



The Home Funeral Experience: **Creating Community Through Loss**



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I'll begin by assuming that something important happened in your life that compelled you to be here today. After all, when we're listing our favorite extracurricular activities, there



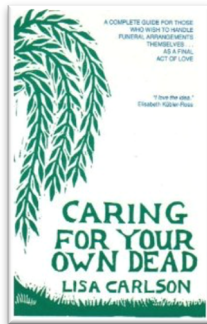
aren't that many of us who willingly write, "reading, hiking, woodworking, funeral stuff..." I'd like to take just a few moments to explain to you how I came to this work.

On my own parents' list of activities in the 60s was "cemetery commissioners", so we kids spent a fair amount of time mowing between the stones and rubbing grave markers—and being whisked away when the Goddard College students came out to weed their communal gardens next door to the cemetery—in the nude. I guess you could say that anything death-related seemed pretty fair game for me from the get-go.

In high school, it was my job to deliver prescriptions from my dad's pharmacy to the nurses' stations at area nursing homes. Working in the pharmacy, I spent a lot of time with the elderly and the sick, observing that sometimes, even in their own families, they seemed virtually invisible.

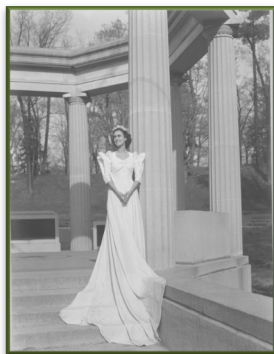
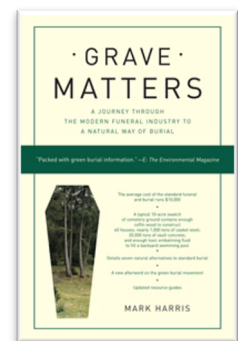


Mostly it appeared pretty easy for most people to live a regular life without seeing or otherwise being involved with sick or dying or dead people until that dreaded, antiseptic five minutes of receiving line at the funeral home downtown.



Later, waiting for my son to be born while living on a sheep farm in the northern part of the state, I happened to catch a program on *Across the Fence* where I heard for the first time about caring for and burying your own dead. I was fascinated. I sent away for the small book, read it cover to cover, and then sent it on to my newly minted mother-in-law...

Fast forward about 20 years or so, through childrearing and hospice training, writing University presidents' speeches and conservation grants, and shepherding authors through the publication process, and there I was, on my way to my "fun" job teaching Nordic skiing, when on the radio I heard for the first time about green burial. I pulled off the road, and ordered two books on the spot. I read one start to finish when it arrived, and sent the other copy to my mother-in-law. Don't get me wrong, we'd become close, but I still liked to yank her chain once in a while.



BTW, during this time I watched her bury her brother, father, mother and aunt, all with no expenses spared, full-on top to toe. I made a point of sending her interesting funeral tidbits over the years but we never talked arrangements. She was the wife of a NY Supreme Court Judge and former Skidmore May Queen—one did not discuss these things.

It was in the back section of Mark Harris' book that I learned what had been happening to open the doors on death I'd sensed were closed years before. I immediately flew to California and sat with people from my Lost Tribe—people who spoke about bereaved families and the dying with extraordinary compassion, and about the death and funeral process with openness and creativity, without fear.

Since then I have continued to sit bedside with the dying, including my own father, the pharmacist, last month; trained with leaders in home funeral and green burial from all over the country; supplied families freely with the tools and knowledge to care for their own; and joined home funeral advocates from across the US and Canada in forming an alliance whose goal is to fight for and protect the innate rights of families to care for their own, and to make family-led after-death care an accepted norm again.



So what do I mean by home funeral?

Well, it's pretty simple. Home funerals happen when we

- fulfill the legal requirements
- choose NOT to fear the “funerales” (those mythical creatures who ride in and arrest you if you fail to call a funeral director immediately), and
- allow what happens next to be felt and imagined by family members, unfettered by industry promoted expectations



Depending on where you live and your cultural frame of reference, a home funeral may consist of a few hours to a few days of keeping the body home or at another venue, bathing and anointing the body or not. Perhaps it includes a formal ceremony with clergy and musicians, or the storytelling (and beer drinking) that occurs while waiting for relatives to arrive; or transporting the body to the crematory or cemetery in the family van or truck bed or hearse.

Home funerals may include engaging others, clergy and funeral directors among them, or be handled exclusively by family, friends, neighbors. In fact, that's the point—choice. Home funerals are an organic response to the intimate process and aftermath of death, and as such are as different as the people whose lives they honor.

Yes, they are a return to more traditional values and practices. Yes, if the family chooses to, they require that next-of-kin take responsibility for chasing down and filing the death certificate, and organizing myriad details particular to their family's needs and customs. And yes, it is not easy to consider turning from most people's expectations.

What's wrong with the current standard anyway? After all, many of you work very hard to be sure that families hiring conventional help with their funeral needs get exactly what they want, and spend countless hours watchdogging legislation to keep funeral options open for American families.



Despite the fact that most families believe today's conventional funerals are the only way—the only legal way—to do it, family-led funeral practices are on the rise. How is this happening? Why bother going to so much bother? Or, as a Baptist minister asked me after a lengthy presentation to the collective clergy in my area, “What I can't understand is why anyone would want to do this?”

Let's start with the why.

The fact is that we need ways to reaffirm the value of all life within the community while acknowledging one's individual place within it. That's the whole funeral gig, right?

