



Natural Transitions

Volume 7 Issue 2

Conscious, holistic approaches to end of life



[Meet Me at the \(End-of-Life\) Fair](#)

[Death Tracks Radio Show](#)

[Crash Course in a Family Farm Funeral](#)

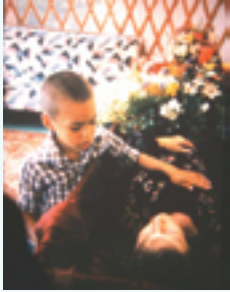
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Photograph by Karen van Vuuren

LAST WORDS:

Poem reprinted with permission from Laura Weaver from *Luminous: Poems and Inquiry for the Soul’s Journey*, Boulder, CO: Soul Passages Press,, 2018.

LAURA WEAVER is a poet, author, soul guide and director of an educational non-profit. Her poetry collection *Luminous* can be found on luminouspoetry.com. For more about her writing, workshops, poetry readings and individual soul guidance sessions, visit her website, LauraWeaver.org, or contact her at weaverpoetry@gmail.com.

On the Cover:

The night-blooming cereus (aka Queen of the Night) only blooms once a year providing beauty in the darkness. Photo credit: DeltaDweller [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

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To Reach Beyond the “Deathie” Crowd

by Karen van Vuuren



Karen van Vuuren

I have a relatively high-profile friend in the death awareness movement who has referred to me as a “deathie.” Deathies are people who seemingly live and breathe all things end-of-life and death-related and whose mission is to bring death out of the closet. In my mind, the moniker also refers to the folks who show up at every death-related event in our communities, our “groupies,” who help us cover the venue costs for our films and presentations.

In researching this issue of *Natural Transitions* magazine, I spoke with one death educator who saw a need to reach beyond the “deathie” crowd to the greater public, reaching regular folks who are less death-aware. It’s not easy. I’ve seen the same faces at public events

time and again. Here in Boulder, CO, there was something of an explosion of death awareness events a few years ago, including multiple death cafés. The cafés are fewer now; patrons partook and were seemingly sated after a few visits, so did not return, and it proved challenging to attract new participants. Other groups flourished, then the organizers burned out or needed to take a break.

But there is still a flurry of death-focused event organizing happening all over the world, on both smaller and larger scales. One effective medium for reaching a less homogenous (“non-deathie”) audience is radio. Aside from podcasts and online shows, community radio stations across the United States provide airtime to death experts. Some stations even incorporate end-of-life educational shows into their programming. Bodhi Be is a regular on his local station on the island of Maui in Hawaii as the host of Death Tracks. See his article in this issue.

For this issue, I particularly enjoyed hearing from a follower of the OSHO spiritual community about her small, home-based community gathering, held to reflect upon our relationship to death. OSHO members regard death as a cause

for celebration, not an easy sell in the western world! Read how Yatro (aka Jean Mackay) encouraged members of her small Devon community through her door to consider the nature and repercussions of being mortal. Another OSHO member, Pim Mol, led a similar gathering at a hospice in the Netherlands (also featured in this issue).

On a more grandiose scale, nothing thus far surpasses the Re-Imagine End-of-Life festivals taking place across the country, a plethora of diverse events over multiple days to talk up end-of-life. NTM’s Mary Reilly-McNellan connects us with, among other things, a traveling phone booth with a line to our departed in her report on this ambitious and well-oiled event. What do you wish you had said to your loved-one before they died? What do you want to say now?

In this issue of *Natural Transitions* magazine we spotlight just a few of the many activists inspiring us to fully realize that our tenure on earth is short, and death should never take the wise person by surprise. [📌](#)



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OUR VISION

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

OUR MISSION

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

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Meet Me at the (End-of-Life) Fair

Re-Imagining Death

by Mary Reilly-McNellan

“Hello, Mom? How are you and Dad? We’re all fine. I just wanted to call to say I’m so sorry that I wasn’t with you in the hospital room when you took your last breath. I miss you—oh, how I miss you. And please know that I will love you forever.” This imaginary conversation has replayed in my head so often, as I suspect it has for others who could not be present when a loved one passed. How many of us have wished that we could pick up the phone and connect one more time with a deceased loved one? If this were possible, who would you call? What would you say?

I was several states away when my mother died in a St. Louis hospital room after suffering a massive stroke in 2004. My sister called late one February evening to tell me the news, and I remember sobbing, “But I didn’t get to tell her goodbye!” Wise woman that she is, my sister gently said, “Then tell her now.” As she held the phone next to the hospital bed up to Mom’s lifeless ear, I collapsed in tears, trying to condense volumes of love, gratitude, regrets and

appreciation into what I knew would be my last phone call with my beloved mother. Even though my words were incomprehensibly garbled by hiccoughs of grief, this final conversation somehow allowed me to have some needed closure, and for that I am eternally grateful. But my heart aches for so many others who long to connect one more time with a deceased loved one to say, “I’m sorry” or simply, “I love you.”

When her own mother died unexpectedly in 2012, artist Morgan Brown creatively tackled her grief by spending several years traveling around the world, talking to others about sorrow and healing. During her travels, Brown was surprised by the number of people who expressed regrets and sadness at things left unsaid when they lost a loved



one. “I wished we could all have a dialog around death,” Brown said. “I thought, this is something I want to do and CAN do.” Brown chose to use her art as a salve to ease this all-too-common pain by re-imagining a way for grieving people to have that final unsaid conversation, and she ultimately created “Conversations I Wish I Had,” a traveling pop-up phone booth exhibit that allows people to speak to someone in their life who has died. It is not a real phone booth, of course, and the conversation is certainly one-sided, but it gives participants the opportunity to express their personal loss in a way that can be surprisingly healing. “I still step in to the phone booth to ‘speak’ with my Mom before every event,” says Brown. “People think they can’t say the things they wish they had said after someone dies. But you can.”

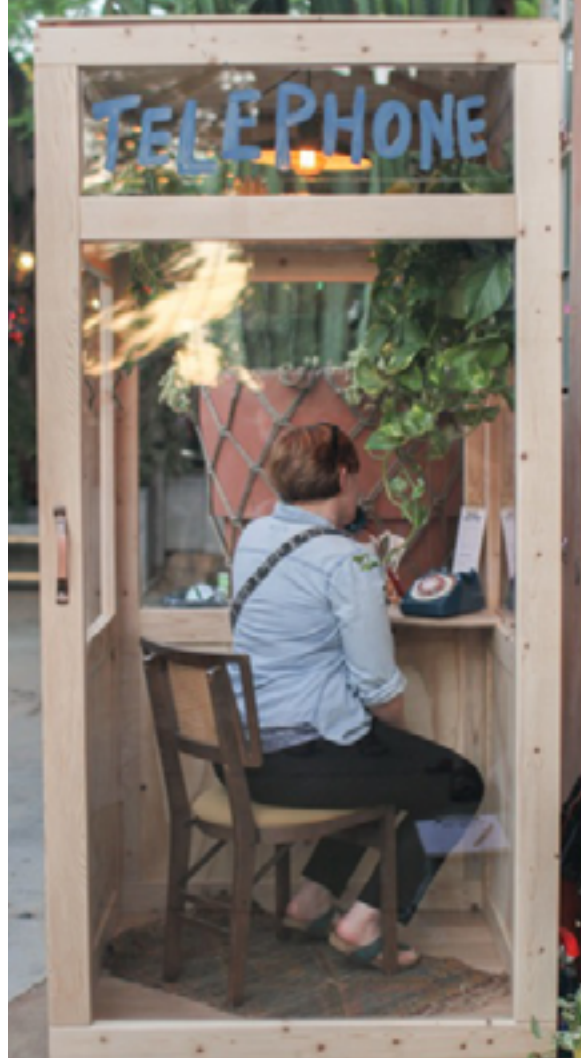
This exhibit—along with dozens of others—was part of a weeklong “Re-Imagine End of Life” (RIEOL) festival held in San Francisco in April of 2018. The community-wide festival explored death, celebrated life, and did not shy away from asking the big questions about both. Attendees could learn the art of successful condolence letter-writing (as penned by such historical luminaries as Emily Dickinson and Charles Dickens), listen to storytellers who work in fields in and around death, or



participate in an immersive theater experience by booking a flight on Malaise Airways™—“the only airline that offers one-way flights to the afterlife!” The RIEOL San Francisco festival offered a whopping 175 events that were attended by nearly 10,000 people, with 7000 attending the October 2018 RIEOL festival in New York City. Another San Francisco festival is planned for 2019.

RIEOL founder and executive director Brad Wolfe intimately experienced the relationship between art and the end of life as a student at Stanford University in the early 2000s. When a dear friend was diagnosed with a rare form of pediatric cancer, Wolfe used his guitar and singer/songwriter skills to help soothe and comfort his companion as she faced her own mortality. His music allowed him to profoundly connect with his friend and honor her and remember her after she passed.

Wolfe never forgot the powerful feeling fostered by using his artistic talents to honor his friend and how it created space for healing. In 2016 he found a way to bring his concept to the forefront by accepting an “End of Life Challenge” extended by OpenIDEO, a global design and innovation consultancy that brings people together worldwide to connect and collectively build solutions for today’s toughest societal problems. OpenIDEO invited more than 100,000 people around the globe to explore the following question: How might we re-imagine the end-of-life experience for ourselves and our loved ones? This query generated hundreds of ideas from people in 89 countries, and OpenIDEO ultimately selected Wolfe’s proposal to host week-long community festivals to bring people together for lectures, workshops and performances that generate conversation on death in a manner that transforms our approach to life. It proved to be a practical and meaningful way for Wolfe to share his discovery that art—even when it involves such traditionally taboo subjects



“Conversations I Wish I Had” traveling pop-up phone booth

as death and dying—can still spark laughter, joy and celebration.

RIEOL festivals allow diverse communities to come together for events that creatively investigate the intersection of art, community and end of life. Offerings include everything from pertinent films, discussions, obituary writing workshops, comic strips, cemetery tours, standup comedy shows and many other events that shed light on the not-so-dark side. Participants can learn how to make a “Memory Box” to hold the special objects connected to those we have lost, or create a “Sound Will,” a directive for the last sounds or music one would wish to hear before passing, since hearing is often considered to be the last sense we lose. Such practical topics as advance care planning and the exploration of racial inequities in healthcare at the end of life are included as well, and participants are encouraged to consciously consider what a “good death” would look like.

The festivals fearlessly tackle big questions regarding life and death: the reasons we exist, how to prepare for a time when we won’t, and how to live fully right up until the very end. And by drawing on the arts, spirituality, healthcare and design, RIEOL festivals help us face our mortality in a way that promotes conversation, connectivity and creativity.

The festivals are getting bigger and better, perhaps reflecting that public interest is growing regarding the topics of death and dying. RIEOL festivals help participants explore ways to make dying—and living—better. Indeed, over 90% of RIEOL attendees stated that they felt more grateful for their lives, and for the people in it. Wolfe plans to take RIEOL to other cities around the world in hopes that the festivals will lead people to live more fully and connect more deeply. And, while the topic is deathly serious, OpenIDEO encourages us to re-imagine dying in a way that is uplifting and unique. For as Wolfe says, “We all want to have a smile on our face at the end of the day or at the end of our life.” 🌱

For more information, see letsreimagine.org.

Photos courtesy of Morgan Brown



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.

Three OSHO Stories

An Afternoon of Death and Dying in Devon

by Yatro (Jean Mackay)

Over the years I have led various events, from meditation and Reiki sessions and workshops to singing classes. More recently, I've been hosting gatherings on the subject of death and dying. In my events we look at death before dying, particularly dying consciously, bringing the subject out into the open, bringing awareness to it, seeing how it might be possible to prepare for it in different ways, including through meditation.

What I'm sharing here is about a small event I titled, "An Afternoon of Sharing about Living and Dying." Usually I have a more catchy title, but this time I followed a friend's suggestion to "just tell it as it is."

Death became my passion through several experiences. Particularly with my father's dying and death in hospital, I had a strong feeling, "It doesn't have to be like this!" I was then involved in a terminally-ill friend's process for about a year, and I made sure I used the powerful and sometimes painful lessons I'd learned with my father. Since then I have been involved, in various ways, with a few other friends at their deaths, and also with my mother. Each person's journey is different, mysterious, unknown—and there has been much learning in all of them.

