionals. The idea of faith communities creating a sacred space in which to perform ceremonial after-death care has ironically become a revolutionary act requiring planning, research, education, mobilization of resources, legal battles and conscious efforts to recover rapidly disappearing practices that were, until recently, the expected norm. Historically, when Jews founded a new community, the cemetery and *chevra kadisha* were the first infrastructure established. But whether it is a place for Jews to perform *tahara* or another community's traditional or innovative after-death honoring, caring for the bodies of our loved ones has become a human rights issue, a human *rite* to be reclaimed.

My *tahara* attire ready to go

Epilogue

Each *tahara* is different and yet similar, and each time I participate I feel myself going deeper into the sacredness. Often I find myself picking up the body in my arms like a child, to reposition her on the preparation table or adjust the ceremonial garments. I feel the weight of a body without a soul enlivening it, and I feel the emptiness of this vessel devoid of its contents. Such holiness, such privilege...

We lift her body into the casket, place pottery shards and sand from Israel, recite more liturgy, wrap her in her familiar prayer shawl and carefully drape the fringe, place the lid for the last time and wipe it down with a

damp cloth to remove the fine layer of dust that may have accumulated. More prayers, speaking to the soul of the deceased, we ask her forgiveness for any indignity we may have caused in our efforts to honor her, wheel the casket with feet toward the door and proceed around the back of the mortuary to the chapel where the body will lie in state.

I kiss the casket as I leave and back out of the chapel in respect. I find a sink and ritually wash my hands again, go to my car, pull off my head covering and shake out my hair, spray the flower essence formula, take a few deep breaths and sips of tea, and turn the key in the ignition. Back at home I disrobe in the laundry room. My *tahara* clothes go directly into the washing machine, and I go into the shower. In clean clothes I make a fresh cup of tea. There is nothing to say. 🌿



Holly Blue Hawkins is a Natural Deathcare advocate, author, educator, Gamliel Institute faculty and Rosha (Head) of the Community Chevra Kadisha of Santa Cruz, California. She provides training in a wide variety of end-of-life subjects in both Jewish and secular settings. hollyblue@LastRespectsConsulting.com

HONORING THE LIKENESS OF GOD

by Seraphima Havens



Marie's body right after washing and dressing. Marie's granddaughter said, "Pascha came for Grammy!"



Marie's priest and spiritual father, Fr. Gregory Horton, sprinkling her body with holy water just before closing the coffin.

In the Christian Orthodox context, we honor the body as the image and likeness of God. We believe in the incarnation of Christ. We recognize that our bodies are the vehicles for our souls and so give them the honor of a proper burial. Traditionally, an orthodox funeral cannot be performed for someone who is cremated, although exceptions are made in extreme cases when a body is not present at the funeral due to a car crash, fire, etc.

We knew of a few orthodox churches that had burial teams to wash the body, dress and prepare it for the funeral. We decided to follow this more ancient practice—abandoned in many places—for my mother-in-law. We purchased and prepared a simple cedar coffin, and toward the end of Marie's time on hospice, we made arrangements to obtain her death certificate and permission to travel so we could hold the funeral at our home in Utah and drive her body, on dry ice, to Texas the following day. Marie wanted to be buried at Monastery Cemetery in Houston, TX, where nuns would always remember her name in their prayers.

After Marie died, her dearest and closest friends and family gathered in our home. With the help of our hospice nurse, we used water with a mixture of lavender, frankincense, myrrh and spikenard essential oils, and very gently cleaned the body with washcloths. Then, together, we dressed Marie's body. It was reverent, peaceful and joyful to handle her painless body after the weeks and years when pain had been her entire existence. When we were finished, Nina, aged five, came in and, seeing Marie dressed in white with red roses scattered on the bed, exclaimed, "Pascha (our Easter resurrection service) came for Grammy!"

Photos Ken Hoglund

We had a gathering of friends in our home that evening and recited the first set of prayers over the body. My husband went to pick up the death certificate and permit for travel, and the next morning, we moved Marie's body into the coffin and used a friend's truck to transport the coffin to the church.

As the wife of a Christian Orthodox priest, I've been to many funerals over the years. There is something shocking about seeing an alive person one day and then coming upon their lifeless body in a coffin the next. Our tradition is to have an open casket and give the embalmed deceased a last kiss before closing the coffin. It was so different touching and kissing a body that had been prepared naturally: Marie's body was still soft to the touch.

We were with my mother-in-law every day and every minute during the last two weeks of her life. We held her hand as she took her last breath. We washed her body, dressed it and prayed for her.

The funeral was simply a continuation of those moments. We said goodbye to her body as we closed the casket. It was sad that we would no longer see her in that flesh again, to greet her or receive a kiss. But there was no trauma. The children were not shocked at seeing a dead body. The funeral was a time to say goodbye and offer prayers for the journey of her soul. Our close attendance on Marie prior to death and afterwards provided a cognitive realization that she had moved from body to soul; the body was gone but her soul would live forever.

The warmth we felt during Marie's time in hospice, the outpouring of love at the preparation of her body, and the intensity of the funeral service gave the first year of our grief a beautiful cloak of grace. Marie's life was one of physical pain and her death ended that. It was incredible to see her body free of pain, to thank it for what it had endured, and to recognize that, with death, her soul was made light! 🌟



Sara Havens was born and raised in Colorado, attended college in Santa Fe, NM, where she converted to the Eastern Orthodox faith and met her husband, Fr Justin. They attended seminary and settled in Salt Lake City, UT, where they've resided for the past 15 years with their eight children.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

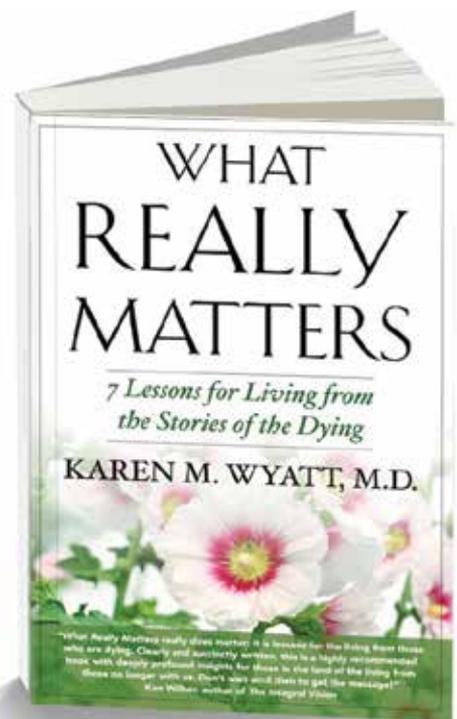
LESSONS FOR LIVING FROM STORIES OF THE DYING

Dr. Karen Wyatt MD., hospice physician and spiritual teacher, leads us on a journey through the final days of her patients who, along with their families, experience profound healing and spiritual awakening as they face the end-of-life. Through the 7 lessons that were most important to these patients during their last days of life, we can also learn what really matters during this earthly journey.

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Partnering with Nature When We Die

Adapted Excerpt from *Reimagining Death* by Lucinda Herring

I am pleased and grateful to have an excerpt from my newly published book reprinted in this issue of *Natural Transitions*.

One of the reasons I wrote my book was to explore what it means to co-create or partner with nature at the threshold of death. My own connection to the physical and subtle realms of the natural world are a spiritual path for me—one that has truly given me refuge and tangible support in working with all aspects of death and dying. Such a connection lies at the heart of my passion for home funerals and natural disposition methods of caring for our own dead. May my story and musings inspire you to turn to nature and the earth as part of your support and solace at the end of life. And may death itself be your greatest sacred teacher and guide.

From Chapter Three

We handle death more easily when we are resourced or connected to something larger than ourselves. For many, a spiritual faith is this greater power, and that is a wonderful aid and gift. But for all of us as human beings, nature itself is an untapped wellspring of support and inspiration, offering us a place of holding and strength to face the end of life. Even if we have never had any conscious connection with the natural world, our bodies have, for we are nature; we are embedded and interdependent with all other forms of sentient life, and we rest in, indeed are held by the earth in every moment of our days. If we can remember this as we die, we have a greater chance of awakening to our larger wholeness, our true natures, and to the sacredness of who we are as human beings.

Such understanding (what I call a nature-inspired Gaian faith) is best

received through our bodies, felt senses and imaginations, not through the musings of conceptual minds. When faced with the inexpressible—and we are here—my way is to tell stories, gleaned from my direct experience of what it means to partner or co-create with nature when we die. The following is a tribute to my father, written when he was dying of cancer on our family land in Alabama.

At the Borderlands

I think the bees knew that Papa was dying. In some strange, empathic communion, one of our hives had developed a beetle infestation with black masses of insects infiltrating the super; at the same time Papa's cancer was spreading throughout his body. Our bees had been healthy for years—no disease or colony collapse, no problems to speak of. Now this. Papa was the beekeeper, the one whom the “ladies” knew and trusted with their honey and with their lives. It was as if this one hive had decided to accompany their friend in his suffering, even go with him across the veil.

We went down together to deal with the crisis—Papa in a cotton shirt that clung to his thin, emaciated body like a shroud—his slow, uncertain gait across the field so different from his usual pace, so sad. My brother Hal marched ahead in purposeful strides revealing a chronic impatience and masking the deeper unraveling going on inside him. Losing our father was a fierce and demanding task, one he could meet, but the toll was considerable.

The October afternoon sun was bright and warm—a mocking contrast to our mission of death. For we intended to burn the infested hive so the beetles could not migrate over to the other supers nearby. I wondered what Papa must be feeling as he pulled on his bee

suit and headgear. The bees were his friends, his constant companions since Mama's death years before. Perhaps destroying the beetles would be cathartic, giving him a sense of power to counteract his own futile longing to remain alive a little longer.

