



Natural Transitions

Volume 6 Issue 2

Conscious, holistic approaches to end of life



Undertaking LA: On the Up

End of Life Doulas: Here to Stay

The Green Reaper

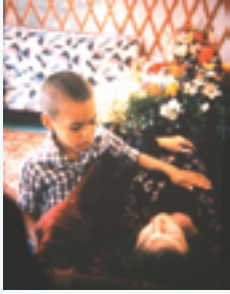
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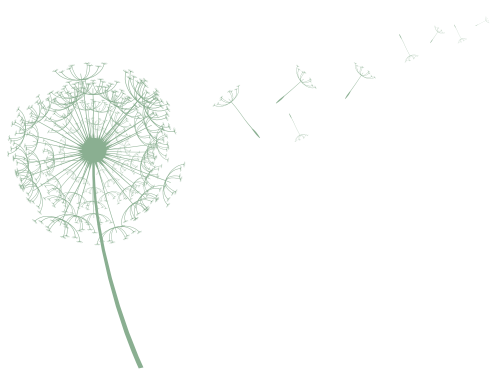
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The Charge of the Light Brigade

by Karen van Vuuren



Karen van Vuuren


A few years ago I was at a gathering when one of the women present introduced herself as a certified death midwife. Someone asked, “Who are you certified by?” She named an unfamiliar group in another state. “How do you get your clients?” was another question. “I haven’t worked with anyone yet,” the response. Okay. We all have to start somewhere in our respective careers; lack of experience is understandable for those who are novices in their fields. But to the general public, certification implies that a certain standard has been attained and recognized by an overarching authority. I hoped that anyone hiring her would inquire similarly about the nature of her certification, but I wasn’t convinced that all buyers would beware.

There is a difference between saying “I am certified” and “I have a certificate.” The issue of professionalization of these new heart-led vocations of end-of-life or death doulas, midwives, transition guides, and their variations has long been a hot topic. The new International End-of-Life Doula Association (INELDA) is a step toward validating doula-ing and making it comprehensible to the general public.

Then there’s the question: Are families or dying people currently prepared to hire and pay doulas to accompany them on their end-of-life journeys? I remember reading an article by a well-known writer on end-of-life who declared that people were always calling her for hospice recommendations, but no one had yet called to ask her to recommend a doula—despite the media coverage about this fast-growing career option. But with the upsurge in end-of-life doula trainings, death cafes, death salons, and other death-related phenomena, who’s to say we are not on the verge of a significant cultural shift?

This week I met a man who was a perfect candidate for doula support. He’d just learned his cancer had spread to his brain. He was lonely and alone,

about to face an intensive course of palliative radiation, disdainful of the doctors who asked, “Are you having any pain?” (meaning only the physical kind), but because of their busy schedules (and perhaps lack of adequate training) were unable to probe further into his existential state. This individual, who may or may not have accepted his mortality, clearly needed a companion, a counselor, a navigator, a witness. I thought of the death doulas I’d met and wondered if they would work with this man. He had no money, no network of friends, and he had not entered a system such as hospice, with social workers and spiritual counselors. But his lack of resources would mean they would be volunteers—and yet who would supervise them, and to whom would they turn for peer support?

In this issue of *NT*, we give space to the voices of the burgeoning doula movement who are taking doula work and training to the next level. We also hear from new natural funeral directors who are helping to change the most moribund of industries. We’re committed to following their progress and keeping our readers posted on the continued emergence of the new deathcare professionals. 



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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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Being Ending Well

by Michelle Acciavatti

“This is my favorite part!”

My husband steps back after introducing me, and I am asked the inevitable, “And what do you do?”

Over the past four or so years, I’ve learned to be careful when answering questions about what I do. And, of course, I’m hyper-aware of who is asking. If it is someone else from the #deathpositive community, I have an ever-evolving elevator pitch, but that’s rare. Usually, I start out by explaining I work with the end of life, while holding eye contact and looking for that first glimpse of fear glazing over. I proceed slowly with strangers, aware that what I do can trigger all sorts of emotions, brand me as morbid, and only sometimes elicit genuine interest.

Technically, my title is “end-of-life specialist.” But, if we’re getting technical, I made that title up. I am: an advance care planner, an end-of-life doula, a home funeral guide, a green burial advocate and founder of the non-profit Green Burial Vermont, a pregnancy loss doula, a community death educator, a hospice volunteer, a death café facilitator, a patient empowerment coach, a memoir writing teacher, and a mentor/teacher to those seeking to find their place in the end-of-life field. “End-of-life specialist” has a much better ring to it. I do this all through my LLC, Ending Well, which I started working toward in 2013 and founded in April 2016.

No one just wakes up and decides, “Hey, I want to be a death midwife.”

– Patty Burgess-Brecht as she interviewed me

Technically, this is true. When I decided, I was sitting at my best friend’s table in the late afternoon. We were talking about my experiences with death and dying and life-limiting decisions at a major hospital, and how I wished there

was something different. My friend, a birth doula/midwife-in-training said, “You should be a death midwife.” She explained to me what she knew of the profession, and I was hooked. I went home and used Google to search; no Wikipedia entry came up. Instead I found websites for some of the matriarchs of the movement—Donna Belk, Jerrigrace Lyons—and books, lots and lots of books. I dug in and started learning. I took any training I could afford, read almost all the books I could find, and sought mentors from anyone willing to reply to my emails.

You can’t just hang out your shingle and expect to make a living

– Lee Webster, driving me home from a home funeral intensive

In 2014 my husband and I moved to Montpelier, VT. In the year since that conversation at my friend’s table, I had left my old path behind and was fully committed to being a death midwife. I needed to learn what it was really like to work with the dying and immediately signed up for the hospice volunteer training that was about to start. Already I had learned that I didn’t want to just support people through dying. I wanted them to learn about the healing power of home funerals, and I wanted to introduce them to the concept of green burial. As I began working with hospice patients, it became clear to me that I could never have the relationship I was hoping for if people hadn’t already thought about their own deaths. I had been participating in the Montpelier Death Café since January, and I could see the difference between people who could openly engage about death and dying and those who were in denial. “It’s like when you used to go to AAA before a trip,” one death café participant said recently. “You get the map, the tips on where to stay, everything you need

to know to make your trip successful. Death café and talking about death is the way I prepare for this trip I know I’ll have to take someday. Who wouldn’t want to be as prepared as possible for death?”

But how to get people to talk about death? The options were there: campaigns like the conversation project and death café were in full swing. I trained with Respecting Choices and learned how to talk to people who wanted to talk about death, but not how to get them to open up. And I began to recognize how my own background—work in hospitals, a master’s degree in neuroscience, two parents with medical science backgrounds who had included me as they cared for their own parents—gave me enormous privilege when it came to being comfortable talking to medical professionals and advocating for myself and my wants, privilege most people don’t have and our culture doesn’t encourage. I started mining my background for tools that would make people feel empowered. When a friend had a miscarriage, I learned that one in four pregnancies ends in fetal death. I started training as a pregnancy loss doula to help answer the question: how can you say goodbye when you haven’t had a chance to say hello?

During this time, I proposed community workshops to anchor a local death awareness campaign to communities. These workshops were successful and well attended. I finally had an answer for how to get people to talk about death: invite them into a space where that was the purpose. First, I decided to create a big space with a community conference of my own to launch my business, which I did in August 2016. From that big space, I formed relationships and moved to small spaces, where I could help people “plan, prepare, and experience your own good death.” I haven’t looked back since. 

“I want you to teach me how to come into relationship with my own mortality.” – A client

The woman who said that was one of the first to seek me out. That question became the first to help me realize that this was my goal in working with people. Although we often choose to ignore it, we live with death every day. Death—or the fact that we will die—is a part of who we are.

I finished college a semester early. During the spring of my senior year I prepared to enter grad school back at home with my parents. One morning, the house phone rang and I barely recognized my distraught friend’s voice, but I knew enough to sit when she asked if I was sitting down. The day before, our mutual good friend had left campus to go home for the weekend. Her car had spun out and into the path of a 52-foot tractor trailer; she was declared dead at the scene. Three weeks later, a friend working at the college asked if I knew any dance majors because there had been a horrific accident in the dance studio. My heart sank: another of my good friends had died when she fell during a dance rehearsal. Graduation a few months later was a surreal event; amid the messages of how we were now ready to do anything, a voice in my head reminded me that one of those things might be to die.

“The miracle is that we get to live!” – A client

I’ve never understood why dying is considered a taboo subject. I took my first steps at my great-grandmother’s funeral when I was nine months old. When I was seven, my great-grandfather died, and when I asked my father what that meant, I watched him cry for the first time and later held his hand tightly as I placed a white rose in my great-grandfather’s casket. A woman I worked with this summer echoed my feelings as we spoke about her experience with death. Her husband had died in her arms. It was beautiful, she told me. And though she was devastated at the time, it taught her that life was a gift, a miracle.

As a hospice volunteer I have found a special niche in working with people who are in nursing homes. Many of the patients I have been with have had cognitive issues such as dementia. Even more have had difficult relationships with their families. In our conversations, I find that they are often processing their lives as best they can. I don’t think it matters to them that they are dying as much as it matters that they are able to tell their story. The first summer I volunteered, I worked with a woman who was no longer able to hear and had outlived all of her family. I had to write out anything I wanted to say to her. Luckily, she had plenty she wanted to say to me, and I rarely had to write anything at all. She described in great detail what Montpelier had been like 90 years ago. The librarian let me check out archival material that included photos from the time this woman had been a child. She used those photos to construct “her” Montpelier for me. And although it’s been nearly four years, I still walk through downtown thinking, “Oh, this is the way she walked to school; this is where her house would’ve been.”

Joan Didion says, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” People who are dying give us the shape of their lives in the stories they tell, but those stories also shape us. Just as I will never look at Montpelier the same way again, I will never watch another war movie without seeing the faces of men I have sat with; I will never drive by an old farm without thinking of the women who made homes there; I will never pass up the chance to hear someone’s story as it is true for them.

***“Will you call, Michelle?”
– Hospice registered nurse***

While the #deathpositive movement focuses on the idea of a “good death,” I’ve been cautious about defining that ever since one of the first death cafés I attended. My mission statement for Ending Well is “your own good death.” Another attendee told a beautiful story of someone who died “kicking and screaming.” We can come into relationship with our mortality,

but that doesn’t mean we become accepting or passive about dying. Even the stereotypical “good death” involves actively engaging with dying. Regardless, most people do not want to die alone, and along with the rise of the narrative of the “good death” has come a resurgence of “the vigil.”

Even as I type those words, I am aware that resurgence isn’t at all accurate. I recently realized that I learned to vigil not as an end-of-life doula or a hospice volunteer, but from my mother when her own mother was dying. Their relationship had never been easy. My grandmother could be quite cruel. We were not close. But my mother was always there for her mother. When my grandmother’s body was devastated by a recurring infection, she told my mother she had had enough. She had a vision of her husband, my grandfather—who had been dead for nearly 10 years—and she wanted to go with him. Without the help of a hospice agency, my mother went to be with her, and I went with my mother. As Christmas approached we sat with Grandmother in the nursing home. When she could no longer talk, my mother just held her hand, and I sat beside them. The room was silent and full of love. As my grandmother’s breathing slowed, I saw tears in my mother’s eyes. When my grandmother took her last inhale, I slipped quietly from the room to let my mother say goodbye. Instinctively, I knew not to go to the nurses’ station and trigger the activity that would follow. Instead I called my dad and asked him to come. He was the one who spoke with the nurse. The three of us sat with my grandmother’s body until my mother was ready to leave. It was this experience that modeled for me what it means to simply be present with someone, for someone.

I sometimes get a call from my hospice agency when someone is lingering in a facility. They are never people I have met before, and I rarely get much personal information other than the basics that are passed along from my volunteer coordinator, and what I can gather from the objects in the room. But I never make

assumptions. I feel like that final stage of dying is a great inward journey and I don't know what these strangers are feeling. I try as best I can to surround them with love. Sometimes silence feels best. Sometimes I'll say out loud, "Everyone you have ever loved knows that you love them. Their love is with you now. When you are ready, that love will stay with you, whatever comes next." I try to recreate in those rooms what I felt in my grandmother's room. And I hope it brings ease to those final hours.

"Our graves are our final stories."
– A green burial admirer

Not long after I launched my business, a cemetery commission member from one town away contacted me. Vermont had some statutes in place that made green burial difficult, and while most of them were changed in 2015, there was one left in place. People were asking about green burial in her town, and she wanted to know what to say. After speaking about the importance of green burial at an amazing community meeting, we got the opportunity to change the final statute that had been interfering with green burial, and green burial is now a fully viable option for Vermonters.

I had come to learn about green burial while training to be a home funeral guide. To me, there is a link between the two ideas. Both are final acts of love that honor the person who has died. When seeking popular support to change the burial law, I traveled around the state providing free library talks about green burial. Over a hundred people came out in eight towns. Many knew nothing about green burial; many of those who did didn't realize that having a green burial wasn't easy in Vermont. The discussions at these events were lively and informative. Vermont was the first state to recognize in statutory law that families have the right to care for their own dead, and yet it is one of the last states to make it possible for people to be buried in accordance with their ethics and values, for their graves to be a part of the larger story of life instead of just birth and death dates on a headstone.

When speaking about green burial, I often tell a story about my father's mother's funeral. She was the last of my grandparents to die and, like all my grandparents, had a conventional funeral. She was embalmed, had a viewing, a church service, and a cemetery service. But at the cemetery, they did not lower the casket. We walked away from her grave with her casket still sitting on top of the lowering device. I don't think I was the only one in my family who struggled with the feeling of leaving her exposed in the cold January air. I certainly felt no sense of closure from the experience. To me it speaks to everything in our conventional funeral traditions that alienates us from our dead and makes us passive participants in after-death rituals.

"In my end is my beginning"
– T.S. Eliot

In building my business over this past year I've realized that the biggest obstacle I face is the same one I wrestled with when I set out to have a career as an end-of-life specialist: our unwillingness to engage with our own mortality. We, as a society, are afraid of death, of dying, and of the dead. I don't think we need to overcome that fear, but I do think we need to overcome the barrier to talking about the things this fear creates. In my work, I ask people to work with that fear. I create a space for them to be themselves—fear and all—and ask them to make plans for their own deaths, their own funerals. I am present with them in their dying. I help them design personal, active, memorial rituals for their parents, siblings, friends, children, and babies they will never meet. It is the greatest privilege to do so, and it has taught me more about life than I ever knew I didn't know.

When once I would have served as the town witch, caring for the dying and laying out the dead, now I find myself at the crossroads of a major transition, one that involves everything from medical care to popular culture. The space I have created for people in my community is sought out by people who have read *Being Mortal*, seen a loved one die, heard

Beyoncé talk about miscarriage, or are curious about the Viking-esque funeral they saw on *Game of Thrones*. Slowly the barriers that fear puts up between death, life, and talking about it, seem to be eroding.

When I tell strangers what I do for a living, I am always seeking a way to create a small space for them to become aware of their fear, at least enough to engage with me about what I do for a living and why. Even if it is just for however long it takes for them to make an excuse and move onto someone else, people who meet and talk to me are reminded that people die, that *they* will die. Changing the conversation, even for a few minutes, is just another way of creating a doorway for death to be a part of talking about life. So I keep talking, even if sometimes it makes for awkwardness at parties. After all, doorways are just holes in walls. 🗝️



Michelle Acciavatti is the founder of Ending Well, dedicated to educating individuals and communities so that people can plan, prepare, and experience their own good death; and of Green Burial Vermont, a non-profit to promote socially and environmentally conscious burial practices. Find her at www.ending-well.com.

End-of-Life Doulas: Here to Stay

by Merilynne Rush

Suzie, a 39-year-old single mother of two teenagers, is dying of a rare degenerative disorder and is in hospice care. She lives alone (her children live with their father) in a small apartment near her boyfriend and her mother, who share in her care. She is lonely and needs companionship and support. A friend who had heard of end-of-life doulas suggested she call me.

Alfred has cancer and has been told he can expect no more than a year to live; he is not yet in hospice. Alfred recently got married to a woman with a 22-year-old daughter. He desperately wants to make it to his first wedding anniversary in six months. Right now he feels fine and is putting things in order, but as his cancer symptoms worsen, he does not want to be a burden to his new family. He calls to ask about what an end-of-life doula is and does.

Marion recently moved to Michigan to be near her aging mother who is very frail and has just begun receiving hospice care. Her mother lives alone and has several caregivers, but Marion feels like more services may be needed soon. She asks if an end-of-life doula can come meet with them and perhaps arrange to visit once a week for now.

The situations described above are real, though the names have been changed.

An end-of-life doula (EOLD) is a professionally trained guide who provides non-medical, holistic support and comfort to the dying person and their family, from as early as initial diagnosis through after-death care and bereavement. The EOLD may practice independently and contract directly with the individual or family or may be part of the services that a hospice agency offers. Either way, EOLDs provide several aspects of care. One is to help dying individuals and their caregiver(s), who may feel overwhelmed, to identify

physical, emotional, spiritual, logistical, and other needs, as well as ways to meet those needs among extended family, friends, neighbors, faith communities, and healthcare providers. The EOLD is informed about community resources, educates the family about them, and makes referrals where appropriate, helping the individual and family to form a circle of support.

