

# Natural Transitions

Sharing conscious, holistic approaches to dying, death, and after-death care

MAGAZINE

## HOME FUNERALS

Learn to use your rights

## JOANNA MACY

ECOPHILOSOPHER

Death can be a blessing

## HOME FUNERAL PIONEERS

Forerunners of  
a movement

## MINNESOTA RECLAIMS FAMILIES' RIGHTS

Legislative change  
for home funerals

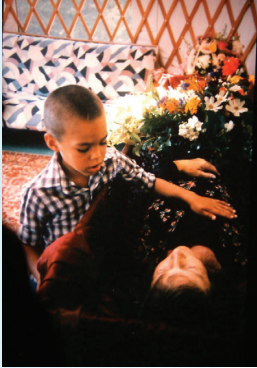


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### Our Vision

- To open the door to a cultural change in which death is embraced as a natural part of life

### Our Mission

- To share conscious, holistic approaches to dying, death and after-death care
- To provide a forum for end-of-life care givers and educators

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## features

When the Time Comes...  
Home Funerals in L.A. 21

By Olivia Bareham

Pioneers Creating Home Funeral Consciousness 25

By Terra Rafael

Ritual that Reconnects 28

Karen van Vuuren  
interviews Joanna Macy

A time to die...  
Joanna Macy's Husband 31

By Joanna Macy

## departments

### editorial

natural transitions news . . . . . 4  
terra talk . . . . . 4

### cultural contrasts

Ghanaian Funeral Extravaganzas . . . . . 5  
Emmanuel's Gift . . . . . 7

### laws & outlaws

Minnesota Reclaims Families' Rights . . . . . 9  
Protecting Home Funeral Rights . . . . . 13

### strange & unusual facts . . . . . 12

### a time to die . . .

Erin's Story . . . . . 15  
A Daughter's Final Gift . . . . . 24

### eye-catching media

Read This Book! . . . . . 17  
Consider The Conversation . . . . . 18

### from the heart

Talking about Dying . . . . . 19

### what people are saying about . . . . . 20

### ntm resource directory & calender . . . . . 33

### last words

The Shortest One in the Family . . . . . 34

# WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

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Natural Transitions Magazine is a project of Natural Transitions, which was founded in 2003 by three spirited women: Faith Davis, Shanti Green and Karen van Vuuren. The focus was on home funeral education and support. This is a big year of growth for our non-profit. We are offering new training programs that expand our focus, a ground-breaking film festival, and, of course, Natural Transitions Magazine. We see a vital need to educate and offer support services to families through the complete experience of death and after-death care. Too often families believe that they can care for their loved ones up to the time of death, but then someone else must take over. This natural part of the life cycle is handed over to strangers as a matter of course, rather than considering the possibilities of a meaningful, healing, hands-on experience.

In Boulder, Colorado and nearby cities, Natural Transitions offers comprehensive consultations with individual families. These consultations address practical, emotional, familial, and spiritual concerns focusing on after-death care. Please consider the many benefits of the home funeral highlighted throughout this NTM issue. In addition to family consultations, Natural Transitions offers consultations and educational programs to churches, hospital staff and private groups.

Our new three-level certificate program in end-of-life transition guidance will begin this year. Level One is designed both as a stand-alone course and as the foundation for second and third level trainings for those who want to become End-of-life Transition Guides.

Natural Transitions is also honored to be hosting the ground-breaking film festival "Life and Death Matters" in Boulder, September 2, 3 and 4. This is the first film festival we know of to specifically address these issues in the U.S. For more details, check [ladmatters.com](http://ladmatters.com).

Watch for more news from Natural Transitions in our upcoming issues. We'd love to hear any comments, questions or suggestions. Send them to us at [info@naturaltransitions.org](mailto:info@naturaltransitions.org). You can see what's new at NT between quarterly NTM issues by checking our soon-to-be updated website at [naturaltransitions.org](http://naturaltransitions.org).



By Terra Rafael | EDITOR

A story recently caught my imagination. It was shared by Wendy Craig Purcell in her inspirational book, *Ask Yourself This*.

When the need arose for a suspension bridge to cross near Niagara Falls, it presented a big challenge. The strong current didn't allow for the usual ferrying across of the wires to suspend the structure. An inventive engineer came up with a contest to see who could fly their kite across the river. The prize: \$5. After many attempts, it was a young boy who succeeded in getting his kite string to bridge the gap. With that slender string, heavier and heavier gauges of string, rope and wire were guided across the space to eventually carry vehicles and people to the other side.

This story illustrates the story of this magazine. I've launched the thin line of my high flying idea into the air and it has landed on your shore. Through the heavy gauge efforts of our magazine staff, riding on my vision, we can carry to you information, ideas and stories that might bridge a gap in your experience.

And this story is the story of us all. While honoring and easing the natural transitions of death for ourselves and for others, we launch our visions of what could be, riding the winds of what is until we reach the other shore.

Let's ride together!

# Ghanaian Funeral Extravaganzas

By Lynn Walton

## Feast or Financial Hardship?

Funerals take many forms around the world. In Ghana, for example funerals are big - transcending even weddings as social events. From extravagant, one-of-a-kind coffins to expensive funeral finery to impress neighbors and potential mates, Ghanaians go all-out to bury their dead.

Ghana is situated in West Africa with its southern-most border touching the Atlantic ocean. Ghana is considered a stable and viable African country with a per capita annual income of about \$1,600. With over sixty ethnic groups and 52 dialects spoken, understanding Ghanaian cultural traditions can be challenging, so I invited a former Ghanaian, Baaba, for lunch.

Baaba came to the United States in 2003 when she finally won an emigration lottery. At 41, this mother of three looked much younger than her stated age. Baaba was from the Akan ethnic group of southern Ghana. Her parents moved from there to Accra, Ghana's capital, where she spent most of her life until emigrating.

Large funerals involving one's entire village are common in Ghana, with some people attending more than one funeral in a weekend. While Christianity is the main religion in Ghana, traditional religious practices are still observed at funerals. According to Baaba, a Christian herself, "There is no alcohol at Christian funerals, but a lot of drinking at traditional ones." It can be dangerous traveling on Fridays and Saturdays when mourners go



Women bring food for distribution to a funeral in Ghana.

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*"In Ghana, color is everything."*

from one funeral to the next, and copious amounts of alcohol are consumed.

Baaba described her mother's death when she was 15 as an unexpected blow for which she was not prepared. Suddenly she found herself having to purchase burial clothes, select a casket, and organize a major event for the village. Baaba is a rarity among Ghanaians as an only child. She had to rely on her "adoptive" mother, relatives and female co-workers to manage the monumental task of carrying out the funeral, which spanned three days and literally involving a thousand people. They helped prepare the food, make arrangements, hire a band, and handled a myriad of other tasks.

Professionals were hired to prepare the body of Baaba's mother, although family members were present during the preparation. It is typical for a body to remain in refrigeration in a mortuary for up to three months before the actual service, so the family must have enough funds to pay for this. This long wait enabled distant family members to arrange their passage back home, as well as giving the family enough time to save for the cost of the funeral. Distant family members who can't attend send money to the family to help defray expenses.

Funerals in Ghana begin on Friday night, when chief mourners, made up of village elders and the head of the family clan, are present to greet and shake the

*“It is vital to the family’s honor that they offer a grand event.”*

hands of those who come to pay their respects. The head of the family clan is often a spiritual leader in the community and commands wide respect. These elders, with the family members, create a receiving line in which a spokesperson might greet people. It is common for people to ask, “Is it true? We heard she died.”

The traditional mourning colors in Ghana are red, black or brown. For family members, black is the dress code on Friday, although there are many changes of clothing over the next few days. Baaba described the importance of the fabric and clothing, “In Ghana, color is everything.” By Saturday, the female family members of the Akan clan wear traditional dresses made of expensive fabric with a brown and black print. Each family member wears a band, cut from the same cloth, around their head or wrist, signifying the solemnity of the burial ceremony.

As the mourning continues through Friday night and into Saturday morning, it is customary that no substantial food is consumed. By noon on Saturday, the casket is closed and the body is transported to the cemetery for burial. Baaba’s mother was buried with the possessions that were customary for all women in her tribe: a bible, a scarf, handkerchiefs and coins.

While the mood is somber and respectful on Friday and early Saturday, by noon the crowd is hungry and things turn celebratory. Saturday is the day of



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commemoration and nourishment and it is vital to the family’s honor that they offer a grand event. In Baaba’s case, all the women who were close to her came together to prepare local dishes of jollof rice, fufu (pounded cassava and plantain), kenkey and pastries for the many people.

Funerals are an important social event where people come together, sometimes with an eye for the opposite sex. According to Baaba, “Dating happens at funerals. People dress well because they might meet their mate.”

While the immediate family members and elders feast on substantial food, the crowds are fed pastries and drinks. Everyone has a bag of food to take home, as a parting gift. A band plays into the night as the crowd honors the deceased. Donations are made to the family and donors’ names are read over a PA system. Each donor is given a receipt so that later the family can send thank you notes to each person who contributed funds. Even if the majority of those attending only get bottled water and a few cookies, it is still an expensive event.

Stories abound of Ghanaians going into debt over funeral costs, even as the same families are struggling to put food on the table for their kids. As economic times are tough throughout the world, it is fitting to question funeral costs. In this matter, it seems we are not so different from our Ghanaian friends.

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Lynn Walton is on the board of Natural Transitions and lives in Denver with her family and two dogs.

*“It is typical for a body to remain in refrigeration in a mortuary for up to three months before the actual service.”*

# Emmanuel's Gift

By Kristine Lauria

Kristine gave the gift of a burial to 4-month-old Emmanuel. But she received much more in the process.

I arrived in Ghana just as Emmanuel's mother was giving birth and dying - something no woman should ever have to do simultaneously. Things here have been tough. The nurses in the public hospitals are on strike so they are not admitting any new patients. Everyone knows someone who has died because they could not get admitted to the hospital. It's unimaginable that this would happen, but it does. This is Ghana.

