

The Natural Way Burial Movement

If you could be a tree, which would you choose - oak, ash, birch, rowan...?

Last autumn was fabulous for colour. A combination of dryness and sunshine over the summer meant an exceptional range of reds, golds, yellows and russets when the trees came to shed their leaves. I was especially delighted to see the rich red leaves of our newest tree in a field we are gradually turning into a woodland, here in the Scottish Borders. This tree, a Canadian Red Maple, was planted in December 2002 at the head of my mother's grave on the first anniversary of her death and this was its first blazing forth in memory of my feisty mother and her blazing engagement with life.

My mother had discussed what kind of funeral she wanted. To be buried in our field - this from a lifelong urban Leith; to be in a cardboard coffin - she needed dissuading from buying it in advance and keeping it in the garage (the damp!); a Church of Scotland Minister - her Church of South Leith, 25 miles away, was very happy to do this; not sadness but a celebration of a life full of complexity - her coffin left the church to Edith Piaf singing 'No, no regrets' and after the committal, by the graveside and accompanied by a piper, we sang the Gracie Fields World War II song "Wish me luck as you wave me good-bye".

By planning her funeral and discussing it with us, my mother gave us a final gift. We knew what she wanted, so when she died suddenly and unexpectedly we didn't have to puzzle that out and we could set to and engage with getting together everything necessary to fulfil her plans and not worry over it. She also gave a gift to the planet. Her remains will nurture the earth (and more directly, the sheep who graze above her grave) and take little out in the way of resource consumption.

We were also intimately involved in her funeral. It was our family who shaped the style of the funeral service. It was our family who arranged for the grave to be dug, and filled in afterwards. It was our family who carried the coffin across the tussocky field. It was our family who sorted out between us who would lean on whom so that the frailer-footed amongst us were able to get to and from the graveside safely. It was our family who arranged for the pipe major from a local pipe band to play the coffin down the field and us back up. It was our family and friends who were engaged in and fully present in all senses at this event and so benefited from an immense healing.

In the *Natural Death Handbook*¹, edited by The Natural Death Centre², a funeral director's experience is quoted when his own father died and he realised he and his family wanted, and needed, to do everything - all the care for his father's body; the notices; the handling of the coffin; the lowering into the grave; the filling of the grave. "Later, weeks later, I asked myself: how many sons, daughters, parents and spouses had I delayed the grief work for because I had performed all of the tasks for them, because I, as a functionary, had usurped their role as care-giving family members? How many times had I made decisions for a family without their opinion, because I had assumed 'they couldn't take it?' ... Immediately, my role in funeral service shifted to being that of a facilitator and it has remained there."³

While my mother's choice of funeral and final resting place with a tree as a living memorial initially seemed surprising for someone so firmly connected to city living, she was in fact in tune with the zeitgeist in seeking a natural burial with a living memorial.

Professor Douglas Davies of Durham University identifies the period up to World War I as a time when society was structured around hierarchy and duty. Everyone 'knew their place' and typically funeral traditions centred on a geographical community with a faith-based ceremony carried out by a Minister or similar person whose standing was as a leader, or figure of authority. The period from between the two World Wars to the early 1980s saw a developing emphasis on the nuclear family - on 'getting by' and 'getting on' - in an increasingly individualised society. With greater social and geographical mobility and increasing consumerism, the sense of developing our own identity became stronger than knowing our place in society and funerals began to focus more on the identity - the selfhood - of the person who died. With cremation becoming more usual from the 1970s onward it also became possible to carry someone's ashes more easily from the place of cremation to a last resting place which might be considered more in tune with their essential self.

Since the 1980s there has been a greater awareness of ecological concerns and our responsibilities to not only live, but to die too, with a concern for a sustainable future. Increasingly we are crafting our individual paths through life, including the selecting or creating of beliefs, leading to creating our own lifestyles - and so, coherently, to an interest in creating our own deathstyles. Greater concern for eco-lifestyles leads to a congruent concern for eco-deathstyles.⁴ So, as on many other occasions, in crafting her own deathstyle my mother was looking forward.

For many, wanting to have an ecologically sound funeral which reflects their own values and beliefs may currently be hard to achieve. But this is changing, and changing rapidly. From having only one woodland burial site in a section of Corstorphine Hill Cemetery in Edinburgh nine years ago, Scotland now has around ten, most set up in the last three years. Plans are in place in several areas to create more, and recently opened sites have been astonished at the high level of interest shown. So far these sites are a mixture of private and local authority ownership, with one new group, Natural Way Burial, aiming to create a not-for-profit woodland nature reserve burial site in the Scottish Borders.

Cremation is becoming more unsustainable with its generous consumption of fuel to achieve the high temperatures required by law and the safe disposal of concentrated toxic materials remaining an ongoing issue. A biodegradable coffin or shroud going into the ground removes both of those concerns. A living tree planted as a memorial increases green lungs for the planet, creates woodland for ourselves and generations still to come to enjoy, creates habitat for flora and fauna and reduces the importation of headstone ma-



terial from distant continents. A simple, woodland burial using eco-friendly materials can also help to shift the emphasis towards simplicity as the appropriate way to honour the deceased, rather than excess. The head of a family owned undertaking business made this telling comment "I've seen funerals become more and more elaborate and expensive over the years, but I'm not convinced they have become more personal."⁵ If funerals become simpler and cheaper, with more direct involvement of the bereaved, they allow everyone, whatever their income, access to a dignified funeral which respects both people and planet.