Another aspect of EOLD care is to provide companionship and hands-on assistance in non-medical ways. The services that end-of-life doulas offer may include any or all of the following, depending on the EOLD's preferences, skills, and availability:

- ◊ Promoting and supporting self-care for the caregivers
- ◊ Light housekeeping and meal preparation
- ◊ Assistance with pet or child care
- ◊ Running errands
- ◊ Providing rides and accompaniment to healthcare visits
- ◊ Being available to the family on-call
- ◊ Funeral and burial education
- ◊ Keeping company with the dying individual or caregivers
- ◊ Hands-on comfort measures for the dying individual, such as foot or hand massage, breathing exercises, guided imagery for relaxation and pain control, etc.
- ◊ Purposeful dialogue, such as life review or identification of goals and priorities
- ◊ Respite care, either during the day or overnight
- ◊ Keeping vigil at the bedside during active dying
- ◊ Creating a ceremony or ritual
- ◊ After death care (home funeral and/or green burial guidance)
- ◊ Bereavement support

We very deliberately choose to use the term “end-of-life doula” rather than “death doula” or “death midwife.” In some

ancient cultures, midwives provided compassionate support to hasten death, but this is not the role of the doula. In Canada, the term *midwife* can be used legally only in relation to birth, so again, not a good match for our services. Given the growing global acceptance and recognition of the value that birth and postpartum doulas bring to families during the childbearing years, it makes sense to use the term *doula* at the other end of the continuum—doulas for the lifespan. EOLDs work consistently within the doula model of care of providing holistic, family-centered, non-medical support.

The end-of-life doula does not usurp the role of anyone on the interdisciplinary palliative or hospice care team, but rather is an additional care provider who helps the individual achieve the goal of being prepared and remaining at home to die in as peaceful an environment as possible. Emphasis is placed on making use of existing support systems and collaborating in care. The role of the end-of-life doula differs from the hospice volunteer's role in that s/he is available for longer periods of time, is contracted directly by the individual or caregiver, has more training, and provides a greater range of services. However, it is becoming more common for hospice organizations to train and/or hire EOLDs to be part of their staff.

I formed Lifespan Doula Association in 2016 with Patty Brennan, a dear friend and premier birth doula educator and author. When we first started talking about it, we thought we invented the concept of the end-of-life doula. Both of us are former homebirth midwives who began to feel drawn to the end-of-life transition. I have experience as a hospice nurse and provider of companion care. In addition, I am an advance care planning facilitator and educator and current Master's student in Hospice and Palliative Studies. I have

been a home funeral guide since 2009. Patty has extensive family caregiving experience. We put our heads together and developed a three-day intensive training and certification program. We also offer ongoing mentoring, business development training, professional networking opportunities, and referral services. To date, we have trained 61 people, both women and men, from eight states and are currently placing EOLDs with individuals and families in need of care.

Our students come from a wide range of backgrounds. Most have been or are some type of care provider (doctor, nurse, social worker, counselor, massage therapist, reiki master, etc.). A few have been healthcare administrators,

ministers or chaplains. Roughly one-third plan to establish an EOLD business that will offer a range of services; most of these are pursuing certification through our program. Approximately one-third became trained for their own edification so they can be better prepared to help a friend, family, or community member. The remaining one-third are discerning their path and are uncertain where this work will take them.

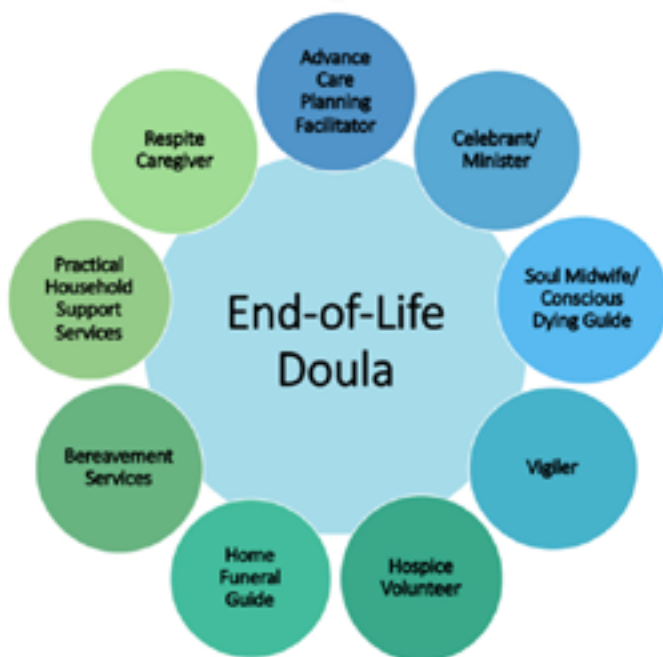
Lifespan Doulas Association is one of several EOLD training organizations in the country. In April of 2017, I began networking with Deanna Cochran of Quality of Life Care in Austin, TX. We reached out to other organizations to form a core group of EOLD trainers.

Together we have developed the National End-of-Life Doula Alliance (NEDA). Our purpose is to unite all those in the field—both trainers and practitioners—to define and promote the profession. By being in good communication with each other, openly sharing information, developing tools, and sharing experiences and resources, we will help the dying and their loved ones to be well cared for and achieve the kind of death they desire. We envision a world where EOLDs are commonplace and everyone who desires the care of a doula has access to one.

This task is difficult because there are so many new types of end-of-life services and practitioners, and in many ways they overlap. Care providers

End-of-Life Doulas: Bridging the Gaps

Developed by Merilynne Rush, Deanna Cochran and Patty Brennan ©2017



Definition

End-of-Life Doulas (EOLDs) provide non-medical, holistic support and comfort to the dying person and their family, which may include education and guidance as well as emotional, spiritual or practical care.

Overlapping Roles

The EOLD's role may overlap with other end-of-life service providers, with the notable exception of medical care professionals.

Cross Referral Networks

EOLDs make referrals to other providers of all kinds (see list below), based on client needs. Likewise, other providers may hire doulas, make referrals to doulas or have their own internal doula training programs.

Mainstream Care Providers with whom EOLDs Network

Hospitals, hospices, community organizations, extended care facilities, home health agencies, independent/assisted living facilities, long-term acute care facilities, medical concierge services, personal care homes, personal companion companies, adult day cares, and social model hospice houses.

and consumers are confused! Labels currently used include conscious dying guide, thanadoula, home funeral guide, and death midwife. When I first learned about home funeral guides (they weren't even called that yet), I realized that some of them vigil with the dying person and are present for the death, some are present only at the death or afterwards to guide the care of the body, and some provide only advance education and don't show up at all. To make it even more confusing, some home funeral guides provide services much further upstream, making them more like what we are now calling end-of-life doulas. And some people call all of this being a death midwife! Participating NEDA members are clear that an end-of-life doula provides a range of services from as early as the time of initial diagnosis, through death, to possibly the bereavement period and beyond.

The diagram on page 9 provides a visual of the many end-of-life care provider roles and the range of services an EOLD may choose to learn about and offer. As I write, NEDA is developing a scope of practice and core competencies and some sort of stamp-of-approval process that will help us further define the profession and educate the public.



Lifespan Doulas class participants (above and below)

We are also networking with national organizations in the field of end-of-life care. NEDA is a place for all EOLDS to come together. We acknowledge multiple training programs and encourage regional, philosophical, stylistic, and practical differences because we realize that having many training options will bring in a variety of interested practitioners from varied backgrounds who, in turn, will be prepared to serve a variety of clients.

Some EOLD training programs offer certification. It is important to note that currently there is no national oversight or certifying body for EOLDS. Anyone who is certified is simply certified by the individual organization with whom they trained. NEDA will be announcing collaborations and launching a website soon.

The field of end-of-life doulas is growing rapidly. Surely there will be more changes and developments ahead. At the root of our work is a desire to honor and serve dying individuals and their families. I welcome your thoughts and questions. 🌍



Merilynne Rush, RN, BSN, former midwife and hospice nurse, offers end-of-life doula training and certification through Lifespan Doula Association. She is a certified Respecting Choices® First Steps Advance Care Planning instructor and natural death care (home funeral and green burial) educator and consultant. She is pursuing a Master's degree in hospice and palliative studies at Madonna University, Livonia, MI. Contact her at <http://afterdeathhomecare.com/> or www.LifespanDoulas.com.

Three Doula Stories

The following stories are by graduates of the Conscious Dying Institute's Sacred Passage End-of-Life Doula Certificate program at <http://www.consciousdyinginstitute.com>

My First Doula Experience

by David Herrick

First, here's a little background information. I started my college education in the pre-veterinary program. After my freshman year it was pointed out to me that my grades and extracurricular activities would not get me into veterinary school. However, I was a great candidate for pharmacy or medical school. I was not interested in either of those paths. I have always felt that I am a healer and have searched for the modality that I am supposed to be working in/with, including multiple energy work disciplines. In my twenties I worked for over five years as an in-home care provider for the disabled, providing physical care, housekeeping, laundry, shopping, driving, cooking, etc. These are all great but did not feel like my path.

When I kept getting emails from the Conscious Dying Institute about their doula program, it occurred to me that this could well be what I was looking for. So I jumped into it and completed the program, which allowed me to serve my first client.

I was terrified. Even though I knew I had received great training, even though I knew I could handle any physical care because of my prior experience, I did not know if I could live up to the standards of the people who trained me, although they had expressed nothing but confidence.

Will was blessed to be at home, made possible by one of his adult sons who had moved in with him when it was clear his cancer was not going to concede. I stepped in because Will's ex-wife was concerned her son was drowning trying to provide all the care

by himself. And he was, so I was allowed to enter their world.

As a trained and grounded doula complete with my doula kit, I should have been even more focused on Beginner's Mind than I was.

The home was in total disarray: boxes, tables, chairs, a bird cage, a dog, all there in the living room, along with Will's hospital bed. There was barely room to walk. I entered and resisted my desire to immediately start cleaning. Will was asleep, so I talked with the son. I asked about the needs, what was going on, told him what I could do and asked how he'd like me to move forward. He was so relieved. He had not given himself any space and, after 20 minutes or so, asked if he could go out. I told him that I was happily committed to the time frame we had discussed—and off he went. In later visits, I learned that Will's son was going through all of his father's belongings with him and revisiting his life.


When Will woke and saw me there, he seemed pleased by my presence. The only unusual and awkward part of my visit was realizing that Will spoke only in numbers. His son told me what Will thought these numbers meant. I went with the flow, and we chatted for quite some time. I am still not entirely sure about the conversation, but it must have been okay, as on my next visit, Will clearly remembered me and was surprised and pleased that I had returned as promised.

Another positive result of my first visit was that the son had experienced that others could and would care about his

situation. He then engaged other support services to help him with his father's care.

Having participated in healthcare in the past, I was not concerned about being in that space with clients. But despite the training, I was surprised at just how fragile Will's body was. He was taking in almost nothing but fluids and was in a diaper. Some days it was a challenge to keep the diaper and any sort of bedding on him because when he was awake, his hands were busy picking at the diaper and following the edge of the blanket, around and around.

It was hard not to cry seeing the joy on Will's face each time I returned. He did not always remember my name or why I was there, but was so elated when I came to spend time with him. On good days we looked through old photos. Some days I just held his hand in silence or just held space for him. When Will was still speaking, he often asked his son why he was not dead yet. Would it not be better if he were?

I sat vigil with him while he was passing, but the actual moment of his death did not coincide with my sitting vigil. Will was with his son when he died, and his son kindly called to let me know. 



Grigsby and Anne

by Aditi Sethi Brown

Creative ways of exploring death and dying in our community was the theme of the gathering where I met Grigsby and Anne a year ago. They were a notable couple: Grigsby, a tall, slender, intelligent, poised male, a Yale-trained historian and Jungian philosopher; Anne, a beautiful, eloquent, thoughtful woman and former counselor.

Recently, I had the honor of bearing witness to Grigsby's dying process, an experience that has deeply impacted my thoughts about end-of-life care. Grigsby chose to consciously approach the end of his life with strength, equanimity, courage, honesty, and mindfulness, and with little medical intervention from the time of his terminal diagnosis until his death at home seven weeks later.

As a hospice and palliative medicine physician, I've had the honor of supporting many individuals through their dying process, of focusing on their physical, emotional, and spiritual care. However, until my experience with Grigsby's death and after-death care, I had not fully appreciated what it meant to have a conscious death or a natural death.

I was between Phase I and Phase II of the Conscious Dying Institute's Sacred Passage Doula training when I met with Grigsby and Anne, two weeks after Grigsby was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. I connected with them, not as a physician, but as a friend—essentially as a doula, offering support, love, and presence during a period of great uncertainty in their lives.

Grigsby was an active, engaged member of his community and lived a full life. However, his life took an unexpected turn when he presented to his local emergency department for an evaluation because of increased confusion and difficulty finding words. His medical workup revealed a left frontal mass extending into the corpus callosum, the part of the brain responsible for transmitting neural messages

between the two hemispheres. After consultations with the neurologists and neurosurgeons, he elected to forego a diagnostic biopsy and any potential life-prolonging measures and return home to prepare for his death. *Courage.*

The weeks that followed involved deep inner work, contemplation, and self-reflection, as well as outward attention to details regarding practical and interpersonal matters. *Honesty.* Grigsby was very intentional about how he spent his time and with whom he interacted in his last few weeks of life. *Mindfulness.* As he lost his ability to communicate verbally, he must have felt isolated at times. Despite this, he continued to do the inner work of preparing for his death with great discipline. *Strength and Equanimity.*

During my time with Grigsby, I was aware of the principles taught in the doula training program and how they were revealing themselves in my interactions with Grigsby and Anne. My medical knowledge and experience were only a small part of my offering to them, as they already had a hospice physician and hospice team to support them. I was reminded that death does not have to be solely a medical event, that it is a natural phenomenon. I offered an open heart and mind, a safe space to talk about his approaching death, and acceptance of his choices regarding his medical care, including the fact that he was not eager to use pharmaceuticals to treat his symptoms. The use of complementary and alternative modalities, including essential oils and homeopathy, CBD oil, and acupuncture, served him and Anne throughout his dying process. I chanted with him, shared Tarron Estes' "Practice for Death Meditation" in song, held a fire circle for him with members of his community, and discussed his fears, concerns, and wishes with him and Anne. I cherished my time spent with both of them as they navigated the complexity of their experience.

I completed Phase II of the CDI Sacred Passage Doula Training on August 13th and Grigsby died on August 26th. He died a peaceful, comfortable death in his own home, with Anne by his side. The care of his body after his death, including a home funeral and green burial, was also very intentional and inspiring!

A professor of history and an educator much of his life, Grigsby continues to teach others. He certainly was my teacher during the doula training program and beyond. His life and death illuminate one way to approach death consciously: with attention, intention, and honesty. He faced his fears, confronted his mortality with curiosity, acknowledged and expressed a range of emotions during his dying process, preparing for his inevitable passage in a way that I hope others can feel empowered and supported to do. 🌍



Taylor Johnson

Aditi Sethi Brown is a palliative care MD working in an Asheville, NC, hospice using the conscious dying communication skills with her patients and families. She is a graduate of The Conscious Dying Institute's Sacred Passage Doula training. This article is an excerpt from the CDI blog about her experience.

The Anointing Ritual

by Trish Rux

Some people have asked me why I took the Conscious Dying Institute's Sacred Passage Doula training since I am already a registered nurse certified in hospice and palliative care. I work at a 15-bed inpatient hospice unit and have done so for over seven years. My answer is thoughtful and measured: working in the inpatient hospice setting, I feel comfortable giving medications, managing symptoms, and educating the dying and their families. I am also comfortable with integrative therapies such as healing touch, mindfulness, aromatherapy, and guided imagery. I hold certifications in healing touch and focused awareness meditation. And yet, I felt there was more I could learn about working with the dying and their families. I was right. The Sacred Passage Doula program gave me tools, insights, and practical information to bring back to the hospice unit.


Especially meaningful to me was a reading about an anointing ritual before death or at the time of death that had a research component with high family satisfaction ratings. Since all medical units are measured these days, conducting our own research seemed a worthy project for my unit. The anointing ritual can be adapted to any spiritual belief or no religious belief at all. It meets a need for families to feel involved in care and to honor their loved one in a concrete way.

I involved the chaplain, my manager, the hospice nurse practitioner, and a few nurse colleagues, and outlined the process at a staff meeting; a video example was shown to help them understand the ritual. Some staff felt uncomfortable conducting the ritual and were given the opportunity to opt out; they could simply ask another staff person or chaplain to participate in their place.

Our unit was already approved to use lavender oil for aromatherapy, so that became my choice of oil for the anointing ritual. A soft music

component was added along with an LED candle to be lit at the time of death. I adapted the script from the article and tried it with the wife of one of my patients at the time of his death.

When I offered the ritual the wife readily agreed. She took the lead by placing a drop of oil at each point of her body in the script, and also added her own words as she lovingly said good-bye to her husband's body. She and I both felt a sense of completion and acknowledgement of the momentous event of death. A second family quickly took to the idea of anointing. We supplied the oil and the script; they carried out the ritual without any staff involvement.

Our plan going forward is to provide a small bottle of lavender oil, a script printed on nice cardstock, an LED candle, and soft music and lighting. We will offer this option to the dying person and family ahead of time, so they can choose to do it or not, and have some time to customize it for their situation. 



Lynnie Wright

Trish Rux is a RN nurse manager at a VA system in North Carolina.

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LA's Non-Profit Undertaking Is on the Up

with Amber Carvaly by Karen van Vuuren

NTM's Karen van Vuuren interviewed Amber Carvaly, funeral director at LA Undertaking, the brainchild of author and doyenne of *The Order of the Good Death*, Caitlin Doughty.

NTM: Amber, how did you get started in the funeral industry?

AC: I was a women's studies major. I went to University of California Riverside, and after that I worked for the downtown women's center, so we served the homeless and impoverished population of women of downtown Los Angeles. When the economy crashed, I got laid off and went back to waiting tables and started figuring out what my next step was. I didn't want to go back into the non-profit industry necessarily because I didn't want to be victim to grants—which ironically is where I am today—I didn't really get out of that.

I had a friend who was a mortician, and so I went to mortuary school. I started emailing Caitlin while I was there. Afterwards I worked for a larger funeral home in LA for about four months. I sat down with Caitlin after that to just catch up and talk about what we wanted to do as women and as funeral directors. She ended up asking me if I wanted to work with her, and now it's been a little over three years.

NTM: Why did you decide to make Undertaking LA a non-profit?

