



Natural Transitions

Volume 8 Issue 2

Conscious, holistic approaches to end of life



Legacy of Addiction

From Heroin to Hope

When Someone's Child Dies: What You
Can Do to Help

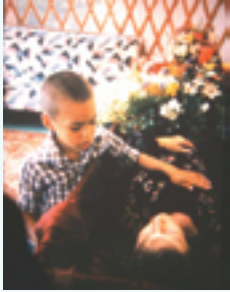
Cryptic Customs and Graveyard
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Altar for Jacob Wilson at his home wake
Photograph by Karen van Vuuren



Love Is More Powerful than Fear

by Karen van Vuuren



Karen van Vuuren

I recently had tea with a mother whose 22-year-old daughter died of a heroin and ecstasy overdose earlier this year. This parent, a single mother, had participated in a reverent washing and honoring of her daughter's body, post autopsy, and felt blessed to have had that experience. It has stuck with her as a positive, love-filled encounter with a heart-wrenching, not altogether unexpected loss. The ritual with the body was powerful and inspired this mother to create her own rituals, including decorating a tree in a local park with mementos of her daughter. Each weekend the mother makes a pilgrimage to this tree, carving out space to remember, reflect and grieve.

This mother told me she preferred a one-on-one approach to support. I referred her to an individualized peer support program for grief, but they were unable to match her with a peer. She was ultimately able to confide in and derive strength from meeting regularly with another mother whose son had died suddenly, albeit in different circumstances.

Based on my conversation with her and others, I have learned that generic grief groups have little appeal. Many have found the most comfort in talking to fellow travelers who have experienced similar, tragic loss. Nar-Anon—the 12-step support group for families of narcotics addicts—welcomes those bereaved in this way. The presence of community is a primary determinant in rebuilding one's life after loss. Sometimes the support of *one other person* can make all the difference.

Like other parents I have met, the bereaved mother also found solace in a psychic reading to confirm that her daughter took responsibility for her own death and was doing fine on the other side. The urge toward consulting a medium for answers can be strong.

Finding peace and forgiveness of self and others are key components in the healing journey of a parent after an overdose death, especially due to the stigma surrounding overdosing, and when the circumstances leading to drug addiction are misunderstood.

This issue of *Natural Transitions* magazine looks at the addiction epidemic and the courage of families—like Debby and JW Wilson—who channeled their grief into participating in addiction education and activism. We learn what drives people to addiction and keeps them addicted (see the Sam Snodgrass article) and consider the unique grief journey of those dealing with the searing wound of overdose death from Marsha Wiggins' *From Heroin to Hope* and Robert Waxler's *Losing Jonathan*.

We hope this issue educates and enlightens end-of-life professionals and volunteers working with overdose loss families, so we can understand their stories and move forward based on their hard-won truth. [t](#)



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OUR VISION

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

OUR MISSION

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

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What It Feels Like to Have an Opioid Addiction

by Sam Snodgrass

We are in the midst of an epidemic of opioid addiction and death. Almost everyone knows someone living an opioid addiction or who has died from one. And they all have the same question: why can't we, didn't we, stop?

Why, they wonder, do we hock, trade, sell everything we own; why do we steal and hurt the ones we love just to get our roxies, dilaudid, our heroin? The answer to that question is really very simple.

I'm a behavioral pharmacologist who has lived the experience.

I started using heroin in 1976 when I was 20 years old. For the next 13 years I used occasionally, never enough to become addicted. I earned a B.A. in psychology, a masters in experimental psychology and a doctorate in biopsychology. After I completed the doctorate in 1987, I was awarded a National Institute on Drug Abuse post-doctoral fellowship in the Pharmacology and Toxicology department at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

My area of research was behavioral pharmacology, which is the study of how drugs affect the brain and behavior. During all of this time I was still, on occasion, using. In April of 1989 I got into a bottle of methadone hydrochloride from the behavioral pharmacology lab and the whole time I was shooting that methadone I told myself that I would stop. And I believed that. Until I couldn't.

For the next 22 years I lived the life of opioid addiction. The last year and a half of my addiction I was homeless, living on the streets and sleeping on the ground, in homeless shelters and on people's floors. The last time I used an opioid was December 11, 2011.

As published in *The Huffington Post*, July 19, 2017, updated August 16, 2017; reprinted with permission

I am sharing this because I want you to know that I understand what your child, what your loved one, experiences in their addiction. I have lived it. And that because of my education and research, I also understand the neurocircuitry, neuropharmacology and behavioral aspects of opioid addiction.

I believe in science. I believe in its truth. And science has shown that opioid addiction is a disease of brain structure and, thus, function. The continual intake of these opioids, day after day, year after year, alters the brain on a cellular, molecular basis. These alterations are opioid addiction. And they are manifested as behavior directed toward the survival of the individual.

The neurobiological explanation of this illness is beyond the scope of this article. But maybe this will help.

Let's say that you haven't had anything to eat for three or four days. You are starving. Can you feel it? What it's like to be really starving? What would you be thinking about? You would be thinking about food.

You would be needing, craving food. This craving that you feel is the brain's mechanism that drives you to survive. Its purpose is to make everything else fall away and to force you to focus solely on acquiring what you have to have to live.

Now, let's go further. Let's say that food is restricted. There's a famine or some kind of government control that limits the amount of food. There are no soup kitchens; there are no food banks. And no one will give you any food because they don't have enough for themselves.

There is, however, a black market in food. But the food in this black market is scarce and expensive. And it is illegal. It is against the law to buy food in this black market. What would you do if you were starving? Would you break the law? Would you steal to eat and to live? How much of yourself would you sacrifice? How much of who you are and what you are would you let go of to survive?

This craving for food is measured in days. Our craving for opioids is measured in hours. Four to five hours after our last use we begin to starve. And we crave. Everything but our need for these opioids falls away. And we focus solely on what we have to do to survive. We don't have a choice. We really don't.

Please understand I'm not trying to excuse our behavior. I am, though, trying to help you to see why we do these things. I know it may be difficult to believe that even when we stole from you, were verbally and maybe even physically abusive, we loved you. We are not narcissistic hedonists. When we hurt you we hurt too. We do these things not

I'm not trying to excuse our behavior. I am trying to help you to see why we do these things. We are not narcissistic hedonists. When we hurt you, we hurt too. We do these things not because we want to do them, but because we have to survive.

because we want to do them, but because we have to survive. We become desperate,

and in our desperation we do things that we know are wrong; we do things that we know are not us. But this doesn't mean we don't care. If you are starving, you still love. What it does mean is that we are so desperate in our starvation that we will hurt the ones we love to end that hunger.


What is sad is that we don't understand why we are hurting the ones we love. And because we don't understand, we can't explain it to you. We can't explain

why we are hurting you. No one told us that these opioids cause changes in brain structure such that they become more important for our survival than food. We don't understand this, and neither do you. And this lack of understanding can rip a family apart. It can replace love with resentments and anger. On both sides. And in this pain, in this lack of understanding, we lose each other.

The knowledge that I hope you take away from this article is that your child or your loved one did not hurt you so that they could go out and buy roxies, dilaudid, or heroin. What they bought was their survival.

Whatever you did, however you tried to help the one you loved, you did your best. Because that's what love does.

For those of you that have lost a child or loved one to overdose and addiction, I hope this article will help you to understand that there is no blame here. Whatever you did, however you tried to help the one you loved, you did your best. Because that's what love does. And I hope you also understand that your child or your loved one also did their best. They fought, they struggled, they did all they could to stop. But, ultimately, their disease took their life.

Understanding and knowledge is power. The lack of it is confusion and helplessness. 



Dr. Sam Snodgrass holds a Doctorate in Biopsychology, a NIDA Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Behavioral Pharmacology, and is a past faculty member of the Pharmacology and Toxicology Department at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

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Discharged, Dismissed

ERs Often Miss the Chance to Set Overdose Survivors on a “Better Path”

By Rachel Bluth

The last time heroin landed Marissa Angerer in a Midland, Texas, emergency room—naked and unconscious—was May 2016. But that wasn't her first drug-related interaction with the health system. Doctors had treated her a number of times before, either for alcohol poisoning or for ailments related to heavy drug use. Though her immediate, acute health issues were addressed in each episode, doctors and nurses never dealt with her underlying illness: addiction.

Angerer, now 36 and in recovery, had been battling substance use disorder since she started drinking alcohol at age 16. She moved on to prescription pain medication after she broke her ankle and then eventually to street opiates like heroin and fentanyl.

Just two months before that 2016 overdose, doctors replaced an infected heart valve, a byproduct of her drug use. She was discharged from the hospital and began using again the next day, leading to a re-infection that ultimately cost her all 10 toes and eight fingers.

“[The hospital] didn't have any programs or anything to go to,” Angerer said. “It's nobody's fault but my own, but it definitely would have been helpful if I didn't get brushed off.”

This scenario plays out in emergency departments across the country, where the next step—a means to divert addicted patients into treatment—remains elusive, creating a missed opportunity in the health system.

A recent study of Medicaid claims in West Virginia, which has an opioid overdose rate more than three times the national average and the highest death rate from drug overdoses in the country, documented this disconnect.

Free to republish from *Kaiser Health News*, February 15, 2019

Researchers analyzed claims for 301 people who had nonfatal overdoses in 2014 and 2015. By examining hospital codes for opioid poisoning, researchers followed the patients' treatment, seeing if they were billed in the following months for mental health visits, opioid counseling visits or prescriptions for psychiatric and substance abuse medications.

They found that fewer than 10 percent of people in the study received, per month, medications like naltrexone or buprenorphine to treat their substance use disorder. (Methadone is another option to treat substance use, but it isn't covered by West Virginia Medicaid and wasn't included in the study.) In the month of the overdose, about 15 percent received mental health counseling. However, on average, in the year after the overdose, that number fell to fewer than 10 percent per month.

“We expected more ... especially given the national news about opioid abuse,” said Neel Koyawala, a second-year medical student at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, and the lead author on the study, which was published last month in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

It's an opportunity that's being missed in emergency rooms everywhere, said Andrew Kolodny, the co-director of Opioid Policy Research at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University outside Boston.



“There's a lot of evidence that we're failing to take advantage of this low-hanging fruit with individuals who have experienced a nonfatal overdose,” Kolodny said. “We should be focusing resources on that population. We should be doing everything we can to get them plugged into treatment.”

He compared it to someone who came into the emergency room with a heart attack. It's taken for granted that the patient would leave with heart medication and a referral to a cardiac specialist. Similarly, he wants patients who come in with an overdose to start buprenorphine in the hospital and leave with a referral to other forms of treatment.

Kolodny and Koyawala both noted that a lack of training and understanding among health professionals continues to undermine what happens after the overdose patient is stabilized.

“Our colleagues in emergency rooms are not particularly well trained to be able to help people in a situation like this,” said Dr. Margaret Jarvis, the medical director of a residential addiction treatment center in Pennsylvania.

continued


It was clear, Angerer said, that her doctors were not equipped to deal with her addiction. They didn't know, for instance, what she was talking about when she said she was "dope sick," feeling ill while she was going through withdrawal.

"They were completely unaware of so much, and it completely blew my mind," she said.

When she left the hospital after her toe and finger amputations, Angerer recalls her next stop seemed to be a tent city somewhere in Midland, where she feared she would end up dead. Instead, she persuaded her mother to drive her about 300 miles to a treatment facility in Dallas. She had found it on her own.

"There were a lot of times I could have gone down a better path, and I fell through the cracks," Angerer said.

The bottom line, Jarvis said, is that when a patient comes into the emergency room with an overdose, they're feeling sick, uncomfortable and "miserable." But surviving that episode, she emphasized, doesn't necessarily change their perilous condition.

"Risk for overdose is just as high the day after as the day before an overdose," said Dr. Matt Christiansen, an assistant professor in the Department of Family & Community Health at the Marshall University Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine in West Virginia. 

Kaiser Health News is a nonprofit news service covering health issues. It is an editorially independent program of the Kaiser Family Foundation, which is not affiliated with Kaiser Permanente.



Rachel Bluth, a Peggy Girshman Web Reporting Fellow, recently earned her

master's from the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. At Merrill, she reported on health disparities in Baltimore, and her work has been published on NPR.org and PBS.org. Rachel Bluth: rbluth@kff.org, @RachelHBluth

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Legacy of Addiction - Tragedy and Triumph

by Terra Rafael

We all inherit legacies in our DNA and we also create them—within ourselves and for our children. I learned more about this from Debby and JW Wilson when I interviewed them in their home in Boulder, CO. They spoke about their tragic and triumphant journey of healing after the June 2017 death of their son, Jacob, from a drug overdose.