“I just want to live until the persimmons ripen, Lulie, and the leaves finish falling,” Papa had said that morning, his eyes moist and his face so wistful. “Life is truly dear, isn't it? I'm sure gonna miss being here, miss being alive.” “Here,” was our Alabama land, in a mountain cove, at the end of a lane, up a steep stony drive, where old log cabins Papa and Mama built forty years ago nestle in the woods, as if they have always grown there. Though Papa really never retired from practicing law, he had changed his high-powered life as a trial lawyer in town to spend his days cutting wood, growing a garden and canning food, driving the tractor across the bottomlands, making scuppernong wine and giving honey away to all his church friends and family.

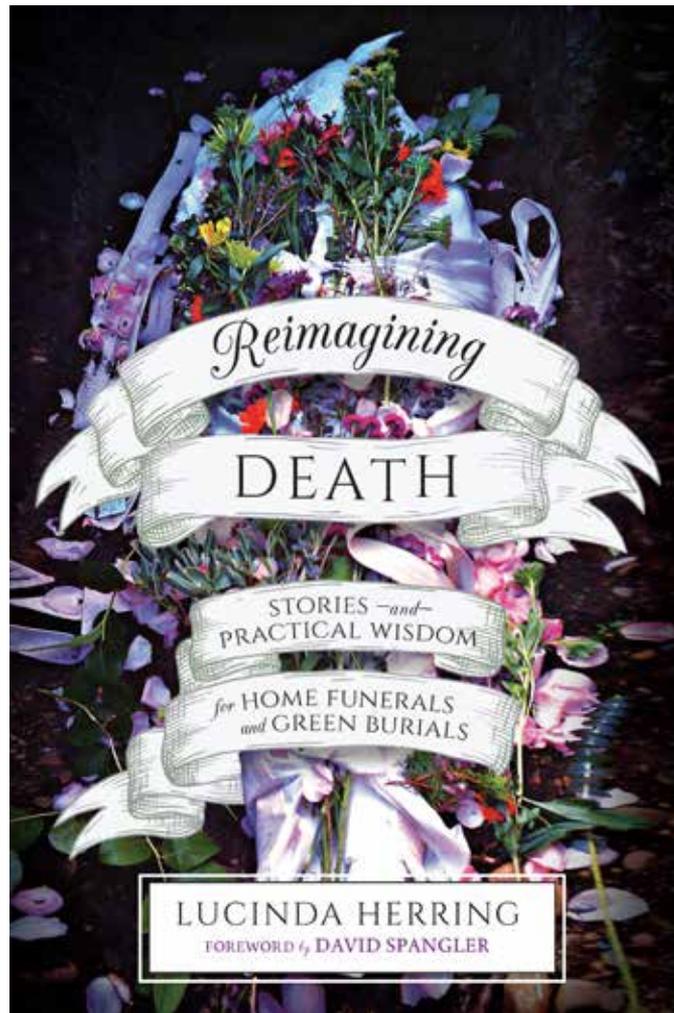
His was a good life, with a new woman companion from church and days spent on the mountain, or driving into town to teach Bible classes about the Divine Feminine to all the old ladies in the little Episcopal church he helped start. This, after the Diocese ordained women, an act of which he heartily disapproved. And yet, after Mama died, the Feminine stalked Papa like a lover, and in his later years, he kept his hands in the dirt and his heart open to Her whispers and wisdom. My Southern, rather patriarchal father told me once that, in the early weeks of anguish after losing Mama, the only thing that really helped his pain was to go down to the garden and bury his face in the earth. His capacity to stretch and grow rather than stay frozen in older ways of being moves me to this day. Grief was Papa's agent of transformation. It cracked him open, and

now it was helping him die. We all felt that his lung cancer, an illness often associated with loss and grieving, probably began in those searing weeks after Mama died.

Papa and Hal carefully dismantled the damaged hive, placing the supers, which were full of lethargic struggling bees, in a row on the ground. I came closer and saw the black beetles swarming over the wax comb, wreaking havoc with the ordered and tidy kingdoms within. Hal told us to move back, stepping forward with a blowtorch. Without hesitating, he aimed the intense flame into the inner recesses of the boxes, so that bees, beetles and comb were suddenly engulfed in acrid smoke and fire.

Papa stood under the tall cedar tree whose low branches serve as a shelter for the hives. A shelter for him, too, in this moment. I noticed for the first time that the netting on Papa's headgear was black, not white, like Hal's. From where I stood, I could no longer see my father's face; he was hidden behind a dark veil, hesitant, hovering at the borderlands. Behind him, the sky was achingly blue, and the air was filled with the humming of other bees in the branches. As I gazed, the sun's rays caught Papa's whole image, outlining his frail form with a bright halo of light. "It won't be long," I thought, witnessing this moment, this image of portending death. I sensed Papa's life force already loosening its hold and spiraling upward and out, upward and out, like the dark coils of smoke swirling and billowing forth from the boxes where his bees lay burning.

Later I went over to the workshop across the gully from the house to check on the status of Papa's cherry wood



casket. My sister's partner, Ray, talked to a local craftsman and got directions for building a simple box from wood Papa already had on the mountain—beautiful milled planks he had saved and cherished for years. Hal and a young man, Brian, who had been Papa's friend and co-worker, helped Ray build Papa's "little ship of death," as D. H. Lawrence called it.

Though our father loved woodwork and could have come at any time to view his casket, he never did, though he knew the men were hard at work evenings and weekends. I found this odd, though I tried to understand. I guess Papa loved living so much, he didn't want to contemplate being dead, which his own fine casket would insist he do. Just like he didn't want to talk about me putting him on dry ice during his after-death vigil in the dining room, though he was able to laugh and joke about being a flayed herring on ice—that being his name. Fish Herring. His real name was Harold but people rarely called him anything but Fish.

When I opened the workshop door, Papa's bees were swarming everywhere. Someone had left the windows open to the honey room. The ladies had left their hives down in the meadows and made their way up the hill to confiscate their stolen treasure. That was to be expected. What I didn't expect was to see hundreds of bees circling Papa's casket in a spiraling dance that was, to me, unmistakably focused and intentional. Old lore says that one must run and tell the bees when their keeper dies, and cover the hives with a black veil for three nights and three days. Just as the diseased bees seemed to know and take on Papa's illness, these sisters were communing with and blessing

the box that would take their keeper down off the mountain and away from them forever. Theirs was a dance of realization, acceptance and honoring—their warm steady humming a portent of all that was; all that had to be. 🐝



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Today she is one of the leading voices for healing and ecological ways to care for our dead. Herring is a home funeral/green disposition consultant and guide, an interfaith minister, and a licensed funeral director in the state of Washington. lucindaherring.com

Research Findings

Home Funerals and Their Effects

Excerpt from Thesis Study by Leilani Ann Maxera, MPH, MSW

The Interviewees

HP is a 58-year-old Caucasian female who is Catholic and lives in Ohio. The home funeral HP attended was for her great-nephew, who was murdered (killed by a gunshot wound). This was the only home funeral in the research study that was for someone who had died a sudden and violent death. HP was also the only interviewee who had no involvement in planning the funeral. Though a great-nephew is generally not seen as an immediate relative, HP said she considered him to be a close one.

RJ is a 72-year-old Caucasian female with no religious affiliation (she considers herself spiritual but not religious). She lives in Northern California. RJ is a therapist, and the home funeral she attended was for someone who had been her client for 14 years. RJ shared that their client-therapist relationship was “unique,” as due to her client having severe social anxiety she had very few other people in her life and RJ was her primary support system.

CW is a 53-year-old Caucasian male with no religious affiliation who lives in Northern California. The home funeral CW attended was for his father-in-law, with whom he was very close and who was sick with a rare form of cancer for two years prior to using California’s End-of-Life Option (legal medically assisted death) to hasten his death. For the last 6–8 months of his life, his father-in-law had an HBO film crew following him around to film his death experience for a documentary.

TT is a 50-year-old Caucasian female with no religious affiliation who lives in Northern California. The home funeral TT attended was for her mother-in-law, who died of congestive heart failure at age 93. She died in TT’s home, where she

also lived at the end of her life. TT was her mother-in-law’s primary caregiver.

OD is a 68-year-old Caucasian male who was raised a Protestant Christian and now identifies as a Unitarian Buddhist. He lives in North Carolina. The home funeral OD attended was for his wife, who died of cancer at age 67. Through various medical interventions, she lived for five years and three months after her diagnosis.

CL is a 36-year-old Filipina female who is Catholic and lives in Hawai‘i. The home funeral CL attended was for her grandfather, who was 99 years old. CL’s grandfather died in the Philippines, and her family traveled there for the funeral.

The Deaths

All but one of the funerals was for someone who had died of natural causes. HP’s great-nephew died when he went to someone’s home to confront him because he had robbed his friend. He brought a gun with him, and when the person saw the gun, he shot the great-nephew immediately. It was later ruled as self-defense.

RJ’s client died from a very aggressive form of cancer. She died 17 days after her diagnosis, so the funeral had not yet been planned. The client was in the hospital when she died.

The death of CW’s father-in-law was essentially a planned event, two years into his living with cancer. California has what is called an End-of-Life Option, where terminally ill individuals who meet the law’s criteria can obtain medications to assist them in dying. Even with his terminal diagnosis, CW’s father-in-law “vigorously pursued” treatment for his cancer. When he reached a point that he felt his quality of life was “beyond what he was willing

to deal with,” he took the medications to end his life. When CW’s father-in-law took the medications he was on his couch, and his coffin was on their coffee table about a foot away. When he died, they moved him into it.

CL’s grandfather had been relatively healthy for being 99 years old, but after coming down with a cold and being sick for a month or so, his health declined and he died.