The bright spot in Ghana is the people, always eager with a smile, especially the beautiful, strong women who have endured generations of hardship. They are dressed in the colorful cloth that is a trademark here. Each pattern means something. No color is random, it all tells a story; you just have to ask and they tell you. The culture is vast and rich but sometimes gets lost in the brutality of day-to-day life.

Emmanuel came to the orphanage as a newborn. Like most children in the orphanage, he was not a true orphan. Being motherless is a huge disadvantage in Africa. Without extended family on the mother's side, the father often can't care for the children alone.

Emmanuel had breathing problems at birth. His last asthma attack was too much and the hospital too far away. Emmanuel died at four months old. This has been by far the most difficult thing for me and believe me, there have been many low points. Of all the babies in the orphanage, Emmanuel is the one I would have taken home if given the chance.

There would be no funeral or ceremony of any kind. Young children have no value here. I could not bear this thought, so I decided to bury Emmanuel. I went to the morgue with two men from the orphanage and a casket in the back of the station wagon. It was just a rectangular box with a lid— nothing special.

Stuck in traffic on the way to the morgue, the radio was

blaring, news came on and statistics were spewed about the maternal mortality rate in West Africa. It's one in 22, one of the highest in the world. I thought about how Emmanuel's mother had not beaten those odds, and about how my work here was to do something about the maternal mortality rate. Our project was to help a small village by providing midwifery care and HIV screening to those who otherwise would have no access to them.

When we arrived at the morgue, Emmanuel's father was waiting for us. We filed the death report with a man sitting in front of an old manual typewriter in an antiquated office. The morgue is at Korle Bu Hospital, with conditions deplorable for the living. Why should the dead fare any better?

Emmanuel's father and I followed a man into the morgue. Tall rubber boots piled in the hallway gave me a heads up on what I might momentarily encounter. We walked down a long dingy hallway and I told myself, "Don't look up, don't look around." In my peripheral vision I could see rooms to my right with metal tables, the cement beneath them wet. To my left old metal gurneys lined the walls. At the end of the hallway there was a big open room and a man in scrubs. On the wall to his left were the proverbial drawers. The man accompanying us told him which body we were there to retrieve. The man in the scrubs eyed me curiously, perhaps wondering what a white woman was doing in his morgue. It had to be a rare sight for him. I was the only white person for miles around but I was accustomed to this.

Emmanuel's father and I stood there together. He had not seen Emmanuel since his birth, the pain of his wife's death being too much to bear. I wanted to tell him how sweet Emmanuel was and how much I loved him, but words did not come.

The man in the scrubs opened the drawer. Emmanuel's father looked and then turned to me, stunned. I touched his shoulder and said, "You need to wait outside." With a grateful, albeit horrified look, he left. The drawer the man had opened had a pile of little children's bodies all tangled up. All you could see was a mass of little brown arms and legs; it looked like a scene from a holocaust movie. The man proceeded to dig in the pile to find the armband he was looking for. When he did, he grabbed an arm and a leg, much like a butcher handling a dead animal, pulled it out and flung the body onto the nearest metal table. It landed with a clunk. I cried, "Please be gentle!"

I went to get Emmanuel before he could be mistreated any more. The man took the body and put it on another table. There was a sponge, soap and pail of water. I stood



PHOTOGRAPH BY Kristine Lauria



A Ghana orphanage.

next to Emmanuel and looked at him. He was still cute. He didn't look pale or dead to me. Were it not for the sutured incisions down the middle of his torso and around his head from the autopsy, he looked as if there was nothing wrong with him – he looked like he was asleep. The man asked, "Are you his mother?" I wanted to speak but felt a huge lump building in my throat. I knew if I were to attempt words that I would begin to cry. What I would have said were I able was, "Does feeling like my chest has been torn open and my heart ripped out and thrown on the ground qualify me as his mother?" When he saw that I could not speak he said, "Well, you loved him very much." All I could do was nod.

I washed Emmanuel's body, as is the custom here. It would have been OK were it not for the fact that he had been cut open. We then moved his body into another room and onto some white sheets. The family had brought clothes and I had brought a little white undershirt and a white sheet with small embroidered chicks on one end. Everything was white. White is a celebratory color in Ghana.

I was vaguely aware of people gathering at the doorway. They were mumbling in Twi, so I could not understand. They had come to see the "obruni" preparing the dead baby. Was it her baby? What happened to it? It was not out of disrespect. Most of them had solemn looks on their faces and conveyed sympathy in their eyes when I did finally look at them. After all, they too were here to retrieve their dead. I was just more obvious because of my color.

I dressed Emmanuel. Copious powder and spray perfumes were applied and when we finished, he was completely dressed in white. I could finally pick him up and hold him like I used to. I kissed his forehead and laid him in the box. The little white sheet with the embroidery

was used to cover him as though I had just put him down for his nap.

I asked someone to get the father, thinking maybe he would want to see him now that all the difficult work was done. He came part way in and then turned away. I whispered goodbye and they closed the box for good. A man with a hammer came in and nailed it shut.

When we arrived at the cemetery, they unloaded the box unceremoniously and went off with it. I quickly followed. Emmanuel's father did not come. If the morgue wasn't bad enough, walking through piles of garbage to bury Emmanuel topped it off. They put the box in the hole, a hole just deep enough to fit the box and cover it. I had dug holes for pets that were deeper than this. The box was covered with dirt and we walked away.

Just before getting in the car, Emmanuel's father came up to me. He presumed that I was a representative from the orphanage and he said he'd be by in the morning for paperwork. I said, "He looked just like you," something I realized when I finally stood face to face with him. It was a relief to see what Emmanuel's face would have looked like grown up. It made me smile. Then I told him I had a photo of Emmanuel I would leave at the orphanage for him.

It was dark by the time I made it home. My own son was waiting for me. As I tucked him in, I could not resist crawling in next to him. I lay there listening to his breathing and thought about my life, my work, the path I had chosen – mother, healer, humanitarian, midwife—and how there would probably be many days like these.

---

*Kristine Lauria currently lives with her son and practices midwifery in Nederland, Colorado.*

# Minnesota Reclaims Families' Rights

By Becky Bohan

A small group instigates meaningful legislative change supporting home funerals.

"Getting legislation passed can take several years, you know." That warning prompted a handful of Minnesotans in late October 2009 to get the ball rolling on home funeral legislation. Little did we expect that seven months later the "Home Care of Our Deceased—Family Rights Legislation" would pass both houses of the Minnesota State Legislature, be signed into law by our conservative governor, and take effect on August 1, 2010.

The Minnesota Threshold Network

(MTN) spearheaded the change. MTN is an informal group started by home funeral educators Linda Bergh and Marianne Dietzel in the fall of 2008. Soon others interested in conscious dying, after-death care, home funerals, home vigils, and green burials were meeting regularly. We thought the current Minnesota law that required embalming for a public viewing of a body, prohibited minors from being in the presence of an unembalmed body (even within a private home), and restricted a

family's transportation options was overreaching.

How did we, a handful of citizens, manage to change Minnesota state law? And how did we do it without any money? Five factors were critical.

## Committed Core of Volunteers

Our MTN meetings usually drew five to ten people. A small group of dedicated individuals pledged to do the work involved, some doing specialized tasks and others being utility players.

Before the legislative session began, a few members met with legislators to express our concerns and hammer out the wording of the bill with a legislative analyst. Once the session began in January, we spent several days at the Capitol lining up support for the bill and attending hearings. Meanwhile communications and outreach work kept us busy. When one person tired of a task, it always seemed that another was willing to pick up the torch.

## Involvement of Experienced Citizen Advocates

One MTN member, Kim Pilgrim, had worked on midwife legislation a decade earlier. She knew the legislative ropes and thought that legislators who supported midwives would be likely to support at-home death care. In addition, Lisa Venable, a legislative advocate for children's issues, took us in hand. Without the participation of these individuals, we would have



PHOTOGRAPH BY Minnesota Threshold Network

Core Team (from left): Linda Bergh, Nancy Manahan, Becky Bohan, Kim Pilgrim, Rep. Carolyn Laine

been totally lost at the state capitol. But these women knew how to:

- Identify legislators who had supported midwives and would likely support at-home death care
- Frame an issue, e.g., stressing family and consumer rights
- Organize talking points that would explain clearly and concisely what we wanted
- State the opposition's concerns and address them
- Pull legislators out of a floor session to talk with them
- Get legislators to sign on to our bill

They knew the jargon. And they knew the importance of finding a legislator to champion our bill. These individuals showed us how to stand outside the legislative chambers, send messages in to legislators to ask them to come out to talk with us, and how to talk to them—respectfully, concisely, warmly.

The bill evolved through many forms before we had the wording that would do what we wanted while not triggering strong opposition from funeral directors. Josh Slocum, executive director of the Funeral Consumer's Alliance and Lisa Carlson, author of *Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love*, provided invaluable help throughout this process.

## A Legislative Champion

Lawmakers have hundreds of bills to go through every session and it is important to find someone who really believes in your cause. Fortunately, we found a champion in Representative Carolyn Laine. She "got" what we were trying to do. A few years earlier she'd participated in a home vigil and was deeply moved by it. She did her homework thoroughly and lined up support for the bill even before it reached the committee level, much



Legislators and Home Funeral Activists (Front, from left): Nancy Manahan, Sen. Sandy Pappas, Rep. Carolyn Laine, Michelle Dehn. (Back, from left): Marianne Dietzel, Becky Bohan, Heather Halen

PHOTOGRAPH BY Minnesota Threshold Network

less the floor of the chamber. She carefully crafted the legislation, met with all the stakeholders—including the Minnesota Funeral Directors Association—and worked with medical experts and officials in the Department of Health to support the proposed changes to the law.