Debby, a natural hostess and Jill-of-all-trades, is a personal assistant. JW works in promotions for The Learning Code, a neuroscience-based learning paradigm. As JW explained, the meaning circuit of the brain is the same as the one that can develop into the addiction circuit. But meaning can overcome addiction. Their story, which they have shared with many others, gives meaning to their experiences.

Both Debby and JW had forms of addiction in their families of origin—alcohol, prescription drugs, sugar and other foods. JW struggled with alcoholism, overcoming it with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous and “a wonderful wife.” He also worked at an accredited holistic rehab center in Arizona where natural methods were used. Later, he studied how the brain patterns itself for addiction, either through inherited or reprogrammed DNA. JW made a video about how inherited and learned tendencies support the disease of addiction.

In the video, JW points out that adolescent brains are especially susceptible to addiction as a type of learning. During adolescence, the brain has about 15,000 connections per neuron, while adults have only 5000. With so much potential for forming neural patterns, dabbling with addictive substances in adolescence is playing with fire. Such connections have powerful reinforcers in the brain chemistry, so are liable to survive the pruning of connections that occurs as

the brain matures into adulthood.

Jacob was susceptible as an adolescent, not only through inherited tendencies, but also through the teenage culture of experimentation. He began using in middle school, and progressed to prescription drugs acquired through friends that resulted in a learned pattern.

Jacob entered rehab for the first time in high school; he was in and out of treatment until he died at age 25.

Outwardly, Jacob did not look like an addict. He held full-time jobs, he worked out, and had 20,000 followers on Twitter, where he shared one-liners. Much of the time, Jacob was high functioning. When it seemed Jacob was clean, his parents invited him to live with them. Many addicts successfully hide their problem, however, especially from those they love.

“Graduating” from OxyContin® to heroin, a much cheaper drug—Jacob ultimately overdosed. Twice before quick action had saved his life. The third time, when his parents discovered him, it was too late. Jacob’s path is common.

According to Debby, the Tuesday they found Jacob’s body, “We were in shock. We were in limbo a couple of days while Jake was at the coroner. Luckily our friend, Faith Ward [co-founder of the non-profit, Natural Transitions] came to our rescue and encouraged us to have a vigil. They described this as a last minute decision. “It went from having the vigil somewhere else to wanting to



Jacob's lovingly decorated wake room

have it in our home, because it’s Jacob’s home.” They started out by inviting about twelve friends over for the Friday night after his death. That day, family and friends went to pick up Jacob from the coroner using Debby’s van. Then eight friends and representatives of the local holistic funeral home, The Natural Funeral, assisted with the preparation of Jacob’s body. Friends transformed the living room into a special space, moving out some of the furniture and decorating with silks and flowers.

That evening, more than a hundred people showed up, many of them Jacob’s friends from his years at the Waldorf school he had attended for all his school years. People could stay outside to chat or go inside to the vigil room to spend time with Jacob. Debby and JW made sure a friend was always with Jacob throughout the evening. There was a table to write notes to Jacob for placing in the casket. Some vigilers brought flowers; one brought a game he had played with Jacob to share. Many of Jacob’s friends were in their early 20s, either in school, starting careers, or fighting addiction themselves. Just being together helped them cope with losing him.

When people started showing up, Jacob's older brother, James, wanted to be alone and went for a walk for an hour or so. By the end of the evening, through the love, kindness, and gratitude of those gathered, James joined them.

After the vigil, Natural Funeral's helpers took Jacob to the crematory. When asked about the ashes, Debby replied, "He hasn't decided yet where he's headed."

A month later, Debby and JW held a celebration of Jacob's life. Early one evening, in a huge tent at Gateway Amusement Park in North Boulder, well over 150 family members and friends from seven states gathered over food and drinks. A friend of Jacob's handled the music and emceed the event. Debby, JW, and James shared slides of Jacob's life. It was "a lovely celebration."

Things calmed down after the celebration. Debby and JW availed

themselves of many avenues for coping with their grief and giving meaning to their experience. JW's approach was through science and spirituality, including quantum physics and many spiritual teachings about how the past-present-future are all happening at the same time. JW explained, "No one really goes anywhere. We're all living in the past, present and future at the same time!"

Debby and JW continue to share their experience. They have spoken at the Parents Exchange Network, sharing Jacob's story, hoping to provide some insight to other parents about their teenagers. They have given talks at groups for addicts and families of addicts. Debby still attends a grief group for parents whose children have died. Reading numerous books on death and dying has been comforting, especially books about the afterlife. A favorite



Jacob with his Camel cigarettes and sunglasses

of Debby's is *Healing after Loss: Daily Meditations for Working through Grief* by Martha Whitmore Hickman. She has also found support in sessions with psychics and tarot readers who told her things about Jake they couldn't have known unless they had tuned into his spirit. These clairvoyant readings give Debby faith that Jake is still out there.

The Science of Addiction Simplified:

- ~ One might be born susceptible to addiction by inheriting the dopamine DRD2 gene, which predisposes addictive behavior, but not all susceptible people will necessarily become addicted.
- ~ Continued use of drugs and alcohol creates changes to the brain's reward centers.
- ~ Overindulgence can change DNA expression (epigenetics).
- ~ Continual overindulgence creates a situation similar to inherited susceptibility.
- ~ Willpower alone cannot overcome addiction. The brain must change to allow blood flow to the willpower structures more than the impulsive brain structures.
- ~ Effective addiction recovery programs must be based on neuroscience teachings.
- ~ Punishment and jail are not effective in stopping addiction.

- from *Cracking the Addiction Code*,
a video by JW Wilson
<https://youtu.be/LIOQRgEzXcc>



Jacob's wake room and portal to the light

Photos by Karen van Vuuren

A Selection of Books on Death and Grief

from Debby Wilson

Healthy lifestyle choices—taking vitamins, using Rescue Remedy and essential oils, and receiving acupuncture treatments—are healthy practices the couple has continued to the present. They shared that part of being emotionally healthy is letting people know when they are feeling sad and educating others about how to support someone who is grieving.

JW's work with education stresses the importance of helping young people find meaning in their lives. "When you don't know what's meaningful for you, you try pleasing other people to get that dopamine hit, but you're never completely fulfilled... The meaning circuit in the brain is the same as the addiction circuit. People who have meaning can have grit for the long term."

Each year on Jacob's birthday, Debby and JW honor their son with an open house. This keeps them in touch with his friends, continuing the community started at the vigil and his celebration of life. It is meaningful for them to see Jacob's friends carrying on.

Rudolf Steiner, founder of anthroposophy and Waldorf education, said when young people die, they stay close to their family of origin. This too is Debby's experience. "There are times when I definitely feel his presence. His birthday was last week and he was right there." 🌐



Terra Rafael is a certified Ayurveda Practitioner and energy healer, teacher, poet and author, and non-violent activist.

Through her school, WiseWomanhood based in Boulder, CO, she offers teachings to support women—body, mind and soul.

Since the death of her son, Jacob, in 2017, Debby has been on a journey to integrate his loss and find healing and meaning in her life.

One Step at a Time: Mourning a Child by Betty Madill. SteinerBooks, 2001.

This book, written by a mother who lost her 3-year-old daughter, is best suited for a young parent or someone newly bereaved. I had already experienced much of what she said, though the sound advice/feedback was helpful to read again.

Crossing the Threshold by Nicholas Wijnberg and Philip Martyn. Temple Lodge, 2003.

Based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, the discussion of vigils, the afterlife (which differs depending on how and when someone died), and communication with the deceased was interesting and easy to understand.

When Things Fall Apart by Pema Chodron. Shambhala, 2005.

This book contains a useful meditation practice and information applicable to dealing with any stressful situation, from a well-known Buddhist nun's perspective.

Light Beyond Darkness: How I Healed My Suicide Son by Dore Deverell. Clairview, 2012.

This was written by a mother who lost her adult son through suicide. It is a story of how she healed herself and her son after he had died because she believed he continued to suffer after death. She became a Waldorf teacher, and much of her thoughts and actions stem from Steiner's teachings.

On Children and Death by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, MD. Touchstone, 1997.

I enjoyed reading how children spoke about dying, heaven and what they intuitively knew to expect in this book that is most relevant for parents of young children who died from accidents or illness. It contains thoughts, memories and visions of the afterlife.

Facing Darkness, Finding Light: Life After Suicide by Steffany Barton, RN. Findhorn Press, 2016. Reading about the feelings described by those who died from suicide based on the author's psychic readings was comforting and helped me a lot. Even though it is about suicide, there are many similarities to dying from a drug overdose and how an addict might feel: being ready and wanting to leave the earth to start again, go home, be free. The people highlighted in the book were done with their life here. I think in some ways, my son, Jake, felt that way. Also, the book covers the life review, which is described in many cultures and religions. Barton's book is easy to read and understand. The author lives in Kansas and is available for personal readings. Our family had a reading and it was sad, but comforting and reassuring to hear that Jake was happy.

A Rainbow Over the River by Veronika Van Duin. Clairview, 2003.

The author has clairvoyant vision and can perceive angels, demonic beings and people who have died. She describes her experiences of the other side, and includes diary excerpts recounting the passing of her mother. The book also includes thoughts on birth, death, grief, healing, prayer and the meaning of existence. Van Duin worked at a Camphill community in Ireland, land-based centers for people with disabilities.

continued



The Wilson family: James (brother), Debby, JW, and Jacob

Talking to Heaven by James Van Praagh. Signet, 1977.

The author is a spiritual medium, someone who is able to bridge the physical and spiritual worlds. Unaware of his spiritual gifts until his twenties, he slowly came to terms with his unique abilities. He relates many of his sessions with grieving people who came to him looking to contact the spirits of deceased loved ones. One example was a devastated mother who received a message of hope from her deceased little girl; another was a young man killed in Vietnam who didn't realize he was dead. Van Praagh affirms the theme of hope and peace in the afterlife. He also helps the reader recognize and positively deal with the pain of grief in a healthy, honest manner. Part spiritual memoir, part case study, part instrumental guide, *Talking to Heaven* will change the way you perceive death and life.

Journey of Souls by Michael Newton, PhD. Llewellyn Publications, 2009.

Using a special hypnosis technique to reach the hidden memories of subjects, Dr. Newton has discovered some amazing insights into what happens to us between lives. His book contains the record of 29 people who recalled their

experiences between physical death and rebirth. It is also a travelog of what happens between lives on Earth and provides moving accounts of astounding experiences.


Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working through Grief by Martha Whitmore Hickman. Harper Collins, 2009.

This is a book of thoughtful words to inspire and comfort those who have suffered the loss of a loved one. The format is one page for each day of the year. I loved this book and have given dozens of them away.

It's OK That You Are Not OK by Megan Devine. Sounds True, 2017.

"This book is POWERFUL. Too many grief books focus on 'getting over it,' but this book says: 'Look grief in the eye. Sit with it.' The author comes at grief with no flinching. Her book is intelligent and honest. It's a message that everyone who has ever dealt with loss needs to read." - Theresa Reed, author of *The Tarot Coloring Book*. This book is more suited to those in the first 12-18 months of grief, but I still found it interesting, especially the suggestions for how to support those who are grieving.

The Afterlife of Billy Fingers: How My Bad-Boy Brother Proved to Me There's Life After Death by Annie Kagan. Hampton Roads Publishing, 2013.

In this personal memoir, the author shares about the death of her brother and how he communicated with her after his passing, including urging her to write the book. Her story offers a great deal of food for thought. 

courtesy of the Wilson family

FROM HEROIN TO HOPE

Book Review by Karen van Vuuren

Dr. Marsha Wiggins' son, Cameron, was "possessed by the powerful force of heroin." In these terms, Wiggins, a PhD mental health professional and retired pastor, describes how her adopted son, Cameron, became a heroin addict and died at the age of 26. He had been released from jail just days before the overdose that ended his life. Wiggins wrote her book, *From Heroin to Hope: Making Sense of the Loss of a Child*, as a gift to all those who are "treading water in the swift currents of grief." It is the story of how Wiggins resurrected her life, building resilience while enduring the terrible pain of losing her cherished child, long before death occurred, to the disease of addiction.

Wiggins describes the grief journey from the perspective of both a bereaved parent and a clinical health practitioner. Despite the knowledge and tools at her disposal as a mental health counselor, she is not immune to the pain of this loss and suffers deeply. When Griffin finds the strength to re-engage with her community and the greater world, it is as a compassionate educator who speaks from first-hand experience about the journey toward wholeness of self.

To begin, Griffin charts the course of her son's short life and his descent into addiction. We learn that, as a pre-teen, Cameron was a happy, joyful, only child from an upper-middle class family. His parents were loving, attentive, successful professionals who afforded him opportunities to play sports and took him to Europe on family vacations. But despite this bedrock of affluence and love, Cameron falls prey to the lure of drugs, with a textbook progression from marijuana to prescription opioids (OxyContin®), to heroin.

