

Making Friends With Death

Christopher Uhl

Last month I celebrated my 60th birthday. Besides experiencing immense gratitude for all that I have been given in life, I also registered, for the first time, a palpable fear of death. My fear has to do with the unpredictability of death—the notion that the “Grim Reaper” can snatch us away at any moment.

I have lived long enough to know that examining my fears can help to dissolve them. This awareness is leading me to question the notion that death is, necessarily, arbitrary and unpredictable and, in its place, to consider that each of us has more say in our lifelong walk toward death than we might be ready to acknowledge. As a case in point, it is now known that the number of years that a person *expects to live* is a good predictor of how long he/she *will actually live*.

Stanley Keleman in his book, Living Our Dying, suggests that we can befriend our dying to the extent that we are alive and awake to each moment of our living. Accepting Keleman’s proposition offers me the possibility of being more of a participant in the process of my inevitable dying and, therefore, less helpless and fearful.

In a similar vein, I have recently learned that it is possible to participate more fully in the mourning process that occurs after the death of a loved one. I had always assumed that there was only one acceptable plan of action when a family member dies. You contact a funeral home, and the funeral director makes all the “mourning” arrangements.

But, then, it dawned on me that we haven’t always handed the body of our deceased family members over to professionals (often strangers). Nor have we always, as a final act of respect, had the bodies of our loved ones injected with a brew of toxic chemicals (i.e., formaldehyde, methanol, ethanol and other solvents) before placing them in the ground in a metal casket. This crazy procedure makes a mockery of the Biblical adage, “dust to dust” in so far as it interrupts the natural cycle, wherein the death of one creature provides sustenance for another.

In the time of our great grandparents, it was commonplace to have funerals, like births, at home. Now, the thought of having the body of a recently deceased family member in the living room fills us with trepidation. All sorts of wild fears arise: The body will stink; it will begin to ooze fluids; it is illegal; the children will be scared; the neighbors will think I am part of some cult.

Fortunately, more and more Americans are discovering the nonsense in these fears and choosing to sidestep the funeral industry in favor of home funerals. In effect, these people are reclaiming their right to grieve on their own terms.

The home mourning process begins, as it has throughout much of human history, with the washing of the body of the deceased. Through this simple act the grievors witness with

their senses, the warmth departing from the body of the deceased. With the involvement of the senses, death is rendered real.

The body might remain in the home for 2-3 days while loved ones visit, in their own time, sitting, talking, and crying with the deceased.

When it comes time for burial, the body might be transformed into ash through cremation or the mourners might participate in the crafting of a wood casket. In addition to being able to directly tend their dead, those opting for home funerals are spared the expense of many thousands of dollars.

In my exploration of home funerals I have been delighted to discover that right in our backyard there is a non-profit organization, “Last Rights of Central Pennsylvania” (<http://www.lastrights.info/>) with volunteers able to help families understand and carry out home funerals.

In sum, the more I read and learn about death—the more I face my fears—the less afraid I become.