AC: Dan Pallotta did an interesting TED talk that I suggest you watch. It's about what it means to be a non-profit and how people think that non-profits shouldn't make money or just make enough to survive and how they don't deserve to have any of the money go to the employees. Pallotta was working in breast cancer awareness, and the year he was allowed to use donations

for advertising, he made five times as much money. The board members of his non-profit got upset because the money went to advertising rather than to breast cancer research. But he pointed out that people are willing to spend money on Coca-Cola—they'll throw their money at things that don't mean anything—but when that money goes to something that's for a greater good, people have real issues with this.

So I'll preface my response by saying that the idea of being a non-profit funeral home isn't that we're not trying to make any money and not expand. We wanted to show that we weren't trying to be a Forest Lawn, we weren't trying to make a lot of money, that we keep our prices at a certain price point. But if we're doing a training, the money we get for trainings goes towards doing free cremations. I do a lot of at-cost cremations, and I donate all of my time completely to do everything for free, so being a non-profit helps give us some wiggle room with taxes and helps keep our costs low, so that we can help to do things like that because other funeral homes aren't going to do that.

The idea of being a non-profit is that we're working toward a greater goal, and the greater goal is the dream of having Undertaking LA be more than a mortuary. I think that's when the non-profit status will be a lot better for us because right now we're this baby mortuary company, with Caitlin [Doughty] who founded *The Order of the Good Death*, and Megan [Rosenbloom] who has *Death Salon*. We're in these fledgling stages of bringing together different branches of a comprehensive non-profit. The goal is to one day have a mortuary where we can do in-house trainings and have more low-income funerals and where we can have services on-site. Right now, we rent our space from All Caring Cremations, so it's really hard to control our prices because we

have to pay them. The goal is that our non-profit status will allow us to get a building at a lower cost and maintain lower overhead, so we can start offering all the other little things that we would like to do.

NTM: Are you planning do alkaline hydrolysis?

AC: Yes, when that becomes a feasible financial option. But, again, all of that is contingent on getting money, zoning permits, etc., and I'll let Caitlin worry about all of that!

NTM: Have you been connecting with others in the LA funeral scene?

AC: It's been really hard to connect with other people because I don't have the time. I work 18-hour days, and if I'm not working, I'm sleeping. So getting out and talking to other people is really hard. What Caitlin and I are doing is very much the same as everyone else, but it is also slightly different. Right now I am focused on getting this to work and I am less interested in connecting. If I don't make this work, I don't have anything to sit down and talk about, so right now my number one priority is making sure I have something to be able to share and proving the model. That's been a really big deal for the last three years. When we first started, everybody wanted to talk to us, but we had just started, so I didn't have anything to offer. Now it's been three years; I have three years of running a funeral home under my belt and three years of experience and just a lot more to bring to the table.

NTM: How do you make your arrangements with clients?

AC: We make most of our arrangements by phone, and I have them sign electronically; that allows me to manage

my time better. We don't do so much business that I can afford to just be at the office, especially in Los Angeles, because traveling would cost me three hours of time and a phone arrangement costs me 20 minutes.



Workshop demonstration of shrouding

Trevor Christensen <https://www.trevorchristensen.com/index>

NTM: When you started how were you received? Are you going to any California Funeral Directors Association meetings?

AC: I don't go to those because they're expensive. But, everyone's been really nice to us. Caitlin and I were really bracing for people to be stand-offish to us, but I think that, for the most part, people in the industry don't care about us. I think they're just like, "Good for you guys! Get out there, have fun! Do it!!" I think it's probably because everyone else in the industry is exactly like me in that they're like, "I don't have any time to think about you or whatever your business is doing because this job is just consuming." If I'm not working, I'm thinking about how to make my job easier, constantly streamlining and fixing things...for example, the phones: We got G Suite, so I'm setting up email accounts, going through decedent files, making sure everything's printed, going through my packet, and so going to funeral director dinners isn't high on my priority list now. And there are some people in the industry who don't super love Caitlin's take on embalming, so potentially having other funeral directors passive aggressively smack me around isn't super high on my list. And besides I'm vegan, so I'd not be able to eat at a typical funeral director dinner anyway.

NTM: Are you seeing an upward trajectory in the business?

AC: Yes we are, and I'm really thankful for it. This last month and a half has been just insanely busy. Right now it's me, and we just hired an assistant, so even if we're getting three or four cases a week, that's enough to keep us pretty busy full-time, just making sure they're okay, doing the crematory scheduling, going to the health office, all that good stuff. I imagine it will only get busier, and I do feel a lot of pressure to make sure that I'm taking care of everybody. The families are my number one priority. I'm feeling like this is a make-it-or-break-it time because we are trying to prove that we are a mortuary.

NTM: Did you have death doulas calling you because they wanted to find a place to work and use their skills?

AC: Yes we did, and I'm super open to that. I think the public's still skittish about keeping the body at home, but we've had a lot of success with doing everything at our crematory, just bringing the body and washing and dressing here. Families really like that because it takes a lot of the pressure off them doing it in their own houses. I have one death doula I think is really

lovely, and I've been trying to find the time for both of us to sit down and work something out, but there isn't a huge demand for it yet.

NTM: What percentage of your customers want to participate in death care?

AC: Ten percent.

NTM: And what about natural burials? Are most people doing cremation in LA?

AC: Most people are doing the cremations because Hillside Memorial does green burials and their green burials are \$50,000. They basically don't want them! Woodlawn in Santa Monica is about \$16,000, and Joshua Tree is about \$7-8000, depending on whether you're getting a casket; but you have to drive 150 miles to get to Joshua Tree. That's a pretty huge deterrent.

NTM: What's the most fulfilling time you have had with a family?

AC: I have two answers and one probably doesn't sound very exciting, but it's every time I finish up a phone conversation with someone and they say, "Thank you, you've made this so easy." That is actually what makes me feel the

best about my job. Even I get confused when I'm looking at other funeral homes' websites! I get overwhelmed. I have spent all this time researching everybody else and what they do, and it's so awful! So when a family tells me that I've made it so easy for them—that's the best thing in the world to me.

As far as intimate moments with families, I had one family in particular—and I still email one of them to check in every three or four months. I send her an email and just ask her how she's doing, how her family's doing. Her 25-year-old daughter had passed away, and I helped her and the young woman's siblings dress her. That was a super magical moment because it was not something that the mom originally wanted to do or asked about; it was a sort of spur of the moment thing where I felt that it was something that she needed. We had the service and she wanted another hour. I told her that was absolutely okay. And then at the end of the service/viewing, I was going to be shrouding her daughter. But then I asked the mother if she wanted to stay and do it with me and if she wanted her daughter's childhood friends to stay. She seemed very overwhelmed and happy, and it just turned into a dressing with the family. It wasn't supposed to be, but it happened.

And it doesn't actually matter to me that only 10 percent of the population might actually want to do this. Recently I was looking over a very long, snide Facebook thread from some embalmers who made a lot of comments about how "the general public doesn't want this and it's so ridiculous that they would offer it!" But to me, it doesn't matter what these people say because with that one woman I helped, the rest of her life was forever changed!

When I was working with the homeless population, it was very much the same idea. You can't save everybody—and that's really unfortunate—and it's really



With Trixie and Katya

difficult to work with the homeless because it is such a black hole of sadness. Every single day these are the saddest stories, and you can't help all of them; but you can help make their lives better and maybe with one or two, you can put them back on the right path. To me, that's what death care is. I don't really care if not everybody wants what we do. That's not the point. The point is that some people do want to do it, and those people ought to have the option.

To clarify what we do: We keep our decedents in a cremation container of corrugated cardboard. If it is going to be a green burial, there are certain restrictions about clothing. It could be an informal viewing—most of our services are like that, not like church services. They are just in our viewing room in our crematory, where friends and family can come and sit and the decedent is tucked nicely into some sheets.

NTM: Does Undertaking LA end up doing free funerals for homeless people?

AC: We haven't had that come up yet. I know a lot of the homeless population usually ends up going to the coroner or the LA county morgue. One of the problems is that we have to have a

next-of-kin; we can't do anything without a next-of-kin. But working with the homeless is something that we would like to do. I've had a few people who were homeless and their families have come to us for help, and I can think of a few cases where we have reduced the cost to help them get everything taken care of.

NTM: Presumably the homeless are going to the coroner and then on to whatever funeral home the coroner has a connection with.

AC: Exactly. If they are unidentified, they'll go to the morgue. If there's a next of kin, there will usually be a direct cremation.

NTM: What has been your biggest challenge thus far with Undertaking LA?

AC: Our biggest challenges are administrative things. Talking to people is really easy for me. Trying to get out the kinks in paperwork, trying to get people to understand the funeral process, timelines—not so easy. People die and families ask, "Are they going to get cremated tomorrow?" I have to say, "No, absolutely not! It's going to be a week." That's one of the most difficult things—trying to get people to understand how soon things can realistically happen, and remembering that you are talking to everyone through an emotional cloud. I have experienced so many times going over everything with a family, and then I talk to them the next day and it's like the movie, *Groundhog Day*.

NTM: Are you having any success in getting people to contact you before death, or are you getting people mostly at death?

AC: We get a fair number of people who contact us before death, a decent number of people who say, I'm not going to die

any time soon, but I just have questions. That's always great. I'm always super happy to help people answer those questions—get them set with things like advance directives and having their next-of-kin situation figured out. It can be difficult when someone has died with no advance directive and there are two children and one child doesn't want to sign the authorization for disposition—those are always super challenging situations. But people are starting to be more savvy and call us when a family member is in hospice. Then I have the opportunity to answer all of their questions while they're still a little clear-minded. It makes the whole process so much easier once the death occurs.

NTM: How much is Caitlin involved with Undertaking LA?

AC: Caitlin is busy with her book tours, but she helps with services when she can. She takes care of all of the financial stuff, and I take care of the administrative coordinating and the services.

NTM: How long have you had an assistant?

AC: Just a month and a half. She's brand new. She usually does my death certificate runs, but I have to do a death certificate run today because I have to put in a veteran's death certificate and I haven't had time to train her on that, so I had her do a couple of others yesterday. She also delivers cremated remains, which has taken a huge burden off my shoulders.

NTM: On the horizon, is there anything new coming up for Undertaking LA? What's your big hope for the near future?

AC: For me it's just continuous case growth, continuously perfecting what we're doing. Everything I've been doing is just trying to build a solid foundation, creating something that can be duplicated. We're not really reinventing the wheel, and that's usually what I try to get across to people. When

they say, "What do you guys do? Tell me how you're different!" I say, "Well, we do everything a normal mortuary does." We are a mortuary and the only difference is that we are open to families helping to dress the dead. I guess the idea is also really trying to simplify and make things less complicated and easier to manage because I think as humans we have a tendency to complicate everything.

Reading that Facebook thread, I have to laugh because the comments these embalmers made are so ludicrous and ridiculously misinformed. Someone said, "I would never let them take care of my family!" So I had to stop and say to myself, "Don't stir the pot!" Instead, my focus is trying to build the brand and getting people to understand that Undertaking LA is just like any other funeral home, but we are more willing to say yes to things. The funeral home I worked at before did not want to let the family dress the dead body because it was inconvenient for them. Does it take more of my time? Yes, of course. Would it be easier if I did everything for you? Of course it would! But that's not the point. It goes back to the mission of Undertaking LA. Why are we trying to brand ourselves more as a non-profit and not just a mortuary? Well, it's because we're an educational service.

I remember what the downtown women's center was like, and we had a lot of material that was training material. So for me it's really trying to recreate everything I learned at the center and simplify: to be able to give my assistant a little folder with "here's how you run this mortuary" or "here's how you train somebody else." At the end of the day, there's not a huge difference between a non-profit and a normal business corporation. I'm just trying to run a good business.

A woman the other day said, "I just called three other funeral homes and everything was so confusing. I was trying to figure out prices, and then I called you, and you just told me exactly what I needed to know, and I feel so good." When somebody says something

like that, it makes me feel competent. I know there's a lot of information in my head, but can I thoughtfully and concisely share it with someone when they're sad and grieving and confused? Yes, it's the greatest thing in the world to hear, "You made this so easy!" 🌟

After graduating with a degree in Women's Studies and working with the homeless and indigent population of Los Angeles, Amber Carvaly obtained a second degree in mortuary science from Cypress College. She worked as an apprentice embalmer at one of the larger funeral homes in the Los Angeles area, but found it lacked the personal interaction and support she felt the families deserved. She now works as a manager and funeral director at Undertaking LA. www.undertakingla.com.

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The Green Reaper

Memoirs of an Eco-Mortician

by Elizabeth Fournier

CHAPTER 23: UNEARTHING MR. RIGHT

Michael took me to a funeral home on our first date. No kidding. He lived in an old, yet elegant, funeral parlour that had been stately in its heyday. It stood on a brick foundation nearly three feet above ground level with capacious steps approaching the entrances and verandahs. An early sixteenth century wooden icon of a little boy hung on one wall inside, and three pencil drawings by Old Masters hung on another. A seventeenth century Flemish chest with ebony and inlaid red tortoiseshell stood in the corner of the room. Red velvet paper covered the walls.

Michael led me through the building and up a set of stairs. He showed me how to cross the roof and traverse a thin attic space, which suddenly dropped us onto the balcony of the chapel.

“How cool!” I exclaimed. Michael told me it was just the beginning and encouraged me to explore further, letting me lead the way so I would have the thrill of discovery. The place was full of bizarre hidden doors and passages. I hadn’t been so intrigued since I poked around the oldest sections of cemeteries as a girl, only this time I had a companion who laughed with me when I made up silly stories about the place.

When I thought I’d found the last architectural surprise, Michael grabbed a grocery bag of picnic supplies he’d stowed when we first arrived and steered me to a set of pull down stairs in the attic. These accessed a small damp platform on the roof, but Michael had a tarp and sleeping bag stashed up there and spread them out for a dry place to sit.

“Come here often?” I joked, wondering if I was about to be the latest in a long series of women he tried to seduce in this private corner of the city.

“It’s a good place to get away from it all,” he said, doing nothing to ease my suspicions.

“Don’t your dates get cold?” I asked, not subtly.

“I don’t bring them here.”

“Why not?” I asked, as he shook out a blanket and spread it over my lap.

“People are strange about funeral homes. You know, either they’re weirded out about mortuaries or they have a weird interest.” I nodded. I did know.

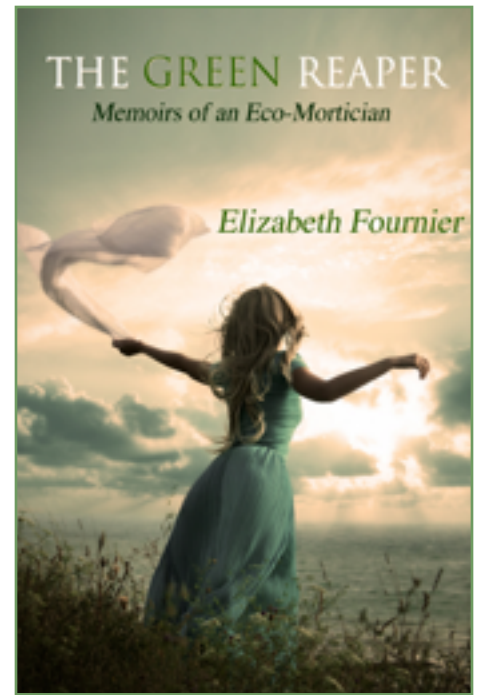
“Plus I kind of like having this place to myself,” Michael added.

“Then why am I here?”

Michael busied himself unpacking the picnic he’d brought and opened a bottle of wine. He poured a pretty good pinot noir into a plastic glass. “You’re not like the women I usually date.”

Personally, I thought that required some clarification but didn’t know how to ask for it without coming off as if I were fishing for compliments. I assembled cheese and salami on crusty bread as if it were the most fascinating activity in the world.

Side-by-side, leaning against the wall of one of the more interesting buildings in the city, we speculated over why the mortuary Michael lived in was full of secret chambers. We got to know each other without any of the attitude of the past. Michael came from a Catholic Italian-American family, and he loved them dearly. He was also a fisherman, which I found surprising for some reason. He wanted to know absolutely everything about me, so I told him about my family, my mother’s death, and how I had been an odd and lonely girl. I told him about my life before the funeral trade, as a ballroom dance instructor



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* * * * *

and DJ Liza James. It sort of surprised him.

We reached the subject of our work and what a horse’s ass Glen was, and whether or not we had any future career ambitions.

“I have a dream of running my own place,” I confided, “but everybody tells me it’s out of the question, since I am a girl with no capital or family business to take over.”

“Why would you want to?” Michael asked. “The big corporations are buying up all the little guys, anyway. It would be a constant fight just to stay afloat.” Like most people I talked to, he thought it made more sense to put my time in until I could get a management position with some parlour lorded over by the almighty funeral corporation.

“You’re probably right,” I admitted, glumly. I confessed how much I hated the focus on upselling and my thoughts about the industry falling short of what it could be. He heard, and sat patiently, as I further expounded about how embalming fluid and concrete and metal

caskets and casket hardware were doing nothing good for the environment.

"You get kind of deep about this," Michael observed.

I blushed. "Sorry."

"No, don't be. I like it," he said. Several brownie points got added to Michael's growing tally.

We talked about funeral customs in faraway places and the strange things we'd seen on the job and stories we'd heard, like Wang from China. Wang was attending a wake in his home when an explosion from a weather rocket took off half his roof and left him dead in the wreckage. Because it had been a stormy day, it was assumed that lightning had killed Wang and left half his home in ruins. However, as Wang was being placed into the cremation chamber at his own funeral, his body exploded, causing the chamber's oven doors to fly off their hinges. Only then was it discovered that a small weather rocket filled with silver iodide, shot into the sky to break up hail into rain, failed to explode in the atmosphere and instead had fallen through Wang's roof and acted like a bullet, instantly killing Wang as it lodged into his body.

The night was easy, companionable, and, eventually, the sun did rise.

"Want to go to breakfast?" Michael asked.