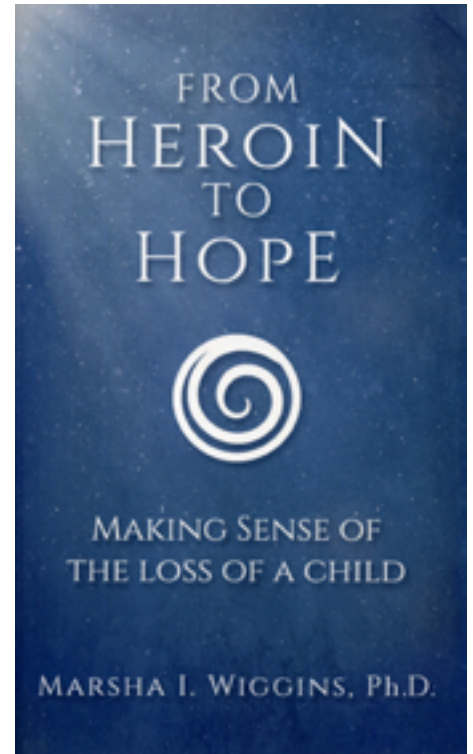
In his predominantly white neighborhood and among his school friends, drugs are abundant and easily accessible. For a long while, Wiggins,

like many other parents with addicted children, is oblivious to the epidemic on her doorstep. In her book, she takes umbrage against the "moral model of addiction" that paints all addicts as moral delinquents, low-lives deserving of punishment. This ignores convincing evidence that biological and genetic factors are clear predictors of addiction. Environmental influences such as peer pressure and accessibility, Griffin argues, are also strong indicators of the likelihood of addiction.

Time after time, Griffin attempts to rescue Cameron with financial bailouts and rehab treatment. She believes she has reached him, the old Cameron reappears, but the encounter is fleeting, and he soon slips back into the abyss. He behaves like a monster, but he is still her son, and she feels helpless. She cannot bear to think of him living hand-to-mouth on the streets. Griffin echoes the words of Sally Swenson, author of *The Joey Song: A Mother's Story of Her Son's Addiction*, confiding that "to love an addict is to run out of tears."

Shortly before his life ends, Cameron swaps homelessness for a jail cell after turning to crime to fund his addiction. Just days following his release—with his tolerance for the drug low due to jail-time abstinence—he uses heroin again and overdoses. Griffin learns that, even after treatment, an addict can experience an overwhelming physiological craving for the dopamine blast responsible for intense euphoria. Kicking opioids is more than hard.

In *From Heroin to Hope*, Griffin returns frequently to our culture's prevailing assessment and response to drug addiction. If addicts are immoral, the implication is that parents are responsible for their children's waywardness, she argues. The "immorality" argument lifts the burden of responsibility out of the public arena



for tackling the addiction crisis. Parents whose children die from opioid overdose feel society has turned its back on them.

The stigma of death from overdose can complicate a bereaved parent's grief process. There can be guilt that a parent could or should have done more to save their child. They can also feel their own failure as a parent. When death ends the futile and exhausting task of rehabilitating an addict, a parent may experience a sense of relief. Guilt can also accompany that sense of gratitude that finally the struggle is over. Griffin identifies this as "unconventional grief," characterized by anger, helplessness and fear. Parents may also have experienced these emotions while their child was alive and addicted.


Parents of children who have died from overdose will recognize the narrative of Cameron's short life and his mother's journey. While Griffin clarifies the likely terrain of the post-death landscape, complete with emotional breakdowns and incapacitation, her focus is ultimately on illuminating a path toward rebuilding a life shattered by the loss of a child.

continued

In the wake of death, we feel the pain of the truth of death, but Griffin urges parents to take breaks from the pain—to care for themselves—in order to allow for glimpses of reclaimed life. In the chapter titled “Life after Loss: Pathways to Adaptation, Growth and the New Normal,” she orients parents to sources of support such as Compassionate Friends, a non-profit support group for child loss, and the Kindness Project, created by Joan Cacciatore in honor of her daughter who died at birth, encouraging an honoring of the dead through acts of kindness. Referencing concentration camp survivor and philosopher, Viktor Frankl, author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Griffin reminds us that we have the freedom to choose the meaning we make of any given situation. It’s perhaps a cruel and impossible question, but Griffin asks,

“Can something positive arise from the ashes of a young person’s death?” Or, in other words, how do we live, renewed, in our loved one’s name?

While professional grief counseling and grief groups are appropriate and valuable support services for the bereaved, Griffin, acknowledging Therese Rando’s seminal work on grief, claims that some parents get stuck in grief. A conscious or subconscious aversion to moving out of grief can exist because to do so would seem like a betrayal of the deceased child. Griffin cautions that a parent who stays too long in a grief group, especially one to which newly bereaved parents are joining often, is at risk of becoming “a servant to sorrow” and experiencing “persistent complex bereavement.”


The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that in 2017 more than 70,000 people in the United States died from drug overdose. (Nearly 70 percent of these deaths involved a prescription or illegal opioid.) That toll is greater than all the American fatalities in the Vietnam War. Education and understanding are crucial if we are to lower that number. In *From Heroin to Hope*, Marsha Wiggins is a wisdom-holder and way-shower. 

From Heroin to Hope: Making Sense of the Loss of a Child by Dr. Marsha Wiggins is available at drmarshawiggins.com.

Paperback, 5" x 8", 211 pages
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Helping Yourself Heal When Someone You Care about Dies of a Drug Overdose

by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD

A friend or family member has died of a drug overdose. Death and grief are always hard, but when someone dies from drug use, understanding your feelings and knowing what to think and say about the death can be especially difficult. This article offers compassionate guidance for coping with your own grief as well as helping others affected by the loss.

Addiction and the opioid epidemic

People of all backgrounds and socioeconomic levels are affected by addiction. Addiction is a recognized disease in which the pleasure centers of the brain get taken over by the need for the drug. Addicts cannot control their behavior.

In the United States today, the majority of drug overdose deaths involve an opioid, such as prescription painkillers or heroin. About two and a half million people are addicted to these drugs, and nearly 100 people die each day from an overdose. In fact, opioid use and overdose trends have grown so bad that the Department of Health & Human Services has labeled the problem an epidemic.

You are not alone. Millions of families and friends have lost a loved one to drug use. This doesn't make the death of the unique person you cared about any less tragic. It does mean that there are resources to help you and many people who may be able to understand and support you.

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www.centerforloss.com

Coping with the stigma

Even though addiction is a disease that can affect anyone, there is still a social stigma associated with drug overdose deaths. For you, a person who has lost someone special, this can seem doubly unfair. Not only has someone you cared about died, but others may avoid you or make you feel ashamed about the death.

Remind yourself that your friend or family member died of a common, deadly disease. Learn more about opioid use and how it's affecting so many. Reach out to others impacted by overdose death. Talk openly about what happened. Shining a light of openness and empathy on overdose deaths will help you and others heal.

A complicated grief

Grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you care about dies. Your grief will naturally be complicated by the cause of this death.

If the person who died was young and otherwise healthy, that fact will affect your grief. We typically feel a sense of injustice and a stolen future whenever a young person dies.

We also often feel anger when deaths are caused by behaviors. You might be mad at the person who overdosed, at others whom you perceive enabled the behavior (such as a drug dealer), or at medical staff or police who may have been involved.

You might also feel guilty that you weren't able to help the person stop using drugs before it was too late—even though the behavior was outside your control.

Whatever your complicated thoughts and feelings may be, your task now is to express them in healthy ways.

Mourning the death

While grief is what you feel on the inside, mourning is what you do when you express your grief on the outside. Crying is mourning. Attending the funeral is mourning. Talking to others about the death is mourning.

Part of your mourning will be about the cause of the death. Over time, the larger part of your mourning will be about the loss of a special, unique person who was loved by you and others.

Openly and actively discussing all your thoughts and feelings about this death will help you cope with the stigma and eventually heal. Mourning helps you acknowledge the reality of the death, embrace the pain of the loss, remember the person who died, consider the meaning of the person's death, and receive support from others.

Do not let the stigma of the death keep you from mourning fully. Talking about drug overdose and your particular loss will help our society grow more compassionate and work toward solutions.

Learn about resources

Your community may have resources for people grieving an overdose death. Call your local hospital, health department, or funeral home to find out more about support groups, counselors, and volunteer opportunities. Nothing is better than face-to-face, personal contact with others who walked the same walk.

There are also many resources online. Google "grief support overdose" and you'll find a number of websites and forums dedicated to helping mourners like you. Reading others' stories and sharing your own is often a great source of comfort, validation, expression, and healing.

Take good care of yourself

As you grieve this death, remember to practice good self-care. Think of yourself in emotional intensive care. Just as people who are severely physically injured need around-the-clock attention, you need and deserve excellent care for your psychic injury.

Rest often. Eat healthy foods. Drink ample water. De-stress your life as much as possible. Exercise gently but regularly. Spend time with people who care about you. Express your grief whenever you're feeling it.

Meet your spiritual needs

Most of all, grief is a spiritual journey. You will naturally have questions about why this death had to happen now and in this way, and you might find yourself wondering about the purpose and meaning of life in general. If you believe in God, you may find solace in your faith, or you may be angry at a God who could let this happen.

All of these spiritual responses are normal. Making time each day to feed your spirit will help. Pray, meditate, visit a place of worship, go for a walk in the woods, journal about your spiritual struggle, or speak with a spiritual leader. All of these practices are forms of mourning, and all will help you experience your natural grief and move toward healing.

Explaining this death to children

Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve and mourn. Children affected by an overdose death deserve our compassion, our presence, and our honesty. Never lie to kids or keep difficult truths from them in an effort to protect them.

Start from the child's place of understanding. Listen to and answer questions with words and ideas that are appropriate to the child's age and unique development.


If the child was unaware of the person's habit, you will probably first need to explain drug use and the disease of addiction.

Remember that young children, especially, are literal thinkers. If you tell them only that medicine killed the person, for example, they might end up being afraid to take their own medicine the next time they're sick.

Young children are also prone to magical thinking. For instance, they sometimes think that something they thought or did may have caused the death. Reassure them that it wasn't their fault.

Children, too, often sense the stigma of an overdose death. You can help by explaining that addiction is an illness and talking about thoughts and feelings openly and without judgment is good. Also, it's never too early to start teaching children about the dangers of drug use.

Children typically grieve in small doses. They may be upset one moment and playing the next. This is normal. Give

them brief, frequent opportunities to ask questions or play out concerns (such as drawing or role playing). Be present and ready to talk and offer support. Express your own grief when it arises. 



Author, educator, and grief counselor, Dr. Alan Wolfelt is the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life

Transition. He is known around the world for his compassionate messages of hope and healing as well as his "companionship" philosophy of grief care. Dr. Wolfelt speaks on grief-related topics, offers trainings for caregivers, and has written many bestselling books and other resources for both caregivers and grieving people.

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A Memoir of Mourning for Making Sense of Loss

by Jerry Waxler

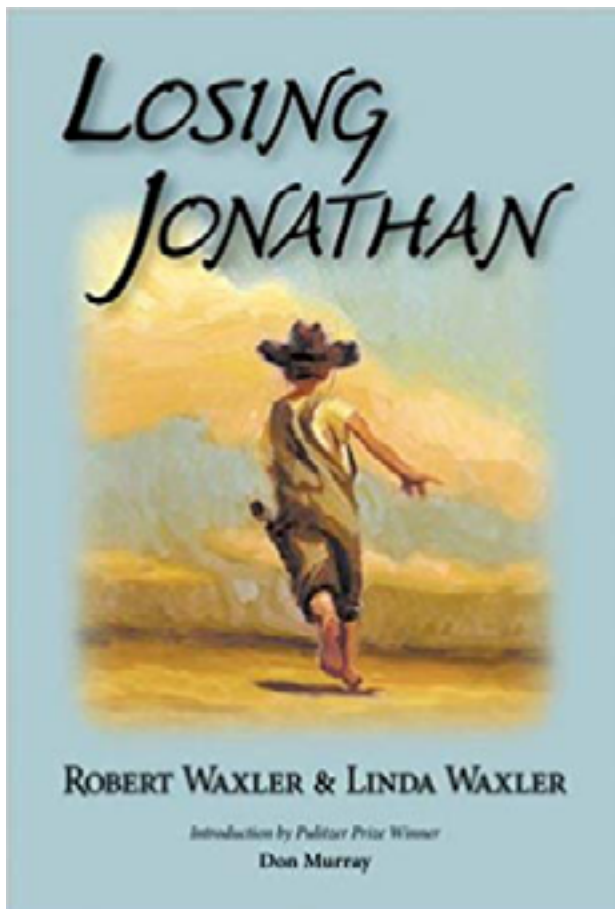
The first half of the memoir *Losing Jonathan* by Robert and Linda Waxler is about their attempt to stop their son's fall into heroin addiction. At the center of the story was a good kid, loved by his family and friends, a college grad bursting with potential and a desire to change the world. By the time his parents discovered his problem, all of that was tearing apart. Horrified to learn that Jonathan was in trouble, his parents were torn out of their ordinary lives and hurled into pleading and research, therapists and rehab.