I'm a disciple of the Indian mystic, Osho, who, in the thousands of discourses he gave over his lifetime, often spoke about death. He saw life and death as one continuum—"living-dying"—and death as the peak of life, something to be celebrated. I once heard him say that he was giving more energy than usual to death in order to redress the balance, as most people preferred to deny its existence. There is a lot of material

from Osho as well as simple meditation techniques that are eminently shareable and universally relevant. Currently I am a part-time administrator and a director of OSHO Sammasati,¹ which offers workshops, meditations and other resources for living and dying in "right-mindfulness."

The plan for the event—the basics

I decided on an afternoon program of two and a half hours in November in Totnes, Devon, UK, at my partner's house, which has a light and spacious living room. We guesstimated that the room was big enough for about twelve people, bearing in mind that for the guided meditation many people would be lying down. I invited small donations.

The program components

- ♦ An introduction during which each participant shared something from their experience about death with a maximum time of five minutes
- ♦ A break
- ♦ General sharing with no time limit for each individual
- ♦ Meditation. I chose the "Three step let-go." Osho led this guided meditation at the end of each day in a meditation camp in India on the subject of death.²
- ♦ Sharing of resources
- ♦ Closing. I obtained contact details from participants for the mailing list, asked for feedback and shared resources.

Getting the word out

I sent out an email to my mailing list about three weeks before the event date, later than I had originally intended. I mentioned that it wasn't a gathering for anyone in crisis or for the very recently bereaved (I am not a therapist



Yatro and her swarmandel

or qualified counselor). The topic of death can bring up strong feelings, and I have had to deal with these "on the hoof," sometimes with and sometimes without success. Being "in the present" is the greatest teaching. I attempt to stay in that space as much as possible.

I sent out a follow-up email a week before and the day before the event. I included some resources, books I find really helpful, the OSHO Sammasati website and FaceBook pages,³ so even if people didn't attend, they would have access to some helpful information on conscious death and dying. I anticipated having to restrict numbers, but received only a few replies from my mailing list, one of the first of which was a question: "Is that really long enough to deeply share?"

I replied, "I have found that depth is not necessarily dependent on time. I'm amazed how deep we go in our women's group with three or five minutes each. And given this is probably not a group that knows each other, it may not be instant depth; no guarantees! I would imagine in the time after our brief

sharing, we will rather go with the flow, and we can see where that leads. This is rather experimental. I have done other groups with more free-form sharing, and that has its advantages and disadvantages.”

In mentioning “disadvantages” in my email reply, I was thinking about the event I had run before this one, which I hadn’t felt very good about. It was a free-form sharing followed by meditation. I really wanted to feel more confident about this event, which is why I super-planned it and controlled the amount of time people could speak. Also, I wanted it to have a quality of lightness.

This event seemed to have a “happening” feeling about it. In between my last event and this, hadn’t I done the OSHO Sammasati Facilitators’ Course? I felt positive and confident, while knowing anything can happen and all is in the moment.

Spreading the word more

The area where I live, Totnes in South Devon, UK, is very alternative and has so much going on—including events about death—that it takes a huge amount of energy to get people to any event. That could, of course, be the same in any place with a lot happening.

Since I’d had only a few replies, I decided to extend my invitation publicly, put up posters locally and share the information on FaceBook.

Planning

I am a serious planner and use lists, and more often spider diagrams. For this event, I made a few.

Spontaneity

A few days before the event, I had what I thought was a brilliant idea! I would ask everyone to bring a joke about death. I promptly sent out an email to the prospective participants with this invitation.



The next morning, my partner’s friend emailed to cancel, with a message that lightly communicated, “After going to church and lunch on Sunday, somehow jokes about death don’t seem to fit.” I thought perhaps I had overdone it. I decided I would soft pedal on the jokes at the actual event.

With all my planning I was getting a bit serious. The night before the event, I had an aha moment. The event had to be an expression of me, not what I thought a group should be. I wanted to begin with dancing, so that’s what we would do.

The event

Thirteen people—aged from 30 to over 70—came through the door, not all of them expected. As with the many modes of communication these days, some had let me know by email, some by text or by calling, but I had missed a FaceBook message and a last minute mail message. A terminally ill person who was keen to come had contacted me and was very positive. I said she could, but unfortunately she got the date wrong and couldn’t make it. One person who said she would come did not. Anyone who organizes events knows this scenario—expect the unexpected!

We had a gentle dance at the beginning, which helped relax and loosen us up (myself anyway!) and set a non-serious tone. Then we got down to our mini-sharing. I didn’t mention jokes but “what about the jokes?” was the cry. Everyone there had brought a joke and was keen to share it. We decided they would each tell their joke in their sharing, which they did, and it really lightened the whole mood. Here is one of them:

“A funeral procession is going up a steep hill on Main Street when the door of the hearse flies open, the coffin falls out, slides down the street into a pharmacy and crashes into the counter. The lid pops open and the deceased says to the astonished pharmacist, “You got anything to stop this coffin?”

The participants were varied. One attendee had experienced a potentially fatal and life-changing accident: being struck by a car at a crosswalk. His focus after that was on how to use every opportunity to be conscious in life and to prepare and be aware of the possibility of death. Another participant was caring for her elderly parents, with attendant frustrations associated with the medical care offered to one of them who was ill.

We heard about a positive, light-filled experience with someone during their dying and at death. Considering his own mortality, a participant over 70 jokingly asked, “Why bother? Why not just let it happen?” Another wondered what to say or what not to say to a non-meditator who was terminally ill. There were certainly subjects for follow-up discussions.

I felt the need to have a break after the initial sharing, earlier than scheduled.

The follow-up sharing was quite animated, not time-controlled and not at all as deep. One or two people took up

quite a bit of time, responding to issues that had come up from the first round.

In contrast, the meditation was calm and quiet with people lying down on blankets on the carpet and sofas or simply sitting on chairs. I guided them, using Osho's words, into slowly relaxing the body, relaxing the breath, relaxing the mind, going inside and being aware of everything from a distance, staying in that space for ten minutes. I then brought them back to fully waking consciousness. The swarmandal, a traditional Indian instrument, is a beautiful way to accompany the meditation. Once the 36 strings are tuned, I strum them gently and intuitively. At times, the sound is like a waterfall or a mountain stream.

People "came back," stretching, slowly rising to their feet, grateful for the silence and the deep spaces they had visited.

We were running behind schedule, so I did a short roundup, but there was no time for the sharing of resources I had planned. I had, however, displayed books and brochures on the dining room table for everyone's perusal during the break. I asked the participants to send feedback by email (although, in my experience, email doesn't often produce results and didn't in this case either). Those gathered were reluctant to leave and were still connecting and sharing.

After the event

Here are a couple of the email responses I did receive:

"It was great meeting you and everyone today. I really enjoyed talking and the meditation too."

From another, "It was slightly strange as there are so many different levels of awareness, and that was interesting in itself."

"It's brought up in me lots of stuff that doesn't find expression in any other group I go to."

I always write down feedback/suggestions to myself at the end—and in this case:

There was not enough time for what I had in the program. I underestimated the time it takes for people to share. The free-form sharing didn't work as well as the timed sharing. Someone who got on a roll with her sharing later said it would have been good if I had stopped her. Perhaps I need to keep a more assertive watch over this.

If you want to cover costs, ask for a fixed amount.

Next time I will do a structure with dyads—possibly could use two rooms for that.

Overall, I felt it was a valuable coming together. As my Scottish relatives used to say "Well done yourself!" 🍀

"Being Mortal" Events around the World *by Sanjiva (Alfredo Ovalle)*

The door to waking up and bringing awareness to my daily life involves becoming a friend to death and embracing it.

I have completed all the available OSHO Sammasati (OS) workshops (which offer meditation support for the living and dying) and the OS Facilitator Program in India. I was considering leading my own workshop using the tools I'd learned in OSHO Sammasati. But before I did that, I decided to participate in some local Death Café gatherings to gain more experience and to go deeper into the subject of death and dying.

After a few Death Cafés, I started my own "Being Mortal" events (named after Atul Gawande's book of the same title). I did this because I was guiding the conversations about death to some extent, and because I also included meditations, which I felt added to the participants' experiences. Death Cafés don't include either of these elements, and I wanted my events to address questions that seemed important and to hear the responses of those who

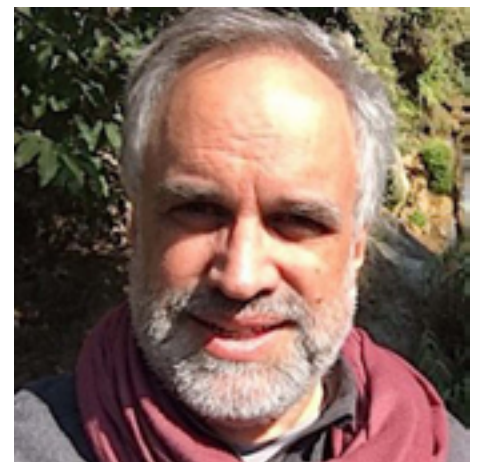
NOTES

1 These discourses and meditations are published in the book, *And Now and Here: Beyond the Duality of Life and Death*, by Osho, Rebel Publishing, 2008. This is a compilation of Osho's words on the subject, including meditations and methods, which could be useful when someone is dying. This includes a CD of the three-step, let-go meditation, "The Art of Living and Dying."

2 In 2016 we ran the first international facilitator's course in India.

3 <https://oshosammasati.org> is a comprehensive website on death and dying with mindfulness. You can subscribe to a free newsletter.

Yatro is the 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.



attended. So my events were a little different from what Jon Underwood envisioned with his Death Cafés, which were inspired by the Café Mortel of Bernard Crettaz in Switzerland.

It is not easy for people to talk about death. It is tough for them to step out of their comfort zone. People find many excuses to sidestep facing the unavoidable. It has been very challenging to encourage people to share



Sanjiva's group

about personal matters relating to their own mortality. It is easier for them to talk about what happens to a relative or a friend who has passed away. My "Being Mortal" events are opportunities to express feelings and thoughts that are hidden within each person, that are deep down in them and wanting to come out. This happened for some of the attendees.

Still, I find that most people don't open easily to the opportunity of going deeper or of regarding death as a source of

transformation. After hosting more than 25 "Being Mortal" events, I find that the main, somewhat inconvenient guest is still "the mind," a guest that I won't intentionally invite to my own death when it happens. I believe our mind should not follow us at that time!


The mystics remind us that we are "not the body" and we are "not the mind." In one particular Buddhist practice, we are advised to breathe, repeating the aforementioned statements. My own goal is to have a practice in my daily living in which death is a mirror. I notice that the presence of death clarifies my priorities and allows me to get in touch with that time when I will have to face my own death. It is my understanding that we have two options: to die consciously or to die unconsciously. In my "Being Mortal" events, I respect the fact that everyone has their own journey.

"Being Mortal" events start and end with a meditation. The conversation in between is based on pre-selected questions. There is no goal, no conclusion we need to reach, no belief that I impose. We metaphorically "hold hands" for two

hours, learning the art of listening and respecting what each person is willing to share. Whenever I host an event, I remind the participants about the date it will happen with some humor—usually cartoons. Death is serious but not that serious!

One of the most touching "Being Mortal" events I organized took place in Japan. All the participants were in a beautiful space of trust and love with what was shared. I gave my most honest view on the process of dying consciously. I didn't know that two of the participants had mothers who were terminally ill. Soon afterward, these parents passed away. Their daughters sent me an email expressing deep gratitude for how the sharing had helped them to say goodbye in peace and love.

I have also organized "Being Mortal" events in the US and Chile. In addition to the general conversation, I have found there is a huge need to know more about both the spiritual and the practical aspects of death and dying; for example, we need to look at our wishes for the end of life and afterward, write them down and share them with friends and relatives. We need to create wills and advance directives.

We all know that we could die at any time, but very few people understand that death can be a source of tremendous blessing if we live in the present moment and with gratitude. I think the mind and the ego have difficulty surrendering to a life where love and consciousness are the main ingredients. But this my practice. 

Sanjiva has been passionate about the issue of death and dying all his life, Osho being his main inspiration since 1982. Chilean born, Sanjiva currently hosts Being Mortal events in Chile and Japan, as well as in Atlanta, GA, where he lives.