Laine worked closely with the Senate co-sponsor, Sandy Pappas. When Pappas testified at the Senate hearing, she unexpectedly broke off her prepared statement to talk movingly about her mother-in-law's death in an assisted living facility. Pappas was grateful to her rabbi for convincing the medical examiner and the funeral director to leave the body until the senator's daughter had time to arrive and say goodbye. The night Pappas and her husband spent with his mother's body felt sacred. The family only wished they could have stayed with the body longer.

Indeed, one of the striking aspects of this legislation was how personally the legislators responded to it. Several spoke from the heart when the bill was up for a vote on both the house

and senate floor, sharing personal stories of the death of a loved one.

## Support of Powerful Experts

The most crucial testimony at the committee hearings was that of Dr. Michael Osterholm, a world-renowned epidemiologist and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. Knowing that the funeral directors would raise objections based on the belief that unembalmed bodies pose a public health threat, he testified in person at both the House and Senate committees. He stated that unembalmed bodies do NOT normally pose a public health threat. His strongly worded letter of support to every member of both chambers was instrumental in countering what he called "scare tactics."

In addition to the scientific experts, we had a "heart" expert testify. In October of 2009, when MTN member Heather Halen's husband died

at home, she kept him there with her for two days in a coffin friends had made. In her calm but powerful testimony, Heather shared how comforting it was to have Gary's body close at hand, to be able to sit with him and talk to him during the awful, lonely first two nights after his death, something that could not have occurred had he been in a funeral parlor.

Heather's testimony was so compelling that local radio and television stations picked it up. One TV station ran a feature news story on the Halens, highlighting the psychological, environmental, and economic advantages of caring for one's own at death. (<http://kstp.com/news/stories/S1456501.shtml?cat=1>)

## Good Communications

Legislators are sensitive to the concerns of their constituents. We needed to have individuals call their representatives and senators to ask them to vote for the bill. All 40 people on our MTN email list received an email about the legislative work, asking that they pass it along to people who might want to join our "alert" list. We presented a free screening of the Academy-Award-winning movie "Departures" at a Minneapolis Unitarian Universalist Church that drew eighty people. During the intermission, advocates including Laine, explained the proposed legislation. The sign-up sheet for that event yielded another group of supporters.

In all our emails, we included a link so that people could easily find their legislator, and we included the name and number of the bill so there would be no mistake about what people were calling or emailing about. This outer ring of support really came through. Several legislators told us that they were receiving lots of calls and emails asking them to vote for the legislation.

In addition to emails, we set up a blog to let people know what was happening. (Since we had no money to set up or maintain a website, blogging on [wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com) was an acceptable alternative.) Whenever a committee meeting was scheduled, we packed the room with supporters. We couldn't testify, but our legislative experts assured us that our presence would make a difference.

## Going Forward

The law that took effect did not do all that we hoped for, but it did a great deal. Minnesotans can now have public visitations of their unembalmed deceased, minors may view the body, and families have more options regarding the transportation of a body. In addition, the Department of Health has updated its brochure "Choices," and includes information for those seeking to care for their own deceased at home. It has been a huge step for Minnesotans.

We know, too, that we need to be vigilant about the gains we have made to ensure that future legislation does not undo the progress.

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*For more information on the Minnesota Threshold Network, please visit our blog [mnthresholdnetwork.wordpress.com](http://mnthresholdnetwork.wordpress.com). We can be reached by email at [mnthresholdnetwork@gmail.com](mailto:mnthresholdnetwork@gmail.com).*

*The Minnesota Department of Health "Choices" brochure is available for free download at [health.state.mn.us/divs/hpsc/mortsci/choices.pdf](http://health.state.mn.us/divs/hpsc/mortsci/choices.pdf)*

*Becky Bohan is a member of the Minnesota Threshold Network.*

# CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE HOME FUNERAL MOVEMENT

This is a brief summary of a talk by Josh Slocum, Executive Director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance at the National Home Funeral Alliance Conference, October, 2010, Boulder, CO.

## His advice for home funeral advocates is:

- + Empower consumers
- + Avoid becoming a "junior" funeral director
- + Form a legislative watch coalition to check weekly on legislation in your state. Know that the change of a single word in a law can have huge repercussions
- + Make friends with your legislators
- + Think about who you want to reach. Many people think home funerals are for new age, California hippies. Couch grief as a human rather than a spiritual condition
- + Join your local chapter of the Funeral Consumers Alliance. See [funerals.org](http://funerals.org) for more information

*Josh Slocum is a former journalist, who now speaks, writes, and lobbies on behalf of consumers of funeral goods and services. With Lisa Carlson of the Funeral Ethics Organization, he has authored a new book, *Final Rights*, on funeral law and regulations throughout the US. See our *Book & Media Reviews* section in this issue.*

# Strange and Unusual Facts About Death

- Neanderthals seem to have invented giving flowers to the dead. In a cave in northern Iraq, anthropologists found evidence of flower pollen next to skeletal remains. Mourners laid the floral tokens between 60-80,000 years ago.
- Wondering how long to wait to bury someone? In the 1800s, people in Borneo placed deceased friends and family in large jars. These jars resided in the relatives' homes for a year before they were buried. However, a tribe in Malaysia took even longer before final disposition. Their dead had to wait 20 years for burial.
- Attacked by bears, mauled by mountain lions? Our fear of meeting our end in the jaws of a wild animal can be quite off the mark. The creature responsible for the most human deaths is the mosquito. And did you know that plants kill more people than sharks? About 150 people a year die from falling coconuts.
- Wonder how a dead friend can still inspire us? Henry Ford did. When Thomas Edison died

## Killer plants, death jinxes and a Napoleonic faux pas

in 1941, Ford captured his last dying breath in a bottle.

- Napoleon accidentally killed over a thousand people with a cough. In 1799, during a conference with his officers about what to do with 1,200 Turkish prisoners of war, he coughed and murmured, "Ma sacré toux!" (My darn cough!). The officers thought he'd said, "Massacrez tous!" (Kill them all!) So they did.
- Are some people jinxes who bring on death? Robert Todd Lincoln, son of Abraham Lincoln, was present at the assassinations of three presidents: his father's, President Garfield's, and President McKinley's. After the last shooting, he refused to attend an affair of state ever again.
- Want to gaze into the eyes of your loved-one after they die? Cremation Solutions sells an uncanny, metal cremation urn, which is molded and colored to look like the head of the cremated deceased. The company will even add a wig to accurately depict those who, in life, had longer tresses.
- Greed and political differences can topple monarchs from their thrones. Such a fate befell George II, who, straining to relieve his constipation, tumbled from the toilet, smashing his head on a cabinet and dying from his injuries.

*If you know any strange and unusual facts about death you'd like to share please email them to us at [naturaltransitionsmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:naturaltransitionsmagazine@gmail.com). Thanks!*



PHOTOGRAPH BY Terra Rafael

# Protecting Home Funeral Rights: I Learned Them; I Used Them

By Phyllis Ingold

We must stand up for our right to care for our own dead by educating ourselves and others about home funeral laws in our state. We must work diligently to make the laws amenable.

It all began with my sister. Her husband called her into the living room to see a show she “might be interested in.” The show, “A Family Undertaking,” was airing on PBS. My sister passed the information about home funerals to me because our mother was already in her nineties. I did my homework to prepare for my mother’s death. We had the phone numbers to call and we knew the paperwork that needed to be completed.

Then my husband Roger took a turn for the worse. He had been struggling with leukemia for a couple of years and hospice became our best option. When I told them I was planning a home funeral for Roger, they were curious and enthusiastic. After his death in May 2009, everything went smoothly.

In 2010, my mother, who was 97 and living in a nursing home, was ready to depart this life. She stopped eating her last two weeks there, so they suggested hospice. I decided to bring my mother home to die, and with the agreement of my sisters, that is what we did.

On September 15, hospice moved in the equipment needed for her care and mother came home on

September 16. My sister Lucy flew in from Wisconsin. My other sister, Ruthanne, lived close by and together we cared for her. We played beautiful nature music, as our mother loved birds. We spoke quietly to her of love and how much we appreciated her. Although she didn’t open her eyes, Mother’s countenance changed from being blank to looking pleasant, so we were confident that even with her eyes closed, she knew where she was. I slept in the same room with her. It was wonderful.

*“...a policeman came to the door. He said that the station had received a call that there was a deceased person in this house.”*

That Friday, September 17, Lucy happened to be standing close by Mother and could hear her last breath. We were using a baby monitor to be in constant awareness of her breathing, so Lucy just whispered into it that I should come to the bedroom. She had such a gentle passing—just slipped away.

The hospice workers arrived a short time later. They wanted to be part of the preparation and were willing to learn, even though they didn’t know anything about home funerals. The death room was in quiet action, when our assistant pastor showed up. We asked her to grab the end of the quilt and she helped us move my mother to her place of honor in the living room. There we had a folding screen at one end of the bed for some privacy when people came in the front door. Mother wore a beautiful blue gown from her 90th birthday party and had baskets of beautiful flowers from a Vietnamese friend.

We had many visitors over the next three days. Extended family came and chatted. We had cookies and tea and shared memories. After all, Mother was the oldest of seven girls in a family of twelve. It was very relaxing and therapeutic for all of us.

But on September 20, a policeman came to the door. He said that the station had received a call that there was a deceased person in this house. He asked whose house it was and when I said mine, he asked to see identification, which I showed him. We asked him if he wished to see our mother and he said yes. He saw her

*“We had many visitors over the next three days. We had cookies and tea and shared memories. After all, Mother was the oldest of seven girls in a family of 12.”*

PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRA RAFAEL

in the living room, apologized for intruding and left.

About an hour later the officer returned and asked to see a death certificate and told us he wanted to make a copy. He returned in a few minutes and said he was sorry for bothering us at a time like this. An hour or two later, the same officer called to let us know that the person who reported us to the police had also called the local hospitals and coroners concerning our activities. Fortunately, that was the last we heard from the police.