TT’s mother-in-law died of congestive heart failure, and OD’s wife died after many years of living with cancer. Neither discussed the death itself in great detail.

The Home Funerals

At all of the home funerals that the interviewees attended, the body lay in wake with the exception of the one HP attended. HP had no hand in planning her great-nephew’s funeral. His home funeral was modeled closely after a traditional one that would take place in a funeral home. All of the furniture was moved to the basement, and the living room “was lined with chairs just like you would have at a funeral home with a little aisle down the center, and when you got to the opposite end the casket was there and the parents were there.”

It was also treated more like a traditional funeral because there was a short visitation and service, and a procession all on the same day; the body did not lie in wake for multiple days. “My understanding, what I remember, is they did all of the embalming and stuff, brought him there...” Out of all of the funerals discussed in the research interviews, HP’s great-nephew was also the only person who was embalmed. The family’s home was large (the family had nine children), but not large enough to accommodate the 100-plus guests who

on the Grief Process

showed up. This forced people, including HP, to have to sit outside on the patio for the service.

In the case of RJ's client, the ritual started at the hospital. It was a pioneering experience because the hospital had never had anyone leave from the hospital to go to a home funeral. The hospital social worker got agreement from the administration and the nurses to work with them on it. "[W]e really started in the hospital, with, you know, the nurses beginning preparation of the body in terms of putting the strap under her chin so her mouth wouldn't stay open and packing the incision well enough so it wasn't going to burst and all of that."

Her client had lived in low-income housing, so having the funeral there was not an option. The client's ex-husband found an acquaintance willing to let them set up her home funeral in a room in their home. While the hospital was generally accommodating, they would not let the body stay in the room until morning. RJ's client had died around 11pm, and because the hospital would not release the body to anyone but a funeral director, they found a funeral home that agreed to come to the hospital to pick her up and take her to the home her funeral would be in. They covered her with a beautiful sarong and treated the transport of her body like a procession. "We lifted her on to the gurney, and they put like a blue velvet cover over her, and we marched her out of the hospital with a security guard who led us through the halls."

For RJ the home funeral came together quickly. RJ and the client's ex-husband went to her apartment and gathered things that had been meaningful to her, such as her crystals, singing bowls, pictures of angels, and her statues, and created altars in the room. They also

brought in a harpist who had played for the client in her hospital room the night she died. When the funeral home brought in the client, the harpist was playing, and RJ, the ex-husband, washed the body, with help from two home funeral guides from a local collective business that assists people with home funerals. Washing the body for the funeral proved to be a significant part of the process for RJ.

"[W]hile I was washing her chest and torso, the harp was playing, and I felt like I was dancing. I was washing, and [the home funeral guides] were watching her face, and she said her face changed while I was doing that."

They decided to leave her naked with just the sarong over her. "And you know, I mean she was just really beautiful. Her hair was all spread out on a purple pillow."

They invited people to see RJ's client for 4-6 hours each of two days. RJ stayed with her most of the time, and slept some of that time in the room with her. On the last day of the vigil, the home funeral guides came back and helped RJ and several other people wrap the body in a shroud and decorate her with flowers. The funeral home had left a cardboard box that people could decorate over the two days. They put her in the box and carried her out to the transport van while singing *Amazing Grace*.

CW's father- and mother-in-law were detailed planners in general, so they had investigated all of their funeral options. Through the same local home funeral guide collective business that RJ had used, they were introduced to the idea of home funerals. His mother-in-law decided that she really appreciated many aspects of things "in terms of the context of not being willing to immediately have

a couple of guys in suits come in and take him away."

CW's father-in-law lived in a type of condominium complex known as co-housing, where the individuals who live there are heavily involved in their integrated community. The home funeral took place in his individual condo and lasted for two days. Though the family was at first skeptical about letting the community members come for the home funeral, they ended up inviting them, and 15 members came.

"And as it turned out it was a great thing for her [his mother-in-law]. It was not, I'll be honest, from my perspective, I wouldn't call myself a reluctant participant, but I was unsure of the whole process from the beginning."

He says he and his wife were reluctant because the idea of the home funeral did not fit their idea of who his wife's parents were. "It didn't seem like them that we'd known for these years. But through these two years, they evolved a lot in the way that they viewed death and everything else."

The community members sat and visited with the mother-in-law and stood around the coffin. "The community members really rallied and were very supportive of her, and there was a point at which they were all standing around holding hands and sort of having their moment together." CW and his wife were not in the room with the group; they were next door. He said his wife was "a little bit more reluctant to the full exposed home funeral piece," and so "they stayed away from that" and just let his mother-in-law and her community have their time together.

CW's in-laws were private people. While they worked with a home funeral guide to learn the specifics of using dry ice,

they were not comfortable with having an outside person come in and do the ceremonial washing of the body. “All that’s well and good for those who want that, but it was not something they wanted. They mostly just wanted a coach, not an outside person to participate.” CW felt that, in his family’s case, taking care of his father-in-law’s body turned out to be “relatively easy” because both he and his son are firefighters “and have mechanical skills for dealing with deceased people,” and his wife works in healthcare.)

TT’s mother-in-law’s home funeral took place at TT’s home, as her mother-in-law had been living with her and her husband when she died. The funeral lasted for two days. TT kept her mother-in-law at home in the bed she passed away in. The home funeral was intimate; a small number of people “came and went.” She died on a Thursday morning. They were able to get the paperwork they needed to bury her by Friday afternoon. They buried her in a “wonderful little cemetery that’s privately owned, so we were able to dig her grave for her instead of hiring somebody. So we were able to do *everything* ourselves.”

OD and his wife had attended home funerals while living in both Indonesia and Nicaragua. They appreciated “the reverence of the skeletal remains and the home funeral celebration,” and realized they “did not want to be separated from our family by the funeral industry and be processed in the more standard industrial way.”

“Well, there were conversations for decades really about us wanting and thinking about how we wanted to be handled, if you will, as how our remains were handled, and our funeral. Once it was obvious that she had terminal cancer, then we obviously discussed it more. For both of us we made legal arrangements to donate our bodies with the hope of retaining family sovereignty over the skeletal remains.”

OD’s wife’s funeral was held at their family home where she died. The night of her death they washed her body and moved her from the bedroom to the living room. “We had been making preparations over a period of time, having had a couple of near-death experiences earlier.” Her funeral lasted for about four days. Afterward her body was donated to a local university’s forensic pathology program.

CL’s grandfather’s home funeral was held in the home her mom had had built for her grandfather in his village in the Philippines. CL and her mother live in Hawai’i, so they had to travel to the Philippines for her grandfather’s funeral. The funeral lasted for nine days, and on the ninth night, formal services took place at two different churches (to accommodate family members who are of two different religions). The nine-day vigil is a normal cultural practice in the Philippines. The family set up the casket in the living room, and visitors came through. Someone always had to be with him, including sleeping in the living room at night because the body can never be left alone. CL said, “It’s just kind of our family’s way of saying farewell. This is kind of how they practice in the village where my family is from anyway.”

It is very hot and humid in the Philippines, and CL’s family was fortunate enough to have an air conditioner in the house, but still “the mortician had to come every day to just kind of touch up” so her grandfather would not decompose too quickly.

Positive Aspects of the Home Funerals

The home funeral experience left HP with conflicting emotions. While she felt that the familiar space made the funeral a positive experience, it was hard to see the home set up like a funeral parlor when their family celebrates Christmas in the same room. She said, “I guess I have mixed feelings, and if you talk to different family members, they all had

mixed feelings about it. It was just out of our comfort zone a little bit I think.”

“The next holiday that we celebrated there, it was kind of difficult to me remembering when we had last been in that room. So, I think for some of us, one of the things I guess when I think about positive, we were in a familiar home. It wasn’t the sterile, you walk in and smell the flowers kind of funeral home experience. You felt the family love, this was their personal space, and I think that was the positive part about it. You were in a personal space, you felt the family love, and you felt like he had been brought home to be told goodbye to, it was like his last time home.”

RJ said it was a “joyful experience.” Part of RJ’s joy was believing that her client had been given some relief in death because she had suffered so much in her life. “[S]he had so much emotional and mental suffering her whole life and had wanted to die so many times that I actually felt relief for her. And I also felt a release myself because I had felt like how could I ever retire because I can’t abandon her, you know, because she was so dependent on me. So I felt like, wow, I could retire now, so that made my, you know, my process of letting go a little different than it would be for someone else.”

RJ thought all aspects of the home funeral were positive: from how they left the hospital to preparing her body, to having people come and share stories about her client. “I sort of went in and out, you know, when I left at night, I said goodnight and kissed her on the forehead, and you know, the atmosphere in the room, seeing so many people come who loved her...The room was full of people who loved her.”

RJ said that the client had had an “ambivalent relationship” with her sister, and that it was wonderful “for her sister to get to see her through everybody else’s eyes and share.”

When RJ spoke about the ceremony at the end of the vigil when they carried

her client out of the house, she said, “I was high, I was totally blissed out. I was just high from the whole experience.” In fact, RJ’s experience was so positive that it made her want to perhaps do home funeral work when she retires. She is not sure when that will be, but she said her first home funeral experience “was very moving, positive...the whole thing about it was just wonderful.”

CW spent 30 years as a firefighter and had seen his “share of deceased people not necessarily in the best environments.” He thinks that the home funeral helped him deal with some of the memories he still carried from other dead bodies he had witnessed. “I had quite a few ghosts in my head of deceased people that were not the best pictures in my mind, and so to see him being there naturally, peaceful, you know, it was not like a classic funeral home funeral where he was made up or embalmed or any of that. It was just his body there in its natural, deceased state. It kind of eased my mind a little bit toward some of those bad memories I had. It was nice that that was a guy I knew and loved for 35 years, and so to see that and to see the way he was made it a lot easier I guess; that was one of my positive aspects on it.”