At a local pancake house, we stuffed our gleeful faces with fat cheese omelets and talked until the early birds had trickled out and families with young kids started filling the booths. Across the aisle from us, a curly-haired little girl started flirting with Michael, which made us laugh. He seemed good with kids; I asked him if he wanted a big family or small.

Michael shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not really the marrying kind."

My heart sank and anxiety rose up, but I did my best to avoid showing it. For Pete's sake, I chided myself, you're not serious about this guy, settle down.

"You want kids?" Michael asked.

"Just one. Just one healthy son."

"You probably want the whole thing, huh? Husband, white picket fence, a kid, little dog, and the SUV."

"I don't care for little dogs, and I don't think a white fence is necessary."

Michael nodded his head a few times, seriously, as if it was just what he had expected. Subjects got changed, and before long he suggested we leave and drove me home.

"Thank you for trusting me enough to come see my special place," he said as I left his truck. "I've wanted to show it to you for a long time."

He looked so earnest and sweet, I couldn't help but forgive him for not wanting a wife or kids. Okay then, he wasn't the marrying type; all it meant was I'd have to be careful of my heart. He was still a nice guy, and I wanted him as my friend. I gave him a hug and watched him pull away from the curb. I saw him watching me in his rear view mirror, and it was hard not to run dramatically down the street to stop him.

* * * * *

For the next few weeks, I spent all my free time getting to know Michael and avoiding my friends. Like it or not, my heart was involved, which seemed crazy—I didn't want this now. How would I break it off if I did meet someone interested in marriage and a family?

Being with Michael was so carefree; I had never been treated better by a man. Reviewing all the drama with Dante, a man who did want marriage and children, I wondered if I should just accept the goodness that entered my life with Michael and not worry about the rest. Then, I'd spend time with my little niece and a baby craving swelled up inside me until I couldn't contain it. One of my own to hold and love! The whole situation was confusing, so I put my mind to pretending it didn't exist—the time I spent with Michael was set apart from the rest of life, my separate, calm,

easy-going space. I told myself it was what I needed for right now.

We spent a lot of our dates processing cremains and doing funerary things. Or, we hung out on the roof of the mortuary where he lived and played board games. Michael was a Scrabble champ, but I could beat him at Dominoes. We didn't need any particular "date" activity; we enjoyed whatever we were doing because we were together—off to the gym, cooking, lazing about. Sometimes I couldn't believe he was the same guy who used to try to scare me by breathing on my shoulder in the basement of Western View. Then he would do something nutty like hide a rubber finger in our meal, but now I considered his irreverent pranks part of his charm. Who was this new, accepting Elizabeth?

Three weeks after we started dating, Michael said, "I've never wanted to get married before, but I'll tell you something: If our relationship is this good a year from now, I'm asking you to marry me."

If our relationship is this good a year from now, I thought, I will say yes.

Obviously, it was time to tell my friends about Michael. I organized a casual get-together. At first I thought I might invite Kevin and Ryan to a "Come as Your Favorite Stereotypical Italian" party, but thought how easily it might backfire and let that brilliant idea go.

A lower-key party commenced. "The 'Incinerator Baiter?'" Kevin asked, sampling Nurse Nancy's illustrious baba ghanoush.

"Please don't say that after he arrives," I begged. "I'm sorry I ever called him that. It would really hurt his feelings if he knew. Well, maybe not, but I don't want to look like a jerk."

"Mr. McCreeper McCreeperson is coming here tonight?" Ryan squealed. Willow chastened him with a dark look. I announced that Michael would be along as soon as he finished the cremation he was working on. The guys continued to joke and carry on until I was so nervous

I almost called Michael and told him the party was a no-go.

When he arrived, I could hardly manage the introductions. “We’ve heard a lot about you,” Kevin said mischievously, as he shook Michael’s hand.

“Oh, yeah?” Michael said. “Tell me one thing you’ve heard.” I about fainted, which made him laugh out loud. Everybody got the joke and started laughing, so I joined in and took beer orders immediately.

It was one of those excellent nights where folks relaxed and one-upped each other with stories, and the world seemed like a friendly, tender place. A perfect cocktail party with my favorite people and I hated to see it end.

“He’s a keeper,” Kevin said, as he hugged me goodbye.

“I’m so happy for you,” Ryan chimed in.

Willow whispered, “I’ve never seen you so comfortable in your own skin. Go with it.”

I shut the door behind them and looked back at Nurse Nancy and Michael. They were clearing the dishes from the table and chatting away and laughing together. It seemed my mother’s voice had been right after all.

* * * * *

Our courtship made work a lot more fun. A trip downstairs to hunt for a file might lead to a surprising, warm hug from behind. A message via the building’s intercom system could contain playful, sweet double entendres, that were even more satisfactory when Glen heard them and had no idea what they were about. It burnt Glen’s toast to see me enjoying myself at work; his

snotty little comments rolled off me and hardly registered. Happiness is amazing emotional armor.

Michael and I spent lots of time in the haunted bowels of the building, keeping company as he ran the ovens, or together on the road picking up bodies. Working together over the months gave us lots of time to talk, and we slipped into a cooperative relationship quite naturally. To my surprise, Michael became open to serious conversations about owning our own mortuary one day. He was also more pragmatic about the situation than I was.

“It’s not whether you can or can’t, so much. It’s really more about how you would make it happen. What have you got in savings?”

I retrieved my checkbook from my bag and peered at the figures—my

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finger moving down the columns as I calculated.

“What is that?” Michael asked.

“My accounting system,” I said, holding it up.

“Where’s your ledger?”

“I don’t use one. I record the check numbers and amount here.”

“And then what?”

“When I’m out of checks, I throw it away.”

Michael was horrified and amused. “You won’t be able to get away with that when you’re running a business,” he advised.

“Why not? It’s working just fine.” I had only been overdrawn once, my credit score was impeccable, and I was saving a big chunk of my income. I thought he should be impressed, but that wasn’t the case. He also insinuated the Internal Revenue Service wouldn’t be impressed either.

“Do you know how to use spreadsheets?” he asked.

“I hate spreadsheets!”

“If we pull this off, maybe I should keep the books.”

I scowled and insisted I could handle it.

“We’ll see,” he said, stifling a chuckle as he reached for my pad of checks. He did get more respectful when he saw my balances, which he added to the business plan he was already working up. “Between your savings and mine, we have a start, but realistically, we need several more years of additional savings to put together the down payment.”

I frowned. “That long? Are you sure?”

He showed me the estimated costs of the fixed assets—a gigantic number.

“Ugh! My life is passing before me while I waste my time pushing people into buying premium caskets.”

“Your life is not passing before you, Drama Queen,” Michael teased, pulling me toward him and kissing away my disappointment. “We just have to figure this out, together.”

Together. Damn, I thought. What a sweet word.

With our eyes on the prize of our own funeral home, we worked harder than ever. Weeks flew by. Before I knew it, I was taking Michael to meet my family at a 4th of July barbecue. Then in the blink of an eye, autumn arrived, and presto, the rainy days of winter. Michael took me home to meet his parents at Christmas. They acted like it was a foregone conclusion our engagement would be announced soon. On our way to Midnight Mass downtown at St. Mary’s Cathedral, I asked Michael if his family knew something I didn’t.

“They know I’ve never brought a woman home to meet them before,” he said. Ironic, I thought, flushing in his praise, how the man I had originally brushed off turned out to be The One. The One who always thought I was awesome.

Perhaps ours wasn’t the most traditionally romantic relationship. That’s to be expected when so many of our dates included a corpse.

He asked me to marry him at the funeral parlour. Valentine’s Day had arrived, and we were headed out for sushi. Michael had the ring in his pocket and a speech at the ready, but we were unexpectedly called back to the mortuary to intake a body. So, in the visitation room, next to a lady who had been laid to rest in a top-of-the-line mahogany casket, he asked me to share my life with him.

I spent the following week phoning friends and hearing the same comments about how they knew all along this was the guy for me; how Anthony and Dante were such douche bags (boy, did my friends love that word!) and they had had to hold their tongues and wait out our courtships; how someone finally came along to exhume me from the graveyard of lame relationships.

I organized a cross-country wedding in five months—funeral directors have mad event planning skills—and we were married in New Jersey at the Palace at Somerset Park.

I know all brides say their big day was magical, but mine truly was. Friends from far reaches of San Francisco and rural Wyoming hopped planes to the East Coast and donned periwinkle gowns to serve as my bridesmaids, as little girls walked in bare feet and sprinkled rose petals. Michael’s eldest cousin planted pungent and flowing herbs in white-painted terra cotta pots and set them on the tables as D-I-Y centerpieces. Two nights prior to the wedding, his mother presented me with an exquisite blue rosary all the women in Michael’s family had carried on their wedding day—I had the family florist weave it through my bouquet so it elegantly draped from my white flowers as I walked the aisle. My bouquet held small frames containing pictures of my mother that only I knew were there. And throughout the whole day, only I knew that she was indeed there.

One month later, I peed on a stick and found out I was going to have a baby. 🍓



Elizabeth Fournier is the owner and operator of Cornerstone Funeral Services in Boring, OR, the first green funeral home in the Portland

metropolitan area. She works as a green mortician and eco-educator, and is affectionately known as the Green Reaper because of her passion for home funerals and natural burials. Elizabeth has sat on the International Board of Directors for North America Natural Burial for the past seven years. She is also a member of the Board of Advisors for the Green Burial Council, the environmental certification organization setting the standard for green burial in North America.

MAKING A LIVING

by Bodhi Be

“Making a living,” a strange phrase, really, right up there with “earning a living” and the “cost of living index.” What I hear are the presumed requirements above and beyond living itself. These are business terms for a culture that sees us as consumers and cogs in the machine. They likely originated when food was first locked up. It wasn’t always so.

Long ago, too far back for most of us, our arrival on earth was welcomed with anticipation and excitement for the gifts we came to share with our people and the rest of creation. What wisdom had we brought so freshly arrived from the other side? Our tribe knew well that we were born with a purpose that would feed the life of the village.

To recognize that we have a purpose—indeed, that there is such a thing as “purpose” for us humans besides the dominant messages of our culture—begins with our steps towards tuning into our purpose. We are drawn to it as it is drawn toward us.

Today we find many people looking for a purpose beyond “making a living.” Too many of us have to choose jobs over following our heart’s calling. This often happens when babies and bills show up. Or it happens when we buy into the culture’s version of success and “happily ever after.” We turn off, maybe cut off a part of ourselves, put our heads down, got serious, and forget we came here with a purpose. We forget that our life

doesn’t belong to us. It belongs to the family of creation.

It belongs to life itself.

Our search for purpose may be because many of us have become more aware of world conditions; it may be because many of us are now parents and grandparents; it may be because many of us are reaching what we imagine is the last third of our life; it may be because many of us are recognizing that we might die one day; or it may be because the purpose we came here with—or the gnawing and longing of that purpose—has become too loud to ignore.

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DOORWAY INTO LIGHT is a 501c3 nonprofit, educational and charitable organization in Hawaii providing conscious and compassionate responses to dying and death since 2006.



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Too, many of us are learning what a truly awakened life of freedom and creativity asks of us. We're learning that real freedom comes with real responsibility. It comes with the awareness of how much we owe to all that has been given to us and is continually giving to us. Many of us discovered service as a path of awakening.

I often hear my great, great, great grandchildren calling to me. "Grandpa," they call, "in those times of madness, insanity, and so much injustice in the world, what were you doing?" It's a question I now live with. In my work with young people, I suggest, "Follow what it is you really love and find where that meets what the world needs."

In our trainings of death doulas, death midwives, or the term I find most accurate, ministers of death, we meet many who are being called to this work. Many who feel connected to "purpose," who have had careers and/or jobs, and now feel compelled to live in and on


purpose. "What is it that's calling us and where is this calling coming from?" I ask. What is a calling and what is it asking of us?

A calling comes from a deeper place than our thoughts, our logic, our intellect, maybe our understanding. It asks us to listen deeply, to let go of our efforts to control, and asks for our willingness and commitment to "follow the call." No small thing! To have a calling is to engage in the work of the sacred, and that work becomes sacred service.

As we, as a people, move out of a broken story of separation, toward the story of unity and oneness, many of us continue to feel the constraints of paying the bills, "covering the nut," and, yes, "making a living." How, we wonder, does engaging in sacred service and following our calling meet the world of needing to make money?

There is a wide spectrum conversation about exactly this. How can we charge

for living on purpose expressed as sacred service? Do we need a job to support our purpose? That doesn't sound right.

The answer, in my view, is found in our calling itself. The heart's knowing informs the body, and, listening, we proceed. 



Bodhi Be is a teacher, guide and ordained minister in the universal Sufi lineage of Hazrat Inayat Khan and

Samuel Lewis. He is an independent funeral director, hospice volunteer, end-of-life and bereavement counselor, notary, ceremonialist, and the founder and president of Doorway Into Light's The Death Store. Contact him at <http://www.doorwayintolight.org/>

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You Don't Know What You Don't Know

by *Chelsea Tolman*

The other day I was reminded of families I have served who were under the impression that they didn't need a ceremony or a service to commemorate a loved one. They felt that moving on meant doing something with the body and then continuing on with their daily lives. It's not that easy. Loss needs to be experienced; it should be felt in all its beautiful and horrible ways. When your heart is shredded like fraying fabric and dangling in pieces, the scotch tape method isn't going to work long term. Careful stitching and skilled hands are needed to put things back into place. Maybe not perfectly, but at least in a way so you can breathe again.

On one occasion, I sat with a father grieving over the death of his son from an overdose, and we went over the details of what he wanted to happen. For several years, the young man had been living in a different state than his family and had made friends and a home there. His father just wanted to cremate his son's body and go home. He even suggested that he could sign the paperwork and have me mail the ashes to his house! As I listened to this father grieve, he told me that he did not know his son anymore, he had made friends that the father had never met, he had worked several jobs, and bounced around different living situations. The father's solution was to bury himself in life and forget that his son had died.

I knew what had to happen: This grieving father could not go home and not know who his son was, what he had done, or what he was to other people! So I gently probed with more questions: "Are there other siblings?" No. "Is there a biological mother living?" No.

Posted on November 17, 2017, by mbalmergirl

(The father had remarried.) "Does he have many friends where you live, where he grew up as a child?" No, not really. Then it stood to reason that if this man wanted to know his son, wanted to understand what kind of life he lived and who he lived it with, it would be in the place the young man had made his home. I suggested that he have an open floor memorial, that we print an announcement in the paper, and that he stay to see who would show up and hear what they had to say. I told him he should get to know his son, if not in life, then with his death. He immediately got angry. He pointed out that his son's roommates, friends, and coworkers were likely the cause of his overdose, and he had no intention of seeing or speaking to any of those people. He would grab his son and run.

That was my cue to leave it alone. He had the right to just take his son home. But I got a call the next morning from the father's wife; they wanted to do

as I suggested. They had decided to print an obituary and put together a memorial for this young man. Then the father got on the phone and told me he knew no one would show up, but if one person who loved his son showed up, it was only fair to let that person say his peace. My heart fluttered; I was excited! I put together an obituary for this kid with the only information I had: born, lived, died, and where and when he would be memorialized. This was not a chapel service; instead, we planned an event with food and drinks, tables, and a microphone. I asked the father to send me digital pictures of his son, which I printed, placed in frames, and set on the tables. I put out a box with the young man's picture on it and set out note cards for his friends to write memories and stories for the father to take home. I made sure the caterer was on time and set things up exactly as I had been instructed. The tablecloths of brilliant blue adorned each table and a centerpiece of succulents sat in each center. The father and his wife showed up early, shoulders hunched, nervous, pessimistic.

As the time posted for the service approached, a person walked in, shoulders also hunched, nervous. I greeted him and asked his relation: a friend. So I introduced him to the father. Then more people showed up, and more and more and more—until the room was full! We had to put out more chairs to accommodate everyone! They all introduced themselves to the young man's father and shared with him what an incredible person his son had been and how much they missed him. Then it was time to start the ceremony.

It was a bit of a game to convince people it wasn't scary to bare one's soul in front of others. I fired up the microphone and introduced myself.

Barbara Horn



(The father and his wife were at the back of the room.) I asked that, as I talked, everyone in the room should think of their friend and what made him special. "Get ready to tell your story," I said. Then I spoke about what I knew, the things his father and stepmother had told me, how it would have been fun to know this guy and the only possible way was through them, the people who had worked, lived, and played alongside him. Then I opened the mic: "The first person gets a free drink," I said... chuckles (they were already free). Silence. Then one person stood up, made his way to the front of the room, and told a story of his friend. Tears, laughter, and pockets of silence as people took turns slowly making their way to the mic and talking about their friend.


After a while, there was no more silence; people kept coming up and talking about how this man had changed their lives, how he had made them feel special, how they had tried to help him through his addiction! We even found out that in the evenings he volunteered for a rehab center, coaching people who were fighting their own addiction! These people loved him, they missed him, and they wanted him back. So many people thanked the father for giving them the opportunity to tell their stories. The event was healing, and it was beautiful.

Then, when everyone else had taken a turn, the father got up—slowly, shaking—and made his way to the front of the room. I handed him the mic. He stood there for a moment and looked around the room with tear-filled eyes. It took several seconds to get his composure, to make any sound from his throat. Then, he talked. He talked about his son and how he was stricken when he moved away from home. How he worried everyday if he was alive or dead. He talked about the conversations he had had with his son when he knew he was high and would fear for him and ache for his safety.

Then he talked about the people in the room. He explained his initial plan to cremate his son quickly and just leave, but how he was encouraged to stay

and have this event for them. How he thought that no one would show up. How he was so grateful that he did this! He thanked everyone for showing up, for helping and loving his son who struggled so much. He thanked them for telling him how much his son helped them, that there was a purpose in his son's building a life here. How all of their words began to heal the anger and sadness he felt over his son's death. That there was now a lightness to know that for all these years, caring and loving people had surrounded his son. That he hadn't carried the burden of fearing for his son alone.