We were amazed at the ease we felt during this time. It made a real difference to have our mother with us those extra days, caring for her in her new state of being. On September 21 the grandsons and a great grandson carried her in a quilt to be laid in a wooden coffin a friend had made a

few years earlier. The coffin was lifted into my sister’s van and we all made the trip to the cemetery. After sharing scripture, poetry and prayer, our mother’s coffin was lowered beside our father. It was very moving to actually see his coffin. One at a time, each person threw a shovel of earth on the coffin, while relating a memory that was meaningful to them. We then returned for a memorial service at the church.

I wish that was the end of my story. But on Dec. 8, 2010, I received a letter from the Department of State, Office of Chief Counsel, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The letter threatened that I could be fined if I worked as a funeral director without a license. I was shocked to say the least. We thought everything was settled after the police checked us out. We thought that we could go on with just our wonderful memories.

We are still amazed at the ease we felt after our mother’s home funeral. Preparation ahead of time really paid off – my husband’s funeral served as practice for my mother’s time. My sisters and I worked as a team. Keeping our mother with us after her death until her burial was a cherished gift.

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*(Editors’ notes: There have been more letters from the State of Pennsylvania, and some replies from Lisa Carlson, home funeral activist and co-author of Final Rights-Reclaiming the American Way of Death. We’ll keep you updated on any further developments.)*

*Phyllis Ingold lives in Hershey, Pennsylvania.*

## Erin's Story

By Cynda Collins Arsenault

When our daughter Erin was born 31 years ago with cerebral palsy and multiple disabilities, we understood that we needed to do things "our way." We also quickly learned that we couldn't do it alone and invited others to share in our journey. Having done things our way in life, there was no reason to change at Erin's death.

Four years ago doctors felt that Erin had only a few weeks left and turned us over to hospice. When we learned about Natural Transitions, the executive director, Karen van Vuuren, told us that Colorado allowed options for after-death arrangements by families. This came as a total surprise—we assumed we had to work with a mortuary. Karen explained our options and after she left, Erin's "team" of family, friends and caregivers put together a list of things to do. A friend, who is a carpenter, built her a beautiful simple casket.

But lo and behold – Erin got better and hospice kicked us out. She liked to do things her way. The casket went back into the garage. Having been told that she probably wouldn't live much beyond 14, every birthday was a huge celebration. Erin's 30th birthday was a big deal and she took her whole "team" to Las Vegas to see Thunder Down Under. Throughout the year, we had parties, picnics at the creek, and special times.



Erin at peace.



Altar at Erin's Celebration of Life.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Ann Harding

But as Erin experienced increasing complications from her lack of blood cell production, her doctors began to ask, "How long are you going to keep her alive?" Our answer was clear – as long as she could maintain a good quality of life we would do whatever we could to keep her here. And she did have a great life! It wasn't long after each hospitalization that she was back to her volunteer job at the cat house, visiting with friends, hosting a baby shower or hat party.

By May, she had fewer smiles and her furrowed brow became more noticeable. Erin's focus moved deep within her. Over the summer our hearts were torn as we watched her struggle, and we renewed our relationship with Natural Transitions. Ironically just two days before she died, she seemed to be perking up. But by the next day she had a fever and we headed to the hospital.

That evening there was a beautiful double rainbow that we took as a good sign that she would be over this quickly. The next day a large yellow butterfly stayed by the hospital window against a dark sky – another sign.



We gathered around Erin's hospital bed that evening – telling stories, singing songs and sharing memories. She fell into a deep sleep and died peacefully in the early morning hours. When we told the nurse that we were taking Erin home, she was aghast and said we couldn't do that. I told her to check the files because it was all arranged with Natural Transitions, which she did.

Once home, the women gently bathed and dressed Erin. We laid her out in her bed with silks and rose petals. We sent notice to the prepared email list and made a few calls. The dawn came cloudy and grey. As I sat sobbing by Erin's bed, I lifted up my head and suddenly a ray of sun shone directly on her face, which had the ultimate expression of peacefulness and beauty. We played the "Graceful Passages" CD and as the music slowly faded, so did the sunlight, until each ended at the exact same second.

For the next two days a steady stream of visitors came to be with Erin – sometimes in silence and sometimes in quiet conversation. People brought flowers, balloons (Erin's favorite) and food. As I walked outside to greet a guest, I noticed dozens of butterflies. The woman was carrying an orchid and a butterfly landed on it as she came into the house. Another guest described this: "When I walked into Erin's house the Sunday morning after she passed, I experienced profound beauty and tenderness, the love and care for the smallest details surrounded her on the bed. The house was filled with this uncanny flow of each and everyone there having their own unique experience, and yet it was as if we were all one continuous organism there for Erin. I felt immersed in a state of grace."

We lined Erin's casket with soft blankets. Kids drew pictures while others contributed photos and gifts of love to be placed inside. Another child drew a picture of Erin in her wheelchair being carried aloft by balloons and flying across the ocean.

On the second day, we laid Erin in her box and loaded her into the van with Dad, her brother John and me. Everything was prearranged by Natural Transitions – we didn't want anyone around when we arrived at the cemetery. The gravesite was dug and ready for us. We said our goodbyes and lowered her into the vault, and then stayed awhile talking, singing and crying.

We held a celebration of Life for Erin a week later. We laid out her scrapbook and hung pictures from the trees. Someone ordered butterflies which arrived in



Preparations for Erin's Celebration of Life.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Ann Harding

small triangular boxes. We kept them in netting until the celebration. Everyone received a biodegradable helium-filled balloon so they could write messages to Erin. Hundreds of people came, including Erin's kindergarten teacher, fifth grade principal, Girl Scouts, and classmates. What a testimony to how many lives she touched! A few people spoke, and as her brother sang a song he had written for her, we released the butterflies.

Six months later the loss and grief are still overwhelming, but I am grateful that we could be fully present with her death. The rituals we created allowed others to share this time with us. The many expressions of support we received fill my heart to overflowing. We are all interconnected.

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*Cynda Collins Arsenault lives in Superior, Colorado.*

# Read this book!

## *Final Rights*

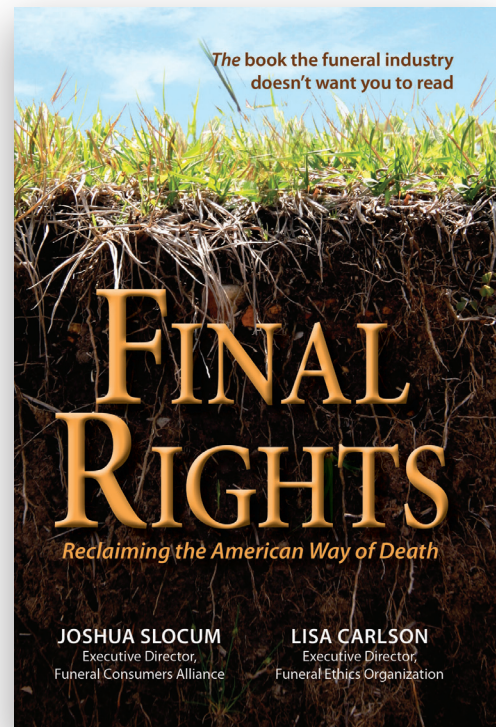
By Karen van Vuuren

### Consumer rights crusaders create a new funeral law handbook

It's the book the funeral industry doesn't want you to read, according to Lisa Carlson and Josh Slocum, authors of *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*. Carlson, executive director of the Funeral Ethics Organization, and Slocum, executive director of the Funeral Consumers' Alliance (FCA) have penned a must-read successor to Carlson's 1998, *Caring for our own Dead*, a tome that assailed the funeral industry for unscrupulous practices, and armed consumers with the legal knowledge to demand their rights. The subtitle, *Reclaiming the American Way of Death*, is a seeming tribute to Carlson forerunner, the late Jessica Mitford, whose *The American Way of Death* took the first hard look at U.S. funerary practice and malpractice.

In *Final Rights*, Carlson's original state-by-state coverage of funeral laws and regulations has been updated. But it is more than just a listing of new laws, such as Oregon's new licensing of so-called Death Care Consultants, which brings home funeral guides under the auspices of the Oregon State Mortuary and Cemetery Board. (Carlson flew to Oregon to sit the first-ever licensing exam, and answered enough of the "vague, badly worded, and/or irrelevant" questions to earn herself a Death Care Consultant license. Examples of the exam questions provide comic relief in the Oregon chapter.)

Slocum, who took over from Carlson as executive director of the FCA in 2002, draws from his arsenal of complaints about the funeral industry. There are accounts of the newly bereaved falling prey to false and misleading advertising such as for the notorious "sealer casket" – a high-priced coffin that instead of protecting the dead from decomposition, efficiently reduces them to pools of putrefaction.



Slocum and Carlson masterfully unmask some of the nonsense used to prop up bad funeral laws and regulations. The state of Tennessee banned retail casket sales because casket sellers needed sufficient "psychological training" and "retail caskets don't protect public health." (A lawsuit overturned this law.) *Final Rights* informs us that consumer protection laws are "rare" and that states stack the deck "in favor of undertakers and their pocketbooks."

Currently, eight U.S. states make it difficult for families to participate in caring for their own dead: Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey and New York require the hiring of a funeral director. Elsewhere, families may handle arrangements themselves. The home funeral movement has grown significantly in the last ten years, but fears of a funeral industry clampdown on do-it-yourselfers remain. *Final Rights* is an invaluable tool for anyone who believes, as Carlson and Slocum do, that knowledge begets change.

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*Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*

Published by Upper Access Inc., Vermont. \$19.95. Expected publication date: June 2011.



## Consider the Conversation

By Karen van Vuuren

Talking about death invites preparation, not the grim reaper.

