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Donna Belk

Texas Funeral, Healing and
Transition Celebrant

As the funeral celebrant communications director at the Celebrant Foundation and Institute, I had the privilege to speak with Donna Belk, a funeral celebrant colleague from Austin, Texas. I was curious about Donna's private practice as a funeral celebrant and home and green funeral educator and practitioner.

First and foremost, I wanted to learn more about home and green funeral service so I could be better prepared to advise and serve my client families as their trusted funeral professional. Donna is right on the cutting edge of offering distinct alternatives in funeral service – as both a teacher and a practitioner – to a public just beginning to learn about the myriad possibilities of having more input in designing a loved one's funeral or memorial, or in planning their own farewell. Secondly, as a funeral celebrant, I was interested about how Donna's education and training as a celebrant is greeted by the individuals she serves and about the different aspects her clients consider when choosing a funeral led by a celebrant, a home funeral and/or a green funeral as the way they wish to honor and celebrate their loved one's life and story. In addition, Donna's knowledge and wisdom are complemented by 33 years of devoted yoga practice. She is also a hospice worker, and it's clear the depth and understanding she brings to the individuals and families she serves facing end-of-life issues is compassionate and rich.

Donna's workshop, called Yoga of Dying, educates people about what to expect as one dies, how to prepare for a peaceful death and how to care for your loved one after death. She holds a bachelor of arts degree from South Texas University but considers her most important educational credential to be her own near-death experience, which occurred in 1985. I asked Donna several questions about her funeral celebrant practice and her work in the home and green funeral movement as well as how she came to develop the Yoga of Dying for families in her community.

How does education about death and dying enrich our

culture? I believe that educating ourselves about death changes our perspective. This knowledge helps us lead happier lives where we feel free and can really embrace an appreciation of the richness and sacredness of life. When we really experience peace around dying, we find ourselves suddenly available to live in expressive and joyful ways. A weight lifts and we become unbound.

How does your education and training as a funeral celebrant inform your service and work in home and green funerals?

My training as a funeral celebrant gave me the tools – how to create ceremony, how to arrange the flow of ceremony, and taught me how to work with the family and loved ones to honor their needs. At the same time, it has helped me focus on creating a ceremony that would be both meaningful as well as reflect the truth and beliefs of all involved, including the deceased. Since I felt comfortable with ceremony because of my training and experience, it was easy to incorporate the principles into the home funeral situation.

How do you go about creating a home funeral using your funeral celebrant training?

There are three levels in dealing with a home funeral: • The practical: how to take care of the body, how to move the body, etc. • The emotional: what people are feeling, taking the time needed to pause, breathe and grieve • The spiritual: reflection about how we're all going to die and the recognition of the deeply felt significance when the passage of death is anticipated and occurs. Creating and performing ceremony weaves all of these elements together and creates a beautiful and sacred container for the whole experience.

How does your yoga background influence and support your work in death and dying?

At the close of every yoga class, most instructors ask their students to rest in "Savasana," or the corpse pose. This pose is all about letting go. So, you see, yoga has this built-in practice of dealing with death. Although the earth part is not talked about very much in yoga classes, especially in the Western world, its presence is there the end of every yoga class. Also, there are ancient yogic scriptures that talk about death and dying. There is a wealth of information available on the topic.

Please clarify for us the distinction between home and green funerals – if there is one.

A home funeral is where a family takes care of all the details themselves – from the care of the body, to the burial or cremation. So there is no embalming that is done. This in itself is "green." Also, usually the family purchases inexpensive wooden caskets or builds their own. So this is also green. A green funeral is where the arrangements are environmentally sound – no embalming, no metal casket, no concrete vault in the burial plot (some cemeteries require this so it may not be possible), etc. But it doesn't mean that the family cares for the body themselves. In thinking about this question I guess the big difference is in the way the funeral is approached. In a green funeral the focus is on environmentally friendly solutions. In the home funeral the focus is on the family and loved ones caring for the deceased.

How did you become interested and drawn to home funeral service?

My father died when I was 16, and the funeral was so meaningless that I wanted to offer people another way to experience funerals and this life-altering passage. That's why I became a funeral celebrant. Then when I was introduced to home funerals it was another step – a big one – toward having a funeral full of meaning and honoring of the deceased. For me, and the clients I serve, the kind of afterdeath care provided by a home funeral offers a more humane and healing alternative to the standard American practice of handing the body over to a mortician for embalming and display before cremation or burial.

Donna, can you share the history along with any ancient rituals or customs that home funerals naturally evolve from?