Though CW at first described himself as a “reluctant participant,” his thoughts on his father-in-law’s home funeral greatly changed after having been a part of it. “I look back on it now as an incredible, great experience. And the rest of us were gathered there, my wife was there, my mother-in law was there, my wife’s sister was there, and so you got a real feeling of full closure. And that’s what I liked, going back to the funeral piece of it, was that was the beginning of all of that process. And it was unanticipated on my part. I really didn’t know how I was going to view it, I just knew that this is what they wanted to do and so therefore we had to do it. As it turns out, it ended up being a great experience.”

TT said the home funeral left her tired because she was more physically

involved, but she felt “emotionally more satisfied that we followed through from beginning to end. We did things as we were ready. And she never left us, and a stranger never touched her. So every hand that had touched her was someone who loved her and cared for her. And there is a lot of peace that comes with that. And a lot less questions or what ifs or...”

OD felt good about how his wife’s home funeral turned out. He shared that “nothing was absolutely perfect, but it was pretty darn close to being as wonderful as it could have been. Just about every aspect was positive. It was lovely not to have her swept away and held at arms-length by the funeral process. We really treasured it. We brought in flowers, and family, and music, and friends, and we had her a few more days. More opportunity to touch and share.”

For OD, the home funeral also helped with the transition of his wife being gone. The home funeral brought OD “a sense of consummation, I think is probably the word, of the intended meaning of the process and honoring of our wishes, and a sense of...I don’t want to use the word closure...a sense of completion. I guess that’s it, a convergence and a consummation of the process of death, that transition. It wasn’t the completion of any grief but it was the clarity that she’s been here and she is gone, and we had enough time and enough closeness to say that difficult good-bye.”

For CL the home funeral was a positive experience because her family had a lot of time to be together. CL’s family is scattered across the globe, living in places like Dubai, Singapore and Japan, and it is rare that they get to see each other. “It actually felt really nice because it felt like we have everyone kind of come together. It was nice for everyone to come together. And because we were in the home for a lot of the services it was just a lot of bonding. Good bonding and good memory of Grandpa.”

The lack of structure in the home funeral afforded them precious time to remember her grandfather as a group. “Family members, you know, we all got to be with each other for more than the hour or two ceremony, just to do a lot more of the remembrance, the memorial type things about my grandfather. I know the service at the house, a lot of the great grandkids got up and got to speak. It was just a lot more intimate. I mean, there were a lot of people, but at the same time it was still very intimate and not so ceremonial and formal. So for us, it felt nice to be able to sit and share those memories, not be stuck to a program and how long you can stay in a venue. So I think in that sense it was nice because it was an actual memorial of his life, and a celebration of his life. And getting to hear from the generations of folks that you know, and he had great-grandkids too there. Yeah, so it was kind of nice to hear from the generations and how they all knew Tata.”

Negative Aspects of the Home Funerals

A large part of HP’s negative experience was being stuck outside in the heat during the service. She had gone out on the patio with other family members when they arrived, not realizing that the house had quickly filled with visitors. She had to listen to the service from outside where not only was it hot, she thought that they had “lost some of the personal [with] us being outside the door.” It was hard to see and hear from outside as well.

HP also felt odd about the home funeral experience because it was not her normal way of saying good-bye. But at the same time, she felt that the home funeral “makes it maybe a little bit easier in some ways? I feel like I am contradicting myself from what I said.”

For RJ, the only negative was exhaustion, from the whole experience of illness as well as planning and executing the home funeral itself. “The only thing

I can think of is by the time it was over, I was exhausted. But, you know, the exhaustion had started actually when we first found out she was dying. Because I spent most of the time at the hospital that whole time. It sort of brought out a mother bear in me.”

For CW, “the mechanical piece” that goes with taking care of a body that has not been embalmed was the only negative aspect of the home funeral. Because his father-in-law was not embalmed, he could start decomposition if he was not kept cooled. CW learned tips on using dry ice from a home funeral guide about where to place it on the body and how often to change it (2–3 times a day).

“And so while not necessarily negative, it was a mechanical thing that had to happen in order to make the rest of it potentially positive... And it wasn’t a terrible thing, but you’re having to move him around in order to essentially preserve the body, so it wasn’t what I considered to be...that piece isn’t really honoring, if that makes sense...But overall I wouldn’t call that negative, and I wouldn’t call really anything about it particularly negative. Partly because we had talked about this so in depth for so long that we knew what we were doing and what was coming and everything else.”

For TT the negative aspect of having a home funeral was finding somebody in her area who had the knowledge of how to have a home funeral who could

give her support and walk her through the process of the paperwork and how it all worked. She did have a friend help her with the paperwork, but because a local person she reached out to was out of town, she ended up getting phone assistance from someone in another part of the state.

CL’s home funeral experience was very different from the other interviewees due to the length of it, how far away it was from where she lived, and how many people came. These issues contributed to one of the main negative aspects of the home funeral for her, which was logistics.

“It’s a lot of work. It’s a lot of work in terms of, so my mom, because he is one of the only...well no she has two siblings that live here also. But she has the resources, so she hosted a lot of the events financially. So it was a lot of work in terms of just like money-wise, because all the nine nights of prayer and the services you have to feed everyone. You have friends and family coming from all over the Philippines, and family that hasn’t talked in so long, and so having to just plan how to feed everyone in the village for nine nights. So that is not necessarily negative but it was a challenge to kind of figure out how to feed everyone.”

She also thought it was hard to plan and prepare everything while also living in the space where it all happened.

Another challenge for CL was that, at the time of her grandfather’s funeral, her dad was also ill in Hawai‘i. He had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and someone had to stay home and take care of him. “My older sister had to stay back, and then me and my younger sister, her family, and my mom went for the services for my grandfather. Which was hard for us, and even with my dad, he was very upset that he wasn’t able to go because of his illness.”

Her grandfather died in April, and then her father passed away in June of the same year.

The Theme of Closure

RJ: “I think if she had just died and been cremated and at some point we had a memorial service, I think it would have felt a lot different. But for me it was such an involved a process of total closure, and total love.”

CW said seeing his father-in-law lying in wake gave his mother-in-law “a lot of closure...time for closure.” He went on to say, “That’s a big piece of the whole thing, this movement of lying in state at home, which is sort of a recurrence of an old movement where people have their time to sort of realize that the person that they knew is gone and now it’s just the body that’s there.”

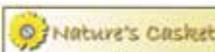
Discussion and Conclusions

Summary of the Major Findings/ Themes

All interviewees but one (HP) had overwhelmingly positive responses to attending home funerals for their loved ones, and even in her case she admitted that she was conflicted mostly because the idea of a home funeral was so foreign to her. Also, unlike the other interviewees who all had a hand in planning the home funerals they attended, HP was only a spectator and did not experience many of the same things other interviewees did that contributed to their positive outlook on the funerals. Other interviewees reported that being in charge of or assisting in planning the home funerals were very meaningful experiences. The planning process was important because these interviewees felt a sense of control and choice. The autonomy of deciding what happened to their loved ones’ bodies after death created a powerful experience for them. HP also could have been frustrated with her own lack of control in the situation.

Some of the aspects of home funerals that aided interviewees in their

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grief processes were very specific to the individual person. For CW the experience of the home funeral he attended was not only helpful for him in grieving his father-in-law's death; seeing his father-in-law die in a peaceful manner, having time with his body and being a part of the final disposition of the body was cathartic because it helped him deal with past trauma. Experiencing a "good death" helped him process other deaths he had witnessed in his career as a firefighter. Unfortunately, CL experienced the death of her father within two months of her grandfather's dying, but this also made it easier for her to clearly compare the two experiences of having a traditional and home funeral because she attended the two different types of funerals so close together. After having spent nine days with her grandfather's body, the act of her father's body being quickly taken away and her never seeing him at home again was traumatizing for her.

Time with the person's body helped interviewees understand they were truly gone. TT, for example, needed that time to get accustomed to her mother-in-law's being dead. She kept checking on her because she was so used to her role as a caregiver, and having that time with her mother-in-law's body helped her transition from caregiver to a person who was ill to caring for someone who died and whose body would soon be leaving the home. The transition was not just a concept, it had a physical reality.

Do Home Funerals Help Attendees with Their Grief Process?

A limitation of qualitative research is that the interviewees reported on their own perception of their grief. There was no validated tool of measurement used to quantify it, and perception can be unreliable.

We do not know for sure what stage of grief the research participants were in at the time of their interviews, though all of the interviewees appeared to be in the acceptance stage, as they could speak

candidly about the deaths in their lives without showing signs of not being able to accept that their loved ones were gone. Someone in denial of death would have given a much different interview than someone who was in the acceptance stage of Kübler-Ross's *Five Stages of Grief* (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007). It is hard to quantify all of the factors that brought them to their acceptance of death. By their accounts the home funeral was helpful in this matter, but the questions asked in the research interviews cannot account for how accepting they were of the deaths and how far along they were in their grief process prior to the home funerals. As mentioned previously, the stages are a fluid process, and while the individuals interviewed had positive reactions to the home funerals they attended, their reactions might have varied had they gone into the funeral in a place of anger or denial.

In looking at the grief process of the interviewees through the lens of the *Dual Process Model* (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), the home funerals helped with both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented processes. The home funerals helped participants cope with bereavement by giving them a safe place to express feelings of grief, especially in the case of CL, who had cherished the nine days she had with her family to cope with the loss of her grandfather. The home funerals also aided in the restoration-oriented process, helping participants accept the deaths of their loved ones and adjust to their new roles. This can be clearly seen in the case of TT, as having the body of her mother-in-law present helped her clearly see the finality of her death, aiding her in transitioning from her caregiver role.