*Consider the Conversation*, a documentary on a taboo subject, asks us to think about life, and its end. How do we want to experience our last years, months, weeks, days, minutes? Would we rather die tethered to a hospital's life support apparatus or in the arms of our loved-ones at home? Thinking and talking about end-of-life wishes doesn't come easily to most Americans, and yet, *Consider the Conversation* encourages us to do just that, to improve end-of-life care, and make it possible for us to leave on our own terms.

Mike Bernhagen, a Wisconsin hospice worker, and Terry Kaldhusdal, a fourth-grade teacher from Wisconsin, spent eighteen months talking to dying patients, their families, physicians, social workers, ethicists and end-of-life care experts. The filmmakers interviewed some of the bigger names on the end-of-life speaker circuit, such as hospice physician and author, Ira Byock, MD and investigative journalist, Stephan Kiernan who wrote *Last Rights: Rescuing the End-of-Life from the Medical System*.

The film's genesis dates back to 2005 when Bernhagen, struggling with his mother's recent death, began a conversation on death and dying with friend Kaldhusdal around a campfire. Three years later, their death talk resurfaced when Kaldhusdal's brother, Peter, received a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer.

The expert voices in *Consider the Conversation* encourage us to "normalize" death and urge both physicians and patients to realize that, "hope is not a plan." You

can still have hope, says one hospice nurse, but you need a plan for when things don't work out.

The film's most compelling speaker is a man who can barely talk. Physician Martin Welsh has Lou Gehrig's Disease, a neurodegenerative illness also known as ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). Welsh's decline to a state of wheelchair-bound dependence causes him to ask when enough is enough. "At what point is life not worth the emotional and physical costs of maintaining it?" He muses that we might come up with a list of 100 things that we do each day. And as the number shrinks, and as we find we can do less and less, we might ask ourselves, "Is life still worth living?"

*Consider the Conversation* is good medicine for healthcare professionals who skirt plain, honest talk around end-of-life wishes, and for the rest of us who need reminding that planning for death really doesn't make death happen.

*"At what point is life not worth the emotional and physical costs of maintaining it?"*

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Consider the Conversation: A documentary on a taboo subject. *Produced by Mike Bernhagen and Terry Kaldhusdal.*

[considertheconversation.org](http://considertheconversation.org)

# Talking about Dying

By Josefine Speyer

Planning and discussing ahead of time will smooth the way.



PHOTOGRAPH BY Terra Rafael

Is death a normal topic of conversation in your family? Can you talk with your children, or with your closest friends, about funeral plans without bringing doom and gloom to the table? A 2007 survey of French men and women over 65, by Bérangère Véron, a PhD sociology student in Paris, found that even though several of her interviewees claimed they had discussed their funeral plans with their children, they did not want her to interview them. They either did not want Véron to bother their children or said the children were too busy. Some children of these seniors were surprised to discover their parents even had funeral plans, and only learned about them when told that a sociologist was going to call.

It's healthy to prepare for death, to think about it and discuss it with close family and friends.

Here is an exercise you can do alone, perhaps using a notebook, or with a partner who is a good listener. Remember to switch roles, so you both take a turn. Using this list of questions, feel free to answer in whatever way feels comfortable, with as little or as much detail as you like.

- If you had the choice, what would be your ideal death; where and why? (Suddenly or after an illness, conscious or unconscious/asleep, alone or with others?) Describe the cause of your preferred death, the place, etc.
- Have you attended, read about, or heard about any funerals that have inspired you or which you liked? What was inspiring about them?
- What kind of funeral would you want for yourself? Which elements of the funeral would be important? (Home funeral? Environmentally-friendly? Would you prefer burial? Cremation?)
- What kind of funeral would you not want for yourself? What would you want to avoid?

These questions make good discussion material. Apart from the obvious practical benefit of making your wishes known, you'll also find out what others want. It's a reminder that we're all terminal and should make the most of our time here.

A good funeral can be incredibly healing, if everyone feels included

*“It's healthy to prepare for death; to think about it and discuss it with close family and friends.”*

and is content with their role. Discussing ideas, writing them down and designating a point person to ensure their execution, promotes more open communication and will help make matters easier for people when the time comes. You won't simply end up with crisis management. Begin the dialogue when you're healthy. You'll help break the taboo of talking about death and become an agent for social change.

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*Psychotherapist Josefine Speyer, a founder and a former director of the Natural Death Centre and of The Befriending Network, offers therapy and trainings in London. She is co-editor of The Natural Death Handbook (2003).*

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what people are saying about...

## Home Funerals



Pearl Street Mall, Boulder, Colorado, January, 2011

"Don't know much about them, although I'd probably be in favor of them."

"I'm very much in favor of them, as opposed to a commercial enterprise."

"Why not?"

"We need more information.  
I think it's a good idea."

"They did it back in the day. It doesn't cost a fortune, and they used to just lay out grandpa on the kitchen table."

"Funerals? Cremations at home? I haven't really developed an opinion on it. It sounds like a good idea, though, like a home wedding. I'd like to hear more about it."

"I don't know, that's not in my culture.  
We don't do home funerals."

PHOTOGRAPH BY Olivia Bareham



## When the time comes... Home Funerals in the City of Angels

By Olivia Bareham

When I first began working as a death midwife in Los Angeles, I fully expected most of my clients to be the hippie types, the ones who had homebirths, drank wheatgrass juice and believed in doing everything naturally; or perhaps, I thought, they would be people who couldn't afford costly funeral home arrangements, and were looking for a simple alternative. But during the last six years, I can honestly say that not one family has chosen a home funeral to save money, and they are a far cry from your average hippie. They reflect the delicious and unpredictable diversity of Los Angeles.

When I first met Muriel, she was lying in bed, in the small, sparsely

furnished, third-floor apartment that she shared with her sister Denise in Burbank. She was fifty two, in the final stages of advanced cancer, and although her body was bony and thin, her smile was soft and wide.

*"Most of my clients have roots in a foreign land..."*

Home was Armenia, the place she and her sister were born and raised, and left, thirty years ago, to seek a better life in America. Most of my clients have roots in a foreign land (Peru, Indonesia, Armenia, Ireland, and Iran, to name just a few). These people have watched their own parents and grandparents die at home. They have watched relatives tenderly care for them, and the community proudly honor them with a

ceremony, a feast, and a procession to the cremation or burial site. It's natural to them. When these people find me, and discover that they can legally continue to practice their cultural traditions, they are relieved and elated. Very often, my role is simply to listen, to hold the space, and to give people permission to do what they innately know how to do.

I glanced up at the beautiful embroidered shawl that was hanging on the wall behind the bed.

"I was a Flamenco dancer," Muriel offered, following my gaze. "I danced with that one in Istanbul. Mother made it. Can you put it in the box with me, when the time comes?"

I assured her that I would, and asked if there was anything else she'd like me to include. "Some flowers, perhaps," she said thoughtfully, "Roses. Oh, and my rosary." I made a quick note in her folder – shawl, roses, rosary. Muriel pushed herself up against the pillows.

"Now," she said, as though getting down to business. "What exactly are you going to do when the time comes?" I gently explained that when she passed, Denise would call, and I would come over right away. I would wash her, and, if Denise wanted to, she could help me. Muriel liked that idea, and asked that I be sure to use the lavender soap, the one her son bought her for Christmas. I then explained about the ancient practice of anointing the body, and pulled a selection of essential oil bottles from my purse. "Perhaps you'd like to choose the one you like best?" I suggested. I opened each bottle and held it under her nose to let her take in the scent. She smiled, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply, enjoying the

temporary distraction from the pain. "That one," she said with a smile, pointing to the green label, "and some of that one on my feet please."

"After the oils, you're going to dress me, right?" she asked. There wasn't a glimmer of fear, or trepidation, just a need for knowing how everything was going to be. "That's right," I agreed. "What would you like to wear?" She took a deep breath. "Well, I was going to ask Denise help me choose something. We always helped each other choose what to wear when we went out, but I think this might upset her." I nodded, imagining how difficult it would be to pick out the dress my sister would wear for her cremation. "Do you think you could help me find something special?" Muriel asked. "Of course," I assured her. "It would be an honor."

I stood up, and drew back the sliding door to the closet, revealing an array of dresses and gowns. I carefully took them out, one at a time, and held them up, waiting for a nod or shake of her head. Muriel

*"I then explained about the ancient practice of anointing the body..."*

narrowed it down to three: A red flamenco gown, a simple, white cotton skirt and blouse, and a green sundress. She told me the story of when she won first prize wearing the red gown, of how she fell in love on the dance floor, and how he broke her heart, and she never wore it again. "No," she said, it didn't feel right to wear that one. Her mother had made the sundress, and it would have been her first choice, but it looked much too big now she had lost so much weight. So the white cotton suit it would be, and anyway, she offered kindly, a skirt and blouse would be easier to get on, wouldn't it? I nodded in agreement, secretly glad of her sensible choice.

"Denise is going to make a wreath for my hair," she told me, while I hung the outfit on the end of the rail where I would easily find it later.

"She made one for my wedding. And she's going to read prayers to me for the three days, like we did for mother when she died." "That is so sweet of her," I said, sitting back down on the bed, and taking Muriel's hand. The grace and presence with which she was attending to her final details was humbling. Muriel nodded. "I know. I'm very lucky. I only hope somebody will do it for her, when her time comes."

I gently explained to Muriel that I would bring the cremation casket to the house after she died, and that everyone who came to visit her could decorate it with messages and pictures. "Is there anything special that you'd like written on the casket?" I asked. "Oh, I'll leave it up to Denise, and my nephew," she replied, "He's a great artist."

She lay back on the pillows and sighed. "I'm tired now. Is there anything else we need to talk about?"

Five days later, at 7 a.m. on a Monday morning, Denise called to say that Muriel had just passed away. I packed the midwife kit, massage table, back board, cooler, casket and art supplies, picked a rose from my front garden, and headed off to Burbank. The hospice nurse, who had stopped by to confirm the death, was leaving just as I arrived. Denise's son was comforting Denise as she made the phone calls to alert family members. I hugged them both as I walked past, and made my way into the bedroom. Standing at the foot of Muriel's bed where she lay so still, and already cold, I breathed in the presence of her sweetness that now filled the room. "Thank you, Muriel." I whispered. "Thank you."