They felt caught in the cruel undertow of drug addiction. Something was stealing their son and they couldn't stop it. After a stint in rehab, they hoped he had returned to them. And then the call came. A tainted dose of heroin had ended his life. The second half of the book recounts the following years of their grieving. The book is told from both their points of view with Robert's passages written in straight font and Linda's in italics.

The father's journey

During the year they knew about Jonathan's addiction, Robert struggled to hold on to his own emotional center, relying on his family, friends, and his Jewish faith. After his son's death, he turned even more desperately toward these supports. Meanwhile, his mind was churning, second-guessing what more he could have done, and struggling to make sense of a world in which such things could happen. Amidst his thoughts are wonderful images of the

Reprinted with permission of Jerry Waxler <https://memorywritersnetwork.com>



young boy in his earlier life, full of hope and promise.

Robert Waxler, a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, has devoted his life to teaching literature as well as finding the wisdom within it. He believed so deeply in the power of writing that he founded a program called "Changing Lives Through Literature" to help convicted criminals find their way to social responsibility.

So when he tried to cope with his own loss, he looked towards literature for help. In *Losing Jonathan* he writes, "Literature helped me keep my anger in check. It gave me a sense of proportions, of tolerance. But it didn't foreclose on passion, nor did it serve as an escape

from Jonathan's death. Sometimes standing in an empty room, I will yell out loud at Jonathan, even now, and wonder why this tragedy happened."

The mother's journey

Linda was so overwhelmed, she didn't know what to say. Neither did her neighbors, coworkers, and acquaintances. So they avoided her. At the time when she needed the most support, she felt most alone.

Losing Jonathan revealed the effects of the passage of time, showing grieving as a sequence of inner adjustments. After a few years, Linda began to reclaim her poise enough to greet people and look them in the eye. Robert writes, "Near the end of the fourth year, Linda wrote her own article about grief, a stunning composite of her feelings and her knowledge. It was published in several places including the *Providence Journal Sunday Magazine*. She was

stretching, touching others, rejoining a community, becoming a writer of her own life."

In the fifth year, Robert writes, "We were like the wedding guest who listens to the tale of the Ancient Mariner in Coleridge's poem, disturbed by the spell cast by his turbulent journey, but wiser now. At the end of the poem, the Mariner is gone, leaving the wedding guest to stand alone, forlorn, stunned into wonder at the vision:


And now the Wedding Guest
Turned from the bridegroom's door.
He went like one that hath been
stunned,
And is of sense forlorn;
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.

Many layers of grieving

Memoirs of grieving have a special place in my library, since they take me on the author's spiritual journey, trying to reclaim the meaning of life after its loss. In another memoir, *Here if You Need Me*, Kate Braestrup wrote about losing her husband in a freak accident. Then, she had to get on with her life. In the end, she arrived at a lovely conclusion, summarizing her feelings about death in a compelling and uplifting chapter on good and evil.

Now I realize after reading *Losing Jonathan* that I loved the Waxlers' memoir for similar reasons. Like Kate Braestrup, they were on a quest to

wrest their sanity back from the abyss. At first they were thirsty for support from their community. Then, after five years, Linda suggested, "We should try to write a book. It would be a way of honoring Jonathan's life. Sustaining it." The suggestion reflected Linda's desire to give back to the community some of the strength they had given her. And the vehicle for their gift was a book.

Publishing the book was a social act, a generous gift to each other and the world. I feel encouraged by the willingness of these authors to share their inner process with the rest of us, to give us insights, tips, and guidance to help us stay strong and wise during our own recovery from loss. 



Jerry Waxler teaches memoir writing at Northampton Community College, Bethlehem, PA, online, and around the country. His Memory

Writers Network blog offers hundreds of essays, reviews, and interviews about reading and writing memoirs. He is on the board of the National Association of Memoir Writers and holds a BA in physics and an MS in counseling psychology.

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When Someone's Child Dies

What You Can Do to Help

by Dr. Joanne Cacciatore

Much of how you can help depends on your closeness to the parents and family, their desire for privacy and the circumstances of the child's death. Here are some guidelines to help better understand ways that friends, colleagues and community members can help.

1st degree of closeness:

This usually includes peripheral family members and close friends who know the parents well and who have been intimate with the family for a significant period of time prior to the child's death.

» Show up non-judgmentally and use words carefully. Be mindful of the questions you ask as some may carry implications that may psychologically hurt family members. A silent, non-intrusive and supportive presence is a lasting gift during painful times like this.

» For now, focus on the core family and their experiences. Understandably, if you are close to the family, you (and others close to them) will have your own strong emotions of grief. When you return home, be sure to seek support for your own experiences, and remember that the burden of this loss is something the family will always carry.

» If you are present during the acute crisis, make sure the primary focus is on the parents, siblings and grandparents. Do as much as you can to protect the family from outsiders, the media or medical staff who may not understand what happened or who may not be acting compassionately. For example, if neighbors see emergency vehicles, some may try to ask questions or intrude on the scene. Usually law enforcement has the area cordoned off from these types

of intrusions. If they don't, do all you can to protect the area.

Another example is that when a child dies or is dying in the hospital, sometimes medical or general hospital staff are unaware. Stand near the door and make sure all who enter are sensitive to the needs of families. Make sure water and snacks are available at all times but don't push family members to drink or eat. You can even advocate for the parent's right to see, hold or touch their child who died if they choose. Many families who do not engage in farewell rituals express later regret. Don't push them, of course, especially children. But do normalize seeing, holding and touching (in most circumstances), and advocate for them should this be their choice.



» Wait before taking radical action to try to protect parents from their own justifiable and normal grief. Make sure that well-meaning friends and family do not take any actions related to the child who died without the parents' explicit consent. Also, make sure the parents understand what's being asked of them. For example, one mother whose one-year-old baby died, returned home from the hospital to find her son's room entirely packed into boxes and in her garage. Well-intending friends and family members thought it would be "too hard" for the family to return to her home with "reminders" of their son and brother. In an effort to help, someone asked the parents, "Should we clean Connor's room before you get home?"

The parents, not fully understanding the question, assented. However, when they arrived home and saw that their son's physical artifacts were "virtually erased" from their home, they felt "re-traumatized." Ask permission and be sure family members are presented with all their options.

» Provide practical help in ways that make sense for the culture of this family. Parents may have a harder time caring for surviving siblings under the weight of early grief and shock. If you are a trusted friend, spending time taking siblings to the park or to the movies gives grieving parents a chance to mourn without restraint, visit the cemetery, go to a yoga class or out for a quiet meal, or even have some quiet time to just be. You can also help organize, with the family's

permission, a food-train. Be certain to provide meals that are appropriate for the family (vegan, gluten-free, vegetarian, ethnically appropriate) and assign different menus so they aren't eating potato casseroles every night for six months. Ask those

delivering meals to leave them at the door and not to disturb the family unless they request visitors. Perhaps you can be there to receive the meals or text a family member a simple message: "Food delivered at 1:10 pm."

» Remember their child today, tomorrow and twenty years from now. As time passes, most people's lives go back to normal. However, for this family, normal has been forever changed. In the beginning after a loss, many people surround the family. Weeks and months later, few remember, few say their deceased's name, few are there for the family in the way they were in the immediate aftermath of this catastrophic loss. Remember with them. If dragonflies remind them of their child

who died and you see a dragonfly, take a photo and send them a text. Make a donation, plant a tree, or send them a meaningful poem in their child's name on the anniversary of the child's death—not just on the first year, but five, ten and twenty years later.

» Continue to always see their child who died as part of the family—because he or she is part of the family. If parents have two living children and one child who died, then they have three children. Be mindful of that in holidays and other rituals. For example, if you share holidays with the family and are bringing gifts for their children, offer a gift for their child who died that they can donate to help an underprivileged family. Or, you can offer a moment of silence to honor their child who died.

» When in doubt—if you aren't sure if something is okay or not—ask. Sometimes, fear gets in the way of love. Pay attention to that fear and set it aside so you can deeply love and demonstrate compassion at all times.

» Help the family find support when they are ready. Books specific to traumatic grief can be helpful. Support groups, such as the MISS Foundation, Parents of Murdered Children and Compassionate Friends, can help them connect to a larger network of like families. Traumatic grief-informed counselors are hard to find but critically important.

2nd degree of closeness:

Second degree of closeness includes casual friends and colleagues who are not intimately connected but who have a caring relationship with one or more family members.

» Offer practical support to the 1st degree supporters. You can do this by offering to coordinate food trains and take their direction about

family needs, degree of privacy and even communication to the broader community about memorial and funeral services. Make sure the 1st degree supporter has food, water and anything else he or she needs to be there for the family.

» Send a sensitive and appropriate condolence card to the family rather than making a phone call. You can also send cards months or years later if you are so moved and if you remember. Most families greatly appreciate when others remember their child who died. Be very careful with words and ditch all platitudes like, “Everything happens for a reason,” “You can have other children” or “Time heals all wounds.” Focus on expressing your compassion and your support rather than asking questions of the family.

» Make a donation in honor of their child by asking a 1st degree supporter what sort of non-profit the family would most appreciate.

» Do not push yourself into the 1st degree of supporters. However, it is okay to be available if the family asks when more support is needed.

» Encourage community members to provide gentle support without speculating about the circumstances of the child's death. Also be careful that community discussions do not turn into gossip about the family or circumstances of death.

» Do not visit the hospital, plan rituals or public ceremonies, or attend memorial or funeral services without the family's—or 1st degree supporters—invitation or consent. This is especially important if the family has a desire for privacy; this is their tragedy and their beloved child, and that should be respected. Some families have a high need for privacy because it helps them

feel safer during a tumultuous and traumatic time. Do all you can to show your respect and compassion without being assumptive or intrusive.


3rd degree of closeness:

Third degree of closeness knows someone who knows the family but does not personally know any of the family members.

» Send a sensitive and appropriate condolence card to the family, but do not call. Most families greatly appreciate when strangers remember their child and express empathy in response to a death. Be careful with words and ditch all platitudes like, “Everything happens for a reason,” “You can have other children” or “Time heals all wounds.” Focus on expressing compassion.

» Make a donation in honor of their child. Choose something that might be meaningful to the family, such as planting a tree or helping children or animals in need.

» Do not speculate or talk about the family. They are going through enough without hearing that their community is speculating about the death of their child.

» Unless you're invited to private events, only attend public events that have been sanctioned by the family or their 1st degree supporters. Do all you can to show your respect and compassion without being assumptive or intrusive. 

centerforlossandtrauma.com/copy-of-advocacy-awareness

David's Date with Destiny

by David Oakford

In the summer of 1979, 19-year-old David Oakford had turned to drugs and alcohol to deal with his lonely, sad, and unfulfilled life. His overdose at a party resulted in a profound near-death experience that transformed and elevated his life. A more detailed account of David Oakford's story appears in his book, Soul Bared: A Metaphysical Journey www.soulbared.com.



I share this experience now because I feel it can spur thought and foster choices that affect the planet in a positive way.

I lay down to use the stability of the Earth in an effort to maintain a hold on reality. I knew I had to do that in order to be able to come back down.

The next thing I knew I was riding in my friend's car. I thought we went up north, crossed the Mackinaw Bridge and came back again. We rode past my childhood home and I saw my parents sitting on the porch.

I felt drawn to the trees. I could see and feel their strength. I saw their roots going deep into the ground. I mean I actually saw the tree roots physically reaching below the ground. I told my friends about the car ride after the experience and they told me that the only place I went was to the chair they carried me to after I passed out on the porch.

I did wake up in the chair my friends say they put me in a bit later. When I woke up I could feel the organs in my body working, each one separately as well as all together. I could not see my friends anywhere. I could see in all the rooms of the house at the same time. The stereo was playing the Doors "Absolutely Live" album, except the volume was way too loud for me. Since I did not see any of my friends around I got up and tried to turn the music down, but could not.

No matter what I did the music kept playing. I knew the stereo too. I had a real problem with the noise. It was tearing at me and I could not figure out why nor could I adjust the volume.

I called out to my friends and nobody came. I tried to unplug the stereo but that did not work either. Every time I tried to touch the cord to unplug it I could not grasp it. It just kept on playing "LA Woman" and the sound rattled my very being.

