

# *The Natural Death Care Project & Home Funeral Ministry:*

## *Two Projects Whose Time Has Come—An Interview with Jerri Lyons*

### *Carolyn's Gift*

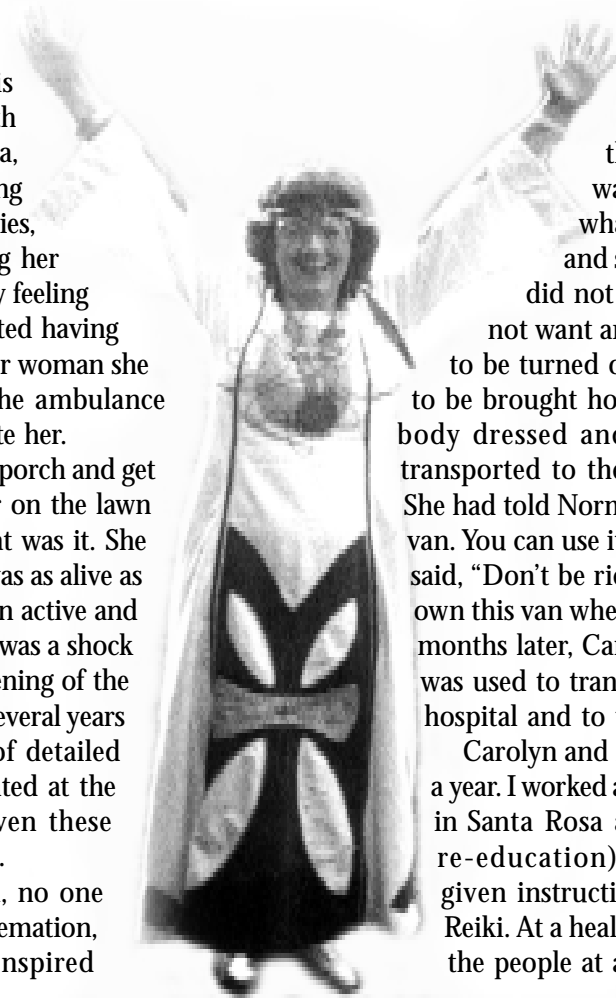
What inspired me to begin this project was the unexpected death of my friend Carolyn. I had no idea, when she went to work one morning to take care of an elder in her eighties, that she herself would be making her own transition. She began her day feeling great, but after breakfast she started having trouble breathing. Marie, the elder woman she was looking after, called 911. The ambulance came, but they couldn't resuscitate her.

Carolyn had gone to sit on the porch and get some air. Marie saw her roll over on the lawn with a smile on her face, and that was it. She was only fifty-six years old, and was as alive as we are right now. She was quite an active and gregarious person, and her death was a shock to her friends and family. The evening of the day she died, we discovered that several years earlier she had prepared a set of detailed instructions about what she wanted at the time of her death. She had given these instructions to her friend Norma.

When Norma's husband died, no one knew what he wanted—burial, cremation, what kind of ceremony. That inspired

Carolyn to get a group of friends together one day to sit down and write out instructions that included what flowers they wanted, the music to be played, what they would like on an altar, and so forth. Carolyn wrote that she did not want to be embalmed, she did not want an autopsy, and she did not want to be turned over to a mortuary. She wanted to be brought home by her friends, to have her body dressed and bathed at home and to be transported to the crematorium by her friends. She had told Norma, "It's a good thing you have a van. You can use it to transport my body." Norma said, "Don't be ridiculous. I probably won't even own this van when you die." Sure enough, several months later, Carolyn did die, and Norma's van was used to transport her body home from the hospital and to the crematorium.

Carolyn and I had been friends a little under a year. I worked at Heart to Heart Medical Center in Santa Rosa as a Trager (neuro-muscular re-education) practitioner and had been given instruction in first- and second-degree Reiki. At a health fair, I was drawn to go talk to the people at a Reiki booth, and they invited



*Jerri's friend Carolyn Whiting, in a celebratory rite of passage, and Carolyn's memorial altar. All photos provided by Natural Death Care Project.*

me to Carolyn's weekly Reiki sharing group. Carolyn was a Reiki master. Within that week, her name came to me in several different ways. When I get the same message several times in a short period of time, I think, "Hmm." So I called her. She was very warm and loving over the phone, and invited me to drop in on the group. I did go, and I liked it so much that I went every week after. I only missed about two weeks during that year. Carolyn and I had an instant friendship—we felt we had always known one another, perhaps in a past life. What I didn't know was that she would become my teacher in other ways as well. She would be my teacher about after-death care, about becoming a spiritual or death midwife and a home funeral guide. These are the terms I have come to embody.