Still, the reaction to attending a home funeral may differ greatly depending on the attendee's condition at the time and their level of personal resilience in dealing with death. There were too many variables and too small of a sample size to be able to definitively say that home funerals help all people grieve easier.

There was also a clear sample bias, as the interviewees were recruited through a small pool of people with whom the researcher had contact. If there had been time to recruit further, a more diverse pool of interviewees may have shared vastly different experiences. Another bias in the sample was that people had to be willing to talk about death to even contact this researcher in the first place; someone severely traumatized by having a home funeral would most likely never have answered the call for research participants.

While this study does not definitively prove that home funerals help ease the grieving process for those who attend, it definitely aided in the grief process of those who were interviewed. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive. Based on this study, it would be this researcher's recommendation to integrate information on home funerals into the options that social workers discuss with their clients who are dealing with the imminent death of a loved one or who are facing death themselves.

Conclusion

Though there were many limitations to this study, it did show that home funerals had significant positive effects on the grief processes of those who were interviewed. It is recommended that more research be done on the subject. 🌍



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Health degree with an emphasis in Aging from the University of California Berkeley and a Master of Social Work degree from Hawai'i Pacific University, where she wrote her thesis on home funerals and their effects on grief.

Poetically Dealing with Death

by Alexandra Donovan

I have the unusual distinction of being a hospice chaplain who has a Masters in Poetry rather than Divinity (as if one could master either!).

When you are a chaplain, people assume many things about you, and I often get called “Pastor,” “Sister,” or less frequently “Reverend.” Though I attend an Episcopal church and have a background in religious studies as well as professional training in pastoral care, these days I find that my identity as a chaplain is more fundamentally rooted in my identity as a poet, as well as in the path of a shaman. Of course, I rarely disclose this fact to my patients, as it is rarely pertinent to the provision of spiritual care.

As a chaplain, I enter into the framework of whatever is meaningful to my patients, whatever is providing them with strength and courage or fear and doubt. We work from that place to create meaningful discussion, ritual, presence. And, though I never lie about the titles I do and don't carry, typically I tend to accept whatever role my patients bestow on me. As one of my supervisors has told me repeatedly: it is our patients who ordain us in this work.

Still, in this work I am most primarily a poet, and poetry remains my primary spiritual modality. It was poetry, after all, that helped me through the experience of my own mother's death, and that eventually allowed me to welcome a new and expanded faith back into the picture.

It is rare in my work that I get to bring poetry directly into patient care, but poetry is the place I take the work when I need to give it over, to metabolize my day, to let in the hurt and also the beauty and to place both side by side on some altar. Often I find that once I have written a poem about a patient or patient encounter, I am finally able to let go of whatever it is that haunts me, having honored the connectedness or

memorialized the hurt I carried out of the encounter with me.

Occasionally with my patients I do get to share poems such as William Stafford's “The Way It Is” or John O'Donohue's “Blessing for a Friend on the Arrival of Illness.” And at memorials and celebrations of life, poetry is often appropriate. Mary Oliver's “The Summer Day” is a popular choice. Perhaps it's because there is rarely space for poetry within my daily patient interactions that I am so glad for opportunities to use it in grief-work and workshops such as the one I currently teach for the Lighthouse Writers Workshop at UC Health Anschutz in Aurora, CO, titled “Writing with Cancer Support Group.”

What has surprised me most about this group is that people often do not want to write about their cancer, or about their losses directly. Some of them have even told me they don't want to “think about the negative” now that they are past the danger, as most in my current group are, for now. I find my task as poet and teacher (and chaplain) is to find ways to hold space in order for our pain and our resilience to emerge quietly, to whisper into our own hearts in a way we can receive. I feel almost stealthy about this at times. I also deeply respect the perspectives assumed by many of my students, and I learn from them: life is short. Why not think about the beauty of it? For me, the beauty and the pain are inextricable, and I suspect that for my students—though not all want to admit it or talk about it—the awareness of the beauty of life comes hand in hand with an awareness of its frailty, with the possibility that we could not be here tomorrow. I often refer to Mary Oliver's poem “The Uses of Sorrow.”

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

Using Jane Kenyon's poem “What Came to Me” as a model, I will often ask students to write about an object that is empty now but didn't used to be. By focusing on a small thing, one image or object, a world of hurt can enter in, and so can the beauty of memory. My friend, Victoria, who was part of our Motherless Daughters Support Group in California, wrote a poem about the empty bathtub where she used to have long conversations with her mother. Only half-way through writing the poem did she remember that the bathtub was also where she found her mother after she died suddenly and unexpectedly. Through the poem and her act of creative memorializing, the bathtub, that box of darkness, became a container for such a searing absence, such a poignant presence; so much pain and so much love together, as they must be together.

During a workshop I led recently for fellow chaplains in Golden, CO, I asked participants to begin writing about a natural object (a pinecone, a feather, a stick), using objects I had gathered on a walk that morning or something else from their own memories. I then asked them to introduce a specific “you” into the poem—a loved one, a lover, the self—and to see what happened, to see how the poem transformed. It turned out they were never writing about driftwood but about the lover who never seemed to stay. It turned out the pinecone was a metaphor for the seeds that got dropped into fertile earth when we went through the awful fire of scathing loss.

In my first class at UC Health Anschutz, I gave students a list of categories and instructed them to fill out each without thinking too much: a body of water, a road, a natural phenomenon, something you carry, something you have lost, a synonym for light, a synonym for dark, etc. I then asked students to create a poem or piece of prose using as many of the items from their list as possible. The

constellations that emerged from this exercise were astounding.

After years of teaching, I have not yet determined if the psyche supplies the raw material it will need for its art or if, rather, in reviewing the available data, it finds meaning and connection because humans are meaning-makers; we are built for meaning. Meaning is real in a way that's beyond our perceptions. We are also built for connection. And we have a deep, innate sense of the interconnectedness of things. Deep cries out to deep. Our soul is in dialogue with itself.

The safe space of art somehow allows for our subconscious to come out and play. Disparate threads can begin to emerge and connect when they haven't before. It's almost like not watching the kettle so it will boil: When we distract our psyches with what we believe to be the task at hand (focusing on an empty vase, working to incorporate the word *feathery* into a poem), we somehow open up space for intuition, for soul. We enter into the space of image and metaphor as opposed to the realm of logic. We begin to find that our psyches are a lot more complex and a lot more whole than we thought. It's within this space that the pain of loss and the beauty of being alive can live side by side as two faces to the same coin.

Teaching has a way of keeping me honest. Whenever I ask my students to write, I also make myself complete the exercise—in part to make sure that the prompt is still working for me, that I can teach from a place of authenticity. While teaching last summer at the Fort Lyon Supportive Residential Community in Las Animas, CO, as the Lighthouse Writers Workshop Summer Writer in Residence, I asked my students to write about the “photograph in their pocket” that they had never shown to anyone. This metaphorical photograph is a memory carried close to the heart; something seen clearly, whether full of joy, pain or both. What emerged was, for me, one of my most personally important poems:



Portrait of a Mother and Daughter

She's standing up, straddling the portable commode,
her soft black leggings down around her ankles.

I am wiping her after she is done
and for the first time I feel how soft and frail

she is down there; for the first time I see
how much of her has become thin, and
soft as bruised petals.

The hair is gone here too
as it is from her head and the rest of her,
a thing I should have expected
but hadn't thought about.

We never talked about this moment.
I never asked what shame or pride or
love it held for her.

But I tell you: I carry no greater memory
than this, of cleaning and caring for

this place where I am from,
this bare and honest earth,

this old house of passion
now a country cottage

who has begun the slow collapse
back into the wild garden of herself,

who is showing me even now the path
home,
my own way forward

into soft earth,
the wild fertility of ruin.

A poem is a box full of darkness. Into that box we can put our deepest fear, our most awful memory, or simply something small and compelling like the way a leaf glows translucently at dawn. That box of darkness becomes tinged with light, and the beautiful things reveal their shadowy undersides, as beauty and pain sidle up to one another, as the “wild fertility of ruin” is revealed. In that box, as Catholic theologian Richard Rohr says, “everything belongs.”

In the space of a poem, even death—especially death—is a welcome guest. As Mary Oliver wonders aloud in her poem, “Goldenrod Late Fall,” as she describes the quiet crumbling of the goldenrod’s “seedy faces”:

And here comes the wind, so many
 swinging wings!
Has he been invited, or is he the
 intruder?
Invited, whisper the golden pebbles of
 the weeds,
as they begin to fall over the ground.

In the realm of psyche, metaphor, image and play, even death can re-introduce himself as a welcome guest. Dying can be reimagined as a “voyage just beginning”—not in the clichéd, platitude ways, but in the hard-earned sense of a poet having intuited her way into a metaphor that somehow saves her; allows her to weep more deeply and see the world as new, “tinged with all/necessary instruction, and light.” Poems are not cheap answers to the deep suffering of a broken heart. Instead, the meaningful poem, like the meaningful prayer, submits itself to pain and beauty equally until somehow, by grace, we find that “this, too, was a gift.” 🌱

Alexandra (Alex) Donovan is a hospice chaplain working with Compassus Hospice in Denver, CO. She is also a poet and creative writing instructor who currently facilitates a “Writing with Cancer” support group at UC Health Anschutz for cancer patients and survivors, as well as their loved ones, through the Denver Lighthouse Writers Workshop. Her first chapbook of poetry, Mother Stump, was released by Yak Press in August 2018. amdonovan.com

The Alchemy of Yoga, chapter 10

Laughing Saints Story

by Osho

I have heard about three Chinese mystics. Nobody knows their names. They were known only as the “Three Laughing Saints” because they never did anything else; they simply laughed. They moved from one town to another, laughing. They would stand in the marketplace and have a good belly laugh. The whole marketplace would surround them. All the people would come, shops would close and customers would forget for what they had come. These three people were really beautiful—laughing and their bellies waving. And then it would become an infection and others would start laughing, the whole marketplace would laugh. They had changed the quality of the market. If somebody would say, “Say something to us,” they would say, “We have nothing to say. We simply laugh and change the quality.”

