

James Lovelock's final warning: **Adapt or die**

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# The laying on of hands

The alternative funeral movement helps people get in touch with death—and with their grief.

By April Dembosky

**MOST OF THE TIME, HEIDI BOUCHER IS** a video producer. But at all hours, sometimes in the middle of the night or during the third quarter of her kids' soccer game, her cell phone rings with a moonlighting request. "Mike has died," she hears on the other end. "Mom is in her final days. We'd like to do something different." Or, "It's Jarrad. He's been killed in a motorcycle accident. We need you."

Some people call Boucher a death midwife, but she prefers "natural death-care provider." When people aren't interested in contracting an embalmer to slush their loved ones with formaldehyde, when they can't bear the thought of putting on a suit and filing through a somber funeral home to pay their last respects, they phone Boucher to make a house call. "I become an ambassador for the dead," she says, describing her duties of bathing and dressing the body, preparing dry ice for the casket and helping the family develop a personalized ceremony. "We've seen people make choices as far as the food they eat, what kind of car they drive, where they send their children to school. I think death is really the last frontier."

Usually, when a death occurs, most

people turn their loved ones' bodies over to strangers and go through the motions of a ceremony planned by someone else. But it didn't used to be like this. Before the funeral industry took hold at the turn of the 20th century, families cared for their dead at home. They washed and prepared the body themselves, hosted rituals and ceremonies in their front parlors, and, with their own hands, buried the dearly departed. Now, professionals like Boucher and a small but growing home funeral movement are bringing death back home.

When Jarrad Cole was killed on his motorcycle on a residential street near Sacramento, California, he was 18 years old. His parents, brothers and sister wanted to care for the body at home. They placed him in his godparents' living room and Boucher guided them as they washed his body and dressed him in a cobalt blue shirt and white suit—the one he wore to his senior prom that spring. Caring for him themselves gave the family the opportunity to caress his face and stroke his hair, to do something for him even though there was nothing they could do.

"The more you do, the more you move the grief and start to deal with it," says

Nancy Poer, Boucher's mentor and author of *Living Into Dying: A Journal of Spiritual and Practical Deathcare for Family and Community*. "But if you're passive and helpless, there's nowhere to put all that." Poer helped organize hundreds of Jarrad's friends and classmates looking for a place to funnel their grief. She set them the task of building Jarrad's coffin. They constructed it out of finished plywood, and painted drawings and farewell notes on it. Evan Cole, Jarrad's father, remembers the sunrise painted on the top, and the silky purple lining his son's body rested on. "It was very easy to approach it," he says. "It was easy to walk forward and to look in and to touch him. It was easy for me to touch his hands and to touch his face."

During the next three days, the community gathered around Jarrad's body in vigil. They set up photographs, school papers, artwork. They sang, played piano, trumpet, guitar. They prayed, read to Jarrad and told stories about his life. Some rolled out sleeping bags and slept next to him. "They had a place for their energy," Poer says. "They were not on their phones or iPods or playing video games. They weren't drinking or doing things to avoid life."

UNDERTAKEN WITH LOVE ADVISED THE ERICSON FAMILY ON ARRANGING A HOME FUNERAL FOR HARRIET ERICSON BEFORE HER BURIAL IN 2007.



**"MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ARE WANTING** to do more and more with their loved ones when they pass," says Nickolas Careone, the former general manager at Forever Fernwood, a green burial ground in Mill Valley, California. "I have not seen a traditional funeral take place here."

While Fernwood's focus is on environmentally sustainable burials, the cemetery has attracted people interested in doing more of the process at home. In those cases, the team is asked to be death-care consultants rather than funeral directors, setting aside a degree of control that makes most licensed funeral directors feel uncomfortable.

The funeral industry does lobby legislators to pass laws that make home funerals difficult, but they are legal in most states. Organizations such as Undertaken With Love ([homefuneralmanual.org](http://homefuneralmanual.org)) provide material to arrange a home funeral. Also, a handful of funeral directors offer "death midwifery" services to help families with the most complicated logistics: filing the death certificate, getting the body released from a hospital, transporting it to the crematory or cemetery. "We're the safety net when they say, 'I can't handle this part,"

or 'This paperwork seems kind of daunting,' or 'Gee, I didn't expect this to happen,'" says Careone.

He remembers the funeral of one woman who'd made clear she wanted to die at home and remain there. She didn't want anyone but immediate family to touch her body. Careone instructed the family how to care for the body and how to use dry ice to prevent decomposition. They shrouded her, transported her to the cemetery and placed her in the grave themselves. They conducted their own ceremony, then shoveled six feet of dirt over the grave with their own hands.

"For so many people, the last memory they have of their loved one is the sound of a plastic bag zipping up," says Maggie Watson, who has assisted with numerous home funerals in Fort Bragg, California. She, and others who work with alternative funerals, believe the hands-on approach has the potential to overlay such traumatic memories and normalize death. Seeing, smelling and touching death neutralizes the fears that swell around it, usually because the experience contradicts the gruesome, gory Hollywood version. "I have never had a family look at their loved one and

say, 'Oh my God' and run and leave the room," says Boucher. "They say, 'He looks beautiful.'" The contact opens emotions that otherwise get stifled.

"It allows the human part of our essence that we so shelter from daily life to open up with wanton abandon," says Cole, Jarrad's father, "without any care of who's looking, without any care of how I look, with absolute, complete innocence."

Cole's father died when Cole was 15. "My father came home in a jar," he remembers. "I never got to experience saying goodbye to him." The disconnect, Cole says, haunts him to this day. But when his mother died, then later his son, he sat with both of them right after they passed, washing and oiling their bodies, reading to them and talking to them.

That, he says, is what has allowed him to "understand, manage and really accept" their physical loss. "It allows you to experience the full range of emotion that we as human beings are capable of experiencing," he says. "It's a huge gift."

**APRIL DEMBOSKY** is a writer and the producer of "Death Comes Home," an award-winning radio documentary.