I was profoundly moved by the three days of personal care given to Carolyn following her death, including the experience of bringing her body home in a body bag, and unzipping it to find her looking as beautiful and peaceful as a baby. In touching her, I was able to get a sense of the reality of her death. I had not seen her at the hospital, so touching her body helped me begin to integrate in my own body, with my own senses, that she really had departed.

Her bathing and dressing was so consciously and conscientiously done. It felt like a ritual—a very ancient rite of passage. Four of us women participated in that ceremony and we occasionally spoke to Carolyn, somehow feeling that she was there and could hear us.

At these ritual times, you are already in another state of mind—I call it "time out of time." There is so much going on, on other energy levels. There is a sense of spiritual intervention, angelic presence, and a special quality of heart-opening and bonding. You are doing something very meaningful and authentic. We had formed a phone tree, so after the preparation of the body many people came over and visited Carolyn, each in their own way—some silently, some singing, some chanting, some reading. Every one entered her house with the same sense of disbelief, trying to find answers for why this had happened. Carolyn was lying on a futon in a room that we had prepared and made sacred to honor her.

In the evening, we had a formal ceremony. We brought her body into the living room, brightly lit with candles and filled

with flowers and fragrances. We surrounded her with our love, prayers and meditations. Carolyn's body was taken to the crematorium the next day. I hadn't expected to stay with the group the whole way through, but I kept feeling called back. Things that I was supposed to do fell away—in the synchronistic way that things seem to fall into place during important times. I was able to continue participating; I helped take her to the crematorium, and joined in a meal afterwards.

A full spectrum of emotions can follow a person's death. I experienced waves of grief from the depths of my soul. Then, as a group, we would experience a joy and euphoric celebration. We wondered why we were experiencing such high feelings, yet we sensed Carolyn's presence in this very clearly. I felt as though she were orchestrating the whole thing. Even her sense of humor came through. When Norma and her friend Dana were preparing to take Carolyn's body to the crematorium, they found a piece of driftwood that fit the shape of her hand perfectly. Then they found a bird wing and placed it on her breast and a bowl of cookie fortunes, which they taped on her body. They asked, "Where should we put this one, Carolyn?" They read the fortune and said, "Oh, on your knee. Okay!" Then they taped it on. This was just like Carolyn. She laughed a lot and had a great sense of humor. That humorous aspect was not left out.

After her body was cremated,



*Memorial for Donna, age 32, who stenciled and decorated her own pine box*

Carolyn's ashes were brought to her home. That happened to be our Reiki meeting night. Instead of doing Reiki, we had a special ceremony with her ashes, passing them around and placing them in small bags. She loved to travel, and one of her instructions was to scatter her ashes all over the world. We each took some in order to take them to special sacred places around the world.

We continued to meet weekly to plan Carolyn's memorial service, which occurred a month later on her birthday. At those gatherings we discovered that our fear of death and the unknown had diminished tremendously. Our experience with Carolyn had taken us through a doorway that I think most people in this country have not accessed. This is because most of our society has delegated death to institutions and industry, instead of taking on the responsibility of caring for our loved ones.

Carolyn's personality definitely came through during this whole event, and it was important to us to include her. Each segment of this journey was all about her, and each person's history with her. Together we designed a meaningful and unique send-off for our beloved friend.

### *Natural Death Care Project*

A year and a half after Carolyn died, I decided that I wanted to start a project to help other people have a similarly wonderful experience. On December 10, 1995, I met with a group of friends who were also interested in this idea. Even though we didn't yet have a name or form, that was the birthing of the Natural Death Care Project.

After another year my friend Janelle, who had been working for Hospice, lost her aunt. She asked our project to assist her with the arrangements, and was particularly impressed by the results of this choice. She knew the loving care provided by

Hospice, but also saw that when a person died, a funeral home was called and a transportation person would show up and whisk the body away with no time for family closure. The body was sometimes wrapped and the face covered without even asking the family whether that was acceptable. The body was not always handled with loving respect.

It turned out that Janelle's aunt had left her an inheritance, so she left her Hospice work to volunteer with our project. She became my co-director. Six months later, we became a program of the nonprofit Community Network for Appropriate Technologies (CNAT), which had been running for about twenty years in Sonoma County. One of its many programs, the Journey Project, includes a book called *Journey to Life's End*. The author, CNAT director Susan Keller, helps us prepare for a death by including information about filling out forms, and stories about seniors she personally cared for.