While just a few moments before, the market was an ugly place where people were thinking only of money—hankering for money, greedy, money the only milieu around—suddenly these three mad people came and they laughed and changed the quality of the whole place. Now nobody was a customer. Now people had forgotten they had come to purchase and sell. Nobody bothered about greed. They were laughing and they were dancing around these three mad people. For a few seconds a new world opened.

The three moved all over China, from place to place, from village to village, just helping people to laugh. Sad people, angry people, greedy people, jealous people: they all started laughing with them. And many felt the key—you can transform.

Then, in one village it happened that one of the three died. The village people gathered and they said, “Now there will

be trouble. Now we have to see how they laugh. Their friend has died; they must weep.” But when they came, the two were dancing, laughing and celebrating the death. The village people said, “Now this is too much. This is unmannerly. When a man is dead, it is profane to laugh and dance.”

They said, “You don’t know what has happened. All three of us were always thinking of who was going to die first. This man has won; we are defeated. We laughed the whole life with him. How can we give him the last send off with anything else? We have to laugh, we have to enjoy, we have to celebrate. This is the only farewell that is possible for the man who has laughed his whole life. And if we don’t laugh, he will laugh at us and think, ‘You fools! So you have fallen again into the trap?’ We don’t feel he is dead. How can laughter die, how can life die?”

Laughter is eternal, life is eternal, celebration continues. Actors change, but the drama continues. Waves change, but the ocean continues. You laugh, then you change and somebody else laughs, and laughter continues. You celebrate, somebody else celebrates, and celebration continues. Existence is continuous. It is a continuum: There is not a single moment’s gap in it.

But the village people could not understand, and they could not participate in the laughter that day.

When the body was to be burned, the village people said, “We will give him a bath as the ritual prescribes.”

The two friends said, “No, our friend has said, ‘Don’t perform any ritual and don’t change my clothes and don’t give me a bath. Just put me as I am on the burning pyre.’ So we have to follow his instructions.”

And then, suddenly, there was a great happening. When the body was put on the fire, the dead man played his last trick. He had hidden fireworks under his clothes, and suddenly there was *Diwali*. The whole village started laughing. The two mad mystics were dancing, and then the whole village started dancing. It was not a death; it was a new life.

No death is death because every death opens a new door—it is a beginning. There is no end to life; there is always a new beginning, a resurrection.

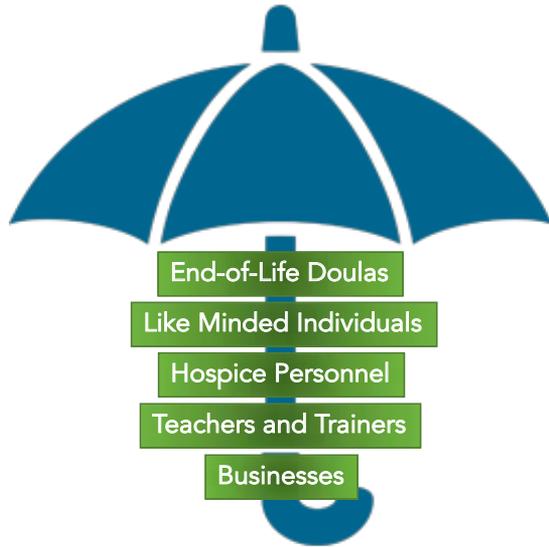
If you can change your sadness through celebration, you will also be capable of changing your death into resurrection. So learn the art while there is still time. Don’t let death come before you have learned the secret alchemy of changing baser metals into higher metals—because if you can change sadness, you can change death. You can be celebrating unconditionally when death comes: you will be able to laugh, you will be able to celebrate, you will go happy. And when you can go celebrating, death cannot kill you. Rather, on the contrary you have killed death. Start it, give it a try. There is nothing to lose. But people are so foolish that even when there is nothing to lose, they won’t give it a try. What is there to lose? 🌟



Reprint of story provided by Prem Yatros, administrator and a director of OSHO Sammasati. She is also a Bowen therapist, a Reiki master and meditation leader. A disciple of the Indian mystic Osho since 1978, she lives in Devon, UK.

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Changing the Face of Death

by Nandi Szabo

*And when the earth shall claim
your limbs, then shall you truly
dance.*

—Kahlil Gibran

It was a beautiful fall day, the autumn equinox, a time when the life force is returning to the roots. Ten people gathered outdoors at my studio, tucked deep in the woods of the Sierra foothills, to explore what it means to change the face of death. I offered participants to meet their fears and denial of death using a creative lens with the goal of creating a light-filled container of safety and curiosity, based on the belief that the more informed one is about death, the more informed one will be about life.

The expressive arts process allows humans to take a peek at our unconscious using non-linear expression. Images enrich meaning, give form to feeling and offer us personal symbolic messages. The complex interplay among perception, kinesthetic action, emotion, sensation and imagery facilitates communication and synthesis between our inner and outer reality.

Using the tools of the expressive arts therapies—journaling, music, movement, poetry and art—I encouraged participants to explore their unique relationship to life and death. For the first three hours of the four-hour workshop, I provided a series of prompts and quotes to ponder and to process through writing in their journals and, through movement and art, encouraged them to listen to their imagination, heart and body. To support and guide us into the mystery, I suggested, “Be aware of what you’re feeling, what you’re thinking or imagining and what you’re noticing in your body.” Sharing the experience of the workshop with each other was held until the last hour of the gathering.

After a circle of introductions and a movement warm-up to the song “Step

into the Light” by Mavis Staples, I showed participants a picture of the Grim Reaper and invited them to describe what they saw. Their list of words included *evil, scary, foreboding, dark, fear, lonely, terror, rage, unknown, cruel, pain, suffering, torture, and alone.*

The image of the Grim Reaper—his bony fingers reaching out, his sickle, his skull with its menacing grin—has a solid foundation in Americans’ relationship to death, creating a subtext of failure, fear, dread and denial of death. When coupled with the medicalization of death and the removal of death from the home, the Grim Reaper becomes the subliminal face of death.

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus, noted that the root cause of human suffering is “our omnipresent fear of death.” I asked, “What precisely are we afraid of?” Participant responses included:

An abrupt end of life by accident or disaster.

That I will be scared and try to hold on, but ultimately die being scared.

That I didn’t give to the world what I intended to give.

Pain, messiness, dependence on others, loss of control, regret.

No longer being a participant and being forgotten.

Leaving the ones I love and those who depend on me.

Then I read quotes from *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death* by Irvin D. Yalom, a highly regarded



Collage

psychiatrist. The first was: “... [T]here is a positive correlation between the fear of death and the sense of an unlived life. In other words, the more unlived the life, the greater your death anxiety. The more you fail to experience your life fully, the more you will fear death.” So many philosophers have reminded us of the interdependence of life and death, teaching us that learning to live well is learning to die well and, conversely, learning to die well is learning to live well.

The second quote from Yalom was this: “Death awareness may serve as an awakening experience, a profoundly useful catalyst for major life changes.” Yalom also spoke of regret and suggested turning one’s gaze to the future and answering the potentially life changing question, “What can you do now in your life so that one or five years from



Drawing



Cremains containers

now, you won't look back and have dismay about the new regrets you've accumulated? In other words, can you find a way to live without continuing to accumulate regrets?"

Participants wrote their reactions to these ideas in their journals. Does our denial of death distance us from the moment-to-moment of being vibrantly mortal—of really feeling things, loving others and showing it, seeing the world around us, speaking our minds with courage and acting on our core beliefs?

The workshop continued with a further series of ponderings, poetry and stories, and more journal reflections about our relationship to life and death. Gentle or percussive music and movement structures helped us stay relaxed, grounded and embodied in our mortal bodies. When we move we feel. The beat of music organizes.

Then, an art project. Each participant received a standard-issue plastic cremains container inside a white cardboard box with these directions: This box will serve as the box for your cremains, your earthly remains. Or it may serve as the box for your bucket list

or legacy. How do you want to decorate this box? What prompts and journal writings have given you inspiration? Hold the box and note what you are imagining and feeling, and when you are ready, begin picking the pictures or art supplies that speak to you, or have a message that resonates with meaning for you. Try not to think too much and know that you may not finish it. It may become a work in progress. Let it speak to you.

I had covered studio tables with pictures from which participants could choose images to create collages on their boxes. Also available were glitter glue, paints, stencils, chalk, magic markers, stones, bones and driftwood. I asked participants to work silently and to stay in their own process. Beautiful music mingled with the sound of the wind rustling through the trees.

Participants had about an hour to work on this art project before they came back to the circle and placed their cremation boxes in the center. To synthesize their experience, I asked them to jot down a list of words that described their box and their experience.

A sense of peace and joy permeated the group sharing. There was a consistency in many of the words shared: *new adventure, welcome, freedom, letting go, trust, pay attention, soaring, unfettered, priority, next level, joy, initiation, transformation, listen*. The boxes were positive statements of life and death.

Then I asked participants to make a final journal entry: a brief description of what the personification of death might be for each of them. One person said, "I would like my 'meeting person' to offer me a cup of tea and admire the galaxy with me. We are unhurried. We are enjoying the beauty of the universe."