I lit twenty tea lights and placed them around the room. I put Muriel's favorite CD into the player. I put up the card table that Denise had agreed we could use for the altar and draped it with one of Muriel's shawls, and then hung another



PHOTOGRAPH BY Olivia Bareham



above it. I placed a photograph of Muriel flamenco dancing on the alter along with a candle, and the rose from my garden. I said another little prayer, and then went to find Denise.

Together we washed Muriel's body. We dressed her in the white cotton skirt and blouse, laid the rosary in her hands, and the wreath around her head. There. She was ready, and she was beautiful. For the next three days, Denise sat vigil by Muriel's bedside. She said prayers, read to her from Armenian orthodox texts and sat in silent communication. I visited morning and night, on the pretext of checking the dry ice, but mostly to check on Denise. Her selfless, unconditional love for her sister reconnected me to my love for my own sister, thousands of miles away. That's what happens at funerals. We give ourselves permission to fall in love.

By the third day, the once white, cardboard cremation casket was complete. A flamenco dancer in pastels adorned the lid, and writings that inspired Muriel during her life were carefully scripted around the edge. A few people had written notes and pasted photographs, and Denise had trimmed the lid with a

strip of lace that her mother hand crocheted. A little boy who had visited, had remarked that the lady on the lid didn't have an earring, so he took one of his mother's and pushed it through to add the final touch. It was breathtaking.

We carefully laid Muriel inside the box, and said a final prayer while ceremoniously closing the lid. I called the transportation company to check that the hearse was on the way. Yes, ten minutes at the most—perfect timing. As the four men, dressed in their black suits, skillfully carried the colorful casket down the stairs of the apartment complex, curious neighbors peeked behind curtains and blinds at the unusual spectacle. When they reached the lobby, the postal-carrier stood back in surprise, and then scrambled to hold open the door, as Muriel, held high, was brought out into the midday sun.

There was no hearse. The apologetic message on my phone said it had broken down four miles away, but they could send a replacement in thirty minutes.

With over 100 Armenians waiting at the church, and temperatures now way above ninety degrees, we did not have the luxury of waiting

thirty minutes. There was no alternative, we would have to take her ourselves. Did anyone happen to have a pickup? As is always the case, at a Sacred Crossing there is never a problem without an immediate solution. Denise ran to ask Samuel, the next-door neighbor and a good friend, and, within minutes, he was backing his truck up against the curb. We stood reverently as Samuel moved aside an assortment of gardening tools, and the men gently lowered Muriel into the bed of the truck.

Everyone stared silently at the colorful flamenco dancer lying next to the lawn mower. It wasn't exactly what we had in mind, but it was the best we could do in the circumstances. "We need to get going," I whispered to Denise. Since she was the next of kin, acting in lieu of a funeral director, she rode up front with Samuel. The men in black suits followed in their Toyota and I took up the rear in my Jeep.

Samuel gave an encouraging "thumbs up" as he pulled slowly onto the tree-lined street and took the ramp onto the Ventura freeway. We tailgated Muriel in the pickup for the twenty-mile drive across the San Fernando Valley, and I did what I always do on my way to a Sacred Crossing departure, I rolled up the windows and in my biggest, deepest, gospel voice, I sang...

"Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Comin' for to carry me home  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Comin' for to carry me home."

---

*This article is an edited excerpt from the upcoming book Sacred Crossings – Bringing Funerals Home, by Olivia Bareham.*

*Rev. Olivia Bareham is founder of Sacred Crossings. She assists with home funerals in the Los Angeles area. Her website is [sacredcrossings.com](http://sacredcrossings.com)*



**M**y mother was dying – at home – with me. I wondered how being with the dead body would be, even feared it a little. I moved in with my parents and became my mother's caretaker in her final seven months. During her last weeks, hospice assisted me. Thankfully, they support personal rituals and beliefs in caring for those who are dying and who have passed.

The nurses told me what to expect, and that helped immensely. They explained that her raspy breathing, refusal to eat or drink much, and joint pain were signs that her body was shutting down. Her end was nearing. The final two days, we didn't roll her back and forth when her joints had drawn up tightly because she whimpered in pain if we moved her. The nurses gave my mother pain and anti-anxiety medications to ease her through the last days.

On March 5, I called hospice to say my mother was no longer breathing. A worker came immediately even though it was 3 a.m. I was not yet ready for the funeral home to take her away. There was no rush or pressure for anything – only gentle encouragement to handle things whatever way I thought was best. It took two hours for my elderly father to move forward with his mourning to spend time with Mother and say a final goodbye.

While we waited for his readiness, we prepared my mother for Father's last visit and my mother's trip to the funeral home. The worker guided me. I did the washing, starting with her face where medications had coated her lips, then her neck and entire front side. Then the worker assisted me with rolling her and washing her back side. I combed Mother's hair, sprayed her with a light scent of Daddy's favorite perfume, and propped her on pillows. We then dressed her in a soft, long nightgown and panties. I had not thought much about it before this moment, but I found it exceedingly comforting to help prepare my mother, since these were my last moments with her. It meant a great deal that I could choose how my mother looked when my father came in to see her for the last time.

It was probably a good five hours from the time she passed until she was picked up for cremation. No one

## A Daughter's Final Gift

By Valerie Sweet



PHOTOGRAPH BY Terra Rafael

rushed me or my father. The hospice worker helped us fill out paperwork as we finalized arrangements and said our goodbyes. I believe my grieving was lessened and my heart strengthened by being allowed these last moments of caring for my mother after she died in an environment that was not rushed. I plan to spend the same personal and comforting time and attention with my father when he passes.

---

*Valerie Sweet is currently struggling with esophageal cancer while raising her grandbaby and caring for her father who suffers from dementia.*

# Pioneers Creating Home Funeral Consciousness

By Terra Rafael

Every movement has its forerunners. Here are the stories of a few good women.

The resurgence of home funerals arose from the well of love. The mothers of the movement took steps to care for their beloveds who had died, with their own hands and in their own realm.

They did so with the wish to both honor the dear dead one, and to allow their hearts the time to come to terms with the physical reality of death. It was not an ideological decision, but rather an urge to continue the care they had given during life into the postmortem period. They chose not to give the body over to strangers.

Home funerals were the norm in the U.S. until the Civil War. Families laid out their loved ones and buried them in the family plot on the farm or in the town cemetery. With the huge number of Civil War casualties—soldiers usually died away from home—inventive entrepreneurs began preserving the bodies to be shipped home. However, the practice of embalming became commonplace as undertakers became more prominent. Grieving families passed on their traditional role as after-death caretakers to the funeral industry.

This change in roles has come with a price. Today the average funeral home service bill is \$7,000, which doesn't include cemetery, flowers,

or other expenses (often about \$3,000). Some families try to avoid extra costs by selecting cremation, but unless negotiated directly with a crematory, mortuary costs are

added on. And there can be urn and cemetery expenses if the ashes are buried. On a more emotional level, passing off the hands-on experience of taking care of our dead has distanced Americans from death and after-death matters.

## The Mothers of the Movement Nancy Poer



*“Home funerals were the norm in the U.S. until the Civil War.”*

The home funeral movement seeks to reverse the trend of the commercialization of death by offering families the option of caring for their own dead. “A home funeral isn't for everyone,” says Nancy Poer, a long-time home funeral advocate in California. “It's about helping others to have choices and to know what their rights are. People didn't know they could make their own coffin. They didn't know that you didn't have to embalm.”

Nancy's story began when she and her husband cared for their own elders by allowing them to die a natural course at home. When they wanted to have three-day vigils with their loved ones' remains for closure and celebration, they found that this was not allowed at a funeral home. Poer stated, “The [mortuary's] insurance wouldn't allow for us to stay like that. Then we knew that we'd have to do it ourselves if we wanted to have that honoring, sharing and closure with loved ones.”

*“It's about helping others to have choices and to know what their rights are.”*

In 1979 Nancy began consulting and helping others who came to her, wishing to do what her family had done. “We began with our own elders and then we supported deaths in our community. Eventually we started traveling around the country to help others form threshold communities to take care of death in their own communities.” Nancy and her group of volunteers realized that they could do it themselves. Her book, *Living Into Dying—A Journal of Spiritual and Practical Deathcare for Family and Community*, shares both

practical and spiritual wisdom she has gained through her work.

Poer commented, “Dying is an act, a deed, an achievement, and a birth. When you come in, your mother births you, and when you go home, you birth yourself. Rather than agonizing over birthing OUT of the body, we can recognize it is a birthing process. It’s an awesome threshold either way.”

**Lisa Carlson**



“In a few generations, we Americans had lost the common lore of what to do at the time of death,” says Lisa Carlson, co-author of the soon-to-be published *Final Rights, Reclaiming the American Way of Death*. Fate prepared her against this lack of information when her first husband committed suicide at age 31. She had read a historical overview called “How to Bury Your Own Dead in Vermont,” which told how previous generations had handled the dead—and mentioned that those ways were still legal. After her husband’s autopsy, she retrieved the remains, and with help, brought his body to the crematory. Afterwards she added his cremains to the garden he had planted.

After some articles were written

## “Americans had lost the common lore of what to do at the time of death”

about Carlson’s experience, people started contacting her about doing their own home funerals. That’s when she realized that the laws varied from state to state. She hit the library and also called about 500 crematories around the country to see which would accept bodies directly from families, to ensure that she was relaying accurate information.

The result of her research was the first published home funeral book, *Caring for Your Own Dead*, published in 1987. Although it went through 26 “ejections,” as her daughter called them, this book sparked media attention. Carlson appeared on Good Morning America and The Phil Donahue Show, among others. It became a vital resource for anyone wishing to do a home funeral within the law. Lisa transformed her experience into a guidepost for others to follow.