The Natural Death Care Project has also created classes and workshops to teach other people this work. One of our goals is to help other communities begin service organizations to guide people through home- or family-directed funerals. We offer in-services, presentations, consultations and four-hour classes with continuing education credits (CEUs) for professionals. Our next four-hour class will be held at the Senior Center in Point Arena on January 8, 2000. Our first weekend workshop on death, called "Midwifing the Final Journey," will take place at Harbin Hot Springs, April 14 through 16. Its subtitle is "Home Funerals: Caring for Our Own." We tell people that it's easy to remember the dates. Just think about the two things every one can count on—death and taxes.

### *Home Funeral Ministry*

When the Natural Death Care Project became an educational program under CNAT, we split off our service

work and started the Home Funeral Ministry to help families create home funerals. This service includes coaching people through bathing, dressing and preserving the body, having a wake and ceremony, helping them complete and file the paperwork, and accompanying them to the crematorium or cemetery of their choice. The cost is very reasonable—half to a third of what people generally pay.

The most basic cost for a standard institutional cremation (called direct cremation) is about \$1300. This would cover the removal of a body, paperwork and the cremation. We can help families do this for less than half that cost. Much of the savings comes from not using a mortuary or funeral home for arrangements. Mortuaries have a non-declinable overhead fee. This means that when you walk in the door, you are charged for staff and overhead. Everything else is extra. Most often people are in such an emotional state that they are not likely to make clear and wise choices. They may not even know what questions to ask, or what other options might be available. They are confused by a lot of information and often choose beyond their means. These choices might include a more expensive casket, embalming, viewing and preparation of the body, a chapel service, burial or scattering of ashes—all of which could push the price to several thousand dollars. The average burial cost in this country is about \$8,000 to \$10,000. Most of the families we help can do this for one-quarter to one-third that cost—depending on the cost of the casket and the cemetery they choose.

A service like Home Funeral Ministry is so much needed. We are not just supporting people in physically getting things done. We support them emotionally and spiritually as well, and hold the space for them to create what they want.

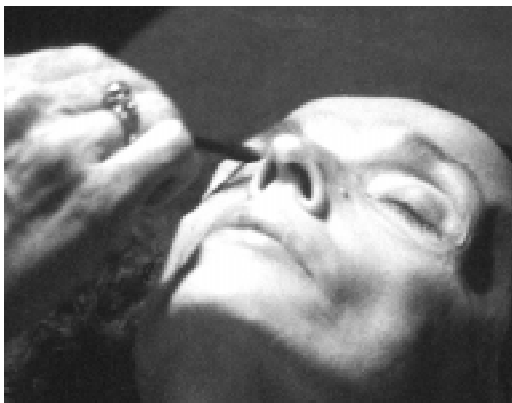
This kind of reassurance allows a meaningful process to unfold in a natural way. Some people come into the experience frightened and nervous. Although we may have ancient memories in our cells of caring for our ancestors at death, we have no current pictures in our minds—no references, visual recordings or positive storytelling from our relatives to give us confidence.

Many families tell me that during the time surrounding a death, a lot of healing of old wounds occurs. People's hearts are so open that armor falls away and walls come down. This provides an opportunity for healing on many levels. It also bonds people that never knew each other. I feel bonded to all the families I have been through this with, and so far I have walked through about 120 family-directed funerals. This is very different

from a funeral business with a funeral director who helps people with arrangements but separates himself from them. We are not working behind the scenes. We are with the family—like a *doula* or a midwife in birthing. We are right there, coaching them or participating with them in ceremonies. We become part of the family. One of the things that makes this work so rich is that we get to experience many different kinds of rituals. We support all cultures, religions and backgrounds.

### *Alternatives to the Corporate Takeover*

Three major corporations are buying up funeral homes and cemeteries across the country. This movement is raising costs and giving people less options. The names of the newly acquired funeral homes are not



*Michele's friend applies makeup*

changed when this occurs, so most people don't realize this is happening. Unlike buying other products, we have no choice about purchasing funeral arrangements. We can't just say, "Gee, honey, could you put off dying? It's not in our budget this year." Death comes to all people, and often comes unexpectedly. If you do not have the money to pay for arrangements, generally there are no funds to help. The

coroner may need to find anyone, however remotely related, and that person can be held responsible to pay the minimum charges.

Our culture often equates love with the amount of money spent. Although we support families in whatever they want to do, they often produce creative and less costly alternatives once they are empowered with a choice. A friend

or relative can build or carve a casket that can be a very meaningful and loving gift.

