



Natural Transitions

Volume 4 Issue 2

Conscious, holistic approaches to end of life



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Home Funerals 2015

Unearthing the Tradition of Natural Death Care

by Jerrigrace Lyons, Founder of Final Passages

My involvement in the home funeral movement wasn't born overnight. Twenty-one years ago, the terms "death midwifery" and "home funeral" were not in my vocabulary, let alone a road map for what to do when someone dies. My initiation and awakening to the possibility of a home funeral came through the sudden and unexpected death of a dear friend, Carolyn, who left specific instructions for her post-death care and memorial. She embraced ancient traditions and asked her friends to care for her at home after her death. I consider Carolyn to be my mentor and guiding light, both before and after her death. Caring for her transformed my life and started me on a whole new path of service to the community.

Today, people call me a trailblazer. I like to say that I am a pioneer, but it is not a new trail. Instead I see the movement as unearthing tradition, cutting back the weeds which have grown over the traditional path of caring for our dead. Like the home birth movement of the 1960s, we are reclaiming our right to care for our loved ones with wakes, vigils, and home funerals. Though it's gaining momentum, I believe there's a distance to go before this movement becomes what I envision: a world in which everyone is aware of their options for having a home funeral, being empowered to direct, participate in, and lead our own end-of-life rites and rituals with honor and grace.

Looking back I can see that there were a number of areas that were organically developing, areas that at times would present an extreme challenge to every fiber of my being and make me want to scream. In the end, I realized I was never alone in my/our plight. There were always angels walking beside me/us and guiding the way. I like to think they have a vested interest in making sure those who cross over the threshold into the

next realms have the same love and care as those entering this world.

Growing into Leadership

I never set out to be a leader in the home funeral or natural death care movement. My role evolved out of the example Carolyn set by writing out her last wishes. A year and half after Carolyn's death, I invited a group of interested friends to my home, and the Natural Death Care Project was born, becoming the first non-profit organization with the mission to inform all people of their rights to care for their dead. Several times I tried to give away the daunting task of leading this group, but it kept coming back to me. When a friend agreed to take it on, she immediately got a full-time job and changed her mind.

There were many ups and downs of our group and through it all, a couple of us were guiding families through their own home funerals. Later, Mark, my husband-to-be, would play a much stronger role as a partner, educating and assisting families. Once I gained enough experience guiding others, I realized the need to develop a guidebook for those we could not reach personally. At that point my friend, Janelle Macrae, stepped

forward to co-author our guidebook *Creating Home Funerals* and to co-direct the Natural Death Care Project.

While developing the guidebook, we realized we needed new language to describe ancient traditions; to find words that the modern world would understand. We coined the phrase "home funeral" to describe the process of home-based and family-directed funeral arrangements. At the time we didn't notice the irony that it was a reversal of the term "funeral home." After a year of writing and revising, the book was completed and made available on our website.

In 2000, Janelle and I developed our first two levels of training, "Honoring Life's Final Passage," and began teaching. We changed our name to Final Passages. With donations, volunteer help, and further developing a language through trial and error, this non-techy leader found real triumph in completing our website (and again this year with a major upgrade).

My Spiritual Journey

My background in Reiki and exposure to the philosophy of the Center for Spiritual Living (which provides spiritual tools to transform our personal lives and make the world a better place) has been vital to me in this work. I learned to listen with more than just my ears.

I was guided by two voices: Carolyn's and my dad's. It was not the norm for me to hear voices speaking directly to me when there was no audible sound, but the day after Carolyn's death, as I was considering whether to go back to her house to complete preparation for the crematorium, I heard her voice say loud and clear, "Go back to the house."

Friend and mentor, Carolyn Whiting



Courtesy of Final Passages

When my father was in a coma dying, connected to machines, and I was wondering why they didn't unplug him, I heard him say, "Be patient." When my mother finally accepted that he wasn't coming back, we knew it was time. My patience had allowed her to get to that place of letting go. I had no idea at the time that this lesson in patience would be so important for my work ahead.