I ran all over the house calling for my friends, yelling repeatedly that the music was too loud but I was not heard. I pleaded for the music to be turned down. I tried to go outside but I could not feel the doorknob. I could see the daylight outside but could not go outside. I ended up hiding in the bathroom in an unsuccessful attempt to escape the noise. I looked in the mirror and could not see myself. That frightened me greatly.

I went back into the family room and saw my body sitting in the chair. It looked like I was sleeping. I wondered how I could be looking at myself. I got a bit scared then because I could see me from outside of me, from all different angles except from the inside angle I was used to seeing myself.

I was alone. I was confused and very scared. I tried to get back into my body but could not. I could not touch the ground either. I was floating. I rose up into a spot above my body and kind of just hung there. I could no longer move. I called out for help and nobody came. I tried to go out the door but like the stereo I could not touch the doorknob. I was scared and alone and did not know what to do. I did not understand what was happening to me.

I asked God to help me. I did believe in God then, but I was kind of angry at him because of the crappy life I was experiencing. I reasoned that if God were really the omnipotent and omniscient being I was taught he was he would not have let me experience the pain I had experienced throughout my life. I thought that if there was a time I needed

God, it was now! I was not disappointed with the result of my plea for help.

I looked over by the door to the outside and saw a beautiful being standing there. His feet did not touch the floor. His feet just blended into thin air. He looked both female and male and was young. I could not tell his/her sex. His hair was curly and he was about my height. He had this glow about him too. The glow was green close to him, then blue, then pure white in the upper areas. He said, "I am here to help you" but when he spoke his mouth did not move. I did not actually hear him speak with my ears. I felt what he was saying.

When I saw this being and he spoke to me, I was no longer afraid. I actually felt peace and comfort like I had never felt before. I felt the peace I was searching for throughout my entire life. The feeling was very familiar to me, like I had felt it before but not in this life.

This wonderful being called me by a name I do not remember. I told him he must have the wrong guy and that the name he used for me was not my name. He laughed and said that I was a great "master" and that I had just forgotten who I was. I did not believe him, because I did not really know for sure what a "master" was then and if I were this great master I would not have had all the problems I had. I felt that I was an evil being because that is what I was told in my life several times by many.

He told me his name, but I do not remember it. He told me that he had been with me always and told me that he knew that I had a very hard life and that he would help me understand why if I really wanted to. He told me that he would help me remember who I am. He said that he would understand if I did not believe him and offered to prove to me that he knew everything about me.

He told me things that I did when I was a child that proved to me that he was always with me. He told me about things I had only thought about. He told me that I could go anywhere I wanted to go and that he would show me how to do it if I wanted him to. He said that if I needed to come back and see my body I could. My body would be fine because I was still connected to it somehow.

When we spoke to each other we did so telepathically. The expression on his face was a happy one all the time.

I told him that I would like to see the pyramids in Egypt as well as the southwest United States. He told me that all I had to

do was trust him, think about where I wanted to go, and we would go. I thought about the pyramids and we were there in an instant. I do not know why I chose the pyramids, the thought just popped into me so I went with that. While we were there he told me some things about the pyramids and Egypt that I do not remember now. I really wish I could remember what he explained while we were there because I do know it was highly significant and had to do with humanity's future.

When we finished in Egypt, we went to the southwest United States but flew there slowly so I could see sights along the way. I wanted to see this planet with the eyes I had then. I saw the countries of the Far East and the Pacific Ocean. Night was falling in the southwest US, and I could see what the being told me was energy emanating from almost everything I could see, especially the plant and animal life. The energy was strongest in the areas of the land and sea that had the least amount of humans.

The energy was the lowest in areas where there were man-made structures,

the cities of the world. The energy I saw came from the human beings that lived in the cities. It was explained to me that humans are the basic producers of energy in cities; because of their relatively low vibration level the energy is lower in general. I could see the higher sources of energy in the cities though. I was shown people who had higher energy levels and some of them actually talked to the being I was with. I saw dark souls during the time the being and I spent on Earth. The dark souls were earthbound spirits who refuse to go to the light. They prey on the energies of

I could see what the being told me was energy emanating from almost everything I could see, especially the plant and animal life.

humans still in human form and try to use those souls to prevent the evolution of spirit. I was told I was protected from these dark ones as long as I chose to focus on the love in me. The dark ones did not even try to affect us, in fact they gave us nasty looks and went away. I was told I would know these dark ones when I see them and I was told to tell them to go to the light. The light is a porthole to the place all souls go if they choose.

I could see energy around the humans too, all different levels and colors. The being explained the human energy to me. He said that the energy coming from humans is what spirits use to evaluate the spiritual condition of particular humans. He said the lighter and more brilliant the color the more advanced the spirit is. He said that seeing the "aura" around a spirit is useful in determining how much a particular spirit needs to work on his development. He said the higher beings know where to go and what to do to help an earthbound soul so they may advance themselves if they so choose. He told me that all souls have this energy, this is why I could see it on every human I saw. He said that I was

of the same energy type as he but my vibration is lower when I am in human form and that in time my energy would raise to match his intensity provided I chose to take the initiative to consciously evolve my soul.

He told me that there is much to this planet that spirits can see which humans do not see with their eyes because their vibrations are so low. He showed me life in the trees that I could see as a spirit but could not see in my human form.

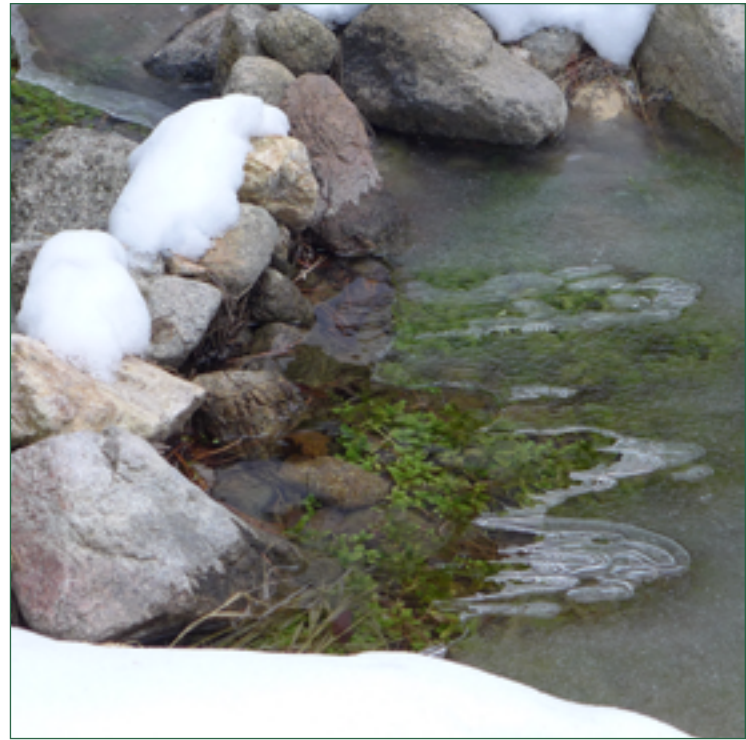
He explained that beings of higher vibration do live on Earth but they are not human, they are part of Earth itself. He explained these beings were the caretakers of physical life on the planet. He said that these beings take care of what we call nature. There are beings that take care of the plant life, the mineral life and the waterborne life. These lower echelon beings work together to ensure that all aspects of nature are protected and remain healthy. When the planet was evolving, these ethereal beings were the ones that kept the balance of nature.

He explained to me that the planet that we call Earth really has a proper name. He told me the Earth is really called "Gaia." He said Gaia has its own energy and that Gaia is really a true living being. I asked if this energy could be seen and he said that we have to be away from Gaia to appreciate and see it. He said humans are the ones who can manipulate Gaia's energy through their choices. He said if humans choose to live in harmony with the energy on Gaia, it is good for Gaia. He said if humans abuse Gaia, they hurt Gaia by altering its energy structure. I was given an example of how humans have deforested the planet and reduced the energy available faster than it could be replenished. He said Gaia was very strong but has been weakened considerably since humans have chosen to use the resources in a manner inconsistent with the laws of the universe.

I asked him if we could go into space and see Gaia's energy and he said yes. He said there were no limits on where we could go. I concentrated my thought, trusted, and we then went into what is known as space.

Away from this planet I could see Gaia all at once. It was so beautiful. I could see the aura around Gaia. The aura affected me greatly. I felt a deep love for this beautiful place. I could hear Gaia move and was told the sound was the energy flowing in and out of Gaia. My special being told me that Gaia is the most unique planet because it is designed for humans to live on forever. It was created for a spirit to play, learn and grow. He said the balance of nature on Gaia allows a spirit to be in human form when a spirit lives in harmony with nature.

Nature exists to compensate for the decreased vibration and was created for spirits to adapt enough to adjust and be in the physical human body while still having access to energy that will help them advance. He explained that humans were designed by God to live eternally on Gaia and are not supposed to "die." He said that "dying" is a human created Earth term that means little in the world of spirit. The reason that humans supposedly die is that they have fallen away from the balance of nature and allow themselves to be affected by what they create that violates the natural laws of the universe. He said that humans have fallen away from living in balance with nature. He said they must relearn about the harmonic balance if they want to survive as a race and live on Gaia forever. He said it was still possible for humans to learn about this



harmony and that it is the next overall goal of humans on Gaia. I was told that humans would eventually realize they must restore the harmony, but great damage will be inflicted before humans will fully realize what they have been doing to Gaia and work to reverse what they have done.

Traveling through the Afterlife Realms

We traveled past all of the planets in our solar system. Near each planet I could hear the energy just like on Gaia. I saw the auras around each one of them too. I saw spirits on all of them as well. My friend told me that all planets are places for spirits to live, learn and thus evolve. I saw great cities on each and every one of those planets. It was explained that other life in the universe is not readily seen because the beings were all of higher vibration and most spirits in human form have yet to attain the higher vibration required to see them.

The being told me that each planet has a theme for learning and that any of them can be chosen by a soul when

we are between physical lives. He said we practice on the other planets to be ready to live on Gaia. He said Gaia is the ultimate experience for a soul. It is ultimate because our souls evolve faster here than anywhere else. It was said that the lessons we need to learn are difficult to learn without having a physical form.

He explained how we pick a physical life on Gaia. He explained to me that I picked the parents I was born to so that I could learn what I needed to learn to grow enough to come back and do spirit work on Gaia after I attain a certain level of growth. He said that I was being told all of these things so that I could help souls come together and return Gaia to harmony.

He explained some things to me about God that I do not remember. They had to do with the universe and the size and structure of it. I do remember he said that God is not to be seen for he is everywhere. He told me that God loves Gaia deeply, much as a man loves his wife. He talked about Jesus too. He told me Jesus was a master God sent to Earth to teach humans how to act toward each other and find their way back to the path of harmony with each other as well as with Gaia.

I was told that Jesus is the being that is entrusted by God to ensure that souls evolve. He said that Jesus has the highest vibration of any other soul. He said that God holds Jesus in the highest of favor because he was the best example of what humans need to do. I then got to see Jesus. I saw his light. Jesus' light was the purest I have ever seen. There was no need for words. There were only love feelings that I cannot even begin to describe.

I was told that loving one another is what souls need to do in order for peace and harmony to be the standard on Gaia.

I was told that there is a hierarchy in the universe that is dedicated to preserving the harmony of the universe. I was told that humans are an integral part

of this harmony and that the free will we have is a part of souls that allows humans to provide service to the universe.

After he explained those things to me I was able to see our whole solar system all at once in full color. The planets were all in a line and I could see all of them from Pluto to the sun. I felt very blessed and very important. I was given this great gift and I did not really understand why. There I floated, a being that went out of his way to inflict pain on other souls, yet I was never asked about what I had done. In fact I was given the honor of getting answers to questions most people wonder about all of their lives.

I thanked this loving being for explaining and showing me what he did. He told me that there was more for him to show me if I was ready to experience it. I told him I was ready. I did not know why I was chosen but I was not about to question why. It just seemed small to me then.

We started to head back toward Gaia. We went to a place in the shadow of Gaia. It was a great city in the clouds. The city had these beautiful white buildings as far as I could see. I saw spirits living there all of whom had vibration but no physical body. These inhabitants went to and from the buildings, going to work and play too. I saw a place where spirits went to get what I thought was water. There were no vehicles there. Spirits seemed to get around the same way my being and I got around, by flying.



The city had no boundaries that I could see. This was a place full of life of all kinds. There was nature there, many pure plants, trees and water just like on Gaia but more pure. Nature there was absolutely perfect. It was untainted by human manipulation. This place was just like Gaia only without the problems. and negativity. I felt that this was what is called heaven in Earth terms.

I was told that loving one another is what souls need to do in order for peace and harmony to be the standard on Gaia.