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An Eastern Vision of Death at a Dutch Hospice by Pim Mol

die; research that spanned Tibetan Buddhism, psychedelics, anthroposophy and Maneesha James' life-changing workshop "An Experiential Enquiry into Death." Maneesha James is part of OSHO Sammasati, and all aspects of the organization's work are based on Osho's contention that there is no death, and on his vision of life as a celebration; death, as part of life, is a cause for celebration too!

It was quite a challenge for the participants to hear that death was something to celebrate, especially in a hospice where young people (generally considered too young) come to die.

The evening program contained puzzle pieces that fit together to form a bigger picture: a dialogue about what death meant to the participants followed by how to prepare now for a conscious death, reflection on the importance of meditation, and the practice of breathing exercises. I noticed while working in the hospice that exercises with the breath are easy to do and an effective tool for relaxation. Two exercises taught by Osho are opening the eyes when breathing in and closing the eyes while breathing out, or with closed eyes humming on

the outbreak. These can bring calm and relieve stress. I discovered that putting your fingers in your ears can be even more effective.

In our final practice together, I led Xenia's staff and volunteers through Osho's "Watching the gap" meditation, which provides a taste of how to enter the stillness. Most of the attendees had never meditated before and were rather surprised by how easy it was to enter into such tranquility.

Ultimately, our time together awakened the curiosity of those gathered and brought a new perspective on dying to Xenia Hospice. We will see if the evening has a longer-lasting effect. Most of the participants appreciated the event; some wanted more. I felt an enormous gratitude to Osho for his vision that opens the door to dying consciously. 🌐

Eight years ago, after working in business for many years, Pim entered the healthcare profession. She now works at Xenia Hospice for terminally ill adolescents in Leiden, The Netherlands. She also guides terminally ill people dying at home.

Since early 2000, the Netherlands has been at the forefront of progressive attitudes to death and dying. Palliative sedation and euthanasia are legal options for those at end of life.

I worked at Xenia—a beautiful hospice for young adults in the city of Leiden—as a volunteer and then in a paid capacity. There I had the opportunity to explore an entirely different approach to death and dying than the dominant Western medical way. My experience at Xenia inspired me to create an event this September called "An Eastern Vision of Death" for volunteers, nurses and coordinators at Xenia Hospice.

As the facilitator of this event, I took the participants through my own research into what will happen to us when we



An advertisement for an Eastern Vision of Death event at Xenia Hospice

My Crash Course in a Family Farm Funeral

by Tawnya Musser

A few short months ago, I hosted a viewing of *In The Parlor* for two fellow death-doulas-in-training. This home funeral documentary highlights the stories of three families. In one story, following the death of Julie, her siblings hang a banner adorned with handprints across the front of her casket. Handprints of brothers and sisters. So beautiful. So hard. After the film, through tears, I shared with my fellow doulas-to-be that I was terrified of the losses to come in my life.

Having nine siblings, many of them much older than I, it is something I think about often. The more you have, the more you have to lose. I choked back full-blown hysterics as I spoke aloud of the fact that one of my seven brothers, 51-year-old Robert, had a complicated open-heart surgery coming up in less than a week.

I was also struggling with not being available to drive my 72-year-old mother to Oklahoma to be with him for the surgery, since I was taking a summer biology course as a prerequisite for a mortuary science program in Colorado (where I live) and couldn't miss classes. Instead she had to take a Greyhound bus.

I also rambled on about how I was planning to invite family members over for a viewing of the film in the months to come, to share with them the beauty of home funerals and to open up conversations about who wants what, in death. As it turns out, my family doesn't need to sit down and watch a film about home funerals because now we all know, first hand, how priceless they are.

Robert Thurlin Alexander, second born son of Karen Knutson, did not survive his surgery on Thursday, June

14, 2018. Many hearts broke when his did. Docs had been putting off the valve replacement surgery for years because they knew going in was risky. Super risky. He had decades of scar tissue and calcification built up around the plastic valve that had been put into him when he was 13. He was scared. We were scared. He felt it. We felt it. The foreboding was so thick you could taste it. But still, we all held out at least a little hope I'm sure. How could we not?

The planner in me wanted so desperately to prepare for a major blow, to the extent that I felt compelled to look into Oklahoma death care law ahead of the surgery—which I did not do, because surely that would have been a jinx. Instead, I found myself reading over said laws while sobbing in the window seat on a flight to meet my mother and surviving brother, Jason, at the heart



hospital in Oklahoma City. I needed to touch and kiss Robert before LifeShare (the donation organization) took him. It turns out he had signed up ahead of the surgery to be a donor. He would live on in others. Fortunately, because they have a 12-hour window post mortem to get a body into cold storage before harvesting corneas, tissues, and bone, they graciously awaited my arrival.

My mom had done just as I had asked her to in a conversation the week before; she waited for me. I'm incredibly grateful that I've always been able to have candid conversations with my mother about death and dying. This particular conversation was one of the hardest ones I've ever had to find a way to initiate. "If he dies..."

That night, exactly a week before the surgery, I took her to see Brit Floyd, a Pink Floyd tribute band playing at Red Rocks. A happy, celebratory, cross-it-off-the-bucket-list kinda night, over which something hung heavily. "If he dies..."

I knew I had to talk to her, and I figured it best to get it out of the way before the show. My eyes kept tearing up under my sunglasses as we drove, trying to find the strength to say it out loud. "If. He. Dies."

As we neared the concert venue, driving through the hills, my voice cracked. "Mom, if he dies, I need you to call me. I will get on a plane, and I need you to not let anyone take his body before I get there. I will call funeral homes. I will navigate all of it, if you'll let me. I don't want you getting suckered." He's not going to die, I tried to reassure her. But if he does, let me help you. He's not going to die, but someday he will. We all will. Let me help you.

That night, when the band played "Time," salty tears streamed down my face and into my mouth as I sang from a primal place within. From the bellows. Everyone did. There was an

eerie comfort in a crowd full of people, belting out lines from the song. Memento Mori. We're all going to die. My brother is going to die, I thought. If not next week, someday. Someday.

A common sentiment shared after home funerals is how beautiful they are. In our death-phobic and death-denying Western culture, it seems almost oxymoronic to use words such as "beautiful" in the wake of death. But that is exactly what caring for a loved one is: beautiful. I was honored, beyond words, to care for and sit with Robert's body. I was blessed that my family jumped right in and were active and willing participants in a process that, the day before, they didn't even know was an option; a process that after having been a part of, they can't imagine not having had the opportunity to bear witness to and engage with. I am so grateful they put their trust in me, and that I was able to share, in so intimate a way, my life's work. Everyone deserves access to death practices like these.

I didn't know if I could make it happen. Despite being a death-doula-in-training, I had no first-hand or real-work experience with home funerals. I had read volumes over the years—documents from the National Home Funeral Alliance, *Natural Transitions* magazine, docu-films, news articles, and more. But, I myself had no experience. What to do first?

As soon as my plane landed, I was on the phone to my brother to track down our uncle Bob's number. His farmhouse in Hinton, OK, was our only real option, short of driving Robert all the way to Colorado. The funeral homes I'd called were outrageously expensive. Please Bob. Please. Please be open to this. I felt in my heart of hearts that he would say yes, but thought it might take some convincing. But he didn't bat an eye. "Of course, Robert can come to the farm,"



he said. "Robert loved the farm. It was home." That settled it. My crash course in organizing a home funeral was a go.

Logistically, everything came together quite smoothly, for which I am eternally grateful. I had a lot of support from total strangers along the way: The teddy bear of a man standing curbside at the airport who hugged me while I cried after my husband dropped me off and I was alone. The woman at the airport kiosk where I purchased frankincense and lavender oil, in a hurry. The kind man at the car rental lot who, when I told him I may need to transport my deceased brother myself, without hesitation gave me a list of all the vans on the lot so I could go look. The Natural Funeral, a home funeral-friendly funeral home in Colorado that was able to tell me how much dry ice I needed. The liaison at LifeShare who trusted my abilities and worked to have my brother brought back to us. I was blessed to encounter so many kind and helpful people along the way. It made a world of difference.

I ran around like crazy that first morning, in a daze, crying along the way as I picked up sheets and absorbency pads to cover the table, flowers, candles, coolers, dry ice, a fan, food, drinks, and more. I never did procure a casket, not even a cardboard one. I'd called a few places. Close but no cigar.

I made sure to stop at Walgreens and print the last photo taken of him in life. Jason had snapped it just before the surgery. There Robert sat, in all his hospital robe and wheelchair glory,

flipping a bird with a shit-ass eating grin on his face. He was itchy from being shaved and mad they'd made him cut his beard back. Jason was joshing him. I am so thankful that moment was captured. It is 100% Robert, true to form...saying f*** you, with a smile.

I arrived at the farm with a rental van full of home funeral loot. As I put things in their place, I waited for word from the LifeShare staff. Once they told us we had a few hours before his body would be brought to us, I asked my mom and Jason to go to Robert's house to get some things to lay out with him.

Walking into his home was incredibly difficult, and I had to remind myself to breathe as I moved about his place, looking for things that represented him: black clothing, skulls and skeletons, Harley Davidson garb and memorabilia, trucks, hot rods, flames, leather, more skulls and skeletons.

I had a good laugh upon seeing the skeleton chillin' in the passenger seat of his truck. His "girlfriend," if you will, Miss Bonie Maronie, wearing a wig, hat, and tank top. He was known for riding around town with her. What a hoot.

I packed up some trophies, his leather jacket and vest, some bandanas, a flaming skull blanket that curtained his bedroom window, and some animal skulls. As we drove back to the farm, a lump sat heavy in my throat. I was so nauseous and anxious, waiting for him to be returned to us. "Can I really do this? Is this really happening? What will my family think? I hope I don't screw this up."

When we got back to the farmhouse, my brother Sean and his wife, my sister Kary and her husband, plus their two kids, my nephew, eight, and niece, three, were all there. They had driven in from Colorado, and none of them had seen Robert yet. When Robert's body arrived shortly after, my brothers helped lift the gurney up the old porch stairs and transferred his body onto a covered table.

We cried a good cry (or at least I did), and my mother and sister helped wipe down his head and hands with lavender oil in water. We couldn't ritually wash much else of him. All but his head and hands was covered with an awkward plastic union suit compliments of LifeShare. He had after all, been a tissue and bone donor. (We never learned if his harvested bones had been replaced with PVC pipe or wooden dowel rods, but it was one or the other.) They were kind enough to make sure to clean him up well. Normally they would have left some of that to the funeral home, but since they knew he was coming home to us, they took extra care. They even glued his lips shut. I was going to use a towel under his chin to keep his mouth closed, which wasn't necessary.

As a family, we dressed him. Jason put on Robert's bandana, and my sister cut the clothes we had collected up the back per my instruction. Robert's arms were

stiff, and his right arm kept falling out to the side to hang in the air. We were able to rest his hand gently in his pocket to keep it in place. Then I wrapped chunks of dry ice in brown paper bags and placed them, one under each of his shoulder blades and one in the small of his back. I felt like I was winging it at that point. Keep the torso cool. That was my mission. Everything would be okay.

Once he was laid out, dressed, and on ice, I was able to step back, take big deep breaths and give thanks. We did it.

For the rest of that day and all of the next, we cried and laughed, laughed and cried. On the second day my husband arrived and my older sister, Christy, and I drove a few towns away to pick up the last of the gang, our brother Billy. There we were, all of us in one place. My mom did not, as far as I knew, have a photo with all seven of her biological children as a group. Robert and Billy had lived in Oklahoma for nearly two decades; we were never all in the same place at the same time. It's bittersweet that we had the opportunity to make that photo happen. All of us, together.

My family was amazing. Anytime it came time to change the dry ice, there were always helping hands nearby to assist. There was nothing scary, or gross, or creepy about caring for our loved one. It was sad, yes. It was hard, yes. But it felt so natural.


On the second day some discoloration started to develop on Robert's right cheekbone, which was disconcerting to some. My older sister said, "It's an angel kiss." It did, indeed, look like he'd been smooched, and of course we all wondered by whom.

Some of Robert's friends and co-workers began reaching out on FaceBook, asking about arrangements/services. We invited them all to the farm. I'd put out paper for folks to write little notes, which we placed in Robert's pockets to be cremated with him.