We closed the workshop with this piece from Tecumseh, a Native American chief:

Live Your Life

So live your life so the fear of death can never enter your heart. Trouble no one about their religion: Respect others in their views and demand that they respect yours. Love your life, perfect your life, beautify all things in your life. Seek to make your life long and of

service to your people. Prepare a noble death song for the day when you go over the great divide. Always give a word or sign of salute when meeting or passing a stranger in a lonely place. Show your respect to all people but grovel to none. When you arrive in the morning, give thanks for the light, for your life and the strength. Give thanks for your food and for the joy of living. If you see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies in yourself.

When your time comes to die, be not like those whose hearts are filled with fear of death, so that when their time comes they weep and pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. Sing your death song and die like a hero going home.

Feedback from workshop participants

I am 67, retired and pondering growing older and facing death. I worked in health care for many years, so I am aware of all the ways one might meet death, which makes the subject a little more real for me. I also sat with my mom, my dad and three somewhat younger friends who died from cancer.

The combination of art and the subject of dying really spoke to me. I have read about the subject, but I think art takes you to a different place and allows a different way to feel and imagine this important transition.

I found the imagery of the Grim Reaper to be very powerful. The Grim Reaper is the visualization of fear.

After our work with images and collages, as well as hearing poetry, I was more inclined to see death in a softer, more luminous way.

I didn't fully finish the artwork collage on my box, so it sits in my living room, waiting for me to continue the work. I am not sure what I will do with it, besides have it as a constant reminder of my own death—a way to have that reality visual in my world—in a beautiful way.

* * *

I liked the idea that the cremains box could be used as a bucket list box. I really liked decorating and collaging my box. Afterward I looked at it and found three words to capture what I saw and felt about the box: Creativity, Honoring, and Transformation. These three words are the “medicine” of my box. The process of working with the box and being prompted to ponder various readings in the class inspired me to bring back my creative nature that has been on hold for awhile. I felt inspired to find more opportunities in life to pause and honor the moment. This will prove to be transformative for me.

* * *

I am retired and looking down the road at the coming of death for myself and my loved ones. I found the title “Changing the Face of Death” most interesting. And as I learn about how one might prepare for a conscious and peaceful death, I seek out learning from many sources.

I loved the little movement/dance exercise you had us do because I don't do that much in my life. It did loosen me up. Your music choices were so right for what you were guiding us to consider. I also loved to hear what the box meant to each person. We are all such different and unique souls.

I most definitely will be adding to my box. I want to use it a receptacle for “my wishes” for the orchestration of my death... which may include music choices, poems, small mementos, etc. I am not ready to have my casket on hand, but this small box is perfect!

* * *

I am constantly pondering life as well as death and how my transition will affect my family—and myself, of course! What motivated me to take the workshop is that I continue to look for positivity in this birthright of a moment—with our gathering together and listening to others and having an instructor to unleash questions. I would not have had the insights or even knowledge to ask some internal questions that will possibly change the course of my current life and the death in my future.

The activities and prompts and listening to others were all equal in helping me discover my contemplations. They were all powerful in their own way and help me find completed feelings in this journey. The movement, the art and creating the cremains box allowed me to celebrate and ponder me not being here, in my Earth-body, at some point in my life.

As of now my cremains box sits in a place in my home where I can see it, and it reminds me of the place of joy and peace that I hope to feel upon my death—what it will really turn out to be when the day comes!

* * *

The “Changing the Face of Death” workshop reinforced and cemented my perspective on death and dying. I wrote the following in my journal at the end and shared it with the group.

I see death as freedom from suffering, from physical and emotional pain. It's relief in some ways. It's freedom to soar with the birds in the sky, swim with the fish in the sea and sway with the leaves in the trees. It's freedom from fear. My life is love and connection with nature, which is deep and full of meaning. It's eternal. There is no end, only new beginnings. Life is eternal because love is eternal and energy cannot be destroyed. My life, my love and positive energy will live on after my body dies. 🌱



Nandi Szabo is co-founder of Full Circle Living and Dying in Grass Valley, CA. Her mission is to serve the living in understanding options and rights in death and dying and, as a death-care midwife, assist all “beings” through the transition of death and grief. fullcirclelivingdyingcollective.com



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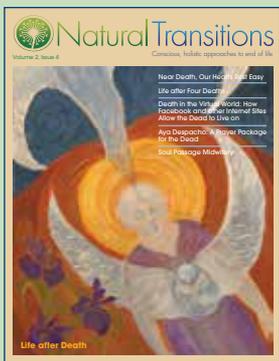
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Informative and inspiring, Natural Transitions should be read by anyone wanting to understand how death can connect with life. – Joe Sehee, Director/ Founder, Green Burial Council International

Natural Transitions is good news for all of us; it demystifies the universal process of letting a loved one go into death and shares heartwarming ways of honoring that inevitable and sacred occurrence. – Joanna Macy, eco-philosopher, peace activist, Buddhist scholar

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Recompose Yourself!

Washington Leads the Way in Human Composting

Washington State has become the first in the US to legalize a new “contained and accelerated” conversion of human remains into soil. Recompose, a public benefit corporation based in Seattle and led by Katrina Spade, is behind the successful legalization of this new method of final disposition based on a patent-pending system that completes natural organic reduction in approximately one month. The transformation of human to soil happens inside a reusable, hexagonal recomposition vessel, and the resulting earth is then available to families of the deceased.

Spade has been campaigning since 2012 for radical change in the way we dispose of our dead. As a graduate student in architecture, she began researching the funeral industry and became interested in natural burial. In 2014 she founded The Urban Death Project to create new options for death care. In 2018, the Recomposition Science Project, a research study at Washington State University in cooperation with the new company created by Spade in 2017, Recompose, found natural organic reduction to be an effective, safe, natural and sustainable alternative to burial and cremation.

With significant reductions in carbon emissions and land usage, recomposition meets increasing consumer demand for greener choices at end of life. The recomposition process uses an eighth of the energy required for cremation and saves over a metric ton of carbon dioxide emissions per person. Spade estimated that if every Washington resident chose recomposition as their after-death preference, the state would reduce CO₂ emissions by a half million metric tons in ten years. That's enough energy to power 54,000 homes for a year.

[I]f every Washington resident chose recomposition as their after-death preference, the state would reduce CO₂ emissions by a half million metric tons in ten years.

That's enough energy to power 54,000 homes for a year.

The bill to legalize recomposition in Washington State enjoyed broad bipartisan support and passed 36-11 in the Senate and 80-16 in the House in May this year. Senator Jamie Pedersen (D-43), who sponsored the bill, said, “What I think is remarkable is that this universal, human experience of death remains almost untouched by technology.... [I]n fact, the only two methods for disposition of human remains that are authorized in our statutes have been with us for thousands of years: burying a body or burning a body.” Today, more than half of all Americans—and 76% of Washington State residents—are cremated. But cremation is an energy-intensive process that releases greenhouse gases and particulates, emitting more than 600 million pounds of CO₂ annually in the US alone.

Recompose has built a broad community of supporters, and many Washington State residents took part in grassroots actions to help pass the bill. Spade said she was thrilled about the feedback from the community: “I heard

from one person in her 90s who called her senators and told them to please hurry up and vote yes.” Spade envisions a future where every human death helps create healthy soil and heal the planet. “We asked ourselves how we could use nature—which has totally perfected the life/death cycle—as a model for human death care. Why shouldn't our deaths give back to the earth and reconnect us with the natural cycles? At the same time, we're aiming to provide ritual, to help people have a more direct and conscious experience around this really important event. As hard as it can be, the end of one's life is a profound moment—for ourselves and for the friends and families we leave behind.”

On May 21, 2019, Washington State's Governor Jay Inslee signed SB 5001 that legalizes natural organic reduction, or “the contained, accelerated conversion of human remains to soil.” The law will go into effect on May 1, 2020.

Now that the bill has passed, Washington State's Department of Licensing is creating the regulatory structure for this new disposition option. At the same time, Recompose is actively working to lease property for Recompose|SEATTLE, the first facility in the world where the service will be offered to the public.

How is this different from green burial?

The process of recomposition is modeled on green burial, but designed for cities where land is scarce. Recomposition happens inside a modular and re-usable vessel. Bodies are covered with wood chips and aerated, providing the perfect environment for naturally occurring microbes and beneficial bacteria. Over the span of about 30 days, the body is

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recomposed, creating soil, which can then be used to grow new life.

What happens to the bones?

Everything—including bones and teeth—is recomposed. That's because our system creates the perfect environment for thermophilic (heat-loving) microbes and beneficial bacteria to break everything down quickly. By controlling the ratio of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and moisture, the system creates the perfect environment for these creatures to thrive. The material is mixed at several points during the process to ensure thorough decomposition.

At the end of 30 days, non-organics are screened out and practitioners make sure the resultant soil is finished. The material given back to families is much like the topsoil purchased at a local nursery: soft, beautiful soil.

What happens to any drugs or pharmaceuticals or antibiotics that remain in a body after death?

Natural organic reduction is a managed thermophilic biological process used to convert organic material, including human remains, into a more stable, earthy, organic material. During the process, change occurs on a molecular level and the microorganisms decompose most pharmaceuticals—including antibiotics.

What about artificial hips?

We screen for non-organics like metal fillings, pacemakers and artificial limbs during the process and recycle them whenever possible.



Katrina Spade at National Home Funeral Alliance Conference.

What about pathogens (i.e., microorganisms that can cause disease)?

Natural organic reduction creates the perfect environment for microbes and beneficial bacteria to create temperatures of 120 to 160 degrees Fahrenheit. These temperatures destroy most harmful pathogens and transform the body, wood chips and straw into a final material that is safe for humans and plant life.

Are there any instances where someone would not be a candidate for natural organic reduction?