I saw spirits going to and from Gaia and the city. I could tell the development of the spirits going to and from by the energy they emanated. I could see that animals came to and from Earth just like humans do. I could see many spirits leave Gaia with guides and could see spirits returning to Gaia without guides. The being told me that some of the spirits passing were the ones that were doing the work with humans on Gaia. I could make out the type of spirits that were doing the work and the spirits that were coming to the great city to become replenished to eventually go back to

Gaia to experience and further evolve. I could feel the emotions of the ones coming back for replenishment. I could feel that some of them were sad, beaten and scared, much like I felt before my being came to me.

My being took me into one of the larger buildings. Inside I saw many spirits working. They were doing things similar to jobs on Earth. When we walked by the spirits, they looked at me. I think they were checking me out because of the being I was with.

We went upstairs and I saw spirits that knew me. They greeted me and asked me how I was doing. They gave me advice, which I do not remember. I thought I was going to be given a job there, but the being knew I thought that and told me that there was something I needed to do first.

I was ecstatic. I was in heaven despite everything I had done during my life on Gaia. I was experiencing what most people only dream about. The love I felt there was the same love I felt when I saw Jesus. I had been searching on Gaia for what was really the same place I was in then. I was searching on Gaia for the feeling I was feeling that very moment. I had found what I spent my whole life searching for. I was truly happy. I was home and I knew it. I was ready to stay and do whatever work I was given to do.

My being took me to another building that was special. It was bigger than the rest and had the greenest foliage I had ever seen growing on it, decorating it like a shrine. We went inside a set of double doors that glowed with life. The inside was decorated with a wood paneling that the being told me was “living” wood from the trees that grew at this wonderful place. He led me to some big double doors and told me to wait on a bench while he went inside.

A bit later he came out of the room. He told me to go into the room and said he would wait for me and to not worry. He cautioned me to ensure that I was truthful with the beings in the room.

He said they were not judges, rather they were the ones who evaluated a soul's development based on a soul's history. He told me to remember who I was and to refrain from fear. I knew I had to leave this being sooner or later but I was glad that he would wait for me. I was a little scared to leave him, but I felt that I was protected and knew that I would be protected here.

Life Review and Lessons Learned

I went in and saw a group of several spirits seated at a table. The table was made of the glowing wood and was perfect in every way. The spirits around this table had the highest vibration I had seen so far with the exception of Jesus.

I looked at these beings and recognized them. I do not know where I recognized them from, but they all had a familiarity about them. They just looked at me.

All of a sudden, I saw my parents on Earth before I was born. I saw how they came to be together and watched them have my brother and sister before me. I saw their positive and negative sides and evaluated them according to what I knew I needed to do on Gaia. The beings asked me how and why I picked these particular parents and asked me to tell them. They said I knew how and why I picked them and asked me to tell them why. I do not know where it came from but I did tell them how and why and they agreed with me. I picked them to help them on their path as well as to achieve my learning.



I saw my soul go to my mother and go inside of her. I saw myself being born from an observer standpoint as well as having the actual experience. I proceeded to see my entire life from the observer point of view and from the points of view of those my actions affected. I felt the feelings they felt that directly resulted from things I had done to them. I saw both the positive and the negative things I had done as they had truly happened; nothing was left out or presented inaccurately.

I saw all of the good and bad from my childhood years and re-experienced what I had done then. I felt all of my emotions and the emotions of the souls I had hurt as well as loved.

I experienced the harshness of being born again. I experienced leaving heaven and the transit to Gaia. I saw myself as a helpless infant who needed his mother for everything. I experienced my father's love as well as his anger. I experienced my mother's love, her fear and her anger as well. I saw all of the good and bad from my childhood years and re-experienced what I had done then. I felt

all of my emotions and the emotions of the souls I had hurt as well as loved. From all of this I learned that it matters deeply what choices I make on Gaia. I learned just how powerful we humans are and how we can affect each other in positive and negative ways. It was amazing to see how my innocent actions had such a powerful effect on souls that I had no idea I was affecting. The experience was one that I will never forget. I experienced the whole spectrum of feelings of my life in a relatively short period of time as we humans see it. Where I was, time did not really exist.

I could see how I became what I had become on Gaia and why I became that way. Everything I did in my life affected the evolution of the souls around me. I saw the reasons for all of my actions and understood why I did what I had done. There was a place for all of my positive and negative actions. There was no action that was necessarily wrong, but there were actions I took that did not enhance positive growth. I was both a victim and a beneficiary of my actions. This was not a fun experience to go through. I could see how wonderful it could be if one chose to act to affect other souls positively most of the time.

Afterward, the beings in the room asked me questions about what I saw and how I felt about my life up to then. I knew that I had to provide an honest assessment; I could not lie. I hesitated when they asked me whether I affected others more positively than negatively. I thought about lying.

These beings knew what I was thinking and I had to tell them that I felt that I could have done a better job on Gaia. I knew what I had come to Gaia to accomplish and was well on my way to doing that but I knew I was not finished yet. They agreed and told me that I still had many things to do and that I may want to go back and do them. I was told it was understood how difficult it would be for me but it was necessary for the universe for me to finish.

They said that it may be wise to go back and live my life how I had originally planned it.

They said I had set lofty goals for my life on Gaia and the events in my life were achieving the goals I had set.

They said that I originally came to Gaia to learn and share with others using the gifts that I have accumulated over several lifetimes.

They said that I am needed on Gaia to help souls bring themselves and Gaia back to harmony.

They said that I have great potential to affect other souls, to help them grow and that Gaia is the best place to do that. I was told that the events I had experienced thus far were preparing me to make a large contribution to the universe and that my experiences were not to be considered personal attacks in any way. I did not want to accept that, I wanted to stay, I told them that.

I told them I was tired and wanted to stay because life on Gaia is hard and unforgiving. I felt that going back would be dangerous for the universe because I was not advanced enough in my spiritual evolution. They said that was precisely why it would be in my best interest to go back to Gaia. They said I was more advanced than I gave myself credit for.

They said that it was possible for me to stay but I would need to finish my work on Gaia sooner or later. The type of work I was destined for can only be done on Gaia. I could stay if I chose to but I would only be prolonging the completion of what I needed to do for this universe.

They explained the fastest way to finish my work would be to go back to Gaia as soon as possible.

I was stunned to say the least. I resorted to bargaining but it was no use. I still did not like living on Gaia and did not really want to go back. These beings understood me but remained firm. I had

a decision to make that was really the hardest decision I would ever make.

I did come back to Gaia and am now living the life that I was (later in the experience) told I would live. Believe it or not, I ended up shelving this experience away, classifying it as a really vivid “trip.” It was not until I evolved more that I realized the gift I was given.

I share this experience now because I feel it can spur thought and foster choices that affect the planet in a positive way.

If I learned anything from this experience it was that every choice I make is duly recorded, noted and will return later, when I leave here again.

My goal is to save people the pain that I felt in my review and hasten the evolution of humans on Gaia, helping Gaia as well as the universe.

Again, I wish you all of the love I feel in my heart and I give this love to you.


Insights

I'm one who had a near-death experience and was given a choice to return to this planet in a physical sense again. I chose to return out of love for this planet, a love so great that I would give up the slot I have “back home.” I did this also in order to help heal the place through the sharing of what I was shown of the in-between and through the choices I make.

Without the free will to return I wouldn't be here in the physical doing what I am doing. The physical pain, war, poverty, pestilence, horror, rape, murder, abandonment, etc., that is here on this planet is the result of humans coming here and making their free choices in order to learn and evolve. Unfortunately learning does tend to create a mess at times, and the physical pain and negative vibration is a part of that mess. It makes sense to me that the same free choice concept is instrumental in cleaning up and tweaking things for the better.

A Select List of Resources for Support after Death from Overdose

In my near-death experience I was also shown that there are many souls in “heaven” who are more than willing to come to this place regardless of the state it is in. I was shown that if I didn’t choose to return I would be in the schools that exist in heaven, working toward the growth I need to accomplish regardless of the form I am in. That was an attractive choice to be sure, except that I had a problem with how long it would take me to grow enough to do what my soul wishes to do. I have a burning desire to experience other places in other universes, and to do that I need to grow more and hone my energy. The prerequisite for that is ensuring that my soul has the IQ for it. I need to learn more.

It’s my understanding that a soul can choose to remain in heaven and operate on the level he/she is on to infinity, but I seek more because I know without doubt that there is more. At any rate, the idea remains that for this place to start feeling and looking like heaven is to create the love felt there, here. I would like to feel that on this planet and I know it can be done. If I need to, I will come back here all over again to make it happen. 

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Also included are general resources for education about addiction.

General resources:

Nar-Anon

nar-anon.org

Nar-Anon, known officially as “Nar-Anon Family Groups,” is a 12-step program for friends and family members of those who are affected by someone else’s addiction.

GRASP (Grief Recovery After Substance Passing)

grasphelp.org

Online support group for those who have had someone die from overdose.

Resources for parents whose children have died from any cause:

Compassionatefriends.org

Compassionate Friends is a non-profit organization that exists to provide friendship, understanding, and hope to those going through the natural grieving process. Local chapters, depending on your location.

Bereavedparentsusa.org

Bereaved Parents of the USA was founded in 1995 by a group of bereaved parents from across the country to offer support, understanding, encouragement and hope to fellow bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents after the death of their loved one.

MISSfoundation.org (Mothers in Sympathy and Support)

The MISS Foundation, established in 1996 by Dr. Joanne Cacciatore, is an international 501(c)3, volunteer-based organization providing C.A.R.E. [counseling, advocacy, research and education] services to families experiencing the death of a child.

The Kindness Project of Missfoundation.org

<https://missfoundation.org/support/kindness>

The Kindness Project began in 1996 as a way for families to honor their deceased child and to help themselves heal. Almost two million cards have been used around the world to perform random acts of kindness in memory of a child, parent, friend or spouse.

The concept is to perform random acts of, usually anonymous, acts of kindness in your community. A little card is left behind so that the person who benefits from the kindness knows that someone’s life and death continues to matter. This movement has helped thousands of families to heal and find positive outlets for their overwhelming grief. You can download the Kindness card template from the Kindness Project website.

Healingheart.net

Dedicated to providing grief support and services to parents who are suffering as the result of the death of their child or children. Publishes a monthly newsletter.

Other resources:


Sandyswenson.com

Mission is to help mothers with addicted children find strength, wisdom, perspective, sanity and hope.

MomPower.org

The place for mothers with addicted children to turn when life and love meet addiction.

Nopetaskforce.org

Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education. Provides education and advocacy. 

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Cryptic Customs and Graveyard Gatherings: Celebrating Death around the World

by Mary Reilly-McNellan

“Do you ever get creeped out working in a cemetery?”

During the seventeen years that I managed a pioneer burial ground in Boulder, CO, I was often amused by people’s reactions to my unconventional job. When social conversation inevitably turned to professions, it often came to an abrupt halt when I described myself as a “Graveyard Ranger.” No one quite knew how to respond to this job title, and I quickly learned to defuse the awkward pauses with humor. “Working in a cemetery is a pretty secure position,” I would say. “Folks are just dying to get in!” That usually broke the tension, and after some initial nervous laughter, people seemed genuinely interested in learning just what a “Graveyard Ranger” did. I was usually peppered with questions about my job requirements: enforcing the cemetery’s rules and regulations, educating visitors on proper cemetery etiquette, applying for grants to fund graveyard conservation work,

managing volunteers and contractors, and assisting families and mortuaries with burials. I learned that nearly everyone has a cemetery story, and the conversations were surprisingly lively for a frequently taboo subject.

Some of my favorite discussions revolved around the myriad ways the living demonstrate their eternal connection with loved ones—often by the types of objects and decorations left on plots to honor and memorialize the deceased. Commonly known as “grave goods,” these items usually consist of flowers, statues, children’s toys, stuffed animals, wind chimes, coins, conch shells and stones. Some are personal objects belonging to the deceased; others represent hobbies they enjoyed. Some hold meanings known only to the bereft and the person interred in the grave. Over the years, I found golf clubs, books, marbles, Frisbees, broken pottery, playing cards, candles, skis, food items, liquor bottles, cryptic messages, and even a child’s swing left behind as commemorative tokens—each representing a desire to remember and celebrate a connection that cannot ever be broken.

Fall is an especially busy season for graveyards, and bright orange marigolds, stuffed scarecrows and pumpkins appear on graves as America gears up for Halloween, the night when the barrier



Ken Wilson

Real-life librarian Wendy Hall portrays early Boulder librarian Clara Savory

between the worlds of the living and the dead is believed to be thinnest. Here in Boulder, Columbia Cemetery is the site of a beloved community event called “Meet the Spirits,” during which several dozen “residents” rise from the dead for one fall afternoon to tell their stories. Actors in period dress stand by their graves and give a first-person account of their lives, making history literally come alive for participants. Many cities around the country have adopted this tradition, and it is a wonderful way to educate the public as well as an opportunity to raise needed funds for historic cemeteries.

