

Notes From The Field: The National Home Funeral Alliance Newsletter for Members, September 2018

We all have an ancestor who made fire with friction, who foraged for food, who birthed her babies surrounded by other women. Each of us alive today has a not-too-distant-ancestor who participated in the ritual cleansing and preparation of the bodies of those who have died.

In the dominant North American Culture, it is our custom to believe that the dead are not ours to hold. We have been indoctrinated to believe that we are entitled not to have to see death - except for a few hours of scheduled grief at the funeral home. In these funeral homes the well-intentioned Directors gloss over death and attempt to make it pretty by filling the bodies with preserving chemicals and presenting the corpse as though resting, and ready for brunch. Like in this quote from a current Funeral Director textbook:

"...it is the embalmer's task to make the body 'presentable" for viewing. This is similar to other life situations, such as when a person prepares for a social activity by bathing or combing their hair before greeting people in public. The ethical concepts of reverence for the dead, decent disposition and dignity in death all demand that the dead body be prepared for viewing so it will not be offensive to mourners..."

Mayer, Robert. Embalming. 2006

I feel moved to live and die with the realities of these transitions being woven into the customs of my community. I know that living with an intimate knowledge of death will affect my evolution as a human. I strive for the courage to remove obstacles put in place by the culture I was born into so that I may live, fully aware of what it means to be alive. Death is the mirror, without death in life we are lost.

It is a little known fact that it is your right to keep the body of your loved one at home (usually around 3 days) and to do the after death care yourself. This right is clearly protected by law in every state! There are 9 states that require minimal involvement by a licensed Funeral Director, but even in these places you can care for your kin safely and sanely in your home. This practice is better for the environment, can save thousands of dollars and most importantly can facilitate a more satisfying grief process.

The ritual cleansing of the dead has been practiced in some form in almost every culture since the dawn of human life on Earth. The elements of warm water, plant medicine, soft fabrics, candle light and a strong offering of care come together to heal the last threads of the physical relationship between the living and the recently dead.

We offer self love and healing to ourselves as we prepare our kin for burial by cleansing the body with warm water filled with lavender, frankincense, cedar wood, clove, lemon balm or rose. Many of these essences have mild antiseptic properties and are also calming and ease anxiety. Trauma research is showing us that having a positive experience, especially one in which we feel useful, in a time of great stress or disaster can change our physiological relationship to the experience. The sense of empowerment that comes from having something to offer to the dead actually becomes part of the memory as it is filed away in the brain. Caring for your own after death can be the difference between Post-Traumatic stress and Post-traumatic growth. Especially if the loss is sudden, it is important to spend time with the body in the familiar comfort of one's home. This creates the space for the new reality to slowly sink in, and allows the grieving person to take space, have a walk, take a nap and then go back into the space of processing grief and caring for the dead. Too often, when the body is quickly taken away, we are mourning in the abstract, not having a physical experience of the death and this can make it harder to integrate.

In this age we find ourselves, where so many are searching to find a true set of customs that belong rightfully to the seeker; In this time of feeling lost in the braided storylines of conqueror and conquered, it might just be that participating together in the ritual of cleansing the bodies of the dead is actually the most fundamental act of living. In reclaiming this birthright we take back our shared humanity.

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