The level of comfort we experienced was one that could not have been matched by any funeral home. Our family was

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free to laugh, cry, cuss, hoot and holler. There was no rush. We all had time to touch him, love him, speak to him, and cry over him as we needed to. Everyone should be so fortunate. There may have even been a dance party. Okay. There was. There was definitely a dance party. We put the fun in funeral. The kids danced too, right there in that room with Robert. In fact, the three-year-old was the one who asked to dance. We dance party at my house often. It was just another day, in her little world, where life goes on, dance parties happen, and everyone likes candy. And because she knows everyone likes candy, she'd tried at one point to share some with Robert. When he didn't move, she said, "Mom, I want him to wake up," and Kary softly replied, "We all do."

My eight-year-old nephew was learning how to do death by watching us. I happened upon him standing in the threshold of the room, looking with sad, curious eyes at Robert from afar. His mouth was moving. He was talking to him. I gave him some space, and when he was done I approached him with a hug. "I saw you talking to Uncle Robert. Would you like to share what you said to him?" He said, "I told him I will miss him, and that I wish he was still alive." So sweet. Sweeter still, there were a few times he walked by to hug my mom and ask her, "How are you, Nana?" and tell her he loved her. He may not have understood the magnitude of a mother losing a son, but he knew darn well that his Nana was hurting, and he cared.

He cried a few times, but his rawest, sloppiest tears fell the morning he came to the farmhouse and Robert's body was gone. We'd let him know the night before to say goodbye because Robert would be gone, but it wasn't until the morning when he saw the empty table that it hit him. "I'll miss him. I'll miss him." Though he'd never had the chance to meet him in life, he'd miss him.

Watching everyone navigate the process—the children and adults alike—was so endearing. Everyone did what they needed to do. They did what felt right. My brother, Jason, put some



feathers in Robert's bandana. My sister, Christy, gathered rocks in the yard, washed them, and placed them on his body. Eighty-one-year-old Uncle Bob, for whom Robert was a namesake, would walk by and occasionally place a hand on Robert's chest and say simply, but deeply, "I sure am gonna miss you." It hit me in the feelings every damn time.

In our final moments as a family with Robert's body, we gathered round as I read the John O'Donohue poem "On the Death of a Beloved," which implores, "May you continue to inspire us."

Robert will certainly continue to inspire us. He inspired our brother Sean to ride home, all the way to Denver, with a skeleton from Robert's house in the back seat of his car, posed to wave at passersby.

He inspired me to drop out of mortuary science school because I now know with confidence that I don't need an embalming-heavy course of study to do what I want to do. And what I want to do is a deep-seated longing that lives all the way down in the depths of my mortal marrow. I long to serve, in any way I can, anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one, so that they may have at least some small semblance of what we had with Robert. Natural. Intimate. Profound.

I am forever grateful to you, brother. Thank you for the gift of clarity. Thank you for letting me love you. 🙏



Tawnya Musser has a background in human services that includes family advocacy, coaching, and case management. 2018

was a year of clarity. She was guided into the world of death and dying, established her LLC, Dear Departures, began training as a death doula, home funeral guide, and funeral celebrant, and realized, "I finally know what I want to be when I grow up."

The Ritual of Washing Diane's Body

by Nancy Manahan

Moments after my sister-in-law Diane Manahan died, her closest friends Bev and Laura arrived. I was still holding her when they entered the bedroom. They knelt beside the bed and burst into tears.

Diane's sister and brother-in-law, Patt and Jerry Madson, had been driving from their campground and were about ten blocks from the house when they got the phone call. As soon as they turned into the driveway, Patt leapt from the truck and raced up the stairs, as if time could make a difference. When she saw Diane, she wailed and almost collapsed.

Soon Bill and Diane's oldest son Mike arrived. He had been in a meeting with landscape clients when the call came, and he extricated himself as soon as he could. Everyone was gathered around the bed or sitting on it. Bach played softly in the background. Someone suggested we put on "Annie's Song," by John Denver. When the notes of the poignant ballad filled the air, many of us joined in singing one of Bill and Diane's favorite love songs. Diane did indeed "fill up" our senses. We were in a heightened state of awareness, our hearts overflowing with the mystery, beauty, and sacredness of her death.

After the tears subsided, we discussed how we should proceed. Remembering that Diane had told Bill to do what made sense at the time of her death, he suggested holding the visitation that day since so many family members and friends were already in town. He didn't want to have Diane embalmed, nor did he want to cool her body with dry ice for a public viewing a day or two later.

Bill decided to keep Diane at the house for the afternoon and take her to the



Nancy Manahan and Becky Bohan

crematorium later that day. A wake could be held in two days, giving out-of-towners a chance to get to Mankato, and her Life Celebration could take place in three days. Although people living out of state would not arrive in time to view Diane's body, we liked Bill's plan. Their four sons went downstairs to telephone other family members and friends.

Bill knew there was a finite window in which Diane could be prepared for a private viewing. Blood would be pooling as her body cooled, and rigor mortis would fix the joints in place. He invited the women closest to Diane to stay for a ritual washing. (Diane had asked that women and Bill, but not her sons, care for her body.) Others left the room.

I shifted my position from behind Diane so she could lie flat on the bed. Her three daughters-in-law, Kate, Katy, and Jill, stayed, as well as Patt, Bev, Laura, and Bill. Bev knelt down beside four-year-old Tessa and told her they were about to do a ritual women had performed for thousands of years for people who had died. They were going to wash Grandma Di's body and dress her in beautiful clothes.

Gently we removed Diane's pajamas. Kate brought a large ceramic bowl made by Diane's friend, John Glick, filled it with warm water and stirred in lavender oil, a fragrance used for millennia in purifying rituals. The nine of us had never washed a dead person before, but we seemed to fall into our roles effortlessly, positioning ourselves around Diane. I had often read novels or seen movies in which women washed the body of a family member, but I had never envisioned myself doing it. I felt tentative and scared but in such an altered state of consciousness that everything flowed easily.

Kate dipped a washcloth in the scented water, wrung it out, and handed it to Bill, who was kneeling at Diane's head. She handed a second cloth to Patt, by Diane's shoulder. When Bill finished cleaning Diane's face, he gave the cloth back to Kate, who rinsed it out, gave it to the next person, and so on. Each person wiped a different part of Diane's body, including Tessa, who washed her grandmother's stomach. Laura washed Diane's ankles and feet, in memory of all the walking and hiking they had done together. I washed her right thigh, which felt muscular and supple, like the marathoner she had been.

After tipping Diane from side to side to clean her back, we patted her dry with

a towel. Kate invited everyone to say whatever was in their hearts. I have no memory of what I or anyone else said. All I know is that it all felt sacred.

As the ritual ended, we wondered what to do with the water left in the bowl. It didn't feel right to pour it down the drain. Kate suggested that it nourish one of Diane's flower gardens. She and Jill carried the heavy ceramic bowl downstairs and out the back door to the children's garden, where they cast handfuls of lavender water into the air. It rained down on the flowers and soaked into the earth.

Back upstairs, Laura opened the closet to find the outfit Diane had chosen: a navy skirt, a short-sleeved white blouse, a navy vest, and the blue shoes Patt and Diane had bought earlier that year for a wedding Diane had hoped to attend.

While the others dressed Diane, I went downstairs, where Becky was serving her famous curried chicken, Indian rice, and vegetables. I was grateful for familiar home-cooked food. When my nephews finished eating, they got back on their cell phones.


When I returned upstairs, Diane was dressed, and Laura was placing a pillow under her head. Patt crossed Diane's legs at the ankle so her feet would not splay, and Kate swirled a white silk shroud from the Crossings Care Packet over her legs. Bev and Laura applied Diane's usual lipstick and combed her hair. We put away any medical items, lit candles on the dresser, and opened the window to let in fresh air. Little Tessa performed a smudging ritual, carrying burning sage slowly around the bedroom, sweeping aromatic smoke into each area of the room and around Diane's body.

All was set for the friends, colleagues, and family members who would arrive that afternoon to pay their respects to

this extraordinary nurse and teacher who had completed her life with dignity, purpose, and peace.

* * *

Bill told Becky and me that washing Diane's body after she died was "the most sacred thing" he had ever done. My brother said he felt close to Diane, because "her soul was still there." The experience was so profound it eased his grief at her death.

I had a similar experience. My initial uncertainties disappeared in the rightness and sacredness of this ancient ritual. Washing Diane's body with my brother, family members, and her closest friends not only comforted me deeply but, I believe, helped surround Diane with love and support as she transitioned to the next realm. 

* * *

[This is an edited excerpt from *Living Consciously, Dying Gracefully: A Journey with Cancer and Beyond* (2007) by Nancy Manahan and Becky Bohan, founding members of the Minnesota Threshold Network. For more information or to order a copy, visit <https://nanbec.com/joint-book> or Amazon.]

This award-winning true story shows an authentic and inspiring final journey—from Diane Manahan's breast cancer diagnosis, to her conscious death at home, to a simple, deeply meaningful eco-friendly funeral to her extraordinary, life-changing after-death communications with loved ones.

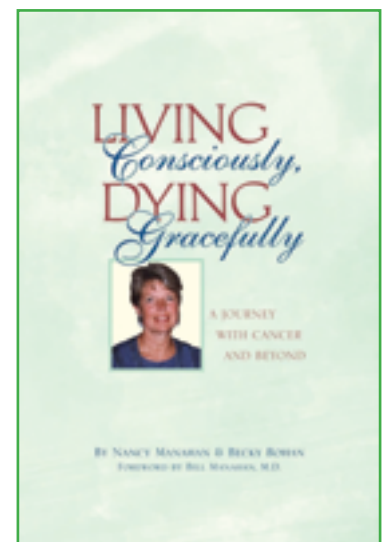
People who seek a holistic approach to dying can learn from this extraordinary nurse's wisdom. Those who fear death can gain strength and confidence

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Diane's story embodies the wisdom of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the humor of *The Last Lecture*, the holistic medical expertise of Andrew Weil and the transcendent spirituality of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

Diane's husband, Bill Manahan, MD, has written an insightful foreword regarding the cultural shift in how we are coming to view death as "a natural process rather than a defeat or a taboo."

*Nancy Manahan and Becky Bohan are two of the founders of the Minnesota Threshold Network. Nancy and Becky have written five books, most recently *Living Consciously, Dying Gracefully*, the inspiring story of their sister-in-law, Diane Manahan. nanbec.com.*



ROSIE: If a Soul Midwife Had Been There...

by Heather Lynn McGuire

A dear friend of mine, Tami, is a dedicated hospice volunteer. Every Saturday she spends several hours visiting the dying, holding their hands, comforting them and listening to their stories. It is a beautiful way for her to give back every week. She went to the hospice care center one Saturday and was asked to spend her time that day with a 95-year-old woman named Rosie. Tami entered room number 31 and introduced herself to Rosie and her husband Harold. They both greeted her with sweet smiles. Harold told Rosie that he was going to take a little break, go home, have dinner and shower and that he would return quick as a wink. She replied, "Why, yes, dear, please take care of yourself. Tami and I will be just fine."

Over the next couple of hours, as Rosie dipped in and out of responsiveness, she shared many stories of her life. She knew death was approaching quickly, and she wasn't one bit fearful. She had been resting for about 45 minutes when she awoke with such a sudden gasp that it caught both her and Tami off guard. Rosie's face had completely changed. Her eyes lit up, and there was not an ounce of pain or agony in the wrinkles of her brow. She lifted her fragile arms effortlessly in the air like a ballet dancer and said it felt as if there were butterflies underneath them. Rosie looked straight into Tami's eyes and said, "I have never experienced this feeling in my life! This is indescribable!" Tami was almost in tears, tears of gratitude for the gift of witnessing this moment of mystery we often hear about at the end of life. Tami joyfully validated what Rosie was sharing. Everything was innately perfect.

Rosie continued to communicate all she was seeing and feeling. When her nurse entered the room and said, "Ms. Rosie, it's time for me to give you your


pain medications," Rosie looked at her beaming and said, "I don't have any pain. I have never felt this good in my entire life!" The nurse replied with her own smile, "I'm sorry, but it's time." Tami, who was sitting there observing, tried quietly to emphasize that Rosie really wasn't experiencing any pain in that moment. However, as a volunteer, she could not intervene or voice her opinion about anything medical. Rosie once again reiterated that she did not want any pain medication. But the nurse gave it to her anyhow. Within two minutes, Rosie was in a non-responsive state and remained there until she passed away that evening.

Tami is not a new volunteer and she understands her role clearly; but this situation has given her so much heartache and angst. She had wanted to advocate for Rosie, that her human condition should have been honored. Instead, this moment had been stolen from her. Even if Rosie just had a few more minutes to experience that euphoric bliss, wouldn't it have been worth it? If Tami had been a family member of Rosie's, she would have been able to be the spokesperson for her and enforce Rosie's refusal of the medications.