Yellow buses arrive at the cemetery almost daily during October as school groups meander among the stones to learn about the pioneers buried within, uncovering clues about how the occupants viewed life, death, themselves



Penny Cornelius

Columbia Cemetery Conservation Corps volunteers working on needy grave markers.



Ken Wilson

Real-life ranger Jerry Katopodes portrays early Boulder mountain park ranger Mart Parsons, who patrolled the city's mountain backdrop on horseback from 1927 to 1947, logging 2500 miles each season.

and each other. Students and teachers alike are often surprised to discover that cemeteries are marvelous teaching tools; indeed, almost any discipline can be taught “hands-on” in a graveyard: history, art, math and geology, for instance. Cultural similarities and differences are an especially intriguing subject that is ripe for exploration in a graveyard.

I learned a great deal from the students as well. One visiting class introduced me to the practice of leaving a “soul cake” for spirits in need of sustenance. The tradition appears to have originated during Halloween or “Samhein,” a pagan ritual celebrated by Druids in Celtic lands on October 31 to mark the end of the autumn harvest and the onset of winter. Bonfires were lit to banish fears of the upcoming season of cold and scarcity, as well as any evil spirits hiding in the night. Soul cakes were eventually added to the bonfire menu to appease these spirits, or even as part of a lottery: If you selected a burnt cake, you became the unfortunate human sacrifice necessary to ensure a bounty of crops the following year. By the 8th century, soul cakes were used to pay beggars who went door to door offering to say prayers

for the family’s deceased members. The cake ingredients varied, but most were small, doughy and sweet, and often contained currents and saffron. The soul cakes placed in Columbia Cemetery one year by a 4th grade class were quite unique: Peanut butter was mixed with bird seed and shaped into small round balls that were undoubtedly attractive to local birds and wildlife. Unfortunately, we discovered that the peanut butter left oily stains on the grave markers, so the students opted to leave the soul cakes on the grassy plots instead of on the stones themselves.

The idea of sating the appetites of spirits can also be found in Buddhist and Taoist communities around the world that celebrate the “Hungry Ghost Festival.” Held annually during Ghost Month (the seventh month of the lunar calendar), it is believed to be a time when the gates of the afterlife open to permit spirits to roam the earth in search of food, entertainment and mischief. The festival particularly honors the restless ghosts of relatives, strangers and the uncared-for dead—who are likely very hungry as they navigate the spirit world—with elaborate meals served to empty seats around the table. Besides a meal, ghosts

can enjoy an opera performance from a front row seat intentionally left empty for their enjoyment. Makeshift roadside altars glow with burning joss paper, and the living make offerings of food, money and entertainment to pacify the hungry ghosts—after all, a content ghost is less likely to make trouble. Buddhists and Taoists also tend to avoid wearing the color red during Ghost Month, as it might attract ghosts who may wish to possess their bodies. Annoying insects are given a reprieve during this time as well, as they are believed to embody the spirits of relatives. At the end of the month, the gates close, and floating lanterns guide the spirits back home to the afterlife.

Another popular tradition honoring the dead is the springtime Qingming festival observed by the Han Chinese of mainland China and Southeast Asian countries. Commonly known as “Tomb-Sweeping Day,” the festival is usually held in early April to honor and show reverence for one’s ancestors. The event dates back over 2500 years, and participants visit family tombs to clean the gravesites, pray and make ritual offerings of food, incense and joss paper. Relatives sweep away leaves, weeds and debris, place floral arrangements, and freshen the paint of the grave marker lettering—all intended to commemorate the deceased and assure them that they are remembered.

The best known and most impressive celebrations that honor the deceased are probably the “Days of the Dead” festivals of Mexico. Usually celebrated on All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day (November 1 and 2), *Dias de los Muertos* is a time when departed souls are believed to briefly return to earth to join the living for feasting and merrymaking. The holiday is rooted in giving thanks to the dead for bountiful corn harvests: Deceased ancestors were believed to ensure a successful crop by being buried in the ground, thus providing necessary fertilizer to grow corn. Indeed, it is said in Xochimilco, “We don’t bury men, we sow them.”

During *Dias de los Muertos*, family reunions, prayers, mariachi bands and feasts all help to calm the dead and allow them to rest comfortably for the next year. Relatives and friends enjoy picnics on the cleaned grave sites of their loved ones, and altars are adorned with photos, food items and other articles enjoyed during life by the deceased. Decorations include brightly decorated depictions of skeletons and sugar skulls, and today many different cultures celebrate Days of the Dead.

A well-known New Orleans musician once said, “Music here is as much a part of death as it is a part of life,” and no discussion of cemetery traditions would be complete without mentioning the New Orleans Jazz Funeral. The custom blends strong European and African influences with Protestant and Catholic Church practices, and is most frequently observed following the deaths of local musicians or members of various social aid and pleasure clubs. A procession of mourners is led to the burial grounds by a brass band, and participants often carry black umbrellas. When the deceased is laid to rest—or more

colloquially, when they “cut the body loose”—the mourners “cut loose” as well. Melancholy dirges morph into rollicking, upbeat music and cathartic dancing following the burial. Indeed, no Jazz Funeral would be complete without a lively rendition of “When the Saints Go Marching In,” and respectful passersby are encouraged to join in.

Dance also plays a part in the funeral traditions of Madagascar, where a living dance partner is not necessarily a requirement during the “turning of the bones” ceremony. Every five to seven years, families hold a celebration at their ancestral crypt to exhume their relatives’ cloth-wrapped bodies, spray them with wine or perfume, and dance with the cadavers as a band plays. During this time, stories are told, news and gossip is shared with the deceased, and their blessing to the living is requested.

Each culture—indeed, sometimes each family—develops its own unique ways of connecting with their deceased loved ones. Many of these traditions have fallen by the wayside over time, or have been eradicated by the church



Ken Wilson

Don Burd portrays gunslinger Tom Horn for “Meet the Spirits”

after being deemed paganistic. While some customs may seem strange and perhaps irreverent, at their core they share a common denominator of love, remembrance, honor and respect—sometimes with a side of fear. And it is these traditions that not only celebrate the lives of our loved ones, but also root us in the present, encourage us to remember the past and, like many rituals, help us to heal. [f](#)



Professionally-trained Columbia Cemetery Conservation Corps volunteers reset a grave marker.
Mary Reilly-McNellan



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

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

Traditions of Death and Burial

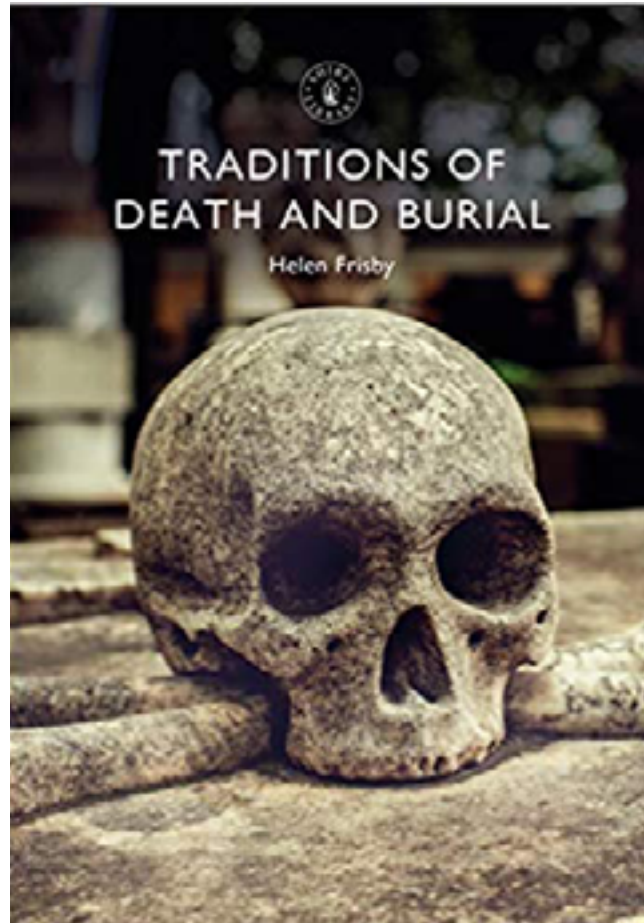
by Helen Frisby

Review by Mary Reilly-McNellan

When I first opened Helen Frisby's new book, *Traditions of Death and Burial*, I remember thinking, "I hope the writing is a bit snappier than the title." I needn't have worried; once I started reading, I couldn't stop. I felt like a kid in a candy store because the book neatly encapsulated my interests in death, history, religion, folklore and sociology, with uniquely compelling illustrations sprinkled throughout.

While the book was published in England and explores how "ordinary English people since the Middle Ages onwards have faced up to the inevitable," many of the traditions are certainly recognizable to those of us across the pond. *Traditions of Death and Burial* explores how the English have related—or not—to their dead over a millennium and what the past can teach us about one of life's greatest mysteries. I was fascinated to learn the stories behind some of our best-known death practices and beliefs.

Frisby begins with an examination of the time period circa 1066 to 1500 AD when the Christian doctrine of Purgatory—an intermediate place between Heaven and Hell where souls were cleansed of venial (forgivable) sins—was established. This cleansing was done by fiery torment, so Purgatory was usually considered to be more like Hell than Heaven. But unlike Hell, Purgatory had an expiration date, and souls would eventually head for Heaven after sufficient punishment had been meted out. Thankfully, there were things that souls—and the living—could do to hurry the process along and diminish suffering, for instance performing good works during life and dying a good death.



Ars moriendi (the art of dying well) emerged as one of the most important things a person could accomplish, as it served to redeem a soul of all but the worst sins. Knowing the physical signs of death thus became very important during medieval times, and any and all clues portending imminent death were scrutinized—even such superstitions as counting the number of owl hoots and cuckoo cries to determine the number of years remaining in one's life. Armed with this "knowledge," people could prepare for their eventual demise by disposing of material goods, arranging for prayers for their souls via a will and receiving the last rites.

Other means of assisting a soul on its way heavenward included ringing the

"passing bell" before, during and immediately after a death to protect the deceased from "airborne demons." Later, the passing bell was also used to assemble the local poor to receive food, clothing and money from the deceased's estate. Aiding the unfortunate one last time was considered helpful for navigating Purgatory. Washing, dressing and shrouding the body offered additional symbolic protection, as well as comfort for the living.

All manner of customs and traditions are covered by Frisby: the establishment of All Soul's Day as a precursor of Halloween; providing "soul cakes" to the poor in exchange for prayers for the deceased; the role of "sin-eaters," those poor souls who assumed any unforgiven transgressions; acceptance of "ghosts" in early Christianity; and various burial practices. While the traditions are fascinating, so too is their historical evolution

and intersection with religion. When the idea of Purgatory was abandoned during the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, people believed that their personal faith would save them from the yawning gates of Hell; hence, there was no longer any point in praying for the dead. Public aspects of death, dying and remembrance shifted as well. Causes of death were looked at more critically, and diseases became more understood, but folklore still played a role. Such omens as bees swarming on dead wood, a swallow falling down the chimney and coffin-shaped cinders in a fire were all considered signs of an impending death. Religion and spirituality became less important in one's final moments, while practical matters such as pain relief and making a will were emphasized.

And although a few Puritans viewed the body as a “stinking karkass” to be disposed of, most people believed that dead bodies should be treated with dignity. To help meet this need, the first dedicated funerary professionals filled a niche to “undertake” the necessary tasks following death.

Frisby describes how, as the Protestant Reformation shifted into the Industrial Age (circa 1750–1900), funerals became more secular and life-focused. Urban populations grew rapidly, and the middle class now wanted tombstones, coffins and memorials that had previously been available only to the wealthy or reserved for nobility.

For those who could afford them, tombstones emphasized the deceased’s achievements, virtues and family life rather than soliciting prayers for the afterlife. Funeral clothes for the living (usually black crepe) appeared, and “garden cemeteries” were established. These burial grounds were commercially run, carefully laid out and planted with trees. The old tradition of “waking” (a social gathering prior to a burial) continued in the Industrial Age, in spite of efforts to eradicate it during the Victorian Era (circa 1837–1901). And when photography was invented in 1839, it was embraced as a way to commemorate and maintain a relationship with the dead. While photographers did not always favor this type of work, post-mortem photography was lucrative and “subjects could be guaranteed to stay still.”