**Jerrigrace Lyons**



“One stumbling block has been that there are no visual experiences [about caring for the dead] other than negative ones in the media

... scary. [Another obstacle is] the view that death is a failure. I started creating slide shows and positive media to begin replacing negative images with positive ones,” says Jerrigrace Lyons, another mother of the home funeral movement.

1994 was a turning point for Jerrigrace in California. A dear friend died who had made it clear that she didn’t want to be turned over to a mortuary after her death. Jerrigrace’s friend had written down her wishes which included, essentially, having a home funeral. Jerrigrace didn’t know it was possible until that experience.

It led her to a new career, and awakened her to the healing benefits of a family caring for its own. Working with others, Jerrigrace formed the Natural Deathcare Project, which has since evolved into a private practice for helping families with home funerals. She added an educational wing, Final Passages, which trains people as death midwives. Since that first home funeral, Jerrigrace has helped over 300 families carry out their home funerals and answered questions for hundreds more by phone.

**Beth Knox**

For Beth Knox of Maryland, “Nancy Poer was the avenue—then everything conspired to make it happen.” Making it happen meant garnering the support she needed when her young daughter was suddenly killed in an airbag accident. She didn’t want her child to go to the morgue and then a mortuary. She wanted to continue mothering her in death, just as she had during her child’s brief life. “I had a lot of friends and [supporters] who helped make it happen. We figured it out as we went along.”

*"...there are no visual experiences [about caring for the dead] other than negative ones in the media..."*

It took her a long time to recover from her daughter's death. "I could definitely have just crawled away." But after a workshop with Tamara Slayton (based on the teachings of Rudolph Steiner), Beth was convinced she could do this work. "I heard myself telling my cousin that I didn't want people to learn the hard way." Beth, through her organization, Crossings, continues to support and educate people who wish to bring death care back into their family.



Char Barrett, First President of NHFA

### **Organizing the National Home Funeral Alliance**

As the home funeral work continued and spread to different locations, there was talk about creating a national organization. Karen van Vuuren, founder and director of Natural Transitions, organized a home funeral and green burial conference in Boulder, CO, in the fall of 2008. Held again in 2009, the talk turned into action. "It was at the 2009 conference when the seed was planted for many of us," says Char Barrett, current president of the National Home Funeral Alliance. Following the 2009 conference, forty active home

funeral guides and educators from around the country met to begin the work of creating an organization. The vision from that meeting grew into NHFA. In its first year, the volunteer board managed to launch a website, create a charter, and organize the first National Home Funeral Alliance conference which took place in 2010.

*"What we really want to support is the empowerment of families."*

Char Barrett shared her thoughts about the mission of the NHFA: "What has always been at the heart of the movement is the family-directed aspect of home funerals. What we really want to support is the empowerment of families to do this [a home funeral] themselves." Once fully established, NHFA will be a resource for its members to further home funeral objectives and also provide education to practitioners and the public.

Beth Knox is banking on the NHFA. "I'm thrilled that it's finally coming about. It's a great organizing tool. When everyone knows home funerals are an option, then we'll have worked ourselves out of a job."

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*Terra Rafael writes, comforts, and plays in Lafayette, CO, when not putting out this magazine.*

*"I didn't want people to learn the hard way."*



*Excerpts from the National Home Funeral Alliance:*

#### **NHFA Mission**

- To support the innate rights of families to care for their own dead.
- To support an alliance of ethical, responsible, and knowledgeable educators and providers whose primary focus is planning and facilitating home and family-led after-death care that is environmentally friendly.

NHFA's aim is to help home funeral guides practice with integrity by clearly defining our goals and ethical responsibilities in relation to our clients, our peers, to the law and to society

#### **Definition of a home funeral:**

A home funeral is defined as a family or community-centered response to death and after-death care.

Depending on the specifics of each state's law, families and communities may play a key role in:

- Planning and carrying out after-death rituals or ceremonies (such as laying out the deceased and home visitation of the body)
- Preparing the body for burial or cremation
- Filing of death-related paperwork such as the death certificate
- Transporting the deceased to the place of burial or cremation
- Facilitating the final disposition of the body such as digging the grave

Home funerals may occur within the family home or not. The emphasis is on encouraging and educating on minimal, non-invasive and environmentally-friendly care of the body.

The role of a home funeral guide is to educate and empower families to exercise the innate right of caring for their own dead.

Home funeral guides believe that after-death care is most meaningful when carried out by family and friends of the deceased. They are guides and not directors. They impart the knowledge that families may need in order to be able to exercise the innate right of caring for their own dead.

A home funeral guide will always practice with respect, sensitivity, integrity, clarity and calmness.

A home funeral guide will maintain familiarity with local and state laws, ordinances and regulations, especially pertaining to family rights in caring for deceased persons.

For more about the NHFA, please visit: [homefuneralalliance.org](http://homefuneralalliance.org)

# Ritual That Reconnects

Karen van Vuuren interviews Joanna Macy



*"Death can be seen . . . as a blessing, even though it's hard."*

Two years after her husband's sudden death, celebrated eco-philosopher, peace activist, and Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy revisits the rite of passage that brought comfort and healing to her family. Francis Underhill Macy, a dedicated environmentalist, energy activist, and citizen diplomat, died January 20, 2009 of an apparent heart attack. He was 81. Macy spoke with NTM's Karen van Vuuren about Fran's

home funeral, and the unfolding of events around her husband's death. (See Macy's blog excerpt on pg. 31)

**Karen van Vuuren:** Did you know about families' rights to care for their own before Fran died?

**Joanna Macy:** Well, I had a video called *A Family*

*Undertaking* from the people at Crossings (home funeral and green burial resource center) in Washington, D.C., and I had talked on the phone with a person up in Sonoma County who counsels people.

**KV:** Jerrigrace Lyons?

**JM:** Yes, but I did not talk to her after Fran died. I had called her a couple of years before, simply to ask about a workshop – if there was a workshop I could go to.

I have a friend who was working with Crossings and we had read Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*. We wanted very much to avoid the funeral industry and I did not want to be cremated for ecological reasons, and also for a personal sense of wanting to decompose in the earth. In late 2004, I discovered a green burial place called Fernwood Cemetery and Fran and I invested in securing two spots side by side. It had a very strong ecological, conservation element to it. The money goes into beautifying and protecting the wild nature of the land.

Our inclination for a long time had been that death was a natural phenomenon and that like life itself, death can be seen and approached as a blessing, even though it's hard, because you are losing somebody you love and you don't know what is happening to yourself when you die. There's that great mystery. At any rate, when we acquired our plot in the green burial site at Fernwood, they told us that we didn't even need a coffin!

There's another beautiful cemetery near our home and I had thought, "Oh, that's lovely! My grandchildren can come and sit by my grave," but then I learned that I would have to go into a cement vault and I did not want to be in some private pool of putrefaction. I wanted to enter the earth. So that impelled my search for green

*I kept saying, "I want his body!  
I've got to get his body!"*

burial. Once we found Fernwood, it made us so happy to think of it. It's right across the bay and about a 45-minute drive from here near a beautiful hike that we used to take.

**KV:** Apart from getting the burial plots, did you have a plan? Had you talked about what would happen when one of you died?

**JM:** No. We thought that we would certainly talk about that, but didn't get around to it. And Fran died very suddenly. As I went to the hospital following the ambulance, I kept saying, "I want his body! I've got to get his body!" And they wouldn't let me have it. They said, "We have a very nice morgue here." And I said, "I have to have it at home!" because I'd wanted to be able to read and play music and sing and pray around his body. So it's because of the green burial place that we were able to get his body that very night. They kept him in emergency and I called Fernwood, managed to get someone, and they sent a mortuary vehicle over across the bay to get Fran's body and bring it to our home, which was just a few blocks away.

We had to wait about an hour. During that time, I sent the children, my grown children, to get dry ice, flowers and candles. I was waiting with a woman who was the co-director of Fran's organization, the Center for Safe Energy. We were standing next to his body in the emergency room and I said, "I want to read to him!" But I didn't want to read to him out of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* because I'm the Buddhist and he isn't. So I asked the hospital

chaplain, "Do you have anything I can read?" and she said, "All I have is Obama's inaugural address." It was the day of the inauguration and the address had been printed in the afternoon paper. We stood there on either side of Fran and read him Obama's inaugural speech. We were next to an adjoining room that was separated from us by a curtain and there was another family with someone who was dying. It was an African-American family. When the driver of the mortuary vehicle came, put Fran in a bag, zipped it up, and wheeled him out, the people in the next room came out into the hall and embraced us and said, "We heard every word you said and it meant so much to us, and we have written you a poem." They had written the poem on paper towels, which was all that they had. So I felt that our way of dying or our way of being with Fran in his passing was a blessing to other people as well.

**KV:** So did anyone raise their eyebrows at your idea of taking his body home?

**JM:** No, they just had rules. And the thing is, we put it in terms of religious faith. We said, "Our practice is to have the body at home and surround it with prayers, so that is our way of doing it." When you put it in terms of a matter of faith, nobody argues at all.

**KV:** That's always a blessing when you aren't meeting obstacles.

**JM:** Yes, it makes such a difference. I felt that several of the personnel in the emergency expressed a strong sense of solidarity with us - and feelings of tenderness,



## A time to die. . . Joanna Macy's Husband

By Joanna Macy

Joanna Macy: Fran's death,  
blog entry, April 12, 2009



No one was with Fran when he died. I had gone down to work in my cottage in the garden, after he and I dragged ourselves away from watching President Obama's inaugural parade, and gave each other a long, strong hug of jubilation. The doctor says the heart attack was instantaneous, but we don't know exactly when it struck. Daughter Peggy, coming upstairs about an hour and a half after that last hug, found him lying back across our bed with one hand, already cool to the touch, resting on his heart and the other holding a copy of *The Nation*.