* * *

Hospice teams have an outstanding understanding of all the medical care and pain management that is needed to help ease the potential suffering at the end of life. But they have so many patients to see in one day, they often do not have enough hours to tend to emotional and spiritual needs. In my experience, hospice staff members are relieved when they know a soul midwife is on board to offer additional support. Soul midwives work in tandem with hospice teams, sharing information, giving the dying their absolute best.

When soul midwives first meet with our dying friends and their families, we reach deep into the questions, sorting out what is important to them. We create a death plan, much like a birth plan, so that everyone is clear on the patient's very personal vision for their dying process. Often we are asked to be present at the time of active dying, to help support in many ways. One of the most important ways we do this is to fill the gap if the family can't be present or if the person does not have anyone in their life to support them at the time of death. In fact, patients can add the soul midwife to their medical power of attorney document, which allows advocacy for the patient's wishes to be honored at the bedside.

We soul midwives sit in death's presence, quietly tending and listening, providing a healing presence as long as we are needed. We may find ourselves without adequate language to share Rosie's experience of wonder and relief during her dying, but we will do everything we can to protect these sacred moments. 



Heather is a Soul Midwife in Denver, Colorado. You can reach her at yourmidwifeattheendoflife.com

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DEATH TRACKS

by Bodhi Be

I have a weekly radio show called “Death Tracks.” Its byline is “Making Tracks, Following Tracks and Playing Tracks.” My show airs on a local Maui radio station that is part of a public access, community TV and radio station to teach anyone all aspects of radio and television production and promote local opinions and events. I am proud to be on a radio station that airs *Democracy Now*, a news show hosted by Amy Goodman.

At this time in the West, when so many of our media outlets are corporately owned, public television and radio are even more important. And the way it looks to me, radio is making a comeback, as so many of us are overloaded with images and tired of staring at screens. Radio stimulates our imagination instead of crowding it out.

“Death Tracks” is a two-hour show covering a wide spectrum of topics in the fields of aging, eldering, dying and death, from a personal as well as a global perspective. As it turns out, “Death Tracks” includes chronicling what is dying in the world. The show is also about how we approach our death and how that affects how we live. It’s about changing the paradigm of our relationship to death, to caring for the dying and to caring for the dead. It’s about how, in the absence of our presence, the funeral, cemetery, and casket-making industries often employ toxic practices that cost us financially and, more importantly, environmentally. It’s about communities taking back what we have given away and getting back to sacred, community-building work. It’s about us collectively moving out of a broken story and into a sane and healthy world story. It’s about who we are and why we’re here and our relationship to the rest of creation. It’s about death as a tool for shaking people out of the cultural sleepwalk so many of us fall

into. It’s about helping us all fall in love with impermanence and death and recognizing that we are Nature. And it’s about that which does not die.

“Death Tracks” has a number of components. I read articles, stories, and poems, and editorialize when appropriate. I read the names in the day’s obituary section and speak about them as best I can. I play recorded stories and share the opinions of others. I often interview an in-house guest or a cyber-connected guest. I invite listeners to call in with questions and comments. I play recorded interviews that I’ve made in the field with old people, kids, dying people, and interesting people. I educate people and expose them to information, choices and issues as they consider life, dying and death. I promote the activities, events and services offered by our

It’s about communities taking back what we have given away and getting back to sacred, community-building work...It’s about helping us all fall in love with impermanence and death and recognizing that we are Nature.

educational and charitable organization, Doorway Into Light, by our funeral home, and by our community resource center and shop, The Death Store. As an ordained interfaith minister, I speak about the sacred and the holy as it relates to the themes of the show and the stories of the world. I respond to callers asking for counsel and support.

I play musical tracks of many genres: country-western, gospel, rock’n’roll, blues and folk, among others—all with the theme of aging, dying and death. The songs and music often provide needed interludes for listeners’ feelings and thoughts to have some space.

The show plays locally on the radio in homes and cars and streams worldwide on the internet. I am bringing my voice

and what’s important to me out into the airwaves, taking up space in the communal soundscape and in peoples’ heads. I feel a big responsibility to bring forth something of value, something that causes thoughtful awareness and insight, something that brings benefit.

One of my favorite parts of the show is when listeners call in. That segment is a wildcard and puts me very much in the moment. I might hear from someone whose wife just died, who is grieving so deeply he wants to end his life. A call comes in from someone who is sitting at home alone, somewhat blind and incapacitated with little or no community of support. Someone inquires about home burial in her state. Someone asks what I would do if my mother were dying far away. Someone with a terminal illness reaches out for information, for comfort, for a listening ear. Someone is concerned about his last footprint, the environmental impacts of burial and cremation. Someone tells me more about a name

I have read from the obituaries; the deceased is always so much more than a name, birthdate and date of death. Someone calls to recommend a song or reports something relevant to our show’s theme. Someone asks a good question.

Our guest interviews have included an array of experts and professionals in many fields. Dr. Nancy, the medical director of our local hospice, has come on our show a number of times. We explore hospice trends and growth, how hospice serves Maui’s dying population, some of the stories that unfold in homes. We explore the challenges and issues confronting hospice nurses when government and insurance requirements demand more time spent on a computer and less time with patients. We look at what it’s like to see six patients in a day,

going from one family and dying person to the next, then doing it again the next day. We explore and contemplate the new “death with dignity” law that goes into effect here in Hawaii in 2019. We talk about the emerging uses of cannabis for pain management, appetite stimulus and sleep support.

I often interview old people. As someone who studies aging, eldering, dying and death, I am very interested in what old people think about these subjects. Many old people feel invisible and worthless in our culture, and I want to change that. “Old” is becoming another taboo word, like “dying,” “death” and “dead.” In our local obituaries everyone “passes away.” It’s common to hear that the tree died, the car died, the dog died, the phone died, but few people say, “Grandma died.” Grandma passes away, transitions, graduates, etc.

Sometimes I go up to someone who is clearly over 80 years old and say, “Excuse me, are you an old person?” As you may imagine, they are often taken aback. I am clearly stepping over an unspoken line. Few people, it seems, think being old is a good thing. Yet, most everyone prefers getting old to dying. “Eighty years young,” “80 is the new 60,” “age is just a concept” are some of the things I hear. The “anti-aging” industry is booming.

When I ask someone if they are an old person, I get their attention. It’s not a question they’ve likely been asked before. I follow up by telling them about me, our nonprofit organization and the radio show. Would they be interested in coming on the show for an interview, or shall we record an interview for future broadcast?

I’ve had some deep and touching interviews with old people. Often they remind us life was very different and usually much more difficult in the early



Bodhi in the studio

1900s, the speed of life was slower, milk was delivered by horse cart in glass bottles, and the cream would rise to the top and freeze during the winter. They help us remember how much had to happen for us to have it so good. Sometimes they are visibly changed by the exchange, having been honored and heard. Many old people only have their stories.

My interviews in the field with children are a treat. When did you first find out there was such a thing as death? Ever have a pet die? Did you bury your pet? So often, as you’d imagine, kids are so unfiltered and honest in responding and, in their own way, see things so much

Few people, it seems, think being old is a good thing. Yet, most everyone prefers getting old to dying.

more clearly than the rest of us. Did someone in your family die? Did you see their body? Did you cry? Laugh? What do you think happens after death?

Melody, who runs a school that trains therapy dogs and brings her dogs into schools and libraries, came on my show. She reads to the kids while dogs rest in their laps. She brought two of her

dogs into the studio, so I had a chance to interview them, a first for me! As it turned out, they were reticent to say very much. They fell asleep and snored. I realized during this interview that I wanted to adopt a dog, my first dog, an empathy dog, to sit with dying and grieving people. Melody offered to accompany me to the shelter and help pick out a dog. My dog and I will then need to go to therapy school.

Lei’ohu and Maydeen, two Hawaiian teachers, came on our show. They brought their ukuleles and spoke about dying and death from a Hawaiian perspective. Other guests have included Prakash, who leads grief support groups at a local hospice; Brooke, who runs an organization that facilitates groups in schools for kids who’ve had someone close die; Greg,

the executive director of a local hospice; Peter, a cancer survivor who facilitates a group for men with cancer; Christa and Ashrof, spiritual teachers; Darrin, author of a beautiful book about the crone support groups she’s started here; Steven, a long-time meditation teacher in a Buddhist lineage who has a brain tumor; Cassandra Yonder, a leader in the alternative deathcare movement;

Deanna Cochran, Jerrigrace Lyons and Stephen Jenkinson, teachers and workers in the “death trade,” as Stephen calls it. Dr. Raymond Moody, the well-known authority on near-death experiences, will be a guest soon.

As a radio host (they say I have a great face for radio), I have worked at improving my speaking skills and at knowing how to graciously interrupt a guest or caller and to smoothly segue from one topic to the next. My radio show is a spiritual practice in concentration. I let go into each moment and ask for inner guidance. I don't have a show all planned out. I balance what is happening in the moment with what comes next, what song to play, how I'm feeling by what just aired. A caller can change everything.


Give us a call!

“Death Tracks” streams live on Tuesdays from 2-4pm Hawaii Time on KAKUFM.org. It also airs on Facebook Live and on the TUNEIN APP at KAKU_LP. Facebook will kick the show off when it notices that I play music I don't have a license to play. I can legally play it on the radio and KAKU's website because the radio station has the required licensing. Also, I have not found a podcast hosting site for my show because I play music. I'm still working on this if you have any ideas. 🎧



Bodhi Be is an ordained Interfaith minister, the executive director of Doorway Into Light, founder of the Death Store and host of the radio show “Death Tracks.” Find our more at doorwayintolight.org

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<p>The Care of the Body, Heart and Soul <i>Spiritual, Emotional, Physical and Logistical Support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What is our purpose and intention in being with the dying and what does it ask of us? -What is 'Spiritual Care' of the dying? -Exploring our own relationships with, and understandings of, suffering, dying and death. - Counseling the dying and their families. - Learning and practicing skills useful at the bedside of the dying. - Responding to family dynamics and the grieving already present. - Children and grief. - Showing up for pregnancy loss, stillbirth and abortion. - Understanding herbal medicines and oils used for pain, anxiety, depression and grief. - Hands-on reiki and foot reflexology for the dying. - Home funerals and body care for the dead. - Creating and supporting ritual and ceremony for the dying, the dead and their community. - Moving from 'calling' to a practice that serves your community. - Death with Dignity, the right to end one's life. - Networking with attendees working in these fields. <p>This training is for those who work in these fields; those who would like to bring their professions, skills and talents to the care of the dying; those who may care for a loved one; and those wishing to deepen their life.</p> <p><i>'Death Doula's are Warriors of the Heart and Protectors of the Sacred, who show up for dying and death.'</i></p> <p>VIEW OUR INTRO VIDEO: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksVEMM7jx1E&feature=youtu.be</p>	<p>DOORWAY INTO LIGHT <i>-presents-</i> THE 3rd INTERNATIONAL DEATH DOULA TRAINING 'SHOWING UP FOR DEATH, NOURISHING LIFE'</p> <p>MAUI April 25-29 2019 at LUMERIA Maui</p>  <p>Ram Dass - Bodhi Be - Lei'ohu Ryder Jerrigrace Lyons - Deanna Cochran - Amy Glenn Brooke Brown - Mary Lane and other special guests</p> <p>Learn More at: www.DoorwayIntoLight.org DOORWAY INTO LIGHT is a 501c3 nonprofit, educational and charitable organization in Hawaii providing conscious and compassionate responses to dying and death since 2006.</p>
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This Side of the Sod

What I love most about life is being alive.

by Don Moore

By the beginning of my golden years, I'd made many monumental transformations—divorce, career change, and moving a thousand miles away—but there was still one more yet unknown obstruction that needed to be eliminated for me to lead a more fulfilling life. Severe chest pains in the middle of the night led to an emergency quintuple heart bypass surgery. The surgery removed that last unseen blockage, but it was the overwhelming love I received from hundreds near and far that day that fed my soul and gave me a deeper awareness for what it means to be alive.

I'd been out of the hospital for about a week when I went to Dr. Oza's office for a follow-up echocardiogram. The first one I had at the end of my surgery had indicated that my heart was functioning normally, so this was just a retake to make sure things were still okay.