New businesses are sprouting up all over the country that provide options to expensive caskets. Kate Broderson has a business in Forestville called A Plain Pine Box. She very lovingly builds pine boxes using high-quality materials. Caskets are also being created using ecological materials such as straw.

Many people are choosing to paint and decorate the caskets themselves. You can get a cardboard casket after, or even before, someone dies, and decorate it in a most beautiful way. We have an entire slide show and photo album of such caskets. Each one could be in an art gallery. They are all about the person who died, and can take any creative direction—with writings, paintings, glitter, rainbow paper, flowers and so forth.

A box can be padded with batting or blankets, and covered with special material. Some people even make pillows to match. One woman, Michele, planning for her own home funeral, told her story, "A Death Without Fear," to the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*. Her friend lined the casket with beautiful purple satin and painted Egyptian icons on top and around the inside of the casket. Michele followed an Egyptian



*Michele lying in honor at home*



*Michele's cremation container cover*

religion, and her elaborate funeral ceremony in the “enchanted forest” behind their home in Guerneville included readings from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

In some cases, people with a terminal illness decorate their own caskets. They can even have a living wake, in which they invite all their friends to a party—a healing celebration where everyone gets to speak their truth and say wonderful things before you die. I have attended several of these.

There is so much potential in this work. I am now learning about the use of essential oils in after-death care—how to anoint the body with oils to help with spiritual release and also to calm those who are grieving.

### Stories

The book that Janelle and I are writing will have a lot of stories about the magical and mysterious things that happen around death. We want to tell these stories in a heartfelt way and accompany them with pictures. We hope these pictures and stories will help create a more positive attitude toward death in our culture.

One man whose breathing had been labored and rapid around the time of his death died with his mouth open. Although his wife tried to close his mouth, she was unable to do so. The Hospice nurse, who came to help her bathe and dress him, also tried to close his mouth and couldn't. I guess they didn't know that you could tie a scarf around the head to help deal with that situation. The wife left the room to see the Hospice nurse out, and was gone for a very brief time. When she went back in, her husband's mouth was closed and he had a smile on his face. No one had been in the room. When Janelle and I came by the next day, bringing dry ice to preserve his body for a wake, we couldn't believe it. The color was still in his face and he looked like he was smiling. We looked at each other and asked, “Gosh, do you think he's really dead?” He was.

For children to become acquainted with death as a part of life is vitally important and can free them from unknown fears. Many families have approached us to ask whether we thought it was appropriate to include children in the ceremony. They were concerned that it might be too much for them. We tell them that children seem to handle home funerals very well. They tend to take their cue from adults. We also see children who are very connected and comfortable around the person who has died even leading the way for the adults. In one family, the son and daughter-in-law had a five-year-old daughter and were very concerned about her being around her deceased grandfather. The little girl ended up bringing people into the room, sitting with them quietly, and talking to grandpa—becoming a model of sensitivity and peace for the distraught grown-ups around her.



*Twenty year old son paints his mother's cremation container*

I was once on a spiritual journey visiting ancient ruins in Mexico. One of our purposes was to help release souls that we felt were trapped. By doing ceremonies and chanting, we were helping to send those souls into the light. At the same time, I was beginning to re-live a past-life memory with a person who was also on the journey. There was emotional pain from these memories, so I did a ritual to help release the pain. My friends buried me in sand, and I cried and grieved for that old lifetime. Then I swam in the ocean and came out feeling relieved and at peace. Once I felt that lifetime was done and complete, I was able to joyfully embrace the remainder of the trip. One of the purposes of ritual is to help a person move through an experience of grief, pain or suffering, and to leave room for something new and celebratory. That is also why participating in a family-directed funeral can be so important.

### *A Bigger Vision*

Karen Leonard, a good friend and advisor of NDCP, directs a nonprofit educational and advocacy group called Redwood Funeral Society, also in Sebastopol. Home Funeral Ministry is one of the providers for her members if they want a home funeral. Janelle and I, along with Karen Leonard and Anne Tompkins from Redwood Funeral Society, have formed a committee for another project called JMMP—Jessica Mitford Memorial Project. The late Jessica Mitford, a witty Englishwoman who wrote a bestseller called *The American Way of Death*, exposed the funeral industry back in the 1960s, writing about the decadence and unnecessary expense of funerals. Her

revised edition was completed and published last year with the help of her husband and Karen, who was also Jessica's research consultant.