Those currently middle-aged - the baby-boomer, post World War II generation - will start to be the majority of elderly deaths from about 2015. More of this group have an ecological awareness than previous generations and are likely to wish their deaths and funerals to be in accordance with these beliefs. The development of woodland burial sites across Scotland therefore needs to continue apace and is very welcome. But death does not wait and to have a 'good death', to be ready for death and so live our lives fully, there is more to do.

Recent decades have seen a separation of death from life; an emphasis on youth with a denial and sometimes denigration of ageing. Planning our own deathstyles is only possible if that separation vanishes. Deciding what instructions to leave should we become ill and unable to say what we want to happen needs to be done while we are well enough to do it. Similarly, to begin working out the details of what kind of funeral we want so that those who care for us will not have to do this unguided, or, if we are single and solitary, so that officials will be able to carry out our wishes, needs us to engage with our own dying and eventual death, while we still live.

The informal Natural Death Movement, linked to green burials but focusing equally on our relationship with death and dying, has a focus in The Natural Death Centre, a charity based in London and born in 1991. In Scotland the charity Another Way⁶ based in Dumfries and Galloway was set up in 1999 to provide 'information and advice to help people come to terms with the inevitability of death and dying' and encourage green burials. Their membership is Scotland wide.

1993 saw the Natural Death Centre, inspired by the Mexican traditional festival, initiate a UK National Day of the Dead. Every April this new UK celebration gives us an opportunity to focus on remembering friends and family who have died, to consider our mortality and to seek and give support in bereavement. The 13th Day of the Dead is Sunday 17th April 2005. Imagine groups all over Scotland meeting to honour the impact of death on our lives and celebrate the lives of others. To perhaps share poems and stories; sing songs; join workshops to explore our relationship with our own mortality; visit a natural burial ground⁷; light a candle for those who have died and share memories of them; find out about different eco-coffins; meet the craftworkers and discuss designs - the options are many.

If we are afraid of the sun rising, we know we limit our lives as the sun will surely rise each morning. If we are afraid of death, our lives are also limited as our own death is inevitable and we are touched throughout our lives by the deaths of others. Our fears can inhibit our relationship with ourselves and others, so let us embrace opportunities to engage with and develop a better relationship with those fears. Contacts with others involved in the Natural Death movement are a joy, with much sharing and support. Perhaps now is the time to make more explicit links between groups and

individuals in Scotland, to share information, experience and events for creating eco-deathstyles within a supportive Community of Interest.

In the Scottish Borders, supported by Borders Forest Trust⁸ and a small grant from Scotland UnLtd⁹, is a new community enterprise, Natural Way Burial. We aim to establish one or more woodland or other type of nature reserve burial sites, provide eco-friendly, low-cost burials for people of all means, faiths, beliefs and abilities and to enable as much personal involvement in and direction of funerals by family and friends of the deceased as they wish. We also aim to use local resources as far as possible, to provide employment by linking with local craftworkers and, through workshops and discussion, to encourage greater engagement with death as an holistic part of the life cycle.

March 2004 saw the fledgling Natural Way Burial hold a Discussion Day in Galashiels. Presentations, Q&A sessions and workshops explored the holistic people and planet issues involved in setting up a woodland burial site and led to the establishing of a steering group.

A membership organisation was set up and ran from 2004 to 2007. Members then voted to close that structure and become a web-based information source.

Two natural burial sites were created in the Scottish Borders in 2004 - one run by the Local Authority and one by a private company.

see www.naturalwayburial.org.uk

And now I have to admit it wasn't completely straightforward planning my mother's funeral. She kept changing her mind about the music and the songs. I had to consult my Canadian cousins for help with that because Mum had had such a great time planning her funeral, she had discussed it over many years with different key people, and made changes. Through doing this, she regularly reviewed her increasing life experiences and placed them afresh in the ever-changing context of the world she inhabited. We were therefore absolutely clear that she was ready to go at the time that was hers, and that we gave her the best funeral possible; in keeping with who she uniquely was. For that, and for our fine, red-leafed tree, I thank her.

Heather I. K. Johnston

© July 2004

1 Weinrich, S. & Speyer, J. eds (2003) *The Natural Death Handbook*, 4th Edition, Rider, Random House

2 The Natural Death Centre, 6 Blackstock Mews, Blackstock Road, London N4 2BT t: 020 7359 8391 www.naturaldeath.org.uk

3 Nichols, R. & J. in *Death - The Final Stage of Growth*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1997) Simon & Schuster Inc.

4 Conference Keynote address: *The Changing Face of Funerals*, Cardiff (October 2002)

5 'For those who can bury their worries, the DIY funeral is best'. *The Independent*, 25th October 2003

6 [Another Way closed in the autumn of 2005]

7 e.g. Cloverly Woods of Rest, Aberdeenshire www.greenburials-scotland.co.uk or Craufurdland Woods, Ayrshire www.craufurdland.co.uk

8 Borders Forest Trust, Monteviot Nurseries, Ancrum, Jedburgh TD8 6TU t: 01835 830750 www.bordersforesttrust.org

9 Scotland UnLtd, 54 Manor Place, Edinburgh EH3 7EH t: 0131 226 7333 www.scotlandunltd.com