When he finished, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. I thanked everyone and closed the service. Some people left right away, but some stayed and hugged the grieving father. The box of written memories was filled to the brim. The sharing had been immense and heavy.

The father, who thought he had lost his son years ago to people who weighed him down, now knew they were a pillar of strength and encouragement, and that his son had been loved and cradled until the end. You just don't know what you don't know. 


Tyson J. Rider, www.tysonjrider.com



This article is an excerpt from Chelsea Tolman's blog. For 15 years she has dedicated her life to funeral service. It is her passion, her life's work and her pride. It has been an amazing and rewarding journey. Contact her at chelseatolman.com.

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Discovering That We Do Have a Choice

by Lisa Goedert

I haven't always been curious about death. On the contrary, I spent the better part of my life in denial of death, as most Americans do. Afraid of facing my own impermanence or the seemingly unbearable thought of losing a loved one, I have lived into the cultural norm of ignoring any natural curiosity about death. There is evidence to prove this denial keeps suffering at bay everywhere we look. "Life is good," is a popular slogan and is often the definition of success. Therefore, death is bad, the ultimate failure. Just watch any show or advertisement and you will find proof. We have become obsessed with youth and vitality. We stick our elderly out of sight, in group homes to be taken care of by professionals rather than facing the challenge of being intimate with the dying process. We die in hospitals when the professionals "fail" to keep us alive. When someone dies, we call another set of professionals to take care of the body and the memorial service. There is nothing wrong with getting support from those more experienced. But when the professionals we hire to help us during an emotionally vulnerable time end up coercing us into spending more money than necessary or misinform us of our rights, then this becomes abuse of power. If we are not given a fair opportunity to choose the way we care for our beloved deceased, then how can we be empowered to fully grieve?

When I was named executor of my uncle's affairs, I chose one of what I thought were only two options: a simple cremation. I picked up his ashes from an unmemorable suburban building about an hour from my home, which was the most affordable option I could find from the resource list the grief support volunteers had given me. A nice woman offered me coffee, handed me a colorless plastic box containing his remains, had me sign some papers, and that was it. No last goodbye, no memorial, no closure.

Nothing personal was included in the affordable option.

My uncle hated plastic and chose to live his life surrounded by nature in the Rocky Mountains. How were his life values honored at the time of his death? At that moment I felt like I had missed out on something. Maybe I should have asked the coroner's office to see the body? I didn't even know what I was missing out on, I just felt incomplete. I knew he wanted to be cremated, but I didn't know I could be in the room while his body was burning. To witness his final transformation, even from behind a metal door, could have helped me understand that he was really gone.

Even though my uncle's passing brought my attention closer to death, I had limited inquiry into finding alternatives to mainstream deathcare services. I just hadn't experienced anything other than what I grew up around. Of all the dozen or so deaths of people I had known up to that point in my life, very few were significantly marked. It seemed normal to hear of someone passing and then just going on with life, immediately, without honoring the transition.

There were some deaths I was around when I was in high school. The mother of one of my best friends died of cervical cancer, leaving her and seven siblings with an overwhelmed, grieving father. The father of another childhood friend died of a mysterious colon disease. Then in the years after high school, young adults my age began to die. One of these was Faith, who died of leukemia. One of my close friends lost his brother to a gas leak. He and his girlfriend gently fell asleep on their apartment couch, never to wake up. A car accident, and then two friends from my elementary OM team [Odyssey of the Mind, an afterschool challenge program] died in a plane crash. A college housemate of mine showed me a photo of her stillborn baby she had

lost the year before. She felt shamed by her family, so they didn't have a service, and she hid the photo in a shoebox in her closet. My first spiritual mentor died mysteriously in her forties; her daughter called me a couple years after I moved out of town to let me know her mom was gone, and I still don't know what happened.

Up to this point, what most of my encounters with death had in common was a lack of completion. Of all the deaths, I was invited to only a few services. There was a pattern of privacy and quietude, which taught me to leave families alone during their time of grief. In turn, I stuffed my need for resolution, unconsciously holding grief.

It wasn't until I was in my thirties and my own family members began to die that I really thought about funerals at all. My maternal grandfather didn't want a service, so there was no goodbye. My paternal grandmother died a few years later and there was a big memorial. It felt good to gather with my father's extended family and share stories together in memory of her, to appreciate her life and fully acknowledge her death. Even though we didn't view her body, I was able to say goodbye and mark the loss with ritual.

Then my mother-in-law passed. She had suffered a few rounds of cancer, but was in remission until dying suddenly in her sleep one night. My husband's family is very small and somewhat quiet. We flew out to California for a private service. I don't remember a priest being there. I just remember spontaneously singing at her funeral while the five of us stood around her gravestone, speechless. My maternal grandmother died ten years after my beloved grandfather, and, like her husband, she didn't want to bother anyone with a funeral. I received an email notice of her passing from her home care team manager and that was

it. I had been very close to her, and, even though I said goodbye when I saw her a year before her passing, I still couldn't believe she was gone.

When my uncle Alex took his own life amidst the grief of losing his mother and facing health challenges of his own, he left me in charge of his affairs. Something about being the one responsible made it possible (and real) for me to show up and meet death. The more I showed up, the more curious I became. Maybe I should have asked the coroner's office to see the body? Was I even allowed to see it after an autopsy?

I have never seen a dead body. When anyone I have known has died, they are just gone. No one talks about the transition or the body. People just give each other privacy, "out of respect." The professionals are called to remove the body and carry out the wishes of the family. This is the way we do it.

It took me a year to sort my uncle's belongings and affairs. This process

gave me the opportunity to engage in grieving the loss of my uncle and my grandparents because he had the family photo albums and the last traces of their lives. When the estate was complete, I transferred his ashes from the plastic into a more fitting leather satchel he had made, grabbed a close friend, and headed to the mountains to send his bones down many rivers, back to the sea.

Creating a weekend of ceremony was healing and a powerful way to say goodbye. Between this opportunity and simultaneously engaging in a three-year ceremonial arts training program in which we students dove deeply into the mythos of life, death, and our collective psychological shadow, I began to consider death on a more regular basis. Why hadn't I gone out to Connecticut to say goodbye when my grandparents died, despite what their plans for final disposition were? Why was it so important for me to mark the anniversary of my uncle's death and the closure of his estate by ritualizing the

spreading of his ashes in the mountains he called home? Why hadn't I asked to see his body? What was I afraid of: the state of an autopsied body? Seeing him dead? Cooties? Staring at mortality? Or my own grief? Probably all of the above. I was afraid of death or, more accurately, of experiencing loss. Like the culture I live in, I believed that denial was the best protection from suffering.

More than a year after the anniversary of Uncle Alex's death, I was in the process of a career change. Clear that I was finished working in nutrition and education, but unclear about what was next, I was resting in a transitional phase. One morning last spring I had a dream that woke me up from a deep sleep and also awakened an even deeper spiritual inquiry. However simple the dream was, it made total sense and my body understood it completely. I dreamed I was a "natural funeral director." I practice conscious living, conscious birthing, using natural medicines, and living in alignment

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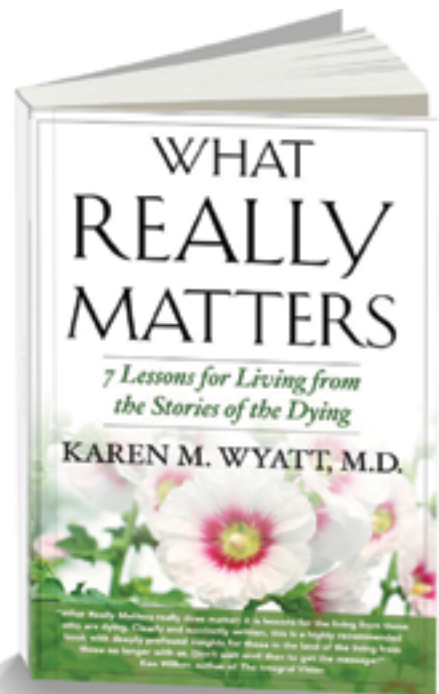
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with the seasons. I have also studied ceremonial arts. Why wouldn't I practice conscious dying and natural death care?

But I had no concept of what a "natural funeral director" actually was! A few calls to friends who work in hospice led me to the work of Karen van Vuuren and Natural Transitions. Synchronistically I was invited to a volunteer work day at her new business, The Natural Funeral. I showed up with a cleaning bucket and some brownies (nutrient dense to cheat death one more day, of course). And so began many conversations, which informed the question: "What is a natural funeral (director)?"

Simultaneously I started to research other organizations aligned with the concept of natural deathcare, which led me to the National Home Funeral Alliance. I went to the NHFA conference this past September in Baltimore to learn about home funerals, natural death care, and whatever else I didn't know I needed to know. I was surprised by the attendance: There were 130 people from all over the country and world, representing many different fields and personal traditions. I felt like a hungry bee in a hive; the non-stop buzz of energy permeating every conversation. I was surprised to learn about the history of funerals in the US, how recent modern practices are, and how corporations are buying out so many family-run mortuaries to the detriment of the consumer. I was shocked to learn that there is so much misinformation out there about what is legal in regards to a family's right to care for their dead. However, I was not surprised to learn that the average corporate mortuary's services can cost a family \$7000-\$10,000 as opposed to \$3000 for an environmentally friendly, family-centered service. I learned about the toxic chemicals and wasteful materials used in embalming and vaulted burials. The networking was diverse and I came home with piles of brochures for everything you could imagine, from funeral celebrancy training programs to washcloths for tending to the deceased.

But unlike many conferences this one was unique in that we were all gathering to explore remembering what our birthright is: our human right to take care of our own dead, rather than putting our power in the hands of the "experts." I was reminded to use my intuition, to follow my instincts, that there is no one right way to die or to tend the dead. I learned that just as in life, everyone has a unique dying process. I enjoyed the skillfully presented panel discussions that covered huge topics like cultural perspectives on deathcare and how to be a deathcare advocate.

Many of the workshops on the second day ran concurrently, and it was hard for a novice to choose! I attended Body Care Basics to learn how to wash a dead body and found it surprisingly simple and potentially transformational for those doing the washing. I heard from another participant who attended a workshop on creating ceremonies for home vigils, funerals, and memorials. She appreciated the focus on how to assist families in customizing their own meaningful ceremonies, rather than using a generic script.

The paradigm shift from powerless (chemical, out-of-our-hands) to empowered (natural, individualized) deathcare was the common theme throughout all the workshops. All of these experiences made me see that we are collectively remembering how to listen to one another and to guide others toward what they know is right for them.

The documentary films we viewed throughout the weekend also helped to illustrate how healing it can be for the family to participate in the direct care of their deceased loved ones. I realized that the process of being with the dying and deceased has been lost to the professionals at a cost not only to our finances, but also to our potential for spiritual transformation; there is power in embracing death with as much love and care as we embrace our lives.

What I have discovered, by answering the call of my curiosity, is that there are as many ways to take care of our

deceased—to say goodbye and celebrate their lives—as there are individuals. The individuals at the conference were interested in bringing this empowerment of choice back to the family and away from an industry that has lost its dignity in favor of corporate profit margins. Transforming our relationship to death and dying may awaken us to live more fully, illuminate our shadows, and honor death as possibly the most important transition of our lives. The more curious I have become about death and how we approach death care as a society, the more clearly I understand that our collective denial of death is a shadow that is coming to light. The more we become aware of the limitations imposed by the current funeral industry, the more we may choose to advocate for our rights to care for our own dead.

We have the potential to choose to live lightly upon this Earth and to return back to nature without causing harm to humans or the environment in our wake. We can participate in tending our loved ones at the time of death, just as we do at birth. I have learned that a "natural funeral director" may be more than just a professional hired to help carry out a green burial, but also an intuitive guide to educate, assist, and empower families to fully engage with compassionately caring for the deceased. This can be a cooperative effort. My curiosity has revealed a flawed system that I took for granted as being "normal." It has also revealed a deep human need to inquire into the ways we can bring light into dark places. 🌱



Holly Wilder

Lisa is a seasoned pioneer in the fields of natural living and sustainable community. With degrees from Naropa University, Seven Bowls School of Nutrition and Healing, and The Path of the Ceremonial Arts, she dedicates her life to exploring, practicing, and teaching sustainable living.

A Telephone Line to the Dead

by Sarah Crews, NHFA President

The National Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA) held its 2017 conference in a beautiful setting—complete with gardens, chickens, and goats—in Reisterstown, MD, late in September. Two years in the making, we approached the theme of “Advocating for Home Funerals: Stepping It up a Notch” with lively panel discussions, presentations, and workshops. Connecting seasoned home funeral guides with those new to the conversation, along with a good measure of expert and legal guidance, provided those who attended with plenty of advocating know-how to take back to our home communities.

The opening evening and first day of the conference consisted mainly of panel discussions. After each panel there was time for questions and the opportunity to brainstorm to take what we had learned from the panelists to create action items to take home. We watched two remarkable films that first evening: Heidi Boucher’s compelling and deeply touching home funeral documentary *In The Parlor* and the extraordinary, educational, compassionate, community-building work of Australian, Zenith Virago, in *Zen and the Art of Dying*.

The first panel, comprised of representatives of faith-based funeral services, shared Jewish, Islamic, and Buddhist perspectives on cultural and religious considerations while advocating for family rights. Take-home action items included: create a faith leader resource list; ground yourself in your own spiritual tradition; listen, let the family lead from their own spiritual background and rituals. Subsequent panels tackled the nuts and bolts of home funeral advocacy, working with authorities, and advocating with hospitals and hospice. With the help of legal experts, the executive director of Maryland’s mortuary board, hospice and hospital workers, funeral directors,

a medical examiner, and the Funeral Consumers Alliance, we outlined action items: volunteer for citizen advocacy positions on local cemetery and mortuary boards, invite your state legislators to your presentations, educate yourself, get to know your local coroner, help to rewrite release policy with hospitals to safeguard family rights to bring a deceased loved one home.

The second day provided attendees with the choice of two concurrent sessions on such topics as body care basics, creating ceremonies for home vigils, home funeral storytelling, and how to start a threshold care group. These and the other sessions held on Sunday were all recorded for the benefit of those who could not attend. We have made them available for viewing on the NHFA’s YouTube page. (Click on the YouTube symbol on the upper right hand corner of our webpage to get there: www.homefuneralalliance.org.) We also had the opportunity to view a short film called *The Art of Natural Death Care* by Katelyn LaGrega. It gives an accessible look into home funerals and provides

a perfect way to start the conversation about what is possible in the end.

We were delighted to welcome NHFA members from Canada, Australia, and Great Britain who generously shared their successes in creating access to home-based natural death care in their communities. We look forward to our continued collaboration with our international members as we learn from each other. It is clear that the NHFA is the international leader in home funerals, giving advocates in other countries a resource road map to further the work of advocacy with consideration for their unique cultural and legal circumstances.

Ongoing activities throughout the conference included an altar art table, a “before I die” wall where participants could write out wishes, and a meditation room. We are so grateful for all of our sponsors whose financial contributions made so much of this possible, for everyone who donated items for our silent auction, to the shroud makers for their creative natural burial sewing



skills, to the carpenters who crafted such beautiful burial containers, and for the installation of the Wind Telephone as a magical way to connect with our departed loved ones.

The Wind Telephone was inspired by a story told on NPR's *This American Life* about a Japanese survivor of the 2011 tsunami who placed a phone booth on a hill overlooking the shoreline where an entire village had been washed away. The phone, which he called the wind telephone, was not connected to anything, but attracted thousands of

Japanese each year who came to connect with loved ones who had lost their lives in the storm. NHFA member Dina Stander provided a telephone on which conference attendees could "talk" with departed loved ones.

Finally, it was with great gratitude, a few tears, and plenty of laughter that we said farewell to outgoing NHFA President, Lee Webster. It is largely due to her strong leadership and the work of a group of dedicated NHFA members in the Baltimore area that our sixth conference was such a success.

If you haven't yet joined the NHFA, we welcome you to do so. Membership in our non-profit organization is free. We encourage members to donate what they can to our mission of educating and advocating for people to choose their own after-death care. We provide a plethora of fantastic resources, including downloadable PowerPoint presentations; links to videos and articles; directories of home funeral guides and speakers in your area; state-by-state legislation that either supports or, in a few cases, restricts families' rights; guide books to purchase; ways to skillfully approach your legislators, medical examiners, and health-care providers as an advocate for keeping home funeral accessible in your communities; and much more.

Joining the NHFA is also a great way to stay informed about all things home funeral happening in your state and around the country. Find us on Facebook. Stay tuned for our 2018 virtual conference and fundraiser held at the end of October to align with Dia de los Muertos, Halloween, and All Saints Day.

We are also looking forward to seeing you at our 2019 conference (location to be announced) because it is by being in community with others, hearing tender stories of moving closer to this mystery we call death, opening our hearts, and demonstrating our hope for a more compassionate world that we reclaim the powerful practice of after-death care, where we all find strength and beauty in our shared humanity. [🌍](#)



Bodycare demonstration: Jerri-Grace Lyons and Claire Turnham



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

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Resolving Grief

by Steve and Connirae Andreas

Introduction

We have been teaching the grief resolution process in Master Practitioner trainings ever since we developed it over fourteen years ago. *Heart of the Mind* (1, Ch. 11) provides an introduction to this process, and a videotaped demonstration, *Resolving Grief* (2), by Connirae provides an example of it. This process is quite often very useful, since the grief response of emptiness and sadness in response to the loss of a loved person is something that everyone will experience at some time in their lives, and many people experience many significant losses. Unresolved grief is often a major unrecognized factor in a wide range of other difficulties that bring people to seek therapy, including lack of motivation, depression, chronic illness, and mid-life crisis.

When we first decided to model the grief response, we contrasted the experiences of people who were particularly resourceful in dealing with significant losses, with the experiences of those who were still experiencing sadness and grieving, and who had difficulty getting on with their lives after a loss.