Stripped to my waist, I lay on my left side on an exam table in a dimly lit room. Dr. Oza's tech, Rachel, jellied my chest with some kind of goo and ran a metal wand on the skin over my breastbone and ribcage. The wand's sound waves bounced off my heart and registered impressions on the screen she was monitoring.

This machine created not only a moving picture of my heart, but the audio portion also mimicked the sound of my blood pumping from chamber to chamber, then out to the rest of my body. And that sound is like the rush of a whip zipping through the air before the ultimate *crack*. It was the most beautiful sound I'd heard since the cries of my son and daughter fresh from the womb.

I wept both times back then, and I wept there on the exam table. For my mended heart, my courageous, heroic heart! For its sacrifices, for the leg veins now pulsing in my chest. I wept over being spared, over not dying, over living one

more day. I wept over no end to laughter, joy, sorrow, and grief along with the full rainbow of emotions, from rage to bliss, all that make me human. I wept over being given more time to play with my grandchildren and watch them grow. I wept for being given more time to live and to love. I wept over all the love I felt passing in and out of my being, the love being sent to me from hundreds of people from North America to South Korea to Norway, those family members and friends all cheering for me since that Saturday in November. I wept for breaths, for breathing in the sweetness of life-giving oxygen.

In open-heart bypass surgery, the sternum is sawn open lengthwise and the ribcage is pulled apart, exposing the heart. The major arteries and veins carrying blood into and out of the heart, respectively, are connected to an artificial heart-lung machine. For the next several hours of the surgery, the heart is stopped and the machine takes over the job of pumping the body's blood through the circulatory system. The blocked coronary arteries feeding blood to the heart muscle are then identified—in my case, five—starting with the severest—in my case, the left main. Thus, the left mammary artery, which branches off the aorta and descends through the left chest cavity, is clipped and rerouted by grafting the clipped end onto the left main coronary artery below the 99% blockage. Four veins from the interior of the left leg are harvested; one end of each of those veins is sewn into the aorta, and the other end is sewn into one of the four other coronary arteries below their 80-90% blockages. Once the bypasses have been completed, the arteries and veins attached to the heart-lung machine are reconnected to the heart, and the heart is restarted. The body's amazing ability to heal and repair itself causes new pathways to be created and old ones to be enlarged, and

the blood in my leg that used to flow through the harvested veins finds other routes.

Some have described coming out the other end of a near death experience as living on borrowed time. I've borrowed nothing. I've been given time without asking, with no deal, no bargain. That gift was simply given and I humbly accepted. It's a gift each of us is given with every breath we take.

"I apologize, Rachel, if I'm messing up your test," I said, wiping at the endless stream of tears with the back of my hand. "But I don't apologize for crying. I am so happy."

"It's okay, Mr. Moore. You've done nothing to interfere with the test." She smiled and handed me a tissue for my eyes, nose, cheeks, and the rest of my sodden face.

I could not stop crying. I was still alive! I had unfinished business: unfinished relationships, unfinished ambitions, unfinished living. I'd been given another chance—another moment, many more moments—and I vowed not to squander this precious gift.

I believe, at least for today, that a celebration of my uniqueness necessitates writing and speaking about what I learned on the day I nearly died. I say "at least for today" because I don't know where this journey will take me. Right now I'm witnessing some pretty amazing scenery and I feel compelled to describe it to you. And, while I'd like to believe this is the beginning of my Final Act, I won't be pigeonholed. I think this is my calling, but who knows? Many times before, in many different settings, I thought I'd found my calling, only to end up taking detours and entirely different routes here and there.

This is one of the things I've learned. We have a tendency to impose upon ourselves and those around us an

existence of confinement in narrow, tight, neat little triangles, and when we/they step out of our/their triangles, it's unsettling and disturbing. (I use the term "triangle" rather than "box" because a triangle is that much more restricting than a box.) It's unsettling for us because it's unfamiliar. It's disturbing for those who love us because it threatens their own sense of security. We have a yearning for certainty in a world where nothing has ever been certain beyond the present moment, but we take that yearning and create a belief that certainty is the foundation of our very existence. That need for certainty then bullies its way into whatever corner of our lives we let it. As bullies are wont to do, that need creates a concern for preserving our self-image, and we then engage in rigidity in an impossible effort to control what cannot be controlled. Just when we think we know, we find out there's something else, and the triangle doesn't fit any longer.

In fact, I don't believe we are ever meant to be confined inside the walls of triangles or boxes. Our uniqueness won't allow it. Each of us is too expansive, too big, too complex, too colorful, too multifaceted, too much to ever really know completely. If we choose to stay inside some little triangle, we play it safe, take no risks. We lose nothing by doing so. Nothing, that is, except for venturing into unknown territory and discovering buried treasure that will dazzle in the sunlight of the spirit. We lose nothing except a chance to lead an authentic life. We can play it safe and continue to meet all we, and others around us, ever expected. Such a path is comfortable, one in which we objectify ourselves, and it's one I choose not to take. If the path you're traveling is easily recognized, well-worn and traversed, it's not your path.

There is a circle of love, gratitude, and compassion that forms the bedrock of meaningful human interaction. It can start at any point on the circle, and I'm suggesting it starts with love,



particularly self-love. Without that foundation, it's difficult to really get very far. If I can't love myself, how would I know how to love another? I can't. It's just that simple. I can't give away something I don't have, and the more I have, the more I have to give away from my bottomless well. Once I find the love for me, then I'm in a place of being able to give love to you; and once I feel that love of self, I can sense the gratitude for my aliveness, for my being, for all that I have.

And once I feel the love for you and am grateful for where I am in the world, then I'm compelled to show compassion for those who suffer. I mean that. Compelled. When I acknowledge my worth, my humanity, the boundlessness of my blessings, I have an overwhelming urge to show compassion for the suffering I see. And, at times, when I'm not feeling the best, I get to show that compassion to me, to my own suffering. It has then come full circle, back to love.

The more I know about myself, the more I learn to love myself; the more love I give to myself, the more I learn how to love others.

Within this discussion is a lesson of love—the thing I came to talk about. Love of self not only allows, but *requires* that we stretch beyond our zone of comfort to learn things about ourselves we didn't know and never considered. It is our birthright to explore the furthest reaches of our uniqueness. To deny ourselves the chance to learn more about ourselves and our infinite possibilities is a tragedy of indescribable proportions. The more I know about myself, the more I learn to

love myself; the more love I give to myself, the more I learn how to love others.

Love of others means we need to practice on a regular, ongoing basis not to place them inside triangles. They need the fresh air and sunshine that is only available outside any confined walls that we want to construct. By keeping (or trying to keep) them inside the triangle we've drawn for them, we may satisfy our need for safety, but

we will cause pain for both ourselves and those we love. To try to keep people inside triangles is an illusion anyway. We don't have the ability to freeze them in time, space, or circumstance. Everything, absolutely everything, is dynamic. Think how absurd it would be to try to keep a flower from opening from a tight bud into an expansive full bloom. We need to learn to love the other enough to allow the spreading of wings and, yes, the possibility of flying away. That's one of the painful joys of raising children. You love, provide for, and nurture them to be able to leave the nest when it's time, and then you suffer pain and grief when they've done so.

At least in part, I think this is all about the illusion of control. No, on second thought, it's *all* about control. We have a belief that if we can control enough, we will be safe, secure, and, perhaps most of all, at ease. So we go about our lives clutching to our breasts our firmly held beliefs, our cherished values, our

hard-fought-for money, our livelihood, the security of our relationships, all that we believe gives our existence predictability. We squeeze tight with sureness that by doing so we can control our lives and the lives of those we care about. I'm here to tell you it doesn't work that way. My life has been a continuous process of learning to let go. I was in reasonably good health, exercised, ate right, never smoked, didn't drink, was only seven pounds overweight (according to some chart of firmly held beliefs), had removed great stressors from my life, and still, I nearly died from a silent killer. Predictability

on longevity was one more thing I had to give up.

While I cannot control much of what goes on in my life, including what happens to me and to those I love, I can control my response to any given situation at any given time. It's one of the reasons why today I'm more interested in the way *I am* and the way *you are* than in what I do and what you do. And you know what? That's plenty. I get to plan my day, live life as it comes, let go of the outcome, and bask in the bliss of it all.

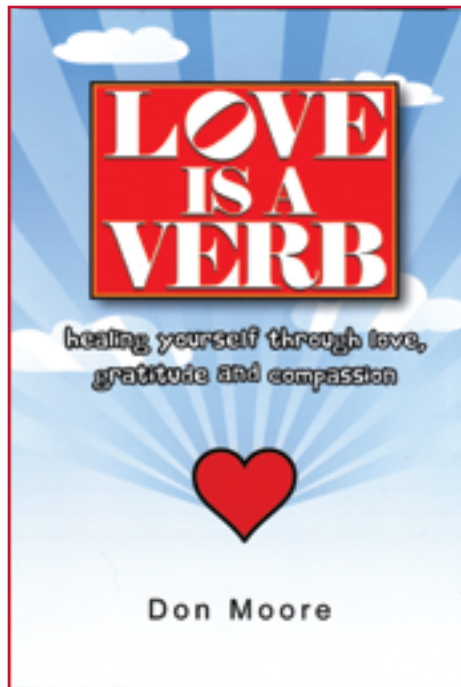
Perhaps the biggest lesson I've learned is that I'm enough.

After daybreak on the morning of the twentieth, I showered, got dressed, took my dog Biff out, and I packed a valise with my laptop and cell phone charger. (Just in case. I mean, you never know.) Just as I was about to leave, teenaged neighbor Gaelan, whose parents were out of town, appeared at my doorstep wanting a ride to Boulder to catch a bus to the airport. I said, "Of course," and of course it took him more than just a few minutes to get ready. I waited, and as we headed to my car, I ran into Toby, another neighbor, told him what I was doing, and asked him if he could take care of Biff if I needed some help. He was more than willing, as he assured me I was doing the right thing to have the tightness in my chest checked out. I told Gaelan nothing of what I was up to. He was 15. On my way to drop him off, I stopped at Walgreens to refill a prescription.

Gaelan, making small talk, asked me what the rest of my day looked like. I told him I

was going by the hospital, but not why. I didn't know what I'd say if he asked the follow-up question, but it never came. I dropped him off and proceeded on my way. I arrived at the hospital at 11 that morning.

Here's another part of the story, a critical part, and no, I'm not truth-stretching. I have three sibs and they all live in Illinois. One of my brothers, Steve, has a



son, Andrew, who lives near me, and just prior to my Event, my nephew's wife had just given birth to their second son, Basil. As I was parking my car in the hospital lot that morning, my cell phone rang. Steve's name appeared on the screen.

"Hi Don! Janet and I just arrived in Colorado for the weekend to see Basil and we'd like to have you over to Andrew's house for brunch tomorrow."

"Uhh, well...maybe," I said. "That may be possible." I went on to tell him I had just arrived at the ED, having had chest pains earlier in the morning, wouldn't know my condition until I got it checked out, and I'd call him back once I found out more.

Love of self ... requires that we stretch beyond our zone of comfort to learn things about ourselves we didn't know and never considered. It is our birthright to explore the furthest reaches of our uniqueness.

"What?" There was alarm in his voice. "Should I come over right now?"

"Naw. I really don't know if this is anything at all. Let me go into the ED and I'll give you a call once I know what's going on." I was calm. Steve was not. He ignored me and arrived at the hospital just after I received Dr. Oza's report on the cath lab results. In the ED, I called Josh and Meghan, my two adult children who live in Chicago.

From the ICU, I called best friends Jim and Rand, Toby, who did indeed arrange for Biff's care (as well as a candlelight vigil held by my neighbors the night after my surgery), and very close friends, Linda and Jennifer. I give you these details because they lead to the heart of this book. This core of people, from Josh and Meghan to Jennifer, then called or emailed others about what was happening, and even before I went into the OR at 7:00 p.m. that night, there were literally hundreds of friends and relatives living in South Korea, all across North America, and in Europe who were notified, tuned in, and sending me prayers, loving thoughts, and healing energy. The love I received that day and the days following was palpable. A warm glow like I'd never before experienced centered in my heart and radiated throughout my entire being—body, mind, and soul. All parts of me were alive and pulsating in tune with something both deep within and far beyond the confines of me. Aware of my expansiveness, I was much more than the limits of my flesh. I was not alone, but deeply connected to all who cared for me, with love being the gossamer thread of that unity. This only approximates what I actually felt, as I am without vocabulary to put words to it all.

