

Death Movers and Shakers: People Who are Changing the Conversation

By Lee Webster

People often ask me how I got started in this business. I usually reply, “Well, I’m not a funeral director, or a nurse, or a social worker, or a teacher, or a scientist. Actually, I’m a recovering English major.”

It usually gets a laugh, especially from fans of NPR Prairie Home Companion’s Garrison Keeler who never fails to point out that a degree in English, particularly one in literature, may be the least marketable major ever offered; yet no course of study feeds its students an intellectual diet of death as part of the human condition as unfailingly as Vonnegut, Chekov, Dickens and the rest of their ilk.

And yet, as I’m speaking to college classes, permaculturists, faith communities, early morning Rotary, and anyone else who will listen, I understand on a fundamental level that most degrees don’t really prepare us to take up this topic. The work I do—educating the public about funeral options, home funerals and green burial in particular—is not a business; it is a vocation. And it’s hot.

Yes, hot. Talking about death in public has become, of all things, trendy.

Death Cafés, Death With Dinner, Mortality Over Margaritas (OK, so I made that one up), LivingLifeDyingDeath Family Gatherings—all organized to encourage open conversation about That-Thing-We-Think-We-Don’t-Like-To-Talk-About.

Except that we do. We DO like to talk about death. And it doesn’t take a degree to have a valid point of view on this one human thing we all share.

What it does take is imagination and a dash of gumption. For some, comprehending death is like trying to hit a moving target. Our brains function

best when not in constant awareness of our shelf life on the planet. Sometimes, even though willing, we need to approach the topic on little cat feet.

Enter some amazing innovators whose provoking ideas are stimulating productive and cathartic conversations and movement toward more sustainable death practices. They are doing so through art, science, education, and social media in ways that are interesting, accessible, engaging, and—dare I say it?—fun. Meet a small sampling of the movers and shakers who are doing something about busting the conversation wide open.



I first met **Nina Thompson** at a Funeral Consumers Alliance meeting in Vermont. She slipped me a sheet of paper that gave a quick peek into her *Wake Up To Death Project*. When we spoke a week or so later, I asked her how she had come up with the concept.

“It came to me in one complete flash,” she said. “I knew exactly what the project was going to look like, what all the elements were going to be, why it was important, everything.”

What would happen, she wondered, if we just paid a little more attention to the fact that we die? Her answer: Perhaps we would pay more attention to the way we live.

Thompson, who has extensive history in politics, the business world, and the nonprofit sector, saw a way not only to engage people, but the need to meet people where they live rather than expecting them to find her.

The project gathers and shares stories about death and dying, and makes them available in a traveling interactive exhibit. Her team records stories from experts and everyday people that

play in surroundsound as people enter a trailer that also houses contemplative hands-on activities and videos. The mobile unit can be parked on any given Main Street for days, traveling from community to community, recording and sharing as it goes.

Adjacent to the listening trailer is a large tent that acts as a portable community-gathering place, with tabling space for local organizations and room for workshops, presentations, films, discussions, or other community events.



Across the country in Washington state, **Ashley Benem**'s art exhibit, *The Art of Death: Shifting the way we look at Death*, aims to bring death front and center in the Bellingham Majestic Ballroom in the fall of 2014.

A birth doula and death midwife, Benem is envisioning the event as a full immersion art experience that allows participants to explore their relationship with death through creativity and curiosity.

The multi-sensory exhibit will focus on juried regional artwork that expresses death as an act of movement or transition. Included in the exhibit will be original display art, as well as live performances in dance, storytelling, music and poetry.

Supporting the event will be organizations and agencies with booths offering educational materials aimed at informing end-of-life choices, such as medical questions and care, living wills, DNR orders, legal concerns, powers of attorney, wills, cremation, burial, green burial, funerals, vigils, ceremonies, religious and cultural services.



In Alabama, **Monica Williams-Murphy, MD**, author of *It's OK to Die*, makes educated guesses about who might or might not die on any given day in her ER.

She is also a leading force in imploring the medical community to begin

reassessing criteria for advancing clinical interventions, often called heroic measures.

While her training has prompted her to do all she can medically to keep patients alive, her experience has taught her that sometimes the most heroic thing to do is allow a natural death that encourages families to be fully present during the last minutes, hours, and days.

With a compelling and entertaining style and stories that will never fail to move her audience, she suggests that patients and their families routinely make uninformed decisions about whether to choose medical intervention and for how long, under what circumstances and to what purpose, when the end result likely will be the same.

