

Home Funeral Guides Meeting the Needs of Suicide Families

By Donna Belk and Lee Webster

As home funeral guides, we are invited into family situations where we do not have all the facts, nor the background story of events. Often, because we are human, we arrive with preset opinions or assumptions about any given situation.

We also bring hope that we will be able to encourage family direction and participation in the face of what may be a roller coaster of complicated emotions—ineestimable grief, shock, anger, control issues, imagining the worst for their loved ones, guilt and shame over their inability to protect their loved one, feelings of abandonment, rejection, failure, embarrassment, survivor's guilt, and the list goes on.

So what must home funeral guides do to assist with deaths where the cause is suicide? What do we, as home funeral guides, have to offer after a suicide, and how must we comport ourselves to provide with integrity and openness of heart and spirit?

No form of dying seems to carry with it more conflicting emotions than suicide. Like it or not, we are culturally, generationally, and often spiritually predisposed to disapprove of a person's choice to end their life to some degree. Many end-of-life practitioners, including home funeral guides, are familiar with and even advocate for Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS, also referred to as Death With Dignity) and Voluntary Stopping of Eating and Drinking (VSED), and yet may harbor feelings of ambivalence about the taking of one's own life, whatever the supporting reasons.

Our job as home funeral guides is to step in and educate the family about what is possible, not to interrupt the family process or take it off in directions that we think are right. We need to be

of assistance with as little of our own baggage as possible.

This makes the need to enter the space without judgment critically important. Very often our judgments may show on our faces, or in the things we leave unsaid, not necessarily in what we *do* say. An abrupt response, a tightening of the mouth, difficulty making eye contact—there are so many ways that we express “out loud” those things that we believe are tucked away inside.

That is why it is important to think about potential situations beforehand...so we can explore our thoughts about uncomfortable circumstances, and perhaps learn to see it in a different, more inclusive way. Drilling down into the lava layer of our own feelings around suicide may yield some valuable insights into what we bring with us—and what we must strive to leave behind.

Steven Levine asks a very good question to help us explore our own attitudes about death. He writes: "Death is not the worst thing; the worst thing is unmitigated suffering or the closed heart. It is not death, but lack of control that we fear. I don't think anyone would have taken birth if they hadn't been absolutely assured beforehand that if the going got too tough they could get out. When a person is at the end of their physical rope, it is not our job to judge them. This Judeo-Christian idea that we're punished for killing ourselves . . . if you feel that God tortures the tortured, that's not a God who loves. Taking away a person's ability to kill themselves is the highest form of fascism. What right do we have to force another person to stay in unmitigated suffering?" [From *Who Dies* by Stephen and Ondrea Levine, Random House, 2012]

Language plays a significant role in how we negotiate suicides. People tend to place weighted meaning on things the deceased may have said or done in the past—consider the importance of the suicide note. The taboo nature of suicide in our culture also keeps us from naming precisely what has happened and how we feel about it, inside a larger framework of death that is already filled with euphemisms and avoidance language.

Sarah York, Unitarian Universalist Minister and author of *Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death* (Apollo Ranch Institute Press, 2012, p.86, <http://www.sarahyork.com/sarah/sarah-york-books/>) says in her book, “The first time I conducted a memorial for a person who chose death, I became aware of how important it is to name the circumstances of suicide and make space for the feelings that accompany them.”

York goes on to say, “The power of the unmentionable subject to tinge both the living and the dead with subtle shame is defused when it can be named.” Certainly the language home funeral guides use during service as guides could demonstrate by example to family and friends that it is safe to acknowledge what has occurred by speaking with gentle sensitivity, honesty, and purpose.

Families will be looking to their guide for practical assistance with what might be challenging physical conditions. The particular requirements of caring for the body in whatever form it is in will provide ample opportunity to confront in a nonthreatening, normalizing manner the realities that present themselves.

The fact that a home funeral has been chosen assumes that the family has faith or curiosity or some other motive at work that their experience will answer unasked questions. Home funeral guides who are well prepared may be able to assist them in answering their questions for

themselves while walking them through the steps of care with assurance and confidence.

Some suggestions for preparing to serve families of suicide

- If you know you are going into a home funeral situation where suicide is the case, discover what support systems and materials are available in your area before you meet with the family. There are frequently special bereavement groups offered by hospices that are especially designed for suicide survivors.
- Research suicide hotlines and the resources they use so that you will be in alignment with their language and approach.
- Roleplay potential responses to prepare for a wide variety of situations.
- Practice phrases that carry the messages you are there to deliver with compassion and neutrality.
- Intentionally clear your mind of conflict around the issues to free yourself to listen more acutely, and respond more authentically, to what arises.
- Self care prior to (and after) working with suicide families is especially important for home funeral guides. Ritual, prayer, cleansing—whatever works for you to be prepared to enter an arena fraught with uncertainty with equilibrium and purpose.
- Search out people and resources who have experience and knowledge of suicide and its aftermath as a way of tempering your response while seeking your own personal insight.
- Music may also be a tool for opening doors for yourself and for other people.

Before Their Time

(<http://www.beforetheirtime.org/ordering.html>) is a 3-volume series of memorial

songs and music conceived to provide comfort for those in mourning for loved ones who have taken their own lives.

- If your practice includes ritual assistance, research celebrant texts for suicide-specific language with which to address

those present. (See *Opening Words for a Suicide* from in *Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death*

<http://www.sarahyork.com/sarah/sarah-york-books>)

Opening Words for a Suicide

Life is full of suffering. To the beloved gathered here has come a grief and loss that strains the ability to bear—and endure the enormity of it and go on.

In the midst of brokenness and broken-heartedness may we know the grace of love that sustains us—love that endures beyond death.

May there be peace and healing. May there be acceptance that _____, beloved son and husband, father and brother (daughter and wife and so on) chose his/her healing into death.

May all who must somehow find the courage to continue in the face of the loss of his/her presence receive the grace of healing into life. May we affirm all that was good and true and generous and beautiful in the life of _____.

May we affirm the love in which he/she was conceived and nurtured and sent forth, an autonomous human being who made his/her own decisions as we all must do.

“The heart that breaks open can contain the whole world” (Joanna Macy)

Keep breathing. Trust that your heart is large enough.

We are here to mourn the loss and to celebrate the life of _____.

Let us speak together. Let us grieve together as we share memories of _____ and all that he/she meant in the lives of those here.

—Barbara Carlson

as quoted in *Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death*

See <http://www.sarahyork.com/sarah/sarah-york-books/>