We found that those who were grieving—whether long-term or short-term—did something that could be described in one of two ways:

1. Recalling the ending. Often they made the mistake of recalling the ending of the relationship, rather than the loving connection itself. For instance, they might recall the last heated argument that led to the breakup, or the ugly divorce process, the horrible terminal illness, or whatever other unpleasant events resulted in the ending of the relationship, rather than the loving relationship itself.

Even when they recall this event in a dissociated way, as if seen on a TV screen, the feelings are of unpleasantness, rather than loving connection. Many people recall these events as if they were happening here and now, with the full intensity of the unpleasantness of the original event. This ending of the relationship is not the precious experience that the person is grieving for, and this common mistake makes it impossible to experience the special loving feelings that they had with the lost person.

When someone recalls the ending, one of the first steps in the process is to ask them to think of what they loved and appreciated about the lost relationship, rather than the end of the relationship. This is a request to the client to change the content of their representation.

For some people, shifting attention from the ending to a special memory of the lost person is a complete intervention, and they don't have to go through the rest of the processes below. When they remember the good times as if they are happening again, they no longer feel any loss. As Dr. Seuss said, "Don't cry because it's over; be glad that it happened."

If their image of the end of the relationship continues to intrude and trouble them, you can use the NLP phobia cure in order to resolve it, and you could also use some other intervention that examines the ending in order to learn from it, and then applies those learnings to future scenarios, so that they are prepared for any potential repetition.

2. Dissociation. Others do recall the loving relationship, but in a way that is distant, separate, absent, or unreal, resulting in a feeling of emptiness, rather than the fullness that the person experienced in the loving relationship. There are a variety of ways to internally

represent separateness or dissociation. You can make an image of the person at a great distance, or you can see yourself with the lost person, so that you can see the two of you enjoying each other over there. You can see a dent in the bed but see that there is no one in it, or the image of the loved person may appear transparent, fuzzy, or ghost-like, etc. One person had a relationship that had occurred mostly on the telephone, and after the person died, he could still hear her voice, but it had a tinny quality as if it were a recording, signifying that it was unreal.

With all these different ways of representing the person as distant and separate, the good feelings of being with them are lost. There is only a feeling of emptiness, and this causes the sadness and grieving.

Resignation

When we interviewed people who said that they had dealt with their loss successfully, we found quite a number of people who had gotten on with their lives, but often with a sense of resignation or quiet defeat. When we asked them to think of the lost person, they would often sigh, their shoulders would slump a little, and their breathing would become shallower. Some would then say, "It's OK," but in a somewhat high and strained tonality. While this is somewhat better than breaking into uncontrollable weeping, it was clear that their grief was not resolved. It was dealt with only to the extent that it was controlled so that it did not often intrude into their ongoing experience.

Resourceful response to loss

There were others, however, who had dealt with their losses in a much more positive and useful way. When we would

ask them about a loss, there would often be a smile and softening of the face, and a gentle lift of the shoulders, and deeper breathing. They could speak about the lost person with softness, caring and happiness. One woman said, "When I think of Joe, it's as if he is right here with me. If I'm in the supermarket picking out oranges, he is right there with me helping choose the best ones, just like he used to." This kind of response is clearly much more enjoyable, and provides easy access to all the special feelings that they had with the person who is now gone. These were the people that we studied to find out how they could be congruently happy about a significant loss.

When we asked them how they thought of the lost person, we found that they literally thought of them as if they were still present, and this gave them access to all the good feelings that they had during the actual relationship. There are a variety of ways to do this. Often people will simply think of the lost person as if s/he is nearby, life-size and three-dimensional, moving and breathing, and able to offer both verbal conversation and nonverbal response, as if s/he were physically alive and present in the real world. Some represent the lost person as if s/he were physically present in their heart, or chest area, or present in their whole body in some way. One person felt the lost person as if he were a comfortable close-fitting sheath embracing her whole body. Others had different ways of representing the lost person, but all of them resulted in a strong sense of the person being fully present with them in the moment, and easy to contact.

"Object constancy"

When we thought about this a bit, we realized that this way of recalling the lost person is really no different from what most of us do when someone we love is physically absent for a short time. Think now of someone who is very special to you in an existing relationship, but who is not physically near you at the moment, and notice how you represent that person in your mind. What images,

sounds or voices, and feelings do you use to think of that person?..

When I (Steve) do this with Connirae, who is in town on errands at the moment, she is standing by my left side, life-size and breathing, and she feels present with me, as if she were actually in the room, so the good feelings that I have had with her are readily available to me. Even though it is possible that she was actually killed in a car accident, or ran off with another man, I can represent her as if the relationship still exists, and enjoy all the warm feelings that are part of that relationship. Psychologists have called this ability object constancy, and the principles used in the grief resolution process can also be used to teach this ability.

Separation anxiety

Object constancy is a skill that smaller children have not yet learned. When mommy leaves, it is as if she is gone forever, and the small child will weep inconsolably, in what is often called separation anxiety. Luckily, most small children are also unable to keep the image of mommy leaving in their awareness for very long, and are easily distracted by other events. It takes some time for the child to learn how to keep an associated image of mommy with them, so that they can retain the feeling of the comfort and security of the relationship when she is gone for a while.

As the foregoing shows, whether or not a person thinks of someone as absent or present is independent of reality, and whether an outside observer would say that there is an ongoing relationship



Karen van Vuuren

or not. It is only dependent on how the person represents the loved person in their mind, and this is the key to the grief resolution process.

The essence of this process is to teach this important skill to someone who is grieving about someone who is now represented as separate and gone. Since there is a great deal of variation in exactly how an individual person represents someone as either lost or present, we first have to gather some information to find out exactly how this particular person does it.

Gathering information

We ask someone who is grieving to first think about someone special who feels present in his/her life (although they are

not physically present at the moment, and may be dead or gone permanently), and then about the person they are grieving about. Then we ask them to think of the two people simultaneously, and ask them to notice the submodality process differences between them. The loss will typically be represented as distant and separate in some way, and with a feeling of emotional emptiness, while the existing relationship will be represented with a sense of presence and emotional fullness.

There will typically be very important differences in the location of these representations in personal space. For instance, one may be close, to the left, and larger, etc. while the other is farther, to the right, and smaller, etc. There are usually many other differences. One image may be brighter than the other, or more colorful, or moving, one may be silent while the other has sounds or voices, etc. These are all differences that are completely independent of the content of the representations. Once these differences are known, it is a fairly simple process to transform a situation of emptiness and grieving into one of fullness and rejoicing.

Usually taking the image of the loss experience and moving it to the location of the experience of presence is all that is needed to transform the loss into an experience of felt presence. Typically the other differences in brightness, color, movement, etc., change spontaneously when the location is changed. If these other parameters do not change spontaneously, we simply ask the client to change them until the loss experience is fully transformed into an experience of presence.

When this transformation is complete, they will recover the good feelings that they had with the lost person. When this occurs, the client will often cry, but these tears are very different from the tears of loss. These are tears of reunion with the lost feelings, and it is important to allow the client to take time to experience them fully.

Reframing objections

Most people are quite happy to be able to transform their grieving to a reconnection with the lost experience, but some will have objections. Before proceeding, it is very important to respect these objections, and find out what the positive outcome of each objection is. Once the outcome is known, the task is to find a way that the transformation will either not interfere with the outcome of the objection, or even support it better than the grieving does. Here are a few examples:

1. *I don't want to say goodbye.* "I agree with you completely. Many people have the mistaken notion that they have to say goodbye in order to stop grieving, but that is exactly backwards. What is necessary is to say hello again and reestablish the loving connection that you once had with that person."

One way to convince a client of the value of reviving the positive lost experience is to say to them, "I'm sure you have heard about amnesia, the forgetting of past events. If I could give you complete amnesia for all your experiences of the lost person, it would be as if you had never known them, so you wouldn't grieve their loss. Now I want to ask you a question, and I want you to give it careful consideration before answering. 'If I offered you complete amnesia for ever having known this person, would you accept that solution?'"

Of all the people I have said this to, not a single one has said, "Yes," driving home the value of remembering the treasured experiences that have been lost.

2. *If I experienced the lost person as being here with me, people would think I'm nuts.* "We certainly don't want that to happen. But I think that could only be a problem if you talk to others out loud. Throughout your life you think of other people, and perhaps even have internal conversations with them—I know I do—without others having any idea what is going on in my head."

3. *If I experienced the lost person as being here with me, it might interfere with my relating to other people in reality.* "We certainly don't want to do anything that would interfere with how you relate to others in the present. I think that you would agree that your preoccupation with grieving for this lost person has been greatly interfering with your relating with other people. On the other hand, the way that you think of your friend gives you a felt sense of connection that actually supports your connecting with others when that's appropriate, and I can promise you that thinking of the lost person will work in the same way. And of course if I am wrong, we can always change it back to the way it is now."

4. *Grieving is a way to honor the dead.* "I completely support your desire to honor the lost person, and grieving certainly is an expression of the depth of your feeling. On the other hand, what better way to honor this person could there be than to carry him joyfully with you in your heart for the rest of your days?"

"If you died tomorrow, would you want your loved ones to grieve and be unhappy, or to remember you joyfully with full feelings of love and appreciation for your special qualities as they move on with their lives? Which way do you think the person you have lost would prefer?"

5. *Well, I guess it would be fine for me to do that, but if I were happy about the person who is gone, my family and friends would think that I didn't care about her/him.* "You want to be sure that those around you don't misunderstand you. You can either explain in detail what you are experiencing, and offer them the same kind of choice that I am offering you, or you can simply put on a sad face at appropriate times, to fit their idea of how you should be reacting."

Whatever the objection, we assume that it is based on a positive and worthwhile outcome that the person is concerned about, and our task is to find a way that

the person can proceed with the grief resolution process, confident that the objection will be fully respected, and its positive outcome preserved.

Resolving grief outline

Part I: Reunion with the lost experience

Someone who is grieving typically represents the lost person as separate from them in the past. Part I of the grief pattern recovers this lost experience so that it becomes an associated resource that is fully experienced in the present. The following steps are written as instructions for you to learn this process, either with yourself, and/or working with someone else.

Preliminary step. Find a “break state” stimulus. If the person is crying or depressed, etc., you need to find a way to change this state to a more useful state before you attempt to begin the process. Even if the client starts the process in a good state, s/he may slip into grieving as you go through the early stages of the process, so you may need to be able to break state later. Asking the client to stand up and walk around, introducing a startling distraction, or asking the client about an experience of resourcefulness or competence, etc. will usually be sufficient to break state.

1. Loss (absence/emptiness). Think of an experience of one of the two following options:

a. An actual loss that you are grieving about and about which you feel a sense of emptiness or absence, or a loss that you haven't fully dealt with yet. “Think of someone you are presently grieving about, or an unresolved loss that makes you feel uncomfortable when you think about it.” Make very sure that your representation is of what you valued and didn't want to lose, not the loss of the relationship. For example, if your child died of cancer, and you recall the child as emaciated and comatose shortly before death, that is probably not what you are sorry you no longer have. What

leads to grieving is what you valued and now miss—the child's laughter and play, special qualities, future promise, etc. If the person just sees the ill child or a coffin, ask, “How do you know something valuable was lost?” or “How do you know this is worth grieving over?” until s/he thinks of the valued experience, not its negation. This step is extremely important; the pattern will not work without it, and any attempt to proceed with the process will plunge the client into unnecessary unpleasantness.

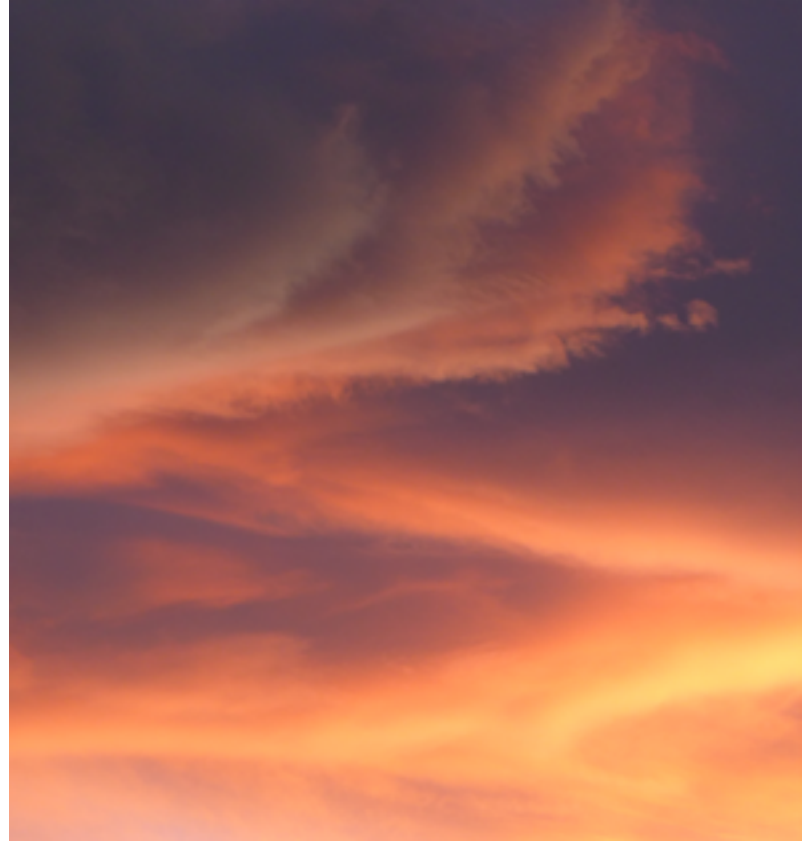
b. A potential loss that you hope never happens, but if it does, you'd like to be prepared for it. “Think of someone who is very precious to you and represent this special relationship, but as forever lost and gone.” You can imagine that you have just been told that s/he recently died in a car accident, and use that representation. If you choose this option, you will be doing “pregrieving,” programming in a useful coping response to a possible future loss.

Calibration. As the person accesses the experience of loss, notice all the many nonverbal responses that you can observe in their breathing, posture, facial expressions, etc. so that later in the process you can recognize when it is changed, and notice if this state recurs.

2. Presence (fullness). Now think of an experience of one of the following:

a. A loss experienced as presence “Think of a positive experience of an

actual loss that does not feel like a loss. Even though s/he is actually dead or gone, you experience the lost person as being 'still with you' in a positive and resourceful way. You can still feel all



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the good feelings that you had with that special person. You have a vital sense of presence or fullness when you think of this person, as if s/he were not lost to you.”

b. Someone you care for who is not actually present “Think of someone who you typically have available to you in your life but who is not physically present at this moment as you think about him/her now.” For example, you have a loving friend, a spouse, or a child who is actually distant at the moment. Yet when you think about this person, you experience him/her with you as a present resource. Most people can easily think of an example of this. Even if someone is very socially isolated, there will be some brief experiences of a warm relationship. (And if you can't find one, you can help them create one.)

Warning: If you use this option, be very cautious about presuppositions that may be linked to this experience that may not be appropriate, such as that the person could always be contacted again in the real world. You can say, “We are using this experience only to find out how you already know how to represent someone as present with you so that you can learn how to regain the feelings that you had in that loss experience. You and I both know that you won’t be able to contact that lost person in real life in the future, the way you can with the person who is still in your life.”

Calibration Notice – all the nonverbal responses that distinguish this state from the previous experience of loss. Later you will use these responses to verify that the loss has been successfully transformed into presence.

3. Contrastive analysis. “Compare these two internal experiences of loss and presence, in order to notice the process differences in how you think of them. When you think of the loss experience, what do you see/hear/feel (tactilely)? When you think of the presence experience, what do you see/hear/feel (tactilely)?” The location of the two representation in the person’s personal space is particularly important, and may be all the information that you really need. (If the person is in considerable distress, move directly to step 5.) Make a list of all the submodality process differences between the two. For instance, the loss may be a dissociated, still, black and white photograph, while the presence is an associated color movie, etc. Especially note differences in movie/slide, association/dissociation, and transparency.

4. Testing submodality differences. (optional) Usually all you actually need is the location of the two representations in space, but sometimes it is useful to know about other differences, and they can give you useful information for checking later, as well as a valuable experiential basis for working with others.

Try changing each of the submodality differences on your list one at a time in order to modify the loss experience and make it similar to the experience of presence. For instance, “Watch the still photograph, and allow it to unfold into a continuous movie of what happened before and/or after the still photograph. When the still has become a movie, notice to what extent that changes your feeling of loss into a feeling of fullness.” Change each submodality back before testing the next one. In the example given, you would make the movie of loss back into a slide before changing the black and white into color. Find out which submodalities are most powerful in reducing the kinesthetic feeling of loss and increasing the sense of presence. If you find that changing one submodality automatically changes some other submodalities on your list, that is an indication that it is one of the more powerful ones, what we call a “driver.”

5. Congruence check. “Do you have any objections to changing your experience of this loss, so that you experience that person as being a present resource? Would any of your family members object if you stopped grieving now?” Satisfy any/all objections before proceeding, primarily through content reframing, as discussed earlier.

6. Transformation (“mapping across”). Change the experience of loss into one of presence and fullness, starting with the most powerful submodalities you have identified. Usually changing the location of the loss image to the location of the presence image will be enough, and all the other differences will change spontaneously. “Allow that image of the lost person to move over to the location of the presence image.” But occasionally it is helpful to also suggest making other changes. “As that image moves into that other location, you will probably find that it also becomes life-size and three-dimensional, and the color will change to pastel hues,” etc. Usually the content of the representation remains the same. However, at times the content may spontaneously change, or need to be adjusted in order to match the structure of presence.

As the person makes the change, there will usually be a softening and relaxation of posture and facial features, and often tears. These will usually be the soft tears of reunion, and this is a very good sign that the transformation of the loss experience has occurred in a powerful way. However, I can’t always tell the difference between the tears of reunion and the tears of grief, so I always ask to be sure. “I need to check on something with you. There are tears of sadness when something is lost, and there are tears of reunion when something is regained. I think that what you are experiencing now are tears of reunion; is that correct?” If they are actually tears of sadness, it means that something was missed in earlier steps, and it’s necessary to back up one or more steps to determine what is incomplete, and finish it before proceeding.