Slowly, I learned to trust and go with the flow. I saw how each home funeral took on a life of its own. I learned to step back and release control. Those in this work know the power of the threshold. Each family feels the energy, whether they call it Love, God, Angels, Spirit, or something else. It is something higher than anyone can create or imagine on their own. Obviously something spiritually bigger is at work here. Feeling this, and experiencing the synchronicity and magical connections that unfold, feeds my soul and keeps me passionate about this work. Standing in the threshold alongside the families makes it all worth it. I feel held. The family feels held. It's why after more than 20 years, when I get a call, I feel both compassionate and enlivened. What a huge gift and opportunity to be a guide. This is a deeply moving and tender time, and we are honored to hold the families as they hold their own to say goodbye.

I have dedicated myself to this work. In embodying and sharing the wisdom and passing it on, I've become part of the shamanic tradition that Carolyn passed on to me. I trust that every person who has had a hand in it has contributed to this living teaching.



Lyons' client, Nancy, in shroud with family gathered for ritual at burial

Encouraging and Empowering Families

I left the powerful experience of caring for Carolyn's body with the strong desire to share it with everyone I knew or met. I was rudely awakened to discover that many people didn't want to talk about death. When I first began this work, it seemed most people didn't want to use the "D" words. When I told people I was a death midwife, some replied that it was so nice of me to work with people who were hard of hearing.

Talking to people about the idea of keeping a body at home was one of the most difficult challenges because of our death-denying culture. People did not understand why anyone might want to keep a body at home. I could see by the glazed look in their eyes they didn't want to think about it, or they thought it was ghoulish. They could not imagine how this could benefit them or be healing. Rather, they pictured what they had seen in the media, zombies and the walking dead, complete with odors

and macabre decomposition. They feared that the last look at their loved ones would be a bad memory.

Many of our first cases were referred to us by hospices that had been assisting people who were financially challenged. One family had spent all of their savings on medical bills and now was searching for a way to cover the cost of a funeral on top of all that. When they heard from hospice that we were helping people to arrange funerals by donation, they turned to us for assistance. Little did they know all the benefits they would reap aside from the financial savings.

When the home funeral was complete, they turned to me and said that they could not imagine doing it any other way. It became a recurring mantra for almost all of the families we have assisted since. They all say it was an amazing experience because they were allowed to say good-bye.

There were others attracted to what we were offering in the community. As I began to study and research how other world cultures handled death, I realized that many cultures and religions honor their dead for at least three days. I encouraged families to stay connected to the death process by spending time with their loved one and to grieve in a slower, gentler way rather than the conventional whisking away of the body.

We slowly started to get people's attention for reasons other than cost savings. One of the first families I guided was Quaker; they loved the simplicity of taking care of their own arrangements. When I started to tell my story about Carolyn, the first ones to listen were those involved with anthroposophy, a philosophy developed by Rudolf Steiner,

who suggested that people stay beside a person's body for three days following his/her death.

Others who have been drawn to the idea of taking care of their own rather than turning their care over to strangers include people who:

- ♦ had bad experiences with funeral homes and were looking for an alternative;
- ♦ had religious or cultural reasons for wanting to have their loved ones at home;
- ♦ were used to being autonomous, like home birthers and home schoolers;
- ♦ understood the important rites of honoring a passage.

The Physical Process Following Death

The experience with Carolyn taught me that washing the body of the deceased is very much the same as washing a bed-bound person. But I didn't know anything about rigor mortis and how to close the eyes and the mouth. Remembering the tradition of coins on the eyes, we tried that, but it didn't work very well, and we had to come up with more effective ways.

We learned how to preserve the body with dry ice. We discovered how to use it and maintain it for three or more days during the wake.

What a surprise when we first discovered that too much dry ice improperly wrapped could cause a layer of frost on the deceased's clothing! We realized that it came from the condensation as the dry ice sublimates – another new term! We also found that dry ice could assist us when closing the mouth if rigor mortis had already set in, and that it did a very good job of preserving the body when used correctly and was maintained during the vigil.

We found that keeping a good sense of humor helped in many situations. For example, one family had elevated the head of their loved one during the vigil. Since dry ice freezes the back of the body, he was frozen in that shape. When we put his feet in the casket, his head was up out of the casket. We gently lowered the head, and his feet see-sawed up! We had to wait for the body to warm enough before we could put the lid on the casket.