A reduction in funeral customs and traditions has been the norm from 1900 up to the millennium. Religious belief in Hell has declined and life expectancy has increased. Death has become the expected conclusion to a long, full life, and has been dealt with in a more practical manner. Traditional folk beliefs declined, in part because by the 1960s,


deaths occurred more often in hospitals and nursing homes. The necessary body care required following a death was taken over by undertakers and mortuary technicians, and some of the traditional customs became obsolete. And when the Church of England formally approved cremation in 1944 (followed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1968), the practice quickly overtook burial in popularity. As a result, there was less participation in death customs and further disconnection between the living and the dead. New commemoration practices evolved—memorial plaques instead of graves, for instance—while others were lost. Mourning clothing has almost disappeared. While we may still wear black while attending a funeral, it is no longer required for any extended period of time. This is too bad, as the tradition was a way to notify the public that one was in mourning and should be treated gently.

Perhaps it is no surprise that death practices are once again in flux. While it is impossible to return to the old ways, we seem to be rebelling against the institutional control and practical (but unsatisfying) funeral customs of the last century. Frisby brings us into the present with a discussion of the increasing popularity of cremation and the more recent development of water cremation, American DeathLAB pods and green burial as less environmentally destructive practices. Even social media plays a role in death practices today. A “Digital Death Manager”^{*} helps people maintain bonds with their loved ones and curate their afterlife. But while funeral customs have changed through time, they often have a way of returning again and again. Home funerals are

^{*}a person or company that handles one’s digital legacy, i.e., ones; online presence, after death

becoming increasingly popular, and more people are opting for the simple burial traditions of our ancestors.

Frisby’s book is a treat for anyone interested in the evolution of death practices, especially when explored against the backdrop of history, religion and folklore. It offers a roadmap of England’s funerary customs that illuminates their evolution, how they look today and where they are likely headed. But mostly, the book is about life. As Frisby says in her introduction, “Most of all...I hope that reading about and considering death in custom and tradition will encourage us all to think that little bit more about what it means to live.”

Memento mori. 

An illustrated introduction to rites and traditions relating to death, funerary rites and commemoration, from Medieval times to the present day.

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Believe It Can Happen

An excerpt from *Signs from the Other Side* by Bill Philipps

Who hasn't wished they could ask a departed loved one for advice, heal an unresolved rift, or even just ask where their grandmother's strand of pearls is hidden? The best psychic mediums know what solace such messages can provide. They also know that communication with those on the other side can be cultivated by anyone with a sincere and open heart.

In *Signs from the Other Side: Opening to the Spirit World*, psychic medium Bill Philipps illuminates all of this for readers by demystifying what he does and providing step-by-step guidance that allows readers to receive afterlife communications themselves. We hope you'll enjoy this excerpt from the book.

No matter what your beliefs, all you need to be able to recognize signs from heaven are an open mind and heart.

Opening your mind to receiving signs simply means believing it can happen. If you have faith in God or in the next life, you are already ahead of the game. If you don't have a deep-rooted faith in God or in anything else, don't fret; you can still do this. How? By detaching yourself from your ego and rational mind for a period of time.

When it comes to receiving signs, our egos and rational minds do us a disservice by trying to find logic in the most incredible messages from the other side rather than accepting those validations for what they are. Set aside any cynicism, any doubts, any preconceived notions, and be open to the possibility that there is something larger than yourself, a kind of energy that is



simply above and beyond the human or material.

That energy can be a gut feeling. We all have intuition. You no doubt have gone with your gut when making an important decision, and you have trusted it. That feeling is guidance from God and the spirit world. It's that part of your soul that is connected to divine knowledge and wisdom, which can be attained by disengaging yourself from your ego and fear-based thinking. Even if you don't think of spirits as being the source, you can still understand this feeling to be an energy inside you that is instinctual and that you know has guided you in the past and you have been able to trust.

You can believe in the energy of the universe, an intangible force around us that comes from the stars, the planets, the galaxy. You may not believe that God is behind any of it, and that's okay — as long as you believe there is an energy beyond the scope of human life that is greater than you and me.

Another type of energy you can tune in to that can open your mind, one that many people don't think of as an energy, is *confidence*. Whether you are a superstar basketball player, a dentist, a mechanic, or a famous singer, when you tap into the energy that enables you to perform at your highest level, your gifts shine. If I am not in a confident mindset, I won't be a clear channel to give effective readings. Like an athlete who needs to stretch, I have to warm up my mind, which I do through meditation and other methods (which I will share in a moment). The more I warm up, the more my confidence level increases, which puts my mind into a positive and open space.

So, is there any hope for an atheist to receive signs from the other side? Well, that would be difficult to do, considering an atheist doesn't believe there is an "other side." But here is an interesting story to ponder.

A friend of mine told me about one of his friends who is a hard-core atheist. This friend had always been adamant that there is no God or spiritual world or life of any kind beyond this one, and he wouldn't hesitate to debate anyone on the subject — which is what makes this story so fascinating.

Two days after a natural disaster had occurred in his community, he was volunteering his time at a local organization he belonged to. The organization was a very well-respected nonprofit known for its charity work. In the case of this disaster, he and other volunteers there were accepting donations of clothes and then sorting them and distributing them to families in need. When his work was finished at the end of the day, he was reflecting on what he had experienced, and he was deeply moved by all that had been accomplished and by the outpouring of love and support from donors and

Excerpted from the book *Signs from the Other Side*. Copyright © 2019 by Bill Philipps. Printed with permission from New World Library—www.newworldlibrary.com.

volunteers. He was so moved, in fact, that he said that throughout the day he had felt the presence of the long-deceased people who had founded the organization years earlier, as if they had been watching over him and the other volunteers. It was the first time my friend had ever heard him allude to the possibility that there was something beyond this life.

Was he no longer an atheist after that feeling? No. His beliefs, or *non*beliefs, hadn't changed at all. But he certainly felt *something* or he wouldn't have made that comment.

To me, there is no question that those founders were there with him and the others. His feeling was real. Unfortunately, he probably released that feeling soon after it arose, listening instead to his rational mind. But it's proof to me that even those who may think there is no such thing as a spirit world are part of that spiritual web I talked about, whether they know it or not. Had he continued to let that door open wider when he felt what he'd felt, rather than allowing his ego to slam it shut, it potentially could have changed his worldview.

Signs are always right in front of us. Your loved ones who have passed have probably already sent some your way today. But, without an open and aware mind, they will be useless. It is much like having a conversation with someone. If I explain something to you and you sincerely listen to me, you will understand what I am saying. However, if I tell you something and you don't listen, my words will still be there, but they will have no effect on you, because you didn't pay attention. 🗣️



Courtesy of Bill Philipps

Psychic medium Bill Philipps is the author of Signs from the Other Side and Expect the Unexpected. His life's mission is to help people deal with the grief of losing loved ones by bringing through validations, evidential information, and beautiful messages from Spirit, which heal and bring a sense of peace. Visit him online at www.billphilipps.com.

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Community Care Groups Spread Home Funeral Wisdom across the Nation in 2020

by Dani Atlas-LaVoire

The mission of the National Home Funeral Alliance is to educate and empower families to care for their own loved ones after death. I love how clear and simple that mandate is. I appreciate that when we look at the laws and what our human hearts desire our pathway forward is clear. The first step, always, is education. Our mission asks us to reach out to our communities and share the idea that caring for our own is possible; holding a vigil at home, transporting the body, filing necessary paperwork and organizing disposition are all tasks that we can manage. As we aim to ensure that every family knows their options, we ensure that these tasks are carried out within a community that

embraces the work of family-centered after-deathcare. Every time we host a workshop in our community, every time a family chooses to care for their own, we cause subtle yet profound changes in the culture.

As I speak with our members, folks tell me that they love our mission, but they lack the confidence to start reaching out in their communities. People who do have the confidence sometime put off taking the leap and scheduling an event. There is a call for mentors to be more available to support folks who are just getting started on this path. We hear you. We are so certain that your participation is what will make a difference that we've

decided that motivating and inspiring our members will be our focus for the year ahead.

For 2020 we've set an ambitious educational goal: We intend to support the formation of twenty new Community Care Groups in 2020! Through collaboration, brainstorming, and networking, we will inspire and empower folks all over the country to get together and do the work of teaching, shifting culture, and building bridges in the places they call home. In the first months of 2020, we will begin to gather the participants, sharing the ins and outs of what it means to form a Community Care Group. As the year progresses, we'll

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National Home Funeral Alliance

New in 2020: Home funeral community care groups forming near you!

Join the party and find out how you can connect or start your own local community care group today, email us at:

info@HomeFuneralAlliance.org



Check out our latest podcast, featuring home funeral stories with Sarah Crews. New episodes released biweekly. We want to hear **YOUR** story!

"Never Doubt That a Small Group of Thoughtful, Committed Citizens Can Change the World; Indeed, It's the Only Thing That Ever Has."
-Margaret Mead



host webinars that follow the study guide laid out in the book, *Undertake with Love*, an NHFA publication. There will be opportunities to hear the stories of the history of this movement, discover the laws in your state and understand how they affect institutional policy, meet medical examiners and funeral directors, sharpen your public speaking skills, make new friends, and understand how to grow a grassroots movement. In short, we are hosting a year-long party. We hope you can make it!

Community Care Groups have the potential to be the heart and soul of this movement. I think Margaret Mead's quote is incredibly appropriate here:

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

As we look ahead with the aim of making real change, we have to be aware

that educating families about home funerals is only part of the journey. If we encourage folks to want to care for their own, we must simultaneously work to remove the roadblocks that exist to keep people from exercising their rights. If not, we risk setting families up for more frustration than satisfaction. We believe that supporting Community Care Groups to sprout up all across the country will be the best method for encouraging education and advocacy to happen simultaneously.

The NHFA is dedicated to searching for these committed citizens, and helping them feel fired up in a small, thoughtful group, and ready to change the world!

We hope you'll join this movement and help support this important initiative. If you would like to learn more about the path ahead and how you can get in on the party, please send an email to dani@homefuneralalliance.org. I can't wait to get to know you! 🌍



Dani Atlas-LaVoire is the president of the National Home Funeral Alliance. homefuneralalliance.org

| ADVERTISEMENT |

A collage of images from a training event. The top section features a man in a green shirt speaking into a microphone. Below that, a woman in a white shirt is shown in a ceremonial act, possibly lighting a candle. A large group of people is shown sitting on the ground, listening to a presentation. The bottom section shows a woman performing a massage on a person lying on a table. Text overlays include: "The 4th International Death Doula Training on Maui April 23-27, 2020", a list of names: "Ram Dass, Lei'ohu Ryder, Bodhi Be Deanna Cochran, Jerrigrace Lyons, Amy Wright Glenn and others", and the title "The Spiritual, Psychological, Emotional and Logistical Care of the Dying, Care of the Dead and Care of the Grieving". The website "www.DoorwayIntoLight.org" is also displayed.



LAST WORDS

Jacob's father, JW Wilson, delivered these words, which he received as an after-death communication from his son, after Jacob's death from overdose in June of 2017.

JW spoke Jacob's words as a eulogy at Gateway Amusement Park in Boulder, CO, because all of the other venues were booked. And it was perfect! Jacob's life was a mixture of adventure and amusement. He had over 25,000 followers on Twitter clamoring for his joke tweets.

JW: What would Leon/Jacob want to say to you about his death? Close your eyes and take a deep, deep breath. Find your center and relax before you hear this eulogy. These are Jacob's words:

May my death be a guidepost to help you find true meaning in your life.

May it help you take the time and energy to discover your true spiritual self, your true genius, your authentic self.

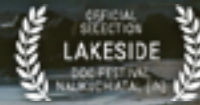
*May my death help you discover the God inside of you ...
And the God outside of you. ...*

So you can lead a life of meaning, fulfillment and joy ... so you can live a true life free from the confines of your own ego and not bound by chasing the materialistic golden balls: money, clothes, cars, houses and fame.

So you can wake up each morning with a smile on your face and a spring in your step, knowing you won't compromise your true self just to make someone else happy, whether it be your parents, your bosses or our society.

This is your life. Live it without compromise.

*Be bold and be real... But most of all, be love.
BE LOVE TO ALL!*



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Gerhard Huber, Rheintaler

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

Andreas Stock, St. Galler Tagblatt

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

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

with

Alcio Braz, psychotherapist and Zen teacher, Brazil

Sonam Dölma, hospice nurse, Shechen Hospiz, Nepal

Ron Hoffman, founder and director Compassionate Care ALS, USA

Elisabeth Würmli, caregiver volunteer, Switzerland

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**Fear is not the enemy
Fear is my direct line to faith**

**Fear keeps me awake
not only at night
Fear keeps me awake
in my awareness
Brightens the colors
intensifies the sounds
enlarges the images
informs my compassion**

**Fear is my companion
my direct line to faith**

**Why be afraid of fear?
It reminds me of the
preciousness, the fragility
of all that I hold dear...
except God.**

**Fear is my direct line to faith
Why should I be afraid of fear?**