Within minutes, firemen and paramedics from the fire station down the street were attempting to revive him, and grandson, Julien, was running to find me, screaming, "Something happened to Opa!" Imagining they detected a flicker of a pulse, the medics took Fran to the ER at the hospital some five blocks away. Peggy and I followed, with Jack, Barbara, Anne and Enid joining us. We didn't wait long before Fran's death was confirmed.

Given the shock of the suddenness of it all, it made a huge difference to bring Fran's body home.

It was a surreal and exquisite night. Our bedroom filled with flowers, candlelight, music, Russian liturgies, and Bach cello suites. With scented water and rose petals in a Palestinian bowl he'd given me for Christmas, Fran's beautiful body was washed, slowly, caressingly, reverently, by his son, his daughter, and his wife. Then we dressed him,

choosing sweatpants and a faded denim shirt I loved, and tucked bags of dry ice under his neck and back and sides, and covered his legs and torso with a sheet of royal blue. He looked calm, handsome, and noble, like a Viking chief on his funeral boat.

The next two days from 10 in the morning till 10 at night people came to pay their respects. No idea how many came, all told, in that steady flow of friends and neighbors, some returning more than once. No need to ring or knock, just come in and up the stairs. Go straight ahead to the bedroom and sit in silent meditation with Fran, or read to him, or join in a song. Or turn right into the dining room where more bounteous food appears by the minute or join in a quiet chat at the kitchen table. Or turn left into the living room and sit down to draw messages or pictures on muslin to be appliquèd to Fran's shroud. The sewing of that was in Peggy's domain downstairs. Two friends took turns stitching long strips from her quilting fabrics while the grandchildren and their friends kibitzed, choosing colors and making more decorations for Opa. What struck me above all was the atmosphere that reigned. I can still almost feel it, the softness and buoyancy of the air, a sweet lightness around us and inside us.

On the morning of the third day we smudged Fran's body with sage and wrapped him fully in the finished shroud. The burial took place at Fernwood Cemetery with family and a handful of friends. First a lovely, spare service in the chapel, beyond its glass wall, a



tumbling stream. Between Kurt Kuhwald's prayer of welcome and Jennifer Berezan's closing chant ("She Carries Me"), people came forward to speak directly, spontaneously to Fran. Then we all circled up for the Elm Dance around his body. Up on a hillside, about a quarter mile distant, the grave was ready. Six men - sons, nephews, friends - took hold of straps and lowered the shrouded body into the earth. No coffin, no box, just cloth and dirt. Prayers. *Dona Nobis Pacem*. Flowers tossed in, then handfuls of loose soil. A gentle rain. The hillside looks out toward Mount Tamalpais to the northwest and due west to a rolling ridge and the great ocean.

On February 21st [2009], hundreds of Fran's friends, colleagues, and kin joined us at Berkeley's First Congregational Church to honor his life. What a great outpouring of heart that was, with tears, laughter, wonderful words, and a wealth of music.

One of the many, hardest things about losing Fran was the sense of losing myself as well. Disinterest in my life and work would sweep over me at moments, and then it was hard to see any value in the teaching and writing that for decades had imbued me with purpose and joy. At those awful moments everything seemed pointless and I'd wonder if I could or even wanted to continue.

Then, just a month after the memorial, that changed. I had a kind of visitation from Fran. Awaking in the middle of the night, I looked up through our high bedroom window to see two stars grow brighter and brighter as they seemed to move toward me. Then every cell of my body was flooded with warmth and energy. I recognized that it was Fran, his love for me, and then, just as strong a charge, my love for him. I couldn't tell the difference, and kept weeping on and on with thanksgiving. Then, in the thought chamber of my mind, these words: "I stayed as long as I could." Given the cardiological history of Macy men, that's true: he made every effort to keep his heart ticking and succeeded till almost 82, twelve years



longer than his father and his brother. A second communication followed, and more insistently. "Continue the work, it's needed. You must keep on."

Since that night the terrible lostness is all but gone. I still get ambushed by grief. The hollowness in my stomach still comes, without warning. I would still crawl on my hands and knees to the ends of the Earth to find him and be with him, even for the shortest while. I want so badly to talk with him about what's happening to our country, our world. But a lot of the time, I'm okay - steady and willing. And when I meet with groups and teach, the old glee erupts.

## ntm resource directory

### **Sacred Crossings**

Olivia Bareham  
sacredcrossings.com  
olivia@sacredcrossings.com  
310-968-2763

### **near and dear**

Anita Garcia  
nearanddear@vpweb.com  
drgarcias1100@msn.com  
520-896-0516 / 520-307-0028

### **Blessing the Journey**

info@blessingthejourney.com  
Olympia, WA  
Sacredly guiding families through  
the home funeral journey.

### **CycledLife, Inc.**

Ed Gazvoda  
CycledLife.com  
303.459.4953

### **Green Burial Council**

greenburialcouncil.org  
Setting standards, offering training and  
technical assistance, and certifying  
providers of green burial options.

### **Life Quality Institute**

lifequalityinstitute.org  
Advancing Palliative Care Through Education  
Offering trainings on palliative care.

### **Threshold Care Circle of Viroqua, WI**

thresholdcarecircle.org  
info@thresholdcarecircle.org  
1-608-606-8060

### **Natural Transitions**

naturaltransitions.org  
info@naturaltransitions.org  
Trainings and support with advance  
directives, home funerals and more.

### **Compassion and Choices**

compassionandchoices.org  
info@compassionandchoices.org  
Rights of individuals to choose their  
end of life scenario.

### **Rayne Johnson**

tearcups.com  
rayne@tearcups.com  
780-642-8703  
Grief Coach/ Educator on EOL issues

### **Life and Death Matters Film Festival**

ladmatters.com  
info@ladmatters.com  
Sept 2-4th, 2011 in Boulder, CO  
A project of Natural Transitions.

### **National Organization for Hospice & Palliative Care**

nohpc.org  
Find a hospice, learn more about  
palliative care.

### **Meryllynne Rush, Home Funeral Guide**

AfterDeathHomeCare.com  
info@AfterDeathHomeCare.com  
734-395-9660  
After-death home care.

### **Eternity Cardboard Casket**

eeternity.com  
Affordability, simplicity, dignity,  
environmentally friendly-perfect for  
green cremation and green burial.

### **Funeral Consumers Alliance**

funerals.org  
Consumer friendly information on all  
aspects of funerals, including consumer  
rights.

### **Funeral Ethics Organization**

funeralethics.org  
info@funeralethics.org  
Informing about and promoting ethical  
business regarding funerals.

### **Final Passages**

finalpassages.org  
finalpassages@softcom.net  
707-824-0268

### **CROSSINGS**

crossings.net  
crossings@crossings.net  
(301) 523-3033 Takoma Park, MD  
Caring for our own at death.

*To be included in the Directory, please contact [adsnaturaltransitionsmag@gmail.com](mailto:adsnaturaltransitionsmag@gmail.com).*

## ntm calendar

### **April 16, 2011**

#### **National Healthcare Decisions Day**

nhdd.org

National Healthcare Decisions Day is an  
initiative to encourage patients to express  
their wishes regarding healthcare and for  
providers and facilities to respect those  
wishes, whatever they may be.

### **April 29, 30 & May 1**

#### **Natural Transitions Training- Colorado**

naturaltransitions.org

Attend level I, for basic end-of-life and  
after-death care, including writing your  
own advance directives. Levels Two and  
Three follow for those who wish to be-  
come an End-of-Life Transition Guide.

### **May 13 - 17, 2011**

#### **Final Passages Level 3 Training - California**

finalpassages.org

Honoring Life's Final Passage  
Multi-Level Certificate Program.  
Please see website for upcoming dates of  
Level 1 and 2.

### **September 2 - 4, 2011**

#### **Life and Death Matters Film Festival - Colorado**

ladmatters.com

A project of Natural Transitions.

### **September 21 - 24, 2011**

#### **National Home Funeral Alliance**

homefuneralalliance.org

Second Annual Conference in Boulder, CO.

### **Ongoing**

#### **Life Quality Institute- Colorado**

lifequalityinstitute.org

Offering series of monthly talks regard-  
ing palliative care and end-of-life issues in  
these locations:

Reality of Care - Denver, CO

Called to Care - Pastoral issues -

Cherry Hills, CO

Prepared to Care - Denver, CO

See website for topics, times, and locations.

*To be included in the Calendar, please contact [adsnaturaltransitionsmag@gmail.com](mailto:adsnaturaltransitionsmag@gmail.com).*

## The Shortest One in the Family

Opa finally moved into the nursing home, worn down by Parkinsons. Eight-year-old Evan would tag along to visit him, shy in the strange environment. He saw how Opa could barely talk any more and was getting thinner and thinner. Finally Opa died. At the church, Evan saw the urn at the altar. At the graveyard, he placed his wildflowers on it before it was covered in earth.

A few months later, when Evan turned nine, we were commenting on his growth. "Soon you'll be bigger than Oma and then she'll be the shortest one in the family."

Evan replied, "No she won't. Opa is the shortest one in the family because he fits in that little box."



# Natural Transitions

[www.naturaltransitions.org](http://www.naturaltransitions.org)

## Three ways

we are creating cultural change

1.

### A New Training



Multi-level Certificate Program in End-of-life Transition Guidance

for laypersons and professionals

Next Level: 1 April 29, 30, and May 1  
visit [www.naturaltransitions.org](http://www.naturaltransitions.org)  
or email [info@naturaltransitions.org](mailto:info@naturaltransitions.org)

2.

### A New Film Festival

**LAD**  
matters



An inspirational, international film festival about  
**Life And Death Matters**  
September 2,3,4 2011, Boulder, Colorado  
[www.ladmatters.com](http://www.ladmatters.com)

3.

### A New Magazine

YOU'VE JUST READ  
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