7. Testing. “Think of the loss experience now. Does it feel like a resource to you in the same way as the original presence experience? Is the new representation of the loss now the same as the presence, in terms of the submodalities?” Observe the person’s nonverbal responses to see if they match the calibration you did in the original “presence” experience (step 2). Direction of gaze is usually a very good indication of whether s/he is thinking of the loss or presence experience, but there should be many other differences that will give you the same information. If there are still differences, identify them and use them to complete the change. Occasionally a few differences will remain between the original experience of presence and the new representation of what had previously been a loss. As long as the person feels it as a fully resourceful presence, it does not have to be a perfect match.

Part II: Reengaging with the world

Part I utilizes whatever internal resources and codings the person already uses in order to transform an experience of something lost in the past into a resource experienced in the present. Some people's natural strategies for getting over loss don't include programming them to seek out appropriate nourishing experiences in the real world to replace the lost ones. It's possible that they could feel good about their internal resources, and just sit in a closet for the rest of their lives. Part II is derived from the most effective strategies for getting over a loss, and makes sure that the person will actively seek out appropriate new experiences in the future.

1. Access the valued experience.

"Take the valued experience that you just transformed from a loss into presence and fullness, and represent it in whatever way is natural and easiest for you now."

2. Identify values/outcomes.

"Keeping that representation in mind, identify and represent in a different location the qualities, aspects, values or outcomes of that experience that make it valuable and special to you. For example, if you lost a good friend, perhaps you valued that friendship because you felt that you could just be yourself with that person, or you enjoyed the particular bizarre sense of humor that s/he had. Think of the special qualities of the relationship you had with this person—the love, comfort, stability, tenderness, humor, spontaneity, or whatever else was very special to you about the experiences you shared with that person. I want you to think of these qualities that made that relationship valuable. Ask yourself the question, "What did that relationship provide for me that was valuable?"

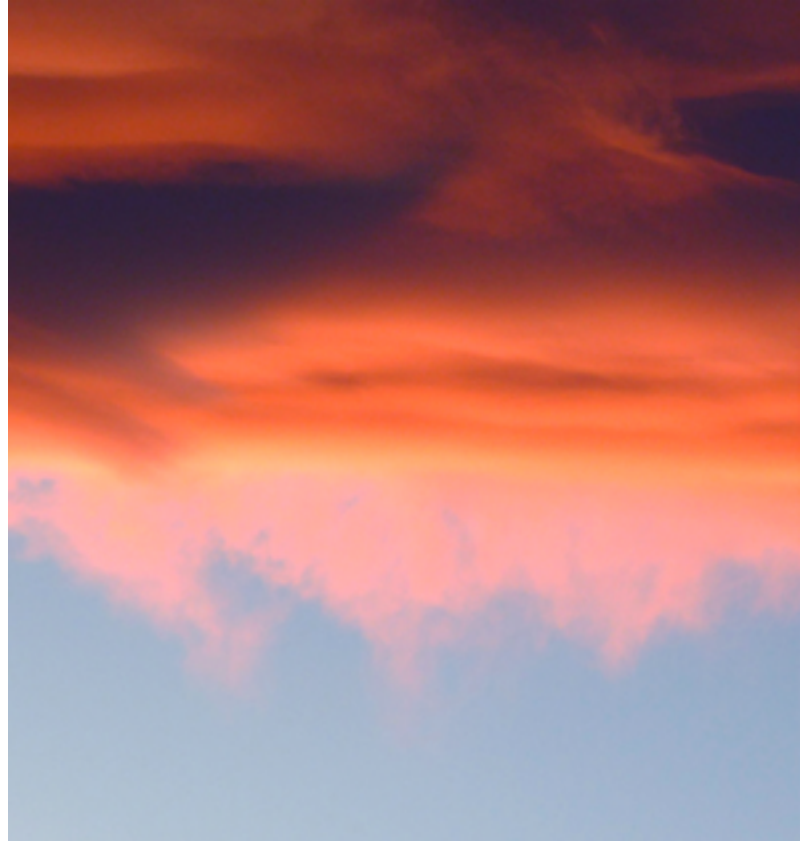
As these instructions are given, it can be helpful to gesture first to the location in space where the person represents the presence, and then to a separate location, in the quadrant of the visual field in

which the person constructs images (usually upper right).

3. Transformation. "If this kind of experience, with these qualities, were to occur in your future, what form might it take? How could you experience these qualities and satisfy these outcomes in different ways with other people in the future, considering your present age and living situation, etc.? Preserving these qualities, values, or outcomes allows additional representations to form (gesturing to yet another location, also in the visual construct quadrant) that are appropriate to who you are now and into the future. These representations will likely be somewhat different from the experiences you had in the past, in order to be congruent with who you are now and what is realistically available to you now and into your future. These representations should be attractive and convincing, but like other future representations, they should not be too specific; they should be somewhat vague and unclear, allowing for a variety of possibilities, and the inevitable uncertainty of the future."

4. Congruence check. "Do you have any objections to having these kinds of experiences or directions a part of your future?" Would anyone else in your life have any objections to this? Objections at this point are infrequent, but if there are any, simply back up to adjust the representations in an appropriate way, and/or reframe to satisfy any and all objections before continuing.

5. Placing the new experiences in the future. "Next I want you to take this picture and first make it glow, and then multiply it into a stack like a deck of cards. As the cards multiply, each one



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will spontaneously become somewhat different, each one a different possibility for having that kind of experience in the future. Then cast these cards out into your future so that they spread out and fall into many different places. When you have finished, you will see lots of little sparkling dots of light that indicate where each card landed in your future, drawing you forward." (Thanks to Robert McDonald for this special embellishment.)

Commentary

Traumatic losses. Some losses are mingled with the traumatic shock of a sudden car accident, or the unpleasantness of a terminal illness. In this case it is crucially important to separate the valued experience that was lost from the traumatic way

that it was lost, and treat these two experiences differently. “Look, the loss that you experienced is quite different from the way that the loss occurred. You are grieving for the person, not the car accident that caused his death. Now I want you separate the loving relationship from the way that it ended into two different locations (gesturing in two different locations in space).” First use the phobia/trauma cure (1, Ch. 7) with the unpleasantness, and then use the grief resolution process with the loss.

Anger or resentment. If there is significant anger or resentment, this will interfere with the grief resolution, so it is important to first resolve this using the forgiveness pattern (3).

Other applications

Different content. Although grief is usually thought of in relation to the loss of a loved person or relationship, losses can also involve the loss of a thing, an activity, a location, or information (the other four categories of what has been called “meta-program content-sorting”). For some people the loss of a cherished ring, the loss of the ability to play a life-long sport, the loss of a family home, or the loss of special memories or other information can be as severe as the loss of a loved person. Often a loss involves several of these simultaneously; the loss of a person can also result in the loss of the activities and the things that were shared, the location in which those activities occurred, etc. The same pattern works equally well with any such loss, as long as the principal content in the resource of presence matches the content of the loss.

Loss of self. Whenever a loss occurs in the world, there is also the potential for the person to experience a loss of self. Someone who loses a job may also lose a sense of herself as a valued employee, and someone who loses a child may lose a sense of himself as a parent and caretaker. The grief pattern works equally well with this kind of loss, but it is respectful to acknowledge this aspect of a loss, which can sometimes be more important than the others.

Loss of a dream. Some people will grieve as deeply for something that they never had as for something that they actually did have and then lost. A woman who has dreamed of having children who finds that she can't, or a man who has dreamed of corporate success who finds himself in a dead-end job may grieve as severely as someone who loses a child or a top job that they actually had. Even though the person never had the content of the dream in reality, it was so real in their mind that the realization that it will not occur can provoke severe grief. Even someone who actually achieves their dream of success often finds that it is not at all what they expected it to be, and may still experience this kind of loss. Often this loss of a dream is described as a mid-life crisis.


A dream is usually thought of as being in the future, but it can also occur in the past. Someone who has had an abusive childhood may vividly imagine the loving and secure family life that they never had. The grief resolution process also works very well to resolve this kind of loss.

Pregrieving can prepare you for a future loss. You imagine that you have lost a present relationship, and go through the same process. This is particularly useful for the friends and relatives of people with a terminal illness. Often the friends of a dying person are so upset over the impending loss that they can't make good use of the little time that they have left with the dying person. And sometimes the dying person finds himself emotionally taking care of the healthy people around him!

Pregrieving is also very useful for relationships that are overly dependent. It can release an ongoing relationship from the clinging behavior that is often based on the fear of future loss. The pregrieving process is also particularly appropriate for ambiguous loss in which someone has disappeared and is presumed dead, but could still be alive.

The grief resolution process is useful in a very wide range of situations, far beyond

what it was originally created for. Many people are troubled by unresolved losses, and may have no idea that these losses are involved in the problems that concern them. The results of using the grief resolution process can be profound and surprising, affecting a great deal of someone's life. It can be useful to simply ask a client about unresolved grief and deal with it, even when the presenting problem is quite different, and apparently unrelated to a loss.

This method is quite easy to learn and use. The video below provides a clear demonstration, and the book, *Heart of The Mind*, outlines the steps in a way that is easy to follow. We hope you find it useful in your own life, and/or with your clients. 

References

1. Andreas, Connirae, and Steve Andreas. *Heart of the Mind*. Moab, UT: Real People Press, 1989.
2. Andreas, Connirae. “Resolving Grief” (video download). Demonstration with a man who lost a child, Lakewood CO, NLP Comprehensive.
3. Andreas, Steve. “Forgiveness” (free online article).

To watch a demonstration of the grief process with a client, go to <http://www.realpeoplepress.com/resolving-grief-video-download-p-97.html>.

Steve Andreas has been learning, teaching, and developing grief therapy methods for over 50 years. He is the author or co-author of several books, numerous articles, and training videos—some on YouTube. Find out more at <http://realpeoplepress.com/blog/> and <http://www.steveandreas.com>.

Creative Ending

Art Collaboration in the Last Stage of Life

by Jill Powers

During her last weeks of life, Janet and I worked together in an unusual way to create a deeply personal work of art that represented the vitality of her life passions. Janet immersed herself in that project with a profound spiritual engagement that later called to mind the words of educator, Rachel Kessler: “To let go of something, we must honor it first.” Janet’s last artistic endeavor became a heartfelt and meaningful way to honor her life before passing.

I used to think of people in their final weeks of life, particularly after a long illness, as having little energy for projects of any kind. Janet gave me an entirely new perspective as I witnessed how much joy and aliveness she experienced in being creative during this challenging final phase of life.

As a life-long artist, I found this unusual project to be one of the most rewarding experiences that I’ve had. I discovered that for someone with an artist’s sensibility, whether they have pursued it seriously or not, an end-of-life artistic exploration can contribute to their sense of well-being during their last days. Aside from the growth and discovery that often accompanies artwork, a creative collaboration with a trusted friend or relative can turn that experience into a meaningful summation of life.

Before this time, Janet and I sometimes met for walks in nature and talks over a cup of tea. With Janet, one didn’t talk casually; there was always a deep reflection or inspiring experience to share. She sometimes came to my art studio to explore creating with natural materials. Janet also was not casual about her appreciation for art, and she filled her home with modest purchases of meaningful work

by artists she enjoyed. Janet’s late-in-life degree in landscape design led to a deep involvement with the beauty and life of plants and in the creation of inspiring outdoor spaces, vegetable gardens, and an activist’s involvement with bee-keeping.

I first heard the news of Janet’s health issues in her message to friends: “Last week I had a series of medical tests and appointments which gave me new information of the extent of the progression of the cancer living within my body. The time has come to share with you that the cancer has outsmarted everything we have thrown at it. I have made the decision to stop all treatments and throw myself heartily into enjoying the last good days of my life. After making this decision I thought would be so difficult, I found myself almost giddy with happiness and peace. I have crossed a finish line. No more nasty chemo, radiation, big surgeries, or long days at the hospital. I feel I have survived this phase of my life, and I am joyous to have

it completed. The best thing you can do for me is to meet me where I’m at, in this place of acceptance and peace. Time enough for grief ahead. Let’s not borrow it into the present.”

Many people responded to this news with support. I responded with a spontaneous question: “I want to offer to spend some creative time together if this appeals to you. We could make art related to your life, or just enjoy the day’s beauty.” Her response came swiftly: “What a marvelous offer! How about a life collage affirming the things I love the most: nature, the oceans and mountains, wildflowers, hiking, gardening, art, and, of course, my loved ones. Also possibly adding words like gratitude, love, and compassion. Playfully yours, Janet.”

Over the next month we planned and finally embarked on what would become a six-week-long creative journey that would accompany Janet to her final week of life. We agreed to meet first to talk about ideas. Janet said she was thinking about using a basket as the base for a paper and image collage, and she wanted artistic support to make it work. As we talked, her ideas emerged into a brilliant vision, which revealed the depth of her life. Her unique idea was to have the inside of the basket represent her inner life: its spirituality, dark sides, and deepest qualities. The outside of the basket would represent her outer life: the joys of family, friends, and the things she loved to do.

Janet began collecting images and photographs to be included in the project and reached out to family and friends to join her in this quest. Many people spent hours poring over images she might like that reminded them



of her passions. Piles of images arrived, and Janet loved her time looking through them. She had an unusual kind of focus at this early stage of the project. She often paused to fully take in the image with great zest and feeling. Her eyes would widen and she would appear to feel the scene with her whole being. It was so inspiring to witness this. I wish I had written down the stream of well-chosen words she said in response to each image. In the end, she could only include a fraction of them in the art piece.

Janet reported that the art project was “mind-blowing fun.” She was “so grateful!” She encouraged others to “keep playing with me as we are looking now for images of female spiritual figures and social justice issues.” A friend remarked, “Janet was ecstatically happy about the time she spent with the art project. She was like a giddy schoolgirl, sharing the process and even all the images she couldn’t use. Completely exhausted, but so, so happy.” Her husband, Rick, said, “When she is awake, she is remarkably bright and cheerful and full of laughter. And she says that she is not experiencing any pain. I don’t know whether or not to believe her on this, but her spirit is shining through.”

Janet was passionate about her family, social justice, and nature. She had raised her three daughters on an organic peach farm on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains in Palisade, CO. Janet’s career was dedicated to improving the lives of the under-served. She worked tirelessly with Child and Migrant Services as executive director of a health clinic. Her efforts produced lasting results, including improved housing for migrant farm workers, housing for victims of domestic violence, a system that ensures

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prenatal care for all women in the county regardless of their ability to pay, and an expansion of medical services for the uninsured to include mental health and dental care. We wove these



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deep involvements into the art project, with Janet thoughtfully re-experiencing these days as she looked at photographs of migrant workers and the farm.

I found an antique Asian basket with a beautiful shape. The images Janet decided to include were copied onto high quality rice paper for ease of gluing and molding onto the basket’s surface and for archival longevity. We spread the images out on the large dining table and began composing the interior of the basket first. She designed the basket to hang with the inside against the wall, thus hiding the inner world. To represent aspects of her inner life, she looked for pictures to depict her spirituality, dark sides, and deepest qualities. Among those images were St. Francis, hands holding earth and new growth; Gandhi; a long, misty, stone pathway in Ireland; a rocky ledge; a seed pod; and people gathered around a campfire at night. Surrounding all the images was the cosmos, the starry skies, and her beloved ocean waters. Floating over everything was one beautiful red flower. Layering these potent images together made for a magical world that in some way met her soul’s presence in that time.

As the project progressed Janet realized that she intended to do it herself with creative guidance and help from me. But as her health deteriorated, she became more of the director as I worked to finish the piece. Her daughters and friends helped to select and cut pieces. Janet’s sister, Ann, lovingly stitched a beautiful piece of hand-marbled cloth, sent from Hawaii by a friend, across the top.

I discovered that making art in this context can create an atmosphere of calm and harmony that offers solace and inspiration in difficult times.

This benefit is not limited to the one creating; the observers and participants are also able to find mental respite, deeper awareness, and healing through witnessing the creative process.

As Janet grew weaker, the family had me visit to work quietly on the project whenever I could. With Janet mostly in bed, sessions were shorter. I was able to witness the beauty surrounding her: musicians' concerts in her bedroom, baking bread and making peach galettes, comforting visits from hospice workers, and short trips outdoors to inspiring gardens she had created. Sipping spoonfuls of peach juice and lying on her bed, she clearly loved working on the project, even as her health diminished. Her loving husband, Rick, found just the right moments between visits from hospice workers, family, and friends for Janet to give attention to the project.

Each step of the project clearly gave Janet much joy. On the front side of the basket, among pictures of her family, she included images of the ancient

divine feminine, the ocean, sunflowers, the peach farm and migrant workers, western landscapes, the sandhill crane migration, the primordial cosmos and photos of dawn and dusk. In the center was a moving picture of Janet floating in front of the Colorado mountains she loved, along with pictures of herself and Rick; her daughters, Caitlan, Marcy, and Gwen; her sister, Ann; her grandchildren, Liam, Rhys, and Brooks; and all the extended family.

Janet made an unusual decision about completing this work of art. She wanted the finishing touch to be something that represented the wild woman in her, an important part of her character. I found some dried seed pod stalks from her garden and stitched a wild group of them to the outside of the basket. The seed pod hair was to look like the back of her head as she departed, leaving us with her love. I marveled that she had found a way to portray both the hidden, inner aspects of her life and her own departure.

Suggestions for an end-of-life collage art project

Find an appropriate object to serve as the base for the art piece. It could be something of some significance for the loved one, either something they already own or just a good shape and material to inspire the work. Examples: wooden box, basket, cloth or garment, or other object of significance. Something from an antique store could be adapted for this purpose. Dismantling or using part of a structure might work well.

Gather images or materials that represent significant people, places, and passions for the loved one. Consider inner and outer life involvements.