I'm convinced the love I felt was part of the reason my life was spared and I had such an incredible outcome. I was then, and I am now, filled with love

and gratitude I've never before experienced, a type that works its way into the subatomic

particles of my cells and literally has reshaped my entire being.

I didn't die, in no small part thanks to the outpouring of love from those friends and relatives who did not want me to die. They loved me just as I was, and I didn't have to prove anything to them. Well, if I'm enough for them, then I'm enough for me. You don't have to prove anything to anybody else, either.

Before my Event, I spent an awful lot of time trying to demonstrate my worth, which is another way of saying to win other people's love. And what I discovered is that those I care about already love me. There is nothing to prove, nothing to win. I already have it. All I need to do in this moment and any that may follow is to simply, without conditions attached, love and receive love. That's it. That's the message.

Chapter 1 Recap:

- ◇ Every breath you take is an absolute gift; treat it as such.
- ◇ Nobody belongs inside a confining triangle, you included.
- ◇ A circle of love, gratitude, and compassion forms the bedrock of meaningful human interaction.
- ◇ Love of self requires that we stretch beyond our zone of comfort to learn things about ourselves we didn't know and never considered.
- ◇ You may not be able to control much of what happens in your life, but you can control your response to any situation at any time.
- ◇ Without conditions attached, simply give and receive love. 🌐



Don Moore, retired lawyer and life coach, father of two and grandfather of four, lives with his wife, Joanne, in Longmont, CO.

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Building the Vital Core of the NHFA

by Sarah Crews

As I write this, I am beginning my second year serving the National Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA) as president of the board of directors. I joined the organization at the 2010 Boulder, CO, conference and began my board service in 2013. I've had the good fortune to work with several NHFA founders and early board members and am grateful for all I have learned from their leadership and gained from their support and encouragement. To use a body metaphor: they provided the exquisite frame, the bones and the heart of this extraordinary organization, and each subsequent group of leaders has added to the healthy, muscular, vital core of the whole.

The current board is an exceptional group of individuals who are passionate about continuing the incredibly important work our founders began. Our mission—to educate families and communities to care for their own—is in excellent hands with these skilled communicators, writers, and tech-savvy, creative thinkers at the helm. I invite you to take a look at our new and improved website if you haven't had a chance to visit it lately. We had a tremendous amount of help from our most recent president emeritus, Lee Webster, in transferring our content over to the new website. There you can read the bios of all the current board members.

I'm excited to report that we now have nearly 2000 members across the country and around the world. There is no fee for membership as we feel it is vitally important that access to home funeral education and the resources the NHFA provides are available to everyone who needs them. We intend to continue to provide high-quality, comprehensive information and resources to our members.

Over the years NHFA has built a reputation for organizing outstanding conferences that draw participants from across the country and the globe. We are excited to be in the planning stages of what promises to be another

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stellar event! The 2019 NHFA Biennial Conference will be held at Oak Ridge Conference Center in Chaska, MN, October 4-6, 2019, with the theme of "The Head, Hands and Heart of Home Funerals: Weaving Art and Ritual with the Practical." We are already seeing strong interest in this conference from our members.

Now that the organization has reached cruising altitude, we are maintaining our sustainability through the generous financial support of our members and friends. We just completed a very successful series of educational webinars and have several innovative projects in the works. I'm particularly excited about launching an NHFA-hosted podcast to allow people to share personal stories of providing after-death care for their loved ones. As listeners hear how ordinary

people have reclaimed this ancient practice and the transformative healing it provides, we get closer to shifting the cultural perception of what makes a funeral meaningful.

The NHFA is a 100% volunteer-run organization, and we rely on donations from members and supporters like you. Please share your enthusiasm for our shared vision with those people you know who have had the life-changing experience of a home funeral and ask them to make a contribution in support of this vital organization. If you are on Facebook please join our closed discussion group for NHFA members. It's already proving to be a wonderful place to connect with our members from all over the country and the world! 🌍



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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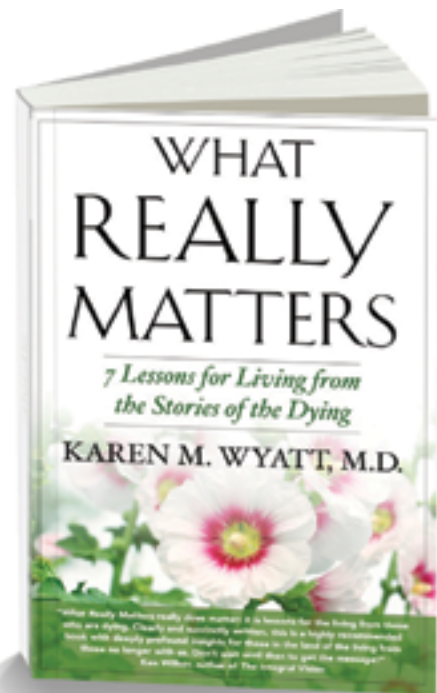
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Holding Space for Pregnancy Loss

by Amy Wright Glenn

This article was originally published in the International Doula Volume 25, Issue 4, and is addressed to birth and postpartum doulas.

Most of us enter birth and postpartum doula work fully focused on supporting families as they experience the joy, and adjust to the challenge, of welcoming new life. After all, doulas are known for offering skilled presence, proven comfort measures, and loving support as a mother opens her arms and heart to her newborn child. We are known for this—and more and more women seek out our support. Most of us have been deeply drawn to the doula path. We love this work.

But what happens when a newborn dies? How equipped are we to hold space for such a profoundly devastating loss? And what about the many women we work with who have known the pain of pregnancy loss prior to a healthy birth? Whether through previous miscarriages or stillbirth, a good number of mothers carry shadows of sorrow in their reproductive histories. Subsequent pregnancies and births can trigger wounds that have yet to be integrated or understood. How prepared are we to be present for this process?

Certainly, it is possible for birth and postpartum doulas to become better equipped to support families through the devastation of pregnancy and/or infant loss. In fact, I believe all doulas have a moral obligation to do so.

Why?

Even if we collectively reach the goal proposed by the World Health Assembly and bring the global rate of stillbirth down to 10 per 1000 births by 2035, stillbirth still exists. (As of 2016, the global rate of stillbirth is 18 per 1000.)

In the United States today, it is estimated that stillbirth occurs in 1 out of every 160 births. The rates of miscarriage, calculated in this country as loss prior to the 20th week of gestation, are even higher with an estimated 1 out of 4 pregnancies ending in miscarriage.

We cannot step inside their shoes and feel what they are feeling, but we can become curious, enter into their story and honor their need to grieve as they choose.

– Jane Heustis, RN, and Marcia Jenkins, RN
authors of *Companioning at a Time of Perinatal Loss*

Anyone who has been touched by death knows there is no returning to a previous life. We are irrevocably changed due to the loss of loved ones, particularly the death of our children. The companioning approach to understanding and being with grief acknowledges this reality.

The longer one walks the doula path, the odds of encountering “unexpected outcomes” increase. Given this, one would think that speaking openly about birth entails an open approach to speaking about death. Yet pregnancy loss remains a taboo subject for many and is still, at times, regarded as an optional continuing education subject of study even in the birth world.

For example, upon teaching at a well-respected midwifery college last year, I came to realize that, prior to my training, there had been no formal integration of pregnancy loss into the curriculum. In a personal essay on miscarriage, freelance author Angela Garbes aptly observes: “People are uncomfortable talking about pregnancy loss, so they don’t. It’s no wonder—any meaningful discussion of it requires acknowledging death, sadness, blood, tears, and items being expelled from the vagina.”

As birth workers, let us not shy away from these meaningful discussions. The vagina

doesn’t scare us; neither should tears, blood, or sadness. And if they do, we can wisely hold space for our own fears and move through them with courage.

Over the last two years, I’ve learned a great deal from deeply personal dialogues with more than 300 midwives, doulas, lactation consultants, prenatal yoga teachers, mental health professionals, funeral home directors, and bereaved parents on pregnancy and infant loss. These discussions

occurred in person, via email, or through phone consultations and conversations. As part of a training I developed entitled “Holding Space for Pregnancy Loss,” I’ve opened my heart and mind to these stories and emerged transformed. Certainly, birth workers from all backgrounds best serve birthing mothers when we are more fully equipped to support families through death and bereavement. Ideally, this isn’t an optional study.

In particular, three practices bring healing medicine:

Companion the Bereaved

There are many approaches to grief work. Some view grief as an illness that needs treatment. Within this “treatment” model, the goal is to return the bereaved to “normalcy,” to their prior function pre-loss, to their “regular life.”

But anyone who has been touched by death knows there is no returning to a previous life. We are irrevocably changed due to the loss of loved ones, particularly the death of our children. The companioning approach to understanding and being with grief acknowledges this reality.

Alan Wolfelt, the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life

Transition, describes it best. He writes: “Companioning is being present to another person’s pain; it is not about taking away the pain.”

As birth and postpartum doulas, we hold space as women open to labor and life with a newborn. We recognize the power of compassionate presence. We don’t try to fill the sacred spaces of birth and early infant care with an onslaught of well-intentioned words. There’s much to be said for being present in loving silence and listening to a new mother process her own journey through the wilderness. We companion as doulas. Hence, applying the companioning model of “being with” to both birth and death is key.

Strengthen the Support Network

Even in our globalized world where social media too often replaces the presence of real-time community, we can do much to strengthen the support networks that surround bereaved families. Consider the following example.

Imagine a rock dropping into still water. Imagine the ripple effect of this act. From the epicenter, all concentric and encompassing rings emerge. Now imagine death. A little one dies. The mother is at the epicenter of this devastation. Surrounding her are those nearest and dearest—her partner/husband, older siblings, her closest friends and family. As doulas we are also included in her circles of care and concern.

Clinical psychologist Susan Silk draws upon this image of concentric circles in her “ring theory.” As described in an LA Times op-ed entitled “How not to say the wrong thing,” Silk highlights that these circles of care are strengthened when people “dump out” and “comfort in.” In other words, we turn to those



who surround and support us to process our grief—we dump out. And we bring forward our best care practices, including companioning, as we care for those closest to the epicenter of sorrow—we comfort in.

Draw upon the Healing Power of Ritual

Rituals are central to the health of human societies, both preliterate and literate. Marking passageways such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, rituals bring communities together and link generations across time. Religious or cultural traditions surrounding key life events often carry great meaning.

Yet, not everyone draws upon traditional rituals of marking death in searching for meaning or healing following the loss of little ones. In fact, some traditional rituals regarding pregnancy loss can feel, and have been, exclusionary. If a child dies before attaining the status of “personhood” within a given community, there may be no formal funeral or burial. Nonetheless, a grieving family is left in the wake.

Given this, some of the families we serve will want to craft their own rituals of acknowledging pregnancy and/or infant loss. And we serve families when we are knowledgeable about the laws in our communities regarding home funerals, home burials, and the cremation or embalment of little ones. We can offer

a list of rituals that have served others similarly bereaved.

Most importantly, we can listen as grieving parents express what matters most and plan various public or private events commemorating their child’s life. So often, parents don’t know they have a range of options wherein they can craft rituals of deep meaning. In this sense, we both companion and guide.

Conclusion

The pregnancy loss movement continues to work diligently to dismantle the silencing taboos that surround discussions of miscarriage, stillbirth, and/or infant loss. As birth and postpartum doulas, we are wise to support this movement and draw upon best care practices, like the three practices outlined above. Let us remember that just as we are skilled in holding space for the beauty and pain of birth and the early postpartum period, we can be similarly capable of companioning those we serve through death.

Let us acknowledge that birth and death are forever twinned and to hold space for one means that we would be wise to learn how to hold space for the other. 🌱

Amy Wright Glenn is an author and founder of the Institute for Birth, Breath and Death. Find out more at birthbreathanddeath.com

Making a Plan

Green Burials & Home Funerals

An excerpt from *The Green Burial Guidebook* by Elizabeth Fournier, “The Green Reaper,” printed with permission from New World Library

The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not “get over” the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to. Death is but a transition from this life to another existence where there is no more pain and anguish. All the bitterness and disagreements will vanish, and the only thing that lives forever is love.

— Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
On Grief and Grieving

We all know that we need to plan ahead for our own death and for the deaths of our loved ones. But these are hard things to consider, and hard conversations to have, and we often put them off. A recent survey by the Conversation Project confirms what I’ve encountered myself: “While more than nine in ten Americans think it’s important to talk about their own and their loved ones’ wishes for end-of-life care, less than three in ten have actually held these sorts of discussions.”

Don’t be part of the 70 percent. Consider what you want, or what others want, for end-of-life care and burial arrangements, and discuss these with your family and friends. Share your preferences and your motivations for choosing them. To help others take care of you in the way you want when you’re gone, clearly blueprint your final wishes. Write down how you want your body handled, how you would like to be celebrated, and the type of disposition you prefer. The advance directives part of your will is a good place to designate a person to carry out your wishes.

That said, I want to begin with a gentle note of caution: Sometimes your vision cannot be carried out. Time, or even weather, may not cooperate. There can be all kinds of stumbling blocks. By the time of your passing, the members of your assembled team may not be physically or emotionally able to follow through, your loved ones may disagree over what’s best, or your well-choreographed ceremony may be too complicated, and so on. As you plan, anticipate this and build flexibility into your wishes. This gives yourself and others a grand gift, since it allows plans to be adapted while still fulfilling your wishes.

In this chapter, I will help you take the first steps in planning. I discuss what you should consider, costs to anticipate, and making a “funeral wish list.” However, what makes considering these details so difficult, and why people often put them off, is the bigger questions they imply. They ask us to undertake a life review. How do we want to make peace with our family and the universe, and depart this world, with the utmost love and dignity? We have to consider this and let our wishes be known. Not only do we want a ceremony that aligns with our personality, or with the personality of a loved one, but we should consider how that ceremony will give people a quality opportunity to express their love and appreciation as a community.

When it comes to green burials and home funerals, it’s even more important to make sure the people close to you understand your preferences and reasons. Unless you tell them, they may think it doesn’t matter, or that you prefer a more traditional burial, using a typical casket, tombstone, embalming, and regular cemetery. Be prepared to answer any curious questions and explain the differences of natural burial. Perhaps even have resources ready, like websites, where people can learn more.

Ultimately, by choosing a natural or green burial, and providing clear instructions, you release your loved ones of the anguish that comes with having to make complicated, and often costly, decisions after your passing.

Tales from the Grave

Traditionally, the Irish celebrate the deceased at home with an overnight vigil and party. Drinking and eating are encouraged, but grieving is not, since they believe that the person’s soul is journeying happily to the next life. According to the website Nerdy Gaga: “Some Irish put a wooden plate on top of

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the deceased's chest with some amount of soil and salt. The soil symbolizes as 'the body will return into dusts,' and the salt symbolizes the soul that will not decay."

What Is Your Vision?

When I talk with families at my funeral home, I find people are increasingly interested in burials and funerals that are more environmentally and spiritually satisfying. Few in America currently care for their dead at home, but the number is increasing as people seek more intimacy and human connection with after-death-care details. Remember, green burials and home funerals are not new ideas. They are the oldest and most natural form of interment. Back in the day, the body was always kept at home, and family members oversaw the final plans.

What is your vision? What would be personally satisfying and feel right to you? What directives do you want to leave your survivors?

Consider every aspect of green burials and home funerals, and keep a list of what's important to you. After your death, how do you want your body handled? Would you want it washed, dressed, and handled with grand kindness by a loved one? Would you like to assign "cadaver custodians" to wrap your body in a shroud, perhaps from a lovely tapestry that has hung on your wall for years? Would you prefer being placed in an organic cocoon made of banana leaves or thatched straw? Would you want your favorite music playing during these preparations?

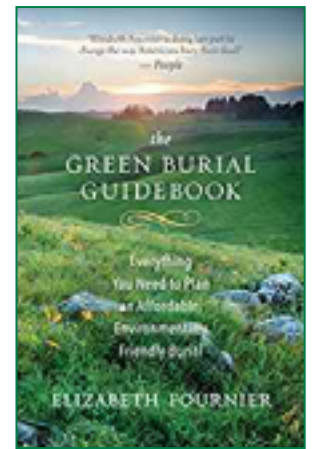
Would you feel comforted to know your freshly clean body will be escorted by people you know and trust to a natural burial ground, a gorgeous, green pasture of flowers and trees? What sort of grave would you prefer, and how would you want to be placed in it: by certain

people or in certain ways that reflect the refinement and care you desire? Are there aspects of the ceremony you'd like to specify? In what way do you want to be returned to the earth, so that in death you nourish the land and the loved ones you've left behind?

What would feel natural as friends come to visit your resting space? Would you want a tree to mark your grave, or would you prefer grasslands to cover you, with no marker at all? As the roots of these gifts of nature stretch down through the soil into your body, do you like the idea that you will rise up and live again to experience the phenomenon of living in the glory of the world? Does it make you smile to think of your visitors marveling at the fruitfulness of your body and praising you for the richness you have added to the planet?

It's as important to think of spiritual questions as practical ones. For help with both, you can also seek out a funeral home that offers or will help plan a green funeral or burial. All funeral homes are legally obligated to help you plan and execute a natural burial, so see what your local funeral director knows about green funeral options. If you talk to someone who just stares blankly back at you, keep looking. Some funeral homes have already adopted green practices in their preparation and burial techniques, making it much easier for you to plan a green burial. Plus, certified green funeral homes are becoming more prevalent. Visit the Green Burial Council (see Resources), which certifies green funeral homes and maintains a list of providers on their website. You may find great options in your area.

Set aside a quiet hour or two to think about your death and what you want for your burial arrangements. Think about how you want your funeral to look and feel for those who will gather in your honor. If you don't, your family will have



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to guess at a time when emotions will be running high. I have seen siblings fall out arguing over what photo to use on the front of the funeral program.

By writing out your after-care suggestions, your loved ones will hopefully feel less anxiety. We can't control how others grieve, but we can express what we want, which will give others permission to celebrate our life by fulfilling our wishes. This may help others cope with their sense of loss and provide a channel for mourning.

Green Burial Tip: It's simple: If you want to be eco-friendlier, think less extravagantly. Kindness toward the Earth usually means doing less, and this attitude can be adapted to all facets of life, including death.

How Much Does a Green Burial Cost?

There isn't a standard cost for a green burial, since so many aspects of a modern funeral and burial can be either omitted or done yourself. Typically, green burials are less expensive than modern burials, and in some cases, they can be significantly less expensive. The difference usually depends on how much work you intend to do yourself and the cost of the materials and services you use.

An average estimate of a modern funeral and burial in the United States

is anywhere from \$6,000 to \$10,000, depending on the specific goods and services you choose. Just like anything in life, you can choose the high-end model with all the extras, or you can pick the stripped-down floor model. Natural burial only requires the basics to get your loved one from point A to point B.

Green burial can be highly cost effective; it's all about simplicity. For instance, you can lower costs by choosing to be buried in a shroud made of a cloth you already own or in a no-frills pine coffin. If you make the coffin yourself, your only cost is the materials. Even a manufactured, biodegradable casket or shroud usually costs less than a conventional casket, which is often made of fabricated steel or lacquered hardwoods. If you forgo embalming, that cost is gone (both conventional and green embalming cost about the same, and both require a professional). Green burials also don't require concrete vaults or liners, which is another cost eliminated.

Headstones are another expense that is highly variable. The grandest headstones can run thousands of dollars, but if you choose a natural marker, or no marker at all, then you pay nothing. Some cemeteries use a GPS system to mark and locate graves, while other cemeteries charge a small fee to place a boulder.

On the other hand, I have known a few instances where a green burial plot was more expensive than a burial space in a standard cemetery. The family chose to bury their loved one in a pricey conservation burial ground, where the cemetery charged a steep fee for the perpetual care of the land. In addition, more specific ongoing maintenance is required for unlined graves, since there isn't a grave liner or box holding up the soil from naturally settling.

Green burials and home funerals bypass many of the standard expenses of modern funerals, such as embalming, limousines, vaults, headstone carving, chapel services, and so on. Of course, prices vary widely, and some aspects of a green burial are potentially more expensive in some circumstances. Still,

the upshot is that green burials usually save money and save the environment at the same time!

Green Burial Tip: If you are using a funeral home, always request a recent copy of their general price list (also called a GPL), which is an itemized list of all the goods and services they offer. The "Funeral Rule" of the Federal Trade Commission requires all funeral homes to provide this to anyone making an at-need funeral arrangement. A green burial package should not exceed the cost of an immediate burial package, as essentially you are purchasing a simple burial.

Funeral Wish List

We plan for all major milestones in life, such as a child's birthday and a wedding ceremony. Why wouldn't we plan for our death? As you read this book and consider all the options (as well as any legal issues; see chapter 4), write down your wishes in a list to be eventually shared. This can be a working document that changes over time, but don't keep this information in your head. That won't do your loved ones any good once you're gone.

Here is a list of seven important aspects to consider, perhaps in consultation with the people you want to carry out your wishes:


- 1** Who have you appointed to handle your final disposition arrangements? Who is your alternative person, in case the first appointed person is physically or emotionally unable to carry out your wishes?
- 2** Have you decided to use a traditional funeral home, or someone else, such as a home funeral guide? Or will your funeral be DIY? Does the funeral home or person in charge have your arrangements on file? Have you paid any pre-need costs?
- 3** What would you like your funeral and burial to look like? Do you want to specify the type of ceremony, or any part of it, such as specific songs, readings, activities, food, or even guests?

4 Is it important to you to have your loved ones view your body? Do you want to specify how a viewing of your body will be handled, and what you will wear?

5 What type of container would you like to be buried in? There are a list of green options, which include a cardboard or wooden casket, a willow or woven coffin, a favorite sleeping bag or comforter, or an organically made outfit or simple shroud.

6 Where would you like to be buried? If a specific cemetery is important, name it, or name the type of place and location, such as conservation grounds or at sea. Consider any specifics about the location that matter to you, such as physical placement on the land. Do you crave to be near a tree? Or the end of a row?

7 What would you like planted or placed on top of your grave? Do you want a specific plant or a standard grave marker? If using a marker, what will it be made out of, and how will it read?

Green Burial Tip: To make sure your final wishes are considered legal, I always suggest writing them down and having a notary public stamp and record the document. Notaries are usually on staff at local banks. You can also google for a mobile notary to come to your home if you prefer. 



Elizabeth Fournier, affectionately called "The Green Reaper," is the author of The Green Burial Guidebook: Everything You Need

to Plan an Affordable, Environmentally Friendly Burial. She is owner and operator of Cornerstone Funeral Services, outside of Portland, OR. She serves on the Advisory Board for the Green Burial Council, which sets the standard for green burial in North America. She lives on a farm with her husband, daughter and many goats. Find out more about her work at thegreenreaper.org.

Remembering Our Descendants

The day comes when you realize
you are not young anymore, at least
not in the way you thought you would stay.

The wheel turns, the circle widens
and you now occupy a simpler place
the circle of your importance dissolving

until you see that you are more a field of light
than the flaming arrow that once burned a hole
through the sky. After the inevitability of our fall,

of our many falls, after the surrender
to our own exquisite dismemberments,
we know we are not any of the identities

that have ever claimed us. Ever.
Some things are created and destroyed—
and this life is a long kiss that opens us

to the beauty of our own disaster
and inevitability of our exquisite return.
We know the way grief and ecstasy

couple again and again, like two hawks
spiraling up the current. And from those heights

we cry out, as we see our own changing face

in the sea waves, in the wildflowers, in our children
running full stride in the fields of the world.
And in this harvest of our life, we feed the world

with our offerings, fully given. And the rest, the chaff,
goes back into the fire that sustains those
who will come long after we are gone from this place.

If only we could wear these wings of our second life
with merciful ferocity—and live as the ancestors
our descendants will remember as the ones

who would not turn away from the impossible,
or give up when all seemed lost.
Yes—as the ones who held nothing back,

as they rode through the center of the storm
forever tending what matters most.

— Laura Weaver



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Death, like all bodily functions
is nothing to be ashamed of
Each day our old skin dries
floats away as dust
to make way for something new
Ultimately, the whole body becomes dust
Death, like all bodily functions
happens to all of us
the body, the sweet companion
stops at the Gate
we kiss it like a mezuzah one last time
and pass through the sacred portal alone
Death, like all bodily functions
is part of life, it reminds our Divinity
that Embodiment is a borrowed state
Death, like all bodily functions
is nothing to be ashamed of

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