Our vision for JMMP includes a newly designed crematorium as a place where people can witness a cremation in a sacred, peaceful setting. The crematorium was our original focus, primarily because cremation is less expensive than embalming and burial and is becoming a frequent choice. In California, over 50 percent of the people who die are cremated. In addition, a round or octagonal memorial theater would give people a place to perform any kind of living or dying ceremony or performing arts. Education would be an important part of the offering.

Our vision also includes a nature-preserve cemetery, where people can be buried only in shrouds or in a biodegradable casket. This would be in a forest setting with only indigenous plants being placed on the graves. There would be trails, but people wouldn't recognize it as a cemetery. Although there would be no headstones or plaques, a visitor's center with a computer could be used to locate people.

On the Internet, Karen discovered a company called MEI (Memorial Ecosystems, Inc.) in South Carolina. They are interested in creating a nationwide system of nature-preserve cemeteries. She contacted them, and they flew out to meet with us. We are now working to see how we can form an alliance to put forth our common vision. Their first memorial nature park, Ramsey Creek Preserve, is located at the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Western South Carolina, in the watershed of the Chauga River. It can be visited online at [www.memorialecosystems.com/](http://www.memorialecosystems.com/)

MEI and JMMP are currently looking for funding to build our site, and we are searching for a land donor in West Sonoma County for this very worthy cause. An architecture class at CCAC (California College of Arts and Crafts) in Oakland is taking up our project, and students are drawing potential designs for the structures.

There is a trend in our country toward new burial procedures and do-it-yourself funerals. We were mentioned in a *Life* magazine article in March, and a couple months of ago we were contacted by *20-20*, which was looking to film a home funeral for use in a television segment. With this mainstream-oriented interest, I know that



*Jerri Lyons of Natural Death Care Project sits with Jasmine during three-day vigil*

a big change is coming. Just like the home- birth movement, and the creation of birthing rooms in hospitals, I expect that home funerals and other new options will become normal options within my lifetime.

*Jerri Lyons is founder and co-director of the Natural Death Care Project and director of Home Funeral Ministry. She is also a Reiki master, Trager practitioner and non-denominational minister. Janelle Va Melvin is co-director of the Natural Death Care Project. She is also a hospice chaplain, ordained minister and certified massage therapist.*

*Home Funeral Ministry guides people through home or family directed funerals. Natural Death Care Project, P.O. Box 1721, Sebastopol, CA 95473, is a nonprofit educational organization that offers consultations, education, in-services trainings, workshops, a videotape and written materials*

*available for sale to the public. Their binder includes a pre-planning section with a workbook for planning a home funeral, a section on caring for the body, and a section on filling out and filing paperwork. Their website is [www.naturaldeathcare.org](http://www.naturaldeathcare.org) NDCP also offers referrals in Sonoma and near-by counties. They be reached at (707) 824-0268 or by email: [atndcp@softcom.net](mailto:atndcp@softcom.net).*

## FUNERAL FACTS

Caring for your own dead is legal in most states. (Check with your local Office of Vital Records or Lisa Carlson's book, *Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love*, Upper Access, 1987)

Embalming is not essential. Dry ice works well for preservation during a three-day home ceremony.

The modern practice of embalming began during the Civil War, for bodies shipped long distances. By 1920, almost all bodies in the U.S. were embalmed. The practice is still rare in other countries.

By 1900, both birth and death had been institutionalized in the U.S., moved out of the home and into hospitals. In March 1998, *U.S. News and World Report* estimated the average cost of a funeral in the U.S. at \$8,000.

Traditional funeral homes mark up the price of a casket by 300 to 500 percent. The rubber gasket on a protective casket costs \$8, but adds up to \$800 to the price.

In a "sealed" casket, the body will not dehydrate naturally. Instead it putrefies in an anaerobic environment. If the casket is closed too tightly, the gasses can't get out, and the casket explodes.

Casket plans for building a homemade wooden casket: \$15.95. For a cardboard cremation casket: \$34.95 plus shipping. Contact NDCP.

Corporate funeral chains are buying up local funeral homes and cemeteries worldwide. Since there are far more mortuaries than can be supported by the death rate, the funeral industry depends on aggressive selling of expensive services.

In California, a family member or Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care (DPAHC) can 1) act in lieu of a funeral director to orchestrate all arrangements and carry out all decisions; 2) fill out and file end-of-life documentation; 3) transport deceased in any vehicle to a home, place of ceremony, crematory or cemetery.

(from Lisa Carlson's *Caring for the Dead* and the NDCP website)