In the United States, for hundreds of years, families provided funeral care for their own loved ones. That was the "normal funeral." The body was laid out in the kitchen, washed and dressed. The wake and then funeral was held in the family's parlor, and the body was buried on the back forty. What changed was that during the Civil War, a doctor found a way to embalm the bodies of soldiers so they could be sent back home and buried at their homes. That required furniture makers to build caskets for the trip. And slowly, our culture was isolated from the very natural event of death. I compare this to births, where in the 1940s and 50s most births were held in a hospital, and in the 60s, there was a trend to go back to home births.

Does the family or beloved always wash the body with you?

The family only does what they are comfortable with. Sometimes the hospice nurse will wash the body after death. I know there is an "ick factor" associated with this idea, but once you are there with your loved one, it is not disgusting to touch them because they are no longer breathing. It is your loved one, and caring for them in this exceptional way is one of the most honoring and loving things that you can do. I think about how I want to be handled after I die, and it is not by strangers who have no feeling for who I was.

Are home funerals always a green and environmentally friendly alternative?

Yes. I suppose you could make it not green by purchasing an expensive casket, etc. but I have never seen a home funeral that was not green.

What type of individual or family seems to choose a home funeral? Tell us about the choice of caskets.

Educated baby boomers are leading the way right now on home funerals. If the body will be cremated, there are very inexpensive cardboard caskets that one can use. The family can paint the casket or attach notes to it, etc. Or a family may want to build their own casket. For example, the men build the casket on the porch while the women clean and prepare the body in the bedroom. Or a family can choose to buy a casket online or at Costco. There are even willow caskets available. And a community of Trappist monks makes beautiful wooden caskets and ships them all over the United States. My own personal preference would be to have no casket but be buried wrapped in a quilt or shroud.

If an individual is not up to preparing the body on their own but would like a home funeral, is this possible?

Yes, there is a Web site that lists the home funeral guides in different states: www.homefuneraldirectory.com. Or a family could have a nurse or friend come in and help with the washing of the body. Quite frankly, the body doesn't need to be washed since it will be shortly disposed of. It is more a ritual than a requirement. I think the most important benefits of a home funeral are psychological. There's a tremendous increase in healing and acceptance of death for the family to touch and see and be with the departed. It can be very empowering at a time when families feel like everything is out of control.

What about the legal ramifications and laws in each state regarding a home funeral?

Home funerals are legal in all but five states. And even in those five states there are sympathetic funeral directors that will work with families. There is a national organization, Funeral Consumers Alliance – they are very helpful to individuals who are planning a home funeral. Also my Web site, www.yogaofdying.com, has information for families who want to know where to go to find out about the laws.

What about embalming? How come this is not necessary?

Most laws state that the body has to be cooled, not embalmed. Cooling can be done by placing dry ice under the shoulders and hips of the deceased. The dry ice evaporates, so it is replaced once a day to keep the body cool.

Do your clients often bring you in before the individual dies – much like hospice?

Yes. It is easier if things can be thought about and planned in advance. Simple things like, "What dress does mother wish to be buried in?" One family even built the casket for their mother and called it her "hope chest" in hope of being resurrected. They showed it to the mom who was very impressed by it and said she approved.

Can a home funeral be compared in any way to a home birth? There seems to be a parallel between a birthing midwife and a midwife who assists one with dying.

Absolutely. There are strong parallels. As I said above, I compare home funerals to births where in the 1940s and 50s (when) most births were held in a hospital, and in the 60s and 70s, there was a trend to go back to home births. It's the other end of the spectrum from natural childbirth. Baby boomers are leading the way on taking control of the dying process just like they did with the birthing process.

Does the individual's or the family's spiritual or religious beliefs matter with a home funeral? With a celebrant funeral?

No. Almost any spiritual or religious beliefs can be honored if they're practical. By this I mean if you wanted a Tibetan sky burial, that might be difficult because there are laws about bodies being buried, etc. But if it is legal, I don't see any reason why a request could not be accommodated with a home funeral. There was a movie called "Vacation" where Chevy Chase starred. In one scene his mother-in-law dies and since they're on vacation, they strap her to the top of the car. In a recent movie, "Little Miss Sunshine," a family is on a trip and the grandfather dies and is put in the back of the car until they get to their destination. In the movie, the actor says, "It's perfectly legal." And he's right ... it is perfectly legal. Now if you're crossing state lines, then you need a Burial Transit Form, but otherwise, it is not against the law. Most people just don't know that it is legal and that home funerals are legal. •

To learn more about home funerals and Yoga of Dying, visit www.yogaofdying.com.