At this time there is not enough evidence showing that natural organic reduction breaks down the pathogens in a prion disease such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob. An individual who has died from a prion disease would therefore not be a candidate for natural organic reduction. Similarly, someone who has died of a highly contagious disease, such as Ebola (an outbreak of which would be

managed by the CDC), would also not be a candidate for this method.

How much soil is created per person?

This process creates about a cubic yard of soil per person. Friends and family are welcome to take some (or all) home to grow a tree or use in a garden. Any remaining soil goes to nourish conservation land in the Puget Sound region. 🌱

For more information, visit: recompose.life

NHFA Annual Conference: Weaving Art and Ritual with the Practical

by Sarah Crews

Are you looking for ways to get energized and inspired about incorporating art and ritual into your home funeral practice and workshops? Look no further. Registration for the National Home Funeral Alliance's 2019 conference is currently open! This year's theme—Head, Hands and Heart of Home Funerals: Weaving Art and Ritual with the Practical—brings together educators, artists, advocates, film makers, musicians, poets, shroud makers and more for a heart-opening couple of days in the beautiful setting of Oak Ridge Conference Center in Chaska, MN, October 4–6, 2019.

We are delighted to be welcoming two internationally known death care practitioners and speakers to the conference.

Pia Interlandi, joining us from Melbourne, Australia, will be delivering the keynote address on Friday evening titled “Ritual Facilitation: Co-creating Meaning through Garments for the Grave.” Pia entered the end-of-life domain through the unconventional area of fashion design. In almost every human culture, an individual is dressed in a garment that will literally and symbolically become part of the body as it returns to the earth. Pia will discuss

her practice, *Garments for the Grave*, in which she co-creates funeral garments, shrouds and artifacts with a person who is dying and their family. These “fashionings” become tools for creating rituals surrounding the care and disposal of the body after death, with the effect of engaging and activating the family and community in its care. Attendees will be invited to participate in making a “community shroud” over the duration of the conference.

Coming to us from Canada, Sarah Kerr will speak on “Community Ritual as Participatory Performance Art.” The practice of ritual healing shares deep

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Sarah Kerr



Pia Interlandi

National Home Funeral Alliance 7th NHFA Biennial Conference

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roots with the practice of theatrical performance. Each is designed to facilitate a shared, altered state of consciousness. Each uses music, color, imagery and symbolic action to create a powerful energetic container in which personal and collective transformation can occur.

Using stories from her work with dying people and their families, Sarah will explain and illustrate the basic principles of ritual healing, and describe the archetypal connections between ritual and performance art. Sarah's visual art practice is deeply integrated with her ritual practice. She will also share examples of her hand-made ritual tools and explain how she invites families to engage with these sacred objects to deepen and strengthen the healing container.

Drawing on the wisdom of nature-based spirituality, Sarah designs and facilitates ceremonies that help her clients and their families integrate experiences of illness, death and loss. These rituals honor the spiritual significance of what's happening and bring healing to the living, the dying and the dead.

NHFA Board Secretary and Events Coordinator, Kim Adams, along with our team of members local to the region, have done a stellar job visioning and creating a conference that reflects the spirituality inherent in our work and the tangible ways we can co-create ritual and art with the families we serve. We are confident this event will surpass everyone's already high expectations.

We hope you'll join us in Minnesota where we'll share art and ritual for the purpose of learning how

to better express and confront the intense emotions surrounding death, dying and after-death care. Check out our conference page for information on registration and to learn more about the amazing presenters: homefuneralalliance.org/conference-2019.html



Sarah Crews is a singer/songwriter and dabbler in the arts. She is president of the the board of the National Home Funeral Alliance.

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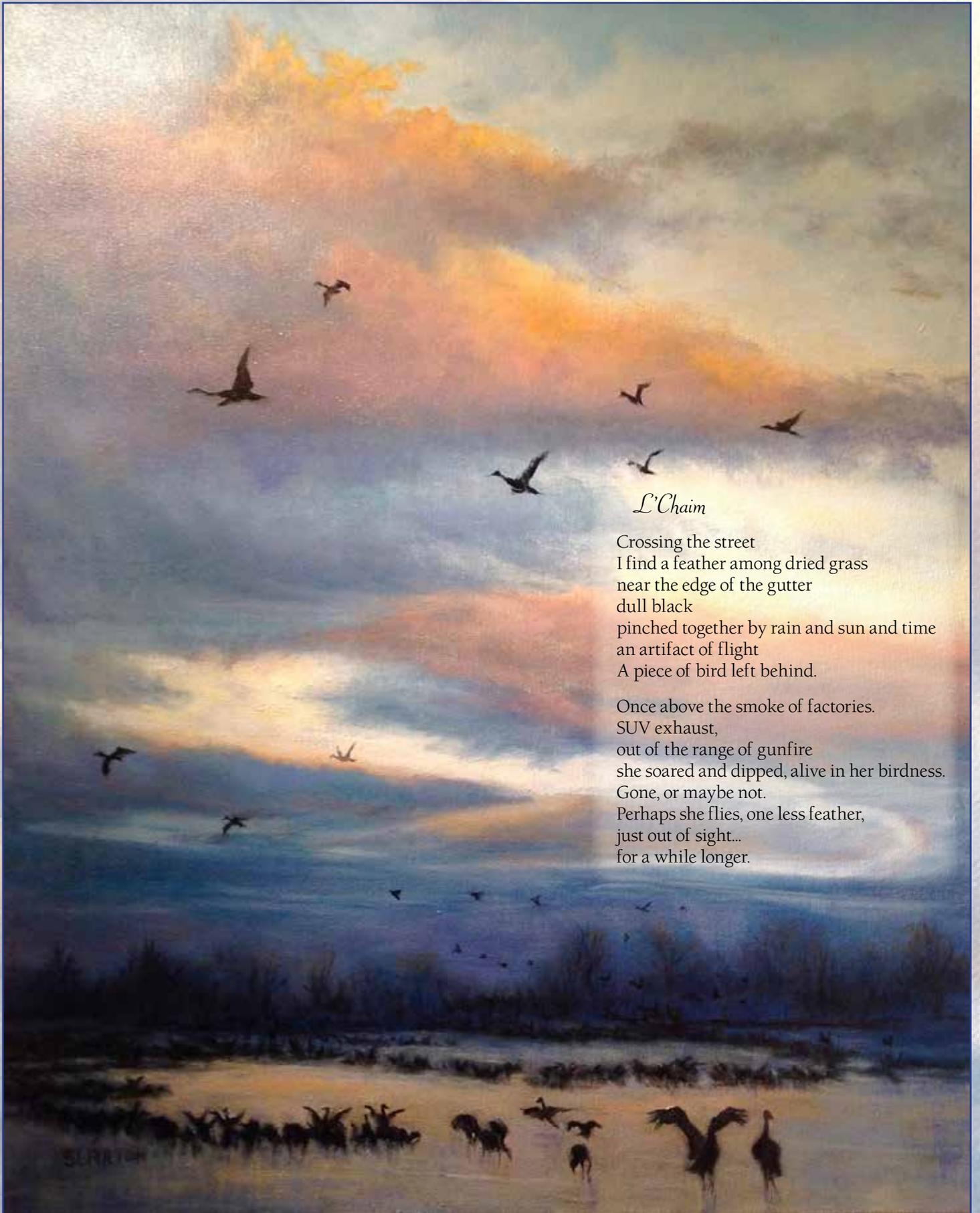
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 Stan Tomandl, MA, PWD
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 phone | Zoom | inperson**



L'Chaim

Crossing the street
I find a feather among dried grass
near the edge of the gutter
dull black
pinched together by rain and sun and time
an artifact of flight
A piece of bird left behind.

Once above the smoke of factories.
SUV exhaust,
out of the range of gunfire
she soared and dipped, alive in her birdness.
Gone, or maybe not.
Perhaps she flies, one less feather,
just out of sight...
for a while longer.

Crane Rise
24" x 30", oil painting



BEING THERE

A DOCUMENTARY FEATURE FILM BY THOMAS LÜCHINGER

“A film about dying. But even more, this is a film about being human, about affection and love. A film about life. Magnificently and purely staged.”

Gerhard Huber, Rheintaler

“Counters our fears and suppression with a truly inspiring, comforting, maybe even encouraging work.”

Andreas Stock, St. Galler Tagblatt

BEING THERE portrays four people from different cultures giving care to dying people. By confronting their own mortality, they present ways on how to show up for dying individuals in the last period of life, and how this connects to their own life again and again, reflecting on their personal relation to death and dying.

The new film by Thomas Luechinger (Steps of Mindfulness – A Journey with Thich Nhat Hanh) sensitively leads us into spaces of transition. It raises the question whether we should adopt a new Ars Moriendi in today's time. A new art of dying – as it was the case in the Middle Ages – that would comprehend dying as a vital part of life and that could enrich our lives again by dealing with our death more consciously.

with

Alcio Braz, psychotherapist and Zen teacher, Brazil

Sonam Dölma, hospice nurse, Shechen Hospiz, Nepal

Ron Hoffman, founder and director Compassionate Care ALS, USA

Elisabeth Würmli, caregiver volunteer, Switzerland

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**Holly Blue Hawkins
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Aptos CA 95001
831/588-3040**

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Sacred space is very ordinary:

It can be made of the stuff of our ordinary lives
only placed with care
each picking up and putting down of a rake or dishcloth
each cutting of hair and filing of nails

Sacred space is as everyday as a toothbrush
or remembering to water the plants

It is what we choose to keep or give away
be it ideas or clothes or poison or food

It is the fragrance of handmade beeswax candles
or homegrown sweet grass

Sacred space is as grand as a grove of redwoods
and fragile as trillium

It is a pine needle basket filled with feathers and Medicine stones

Sacred space is very ordinary.

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