Another family wanted to close the eyes of their deceased patriarch by putting salt in a zipper baggie. They found that they were out of zipper baggies, so they used a surgical glove. They placed the salt-filled glove over his eyes, and laughed when they saw that the glove appeared to be pointing, just as he always had in life.

Paperwork and Crematories


In order to help families with all of their arrangements, we needed to learn how to correctly complete the Death Certificate and Disposition of Remains for the state of California. This was no small feat. Initially, we invited an employee of the Office of Vital Records to one of our group meetings to explain the rules and how best to work with their office.

When the Office of Vital Records started to use the online EDRS (Electronic Death Registry System) in 2006, we thought that completing and filing the paperwork for families would be much easier. But we soon discovered that families were not allowed to use this simpler method; they are still required to hand-write or type these documents on an old-fashioned typewriter.

I also discovered that the stereotype of doctors having some of the worst handwriting is true! Early on, I had to buy a medical dictionary and still frequently need to call the doctor's office to help me decipher handwriting and medical terms. Just last week, an assistant helped me decipher the doctor's handwriting, and now I know how to spell "oropharyngeal aspiration," and what it means. Don't even ask.

Right away we were able to find a crematory willing to work with families who were caring for their own, but

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after a couple of years they felt pressured by other funeral directors to stop encouraging this autonomy due to their fear of withering financial gain. They stopped engaging with us and I persevered until finding others who were more open minded. No easy task. Now we have three in our area.

Rituals, Ceremonies, and Mourning

The beauty of this work is that every home funeral is unique. One man who died loved Volkswagens, and was always working on one. His wife lined his casket with fabric printed with Volkswagens. Another man raced cars, and his family painted the outside of his cremation casket to look like a racecar. Friends of one woman who died threw chocolate kisses into her grave because she loved them.

We found that people needed a place to put their grief, and came up with the idea of decorating a cardboard cremation casket and other art projects to enhance their memorial experience. One family collected lace remnants and sewed them together into a blanket to cover their mother after she died. Another family wrote love notes and stories on paper stars and hearts and placed them in the casket with their loved one.

Every home funeral can reflect the life of a loved one, and bring meaning and value to everyone participating. A home funeral and the attendant grief are one of the most personal and potentially life-changing passages that we go through. The death of a loved one brings everything in our lives into sharper perspective and unites us all beyond our cultural differences.



Lyons teaching in New Hampshire

Going Forward

The movement has grown so much since I began this journey 21 years ago. There is now a National Home Funeral Alliance non-profit organization with countless home funeral educators and guides, and growing media coverage on this topic. We have already trained more than 1,000 people in our workshops, and helped nearly 400 families with home funerals. We have traveled across the country, and to Canada, England, and New Zealand. Wherever we go, people are hungry to learn about relevant ways of embracing death, rituals that will include all ages of family members, and how to exercise more authority over their loved ones' final passages.

I've heard it said that when 20% of the population adopts a habit or lifestyle, it becomes a permanent part of the culture. I would like to think that home death care, home funerals, and green burials (burial with low environmental impact on the earth) will once again become a normal part of family life.

I recall when I first started talking about home funerals to groups of people, I

would ask how many had heard of Reiki. Very few raised their hand. Fast-forward 20 years, and now almost everyone in a group will raise their hand and say that they have at least heard of it. This gives me hope that in another ten years, the terms "death midwife" and "home funeral" will be common knowledge. Even if people don't choose this direction for themselves, they will know that they have this choice. Home funeral guides/death midwives/death doulas will be accepted as an option for a path of service.

Personal and spiritual lessons learned and experiences I have had during my journey have been rewarding beyond my imagination. My heart feels nothing but gratitude for all of it, challenges included. My role as an educator and guide in this process has given me a purpose, knowing that I am empowering others through the experience of home funerals. Knowing that there is even more to learn and that we can bring this movement to common practice together inspires me. 🌍

Learn more about Final Passages at finalpassages.org.