Enjoy discussions with the loved one about the meaning of these aspects of life. Help him or her discern what is most important to include.

Find ways to attach or collage the images and materials to the object or structure

that serves as the base: gluing, stitching, nailing. There are many archival glues that come in easy-to-use forms like dots or tape. Varnish-like glazes are available in matte finishes. Janet's project was not coated because she did not want to obscure the natural textures.

For images, print them on archival thin, flexible paper or art papers cut to fit the printer size. This makes them more flexible and easy to shape and attach. Cut around images and fit them together to make a composition.

Work with the design, overlapping where appropriate. Check in with the loved one and their family or friends who will enjoy it later, so people feel comfortable with (and perhaps included in) the process and result. Or have the project be a private experience just for the loved one to savor.

Working Together

We shape our self
to fit this world

and by the world
are shaped again.

The visible
and the invisible

working together
in common cause,

to produce
the miraculous.

- David Whyte

Janet made the last decisions on the piece when she was quite far on her journey of letting go. Toward her last conscious days, Rick brought in the work to show her, and she was able to see the finished art piece. She opened her eyes wide and took it all in. Then she raised her arm in the air and said, "Yes!"

The day Janet passed on, Rick said, "The song that continues to play in my mind and my heart are the words that Janet kept repeating over the course of the last three weeks: "Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful." She was such a gifted, creative soul. 🎵

Jill Powers is an artist who specializes in working with unusual natural materials and processes, and exhibits her work nationally. She teaches art at Naropa University, in Boulder, CO, and offers workshops and retreats. She is a graduate of Tyler School of Art. To learn more and see Jill's work, visit JillPowers.com.

David Whyte poem is from River Flow: New and Selected Poems. © 2012, Many Rivers Press.

Dying Out Loud: A Love Song to Cari Leverage by Mary Reilly-McNellan

The home funeral community lost a shining star with the passing of Cari Leverage on November 19, 2017. Cari served as treasurer for the National Home Funeral Alliance, was a trained home funeral guide, a hospice end-of-life doula, advisor to the Funeral Consumer Alliance of Southern California, and a licensed funeral director. Among her passions were helping families care for their dying and dead loved ones, providing education on death care options and legalities, and advocating for increasing availability and awareness of environmentally and economically responsible funeral and burial choices. She chose to be part of the change she wished to see in the American way of death by restoring the public's right to choose those options allowed by law that assure loved ones are attended to with grace, dignity, and extraordinary compassion.

Cari walked the talk by bravely sharing her own death in an extraordinary way. As her physical life drew to a close, Cari and her loving husband, Richard, used social media to share her personal journey, express her love and appreciation for friends and family, and provide them with a shining example of what it means to be fully present for one's death. It also permitted Cari to participate in her own "living funeral" by giving and receiving loving messages, memories, and photos via Facebook before her death. You can relive her shared experience of dying on her Cari Leverage Facebook page. The following are a few excerpts from her remarkable journey:



October 23, 2017

Dear Ones,

The avalanche of heartfelt responses to me sharing my end of life journey has taken my breath away. My spirit is in awe of the community I see looking back at me as you all bear witness to me at a most vulnerable and sacred time. I have infinite gratitude for your love and tenderness. I never imagined dying out loud on social media; it just sort of unfolded that way organically. My intent initially was to pay tribute to those I love and hold dear before my departure. To have all this love reflected back at me in response is profoundly humbling. Thank you for affording me the honor of a living funeral. I highly recommend it for all those who will one day die. I don't know when my final breath will be, but I do know I will be riding a mighty wave of love into whatever is next for me. I reverently bow to each of you with love and gratitude.

Since we're now on this journey together in a way, I want to share what is in store for me, which will come when I can no longer share about it myself. My loved

ones will be holding a home funeral for me in full view of the ocean. And, thanks to kind contributions to my request for support to be able to have a full body deep-sea green burial, my final resting place will be deep in the Pacific Ocean amongst the Channel Islands. I will be wrapped in a 100% biodegradable canvas shroud

handmade by a dear friend of mine at Kinkaraco.com that will be heavily weighted down to insure my one-way voyage. Santa Barbara Harbor will be the final port I sail from. I share these details with you because you are already participating. Let me explain with a little backstory first.

Seventy percent of Americans say they would prefer to die at home, yet 70% of Americans actually end up dying in some medically oriented facility. Being a typical statistical outlier, I am dying at home. And it is at home where I will segue peacefully into my home funeral to be cared for by my loving tribe until they are ready to let my body go. At some point after I become one with the breath of the universe, my loved ones will conduct a ceremonial ritual in my honor. My body will be lovingly bathed, anointed with sacred oils, dressed, shrouded, and finally laid out in honor at a specially chosen place in our home. My body will rest here a while for those who wish to bid me a final farewell. This will also be a focal point around which to gather and share comfort and

companionship in grief. Family directed home funerals create fertile ground for healing journeys to truly deepen. They were the norm 150 years ago—taking place in what was once called the parlor and is now typically referred to as the living room.

Now to the part about community participation. The container my shrouded body will be laid to rest in is a simple, plain, cardboard box just itching to be decorated and transformed into a beautiful vehicle. It has been painted white and will soon be coated with many of your printed digital comments and tributes of love. The next step will be gracing the box with artwork (as in the photos). Once in the box my body will be cloaked in your loving words, blessings and prayers. If you would like to add artwork to the box, the box will be at Hospice of San Luis Obispo County until it is needed. Feel free to come by HSLO and use the variety of art supplies available to decorate to your delight. We can also print digital submissions and attach them to the box if you cannot decorate it in person. My tribe will also be decorating the plain white shroud during the home funeral. They won't be able to glue on paper submissions to the shroud, but they can sew on pieces of biodegradable fabric or patches.

Love and gratitude to you all. Cari

October 30, 2017

I dedicate this tribute to my first and final romance: ME. I'm talking about true self love—NOT narcissism. The kind of love you love others through and allow others to love you through. I'm courting spirit through my heart and just loving up the magic and divinity of it all. Not much need for words in this realm, so I'll just give thanks and spew love and joy. I'm thankful for the blessed life I have been graced with. I ecstatically

sing out my love and gratitude to all those who have seasoned my life with their contributions and added to my deliciousness. I am who I am because of me and all of you and I love what we all created together! Thank you. We truly are all one. Hugs and kisses to us all!

In addition to my fellow humans, I bow deeply in reverence to glorious Mother Nature and the lovely Planet Earth. To that cast I add an incomplete sampling—I'm referring to all the creatures walking, crawling, slithering, flying, buzzing, swimming, etc.—all existing beside and/or inside us. Add to that all the wise, nourishing, healing, teaching, whimsical plants; beautiful flowers, grounding roots, miraculous seeds, grasses, rocks, sediments, sands and dirt, etc. To this fine lot of mysteriously luscious life I sing my praises and extend my infinite love and gratitude. Finally I kneel in awe-filled humble prayer to dream space; to journey space; to sacred space; and to the power of meditation, ritual and ceremony. It has been through my dedication and appreciation of all this and more that I have found my way to live a rich, meaningful and magical life of grace even while balancing fears, failures, sense of duality and separateness. The sour makes the sweet so much sweeter!

It's been a damn grand journey that has nourished my smile. I overflow with love and gratitude for having it all to enjoy just as I overwhelm with grief by having to leave it all behind. Fortunately I get to make the journey with a lover—me! Peace out.

November 8, 2017 **Greetings All,**

The time has come for me to step out of the rapidly moving stream of engagement we all swim in. The clarity of this need came with a surprising

swiftness necessitating a full turn of my focus from outward activity to inward evolution. My remaining energy reserves will now be devoted to practice being still, mostly quiet, and very present.

Gravity, whitewater rapids, big waves, and riptides taught me repeatedly how futile resistance is to a strong flow. Yet, amazingly, my first instinct is often to fight the flow before allowing wisdom to guide letting go. The flow I am relaxing into here and now is the inevitable flow to my death.

I recognize my cultural competency addiction to want to control dying (e.g., how, when, where). I instinctually want to “do my dying” by pushing, strategizing and managing death, rather than allowing, making space for and even acknowledging its benefits. It's necessary for birthing in the new. A ticket to sustainability. Yet we all still want some control. If we just get affairs in order, mend breaks, complete incompletions, embrace forgiveness, then we're ready. For what I wonder? I marvel at the excruciating wonder of life. Why am I still here? I surrender. It's a mystery, an agonizingly beautiful mystery. Why is it so hard? I trust that by allowing the organic 'pushing through' of the death act to occur with natural untethered grace, the epiphanic peace I seek will arise and all will be well.

I humbly bow and kiss the feet of all teachers before me for “breaking trail.” Thank you for your love, prayers, songs, virtual hugs, acknowledgments, check-ins, accolades, high fives, etc. In my “dying out loud,” I am grateful that you all spoke up; shared what was in your hearts; talked about the love we shared; told me how you felt seen by me; shared how I had impacted you. And especially for reflecting back to me how much I am seen by all of you. There is so much I was unaware of—so much I have received. I am ecstatic to have had the opportunity

to BEAR WITNESS to such love and appreciate the inspiration to fall in love with and forgive myself. There is so much lightness of being and freedom in forgiveness. You have all contributed to my rebirthing and preparations for me to walk face first into my death.

I apologize to those who I will leave hanging and please forgive my over-committing. I really do want to stay viscerally connected to each and every one of you, but I have reached a point where I can no longer effectively respond to texts, enjoy phone conversations, reply to emails, interact well in the Facebook realm while simultaneously tending to my own well being in a manner I deserve and desire. So, I will find peace in staying connected heart-to-heart.

I cannot direct you to my generous husband, best friend, sweet lover and full-time caretaker, Richard Leversee, for updates on my well being because he is so deeply present with being of service to me and, when he can, tending to his own survival. So, I will suggest you connect with my mother, Diane Billingsley, who has devoted her full-time attention and support to me as I journey along to my death. She is so heartwarmingly touched by each opportunity to see her baby girl through the eyes of others and to be so graciously gifted to learn about the wake her child leaves in the hearts of others along the way. Lots of love and gratitude strongly flowing here. The ripples in this community go far and wide.

I release into the arms of love and remain eternally yours. I bid you a loving aDIEu. All is well.



Daniel Rogness

November 23, 2017

This is my final post ... a real post from beyond ...

I asked my husband Richard to post this right after I died in order to notify as many as possible with as minimal effort as possible. I knew how present he would be with me and I wanted to help minimize his distractions.

As was my wish, my body died at home looking out over the ocean on Sunday evening, November 19th, at “nine minutes to nine” pm under a beautiful new moon. I exhaled my final breath from this world and followed that with the breath of the universe. My Soul Self has birthed me into my next expression. I bid you all a fond farewell.

Thank you for walking me home and sharing my dying journey with me during my time on earth. I'm grateful for your gifts of love, gratitude, honor and adoration. I especially appreciated my living funeral with all of you. And I was truly honored by your support that allowed me to realize my dream of a deep-sea burial.

I miss you already. Take sweet loving care of yourselves and each other. I love you. I may see you again if our paths cross, which would be delightful.

Look for signs from me. I'll work hard at getting them through. When you see something you think is a sign from me, trust it. That trust is where the true fun and magic lie because there is so much power in belief.

All is Well. Cari ♥

* * *

Like her friend Ram Dass, Cari believed that we are all just “walking each other home.” She wrote, “I now find myself having come full circle on my death doula adventure, from

holding vigils for others while they find their way across the threshold to receiving a death doula's loving soul presence myself as I make my own way home.” And she never lost her sense of humor about her final adventure, noting, “I'm about to dive into a new dimension of the unknown. Holy s##t! (I believe the last sense to go is the sense of humor.) Putting FUN back into funeral.” She playfully encouraged her “tribe” of caregivers to decorate her cardboard casket with loving abandon. “Feel free to liberally splash color on the box,” she wrote. “It is a true salute to me to passionately color outside the lines.”

Richard Leversee continues to honor his wife's love of the natural world, coining the phrase “cleversee” (Cari's email address, comprised of her first

initial and last name) when looking for physical signs that his wife is still connected to loved ones. Indeed, friends and family members continue to be reminded of Cari's presence in such "clever-sees" as hummingbirds, butterflies, sunrises, auras, leaping dolphins, and even fungus, which she loved. "You have always colored outside of the lines!" noted one astute Facebook tribute. "Well done, my dear friend."

RIP, Cari.

Postscript

Cari Leverage's bodily remains received the deep-sea burial, although it was a bit different from the way she had

originally envisioned. Her body was cremated after two days due to unexpected physical bodily changes. These changes made a lengthier home funeral followed by a full body, shrouded sea burial no longer viable. Instead, Hospice of San Luis Obispo County hosted a shrouding ceremony, where Cari's remains were arranged with fresh herbs into a clothed effigy of her body. This was wrapped in her decorated shroud. The following day (Winter Solstice), she received the shrouded deep-sea burial she dreamed of near the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara, CA. A documentary about Cari and this unique ritual is planned for the future. [+](#)



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



Daniel Rogness

What Does Death Look Like?

by Donalyn Gross

Review by Mary Reilly-McNellan



Imagine that you are back in school, and it is time for art class. You look expectantly at your teacher, waiting for direction, with visions of zebras, flowers, and abstract stick figures dancing in your head. But instead of suggesting a landscape or portrait, your teacher presents you with an unexpected assignment: “Draw death,” s/he says simply. How would you react? What would your sketch look like? Would it be easy for you, or challenging?

Donalyn Gross taught Death, Dying, and Bereavement classes and workshops for five years, and this assignment was a key component of her curriculum. Children, social workers, students, artists, nurses, and other healthcare professionals tackled the task with varying degrees of ease, difficulty, certainty, and uncertainty. The result was five years worth of drawings that made their way into her 2010 soft cover book, *What Does Death Look Like?*

As a social worker, certified music practitioner, and thanatologist (death and dying counselor), Gross has spent 26 years working with the dying and their loved ones in hospitals, hospices, long-term care facilities, and correctional systems. The cover art of her book is a drawing by a prison inmate, AIDS patient, and tattoo artist that depicts a decidedly medieval version of the Grim Reaper in armor, atop a white horse with serpent-like eyes. A drawing inside illustrates an aging man with sunken cheeks observing his mirrored reflection as healthy, vigorous, and youthful. Still others are symbolic representations of peace, fear, and souls rising to heaven.

When I was asked to review this book, my first thought was, “Well, this will be easy!” After all, how much can you say about an assortment of colorful drawings? But when I took a closer look, I found myself drawn to the often enigmatic details, the choices of colors,

the questions posed by the artwork. I was compelled to share the book with friends and family, sparking all kinds of philosophical questions about life, death, hope, faith, grief, and despair. There is clearly more to this book than meets the eye, and that is perhaps its finest achievement—by sharing deeply personal interpretations of something that most people prefer to avoid, Gross shines a light on how our culture views death.

While the artwork is the focus of the book, Gross includes a foreword and epilogue written by Bernie Siegel, MD, retired pediatric surgeon, speaker and best-selling author of *Love, Medicine and Miracles*. “I work with peoples’ dreams and drawings which reveal past, present and future,” he writes. “In drawings when the person is wearing purple or their disease is drawn in purple, they are often saying symbolically that they will die of their disease. Purple is a spiritual color. The emotional colors red and black symbolize a very different experience, more likely a transition with much anger and despair related to the person’s life and lack of love.” Gross herself asks the reader, “What is death? Is it a person, a place, a feeling? Is it good or bad? Is there a tunnel that we travel through and ‘go toward the light’? Do children

think about death differently from adults? Is death our friend or our enemy? Is death dark as night or a blazing white light?”

The answers are as intimate and enigmatic as the artwork Gross has chosen to share. Some drawings contain standard representations of death as the Grim Reaper, angels, tombstones, demons, clouds, and doorways. Others are more abstract: a soul ascending to heaven, a circle, a curtain, a tunnel, or a keyhole. Most drawings are accompanied by a brief description of the artist. All are thought-provoking and compelling; they offer glimpses of how ordinary people view life’s greatest mystery.

I asked Gross if she was surprised by the drawings submitted by her students. “Generally, they were happier than what I anticipated,” she replied. “I thought they would be much darker.” Only one student—a nurse—was not able to complete the assignment. “I see nothing,” she told Gross. Yet even this observation offers a glimpse into the myriad views we have of death. While the author has loosely categorized the drawings as “Death as Confusion,” “Death as Spirituality and Faith,” “Death as Hope,” and “Death as Healing,” each reader will see something different in the drawings. Depending upon our life experiences, we may agree or disagree with these categories. But every one of us will be compelled to consider how we would answer the intriguing and provocative question, “What Does Death Look Like?” Gross has included a blank page at the end of the book and invites the reader to do just that. You may be surprised at the rich insights and wisdom you gain from this simple exercise.

What Does Death Look Like is available from Amazon.com and Xlibris.com. © 2010 64pp, 8.5" x 11" ISBN# 978-1-450024-69-3



Creation Series #38
by Verity Dierauf

Acrylic on rag board
30" x 22"
1993

Verity Dierauf was an inspiring and accomplished artist, teacher, adventurer, wife, and mother who died on October 11, 2017, in Boulder, CO. See more of her work at www.VerityArt.com.

A Verse for Those Who Have Died

**Feel how our loving gaze
Is lifted to the heights
That have called you away for other tasks.
Offer the friends left behind
Your strength from out of spiritual lands.**

**Hear the plea of our souls
Sent after you in trust:
We here need for our earthly work
Strong power from spirit-lands,
For which we thank departed friends.**

– Rudolf Steiner



**Counseling, Needs Assessments
Community Education, Referrals
Natural Deathcare Advocacy
Integral Thanatology Institute**



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Blessing

**Come out from under
the weight of yourself
and fly into your lightness
become wing, wind, and water
all at once**

**Hurl the wave of you
onto your own shoreline
into your own heaven
become your own stars**

**Inhale everything that ever was
and exhale everything
that ever shall be
open your bosom to the Universe
ignite!**

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