Home funeral advocates contend that it's not just the right to care for our own dead that we are fighting for, to bathe them, to bury them. We are fighting for the kinship that doing these simple, mindful things brings us.

And the home funeral experience is, first and foremost, mindful. Instead of handing off the inconvenient responsibilities and uncomfortable details, we immerse ourselves in them—we want to be fully present with and for our loved ones, living and dead; we choose deliberately to not let this tender time speed by at a distance, in a blur.

A death in our lives requires reorganization. Just as the dying one is actively detaching, it's the job of everyone who has been on this journey with the dying to reform those

attachments. As our loved one is disengaging from his or her community, the community itself is rebuilding by communicating intimately with those who matter most.

That, by the way, is the definition of the root word *commune*, “to communicate intimately.”



And we believe that the more genuine, more invested, more present we are, the more authentic our personal and communal experience will be.

That is what we lost when professionals offered to shoulder the burden of care for our loved ones, and we who advocate for home funerals are looking for more than to simply reclaim old traditions or save money or thumb our nose at convention.

We see family-led after-death care in all its potential expressions as a conduit for clarity and shared experience at the deepest level—at a time when we are as close to mortality and mystery as humans can possibly fathom. Joe Sehee, Jesuit brother and founder of the Green Burial Council, says that this is where those in spiritual practice may *access the divine*. (Take that, Baptist minister who I learned worked his way through divinity school helping pick up bodies for a Boston funeral director.)

Or it can be a time of completion, whether intentional or not. A woman in southern NH cared for her mother for 25 years with the generous and willing help of her husband and family, and most recently, hospice. Her mother, about to celebrate her 101st birthday, passed on a Friday afternoon. Determined to tend to the details of her mother’s death herself, and despite well-meaning interference from an uninformed hospice nurse, she laid out her mom in the north bedroom, with the heat off, and frozen peas under her shoulder blades. There the two of them watched Cary Grant movies all weekend together, till it was time to go get the death certificate filed on Monday morning. She told me, “I know I took care of her for 25 years.



That wasn't the point. I still needed time to be with her—I just wasn't ready for her to go yet. We had a wonderful time together."

Now for the how



78 million baby boomers have begun to reach their 65th milestone this year. Baby boomers are by nature self-reliant—we brought back fearless breastfeeding, we're bringing you fearless death practices.

Hospice has paved the way for families to segue from caring for their loved ones in their homes at end of life to after death. We share a similar philosophy of care: both provide an experience through which family members can reconnect to each other simply because of the necessity of coordinating and cooperating.

The hospice to home funeral model has validated the desire of families to bring their loved ones home after sudden deaths as well. Home funerals give them time to process the unthinkable.

Home funerals also provide friends and neighbors the opportunity to show real support and caring as they perform tasks, taking time out of their normal routines.

Concerns about the environment have expanded to include recognition of toxic, land-contaminating funeral practices that is galvanizing the conservation community. I like to think it is an evolving shift from a personal fear of death to fear for the future and those who will be here when we are gone. The marriage of burial space and protected conservation land is a win/win, and the environmental lobby is still powerful and influential—and one of our greatest allies.



Spiritual communities are taking back the sacred work of caring for their own dead in fellowships and parishes.



Community-based funereal organizations are forming to help friends, neighbors, community members, and the indigent. Something as simple as threshold choirs who sing for the dying and the dead demonstrate our need and desire to bring beauty into an arena that we have been influenced to think of as frightening and ugly and fearful for too long.

It's a financial necessity—let's face it, we can't keep throwing money at things thinking it will fix it or make it more palatable or, worst of all, express our deepest emotions for us.

Hospitals, hospices, lawyers are doing a better job with advanced directives, designing them and getting people to fill them out; the new Vermont version is a great example, and others, such as Five Wishes, are available to help families begin the conversation.

New methods, including Techni-ice, make body care easier.

Caskets are available for purchase on-line or from box stores, and, better yet, more people are looking for products made of native resources by regional artists and craftspeople.



Compliant policies for releasing bodies and supporting patient choices are being adopted by hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices.

People are more bold about calling places like crematories and cemeteries to ask about transporting their own and how they can participate more; and about contacting funeral directors making it clear exactly what they are looking for—and funeral surveys are the best tool in helping families make informed choices.

There are more internet resources, how-to directions, free advice on-line.

But influencing the increasing instance of family-led after deathcare most of all is the growing acceptance of funeral educators, as we at the National Home Funeral Alliance consider ourselves, first and foremost.



We are actively seeking opportunities to educate those who may have presented barriers in the past, either personally or through misguided policies, in hospices, hospitals, nursing homes, town and state offices, and the like. We are meeting in private homes and churches, over runny eggs at morning Rotary, and at hospice trainings all over the country to educate individuals, families and communities in how to care for bodies and preserve this fundamental American right.

We don't expect that home funerals are for everyone, or that everyone who attends one will see their value in terms of family reconnection or strengthening bonds within the community. But I can tell you this: every person I've ever heard tell their home funeral story has clearly said, in one form or another, "Now I can't imagine doing it any other way."

Oh yeah, and about my mother-in-law

When she died, she didn't have a Batesville Blow-out after all.

We found her plans, written on one of her husband's yellow legal pads tucked under her knitting. They included her favorite music, the poem she wanted read, and pages of what she wanted her family to remember about her, and what she loved about us all. She let us all know in no uncertain terms what she expected of us and that she wanted to do this her way—a quiet passing, a simple cremation, a family meal together. We sat like Quakers in a circle and took in the essence of her that day, and I marveled that she must have been reading all that stuff I'd been sending her all along.