Make no mistake: Williams is not a proponent of physician-assisted suicide. What she is promoting is an emerging discussion about how the medical community can offer more than one path toward addressing decision around treating terminal conditions.



Want to be a lifetime learner? Enroll in **Karen Wyatt, MD's** *End of Life University*.

Wyatt established EOLU to connect groups of death workers by broadcasting interviews that span caregiving, end of life preparation, advance directives, spiritual lessons, ethical concerns, and practical information about end-of-life concerns, the dying process, and post-death care and practices.

After attending her mother during her transition, Wyatt discovered that helping others cope with loss had become her passion.

"I realized how important it is to find the deeper meaning in life, and that the message I needed to get out to people was that we find more meaning when we accept the fact that we are going to die one day."

Wyatt's collection of interviews culminated in a

weeklong seminar series in the fall of 2013 when 565 EOL “students” tuned in. Here’s a sampling from 2014’s roster:

- Deanna Cochran, RN, CHPN, author of *Accompanying the Dying: a Practical Guide and Awareness Training*
- Cassandra Yonder, MA, gerontologist and thanatologist Canadian homesteader
- Betsy Trapasso, MSW, on starting death cafes
- Stanley A. Terman, MD, PhD, CEO and medical director of Caring Advocates
- Edgar Barends, filmmaker of *Prison Terminal*, about providing hospice care for terminally ill prisoners

Wyatt continues to conduct interviews and weekly teleconferences from her retirement home in Colorado that connect those who have devoted themselves to death work with those who are ready to learn. She writes about her experiences in her book *What Really Matters: 7 Lessons for Living from Stories of the Dying*.



Cynthia Beal has taken to the classroom at Oregon State University’s Soils Department in the College of Agriculture to create an online program in cemetery management. Her *Natural Ends Living Cemetery Project* gives students a chance to get their hands dirty as they transform cemeteries into habitat for native vegetation and indigenous animals, and create open space for social and cultural exchange.

Beal is an entrepreneur in the best sense of the word. Her *Natural Burial Company’s Good Funeral Store* has been one of the forerunners in providing biodegradable burial products made by crafters around the world, including wicker, bamboo, seagrass, and papier maché coffins and urns, and her considerable energy is now driving a movement to produce these goods in the US.

She has designed funeral products such as the Shrouding Board™, the Casket™, and the Earth Cell™, spurred by her background in natural product standards and business, and by her deep interest in sustainable post-death practices.

Along with other notable ceterierians, Beal is Senior Technical Advisor for the *Sustainable Cemetery Management Group*, helping existing cemeteries convert to natural burial, promoting sustainable business models as well as burial spaces.

Last but not least, Beal manages the *Natural End Map*, featuring funeral service providers who have pledged to provide natural funeral goods and services.



If you’ve heard about natural burial, you’ve no doubt heard **Mary Woodsen’s** statistics detailing how much embalming fluid, board feet of hardwoods, and tons of steel and concrete are buried in US cemeteries every year. She has recently updated those statistics to surprising results.

Woodsen, a science writer for prestigious Cornell University, was the founding president of Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve, one of the first conservation burial cemeteries in the US.

“It took us ten years from conception to opening Greensprings, and we learned a lot about how to go about it,” she reports. “Now I get to share that knowledge and help local groups get started with their own projects by traveling all over the country as part of my work with the Green Burial Council.”



Speaking of natural burial, who remembers the 2005 HBO series *Six Feet Under* episode where Nate is buried sans casket or vault? The shroud he was buried in was made by **Esmerelda Kent**, Hollywood-born costume designer turned shroud-designer and owner of *Kinkaraco*™.

Kent’s keen design sense, love of high quality fabric, and lifetime commitment to organic living converge in the creation of shrouds that are both ancient and contemporary in intent and design.

The publicity Kent's shrouds received as a result of the groundbreaking TV series served to usher in the concept of natural burial to the American consciousness. She continues to be a top designer and producer of quality shrouds for green burial.



In the home funeral world, **Merilynne Rush**, former birth midwife and current home funeral guide of *After Death Home Care*, crusades to expose and balance the complexities of after-death work.

Rush, who lives in Michigan, a state that requires hiring a funeral director, brings an ethos of inclusion to the movement, encouraging the acceptance of blended funerals where families, guides, and professionals keep hearts open to the possibilities that home funerals present, rather than trying to over-define or place restrictions on what it means to have a home funeral.

"We need to bridge the divide between people's preconceived notion of what has to happen when someone dies, about who can be involved, about how and where it happens, and keep all of our options open."



Rush stands on the shoulders of giants, chief among them **Karen Van Vuuren** with *Natural Transitions* in Colorado, **Jerrigrace Lyons** of *Final Passages* in California, **Nancy Jewel Poer** in California, **Char Barrett** of *A Sacred Moment* in Washington state, **Donna Belk** and **Sandy Booth** of *Crossings Care Circle* and *Undertaken With Love* (along with **Holly Stevens**) in Texas, and **Elizabeth Knox** of *Crossings: Caring for Our Own at Death* in Maryland. All of them feature prominently in

Rush's e-book, *Home Funeral Guides: Illuminating the Path*.

Rush is currently busy organizing *Green Burial: Exploring Issues and Options*, a conference that will feature open forum discussions, networking with professionals, and a demonstration on the grounds of the Matthaei Botanical Gardens in Ann Arbor in fall of 2014.

While all of these home funeral advocates and educators are standouts, **Karen Van Vuuren** has brought a totally new dimension to the work through various projects that have garnered international attention.

Natural Transitions, her foundational organization based in Boulder, CO, opened its door to home funeral education, with workshops and support for home funeral individuals and families.

Since then, the members, led by Van Vuuren, have hosted the founding gatherings from which the *National Home Funeral Alliance* was born, and held annual film festivals that include the showing of her groundbreaking documentary *Dying Wish*, the story of a dying doctor's decision to stop eating and drinking and die with grace.

Aside from creating new film projects, Van Vuuren is also the editor of *Natural Transitions Magazine*, an ongoing effort to explore topics that span the death experience, made accessible through print and free through online subscription.



To prove that not all death talk is gloomy, meet bloggers **Caitlin Doughty**, *Order of the Good Death*, **Caleb Wilde**, *Confessions of a Funeral Director*, and **Suzette Sherman**, *Seven Ponds: Embracing the End-of-Life Experience*.

Though distinctly different in style and content, these bloggers are reaching epic numbers of

“deathlings” across all socio-economic lines with their witty banter, astute observations, moving essays, cunning videos, and absurdist and wrenching photo images.

What’s the appeal? At a guess, I’d say it’s the raw honesty.

While some see their death posts as cavalier, a false bravado to disguise fear, or just plain not circumspect enough (and many do), their followers—thousands of them on Facebook and Twitter alone—are confronted with the

conversation directly, no euphemisms, no place to hide.

The result is a younger generation that is taking death in stride rather than avoiding it. Baby boomers, savvy enough with technology, are reaching their come-to-grips-with-it moment with more tools and better connections than previous generations, too. Together, boomers and their hip progeny are taboo-busting their way to creating a more level playing field when taking on every English major’s favorite theme.

To learn more about any of these movers and shakers and their work, go to:

Nina Thompson **The Wake Up to Dying Project**
<http://www.wakeuptodyingproject.org>

Ashley Benem **The Art of Death: Shifting the way we look at Death**
<https://www.facebook.com/events/208397829362587/>

Monica Williams-Murphy **It’s Ok To Die**
<http://www.OKtoDie.com>

Karen Wyatt, MD **End of Life University**
<http://www.eoluniversity.com>

Cynthia Beal **The Natural Burial Company/Natural End Map/OSU**
<http://naturalburialcompany.com>
<https://www.facebook.com/natural.burial.company>
<http://www.naturalendmap.com>
http://natural-burial.typepad.com/digging_deeper/

Mary Woodsen **Green Burial Council/Greensprings Natural Cemetery**
<http://www.greenburialcouncil.org>
<http://www.naturalburial.org>

Esmerelda Kent **Kinkaraco**
<http://www.kinkaraco.com>

Merilynne Rush **After Death Home Care**
<http://www.afterdeathhomecare.com>
<http://www.homefuneralalliance.org>

Karen Van Vuuren **Natural Transitions**
<http://www.naturaltransitions.org>

Jerrigrace Lyons **Final Passages**
<http://www.finalpassages.org>

Char Barrett **A Sacred Moment**
<http://www.asacredmoment.com>

Donna Belk & Sandy Booth **Crossings Care Circle**
<http://www.crossingscarecircle.org>

Beth Knox **Crossings: Caring for our own at death**
<http://www.crossings.net>
<http://www.homefuneralalliance.org>

Caitlin Doughty **Order of the Good Death**
<http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com>

Caleb Wilde **Confessions of a Funeral Director**
<http://www.calebwilde.com>

Suzette Sherman **Seven Ponds: Embracing the End-of-Life Experience**
<http://www.blog.sevenponds.com>