

The Natural Death Centre's NEW magazine

# more to death

Issue 01 | January 2013



**PETER  
OWEN JONES**

THE CHURCH AND  
THIS SACRED EARTH

*Plus*

**BURIAL  
SITES**

A CONSIDERED OPINION

*Plus*  
**DAN'S  
STORY**

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

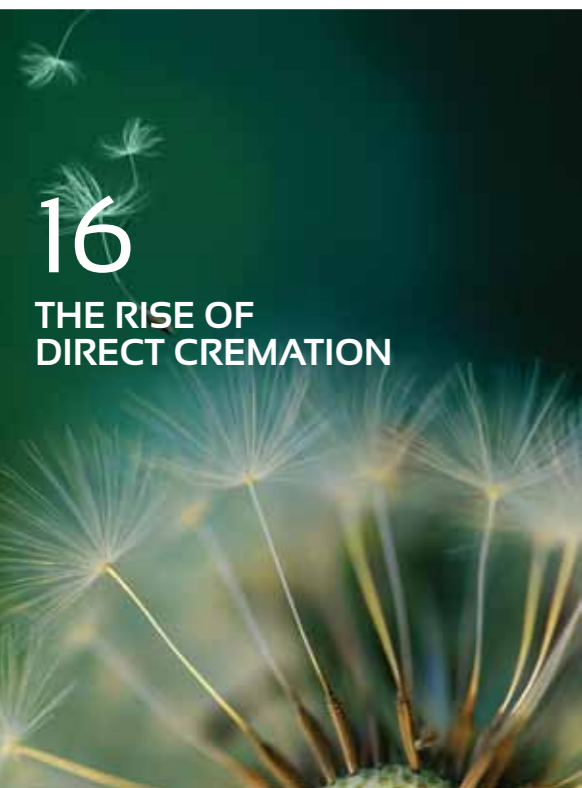
How a proud parent chose to  
celebrate his 5 year old son's  
short life.

**CHARLES  
COWLING**

INTREPID EXPLORER

FOUNDER OF THE  
GOOD FUNERAL GUIDE

UNCOVER HIDDEN AND AMAZING OPTIONS  
SURROUNDING DEATH & FUNERAL PLANNING



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### About this magazine

We hope you enjoy the articles assembled in this first edition of More to Death Magazine. Actually, we hope your reaction is more of the "Wow, this is extraordinary stuff!!" or the "shocked, enlightened and moved to tears" variety. Let us know! You can expect the second edition to be winging its way to you in the Autumn, and it would be great to have your input.

All advertisers are known to us, they are a selection of the best and are companies who are doing things differently, flexibly and transparently. They are the 'progressives' if you like. This magazine is not open to just any advertiser, we do not recommend every-one, if you get our drift? Importantly, if you have feedback about any company mentioned by us don't hesitate to drop us a line; keep everyone on their toes!

If you too are an agent of reform or information please use the articles within for your own editorial. We are not precious, just credit the author and link to us please.

Above all, I hope you find the following pages a great read and if you need any further help or resources, check out our [www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk). Ring 01962 712690 or email the helpline [contact@naturaldeath.org.uk](mailto:contact@naturaldeath.org.uk).

Lastly, hello to all the pioneers on foreign shores, we hope things are progressing for you too. We appreciate that in Britain we enjoy many freedoms that you may not have. Our problem is that generally the public don't know they have them!

Good luck with your endeavours.

t: 01962 712690  
[www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk)

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THE NATURAL DEATH CENTRE IS A REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 1091396



Rosie Inman-Cook  
Editor

The Natural Death Centre  
**more to death**  
magazine

It is happening. Things are definitely changing for the better. WE are winning.

By we I mean us and you. Us the 'progressive' movers and shouters in funeral world and you the public who have picked up on possibilities and are empowered enough, though possibly grief stricken, to get what you want.

This is a very special new publication. Unique and modern.

Please pass it on to all your contacts, friends and mailing lists. If we can go viral we can help thousands and inspire millions both here and abroad. You can play your part.

Hope you love it and please get in touch if inspired or you have something to share.

Rosie

# NATURAL BURIAL

A look at the growing number of natural burial sites in the UK and what to look out for when considering your options..

A CONSIDERED OPINION

ROSIE INMAN-COOK

**Whether you want to call it natural, woodland or green, eco burial grounds continue to grow in number despite the increasing requirements of planning authorities and the demands of Brussels.**

The figure of 270 sites UK wide is possibly misleading, as at least half of these are, what we, here in the bunker, refer to as hybrid sites and amount to little more than token gestures within conventional cemeteries - most are negatively viewed by the public.

Often managed with little interpretation and by staff lacking knowledge and understanding of habitats and wildlife, let alone the differing requirements and

support required by families, public sector sites generally have a long way to go to catch up with natural burial grounds set up by individuals with passion and commitment. There are some exceptions, but on the whole the natural burial movement thrives best away from local authorities and big business.



It may seem that the heady days of idealistic visionaries and altruistic providers are increasingly being hijacked by competitive corporations looking to make a fast buck, or, as above, those providing lip service to a genuine call from the public. We hope that this improves, but it is not easy trying to advise a civil servant or money maker how to run a natural burial ground in the spirit of the movement.

All is not lost however. There continues to be a steady rise of individuals and diversifying farmers who do 'get it' and are running beautiful, positive sites. We receive dozens of feedback forms every week from families who have used Association of Natural Burial Grounds members sites and the vast majority are glowing.



// whether you want to call it natural, woodland or green, eco burial grounds continue to grow in number //

One superstar, who has hit the ground running since opening three years ago is Jo Vassie on her organic sheep farm down in Dorset. Granted, she does have the advantage of a stunning landscape and fragrant herb-rich flower meadows but for me she is what it is all about. Jo is a compassionate, practical, sensitive woman for whom nothing is too much trouble. Her grandchildren may call her an old fuss pot, but the end result is that dozens of families have had fantastic funerals and she has made a positive difference to the lives of many beyond simply the families of those who are buried on her land.

The latest site to open is Clandon Wood near Guildford, fingers crossed that this will turn into another 'good egg'.

Most weeks we receive several calls from land owners looking at the possibilities, pitfalls and responsibilities of setting up a natural burial site. Usually my first task is to check out the Environment Agency's website, so whilst on the phone, with both parties looking online, we see if their land is an obvious no-go

area as far as ground water contamination is concerned. I can usually get a picture of their motives during these calls and I find it frustrating when called by agents and 'representatives' blocking my understanding of the owners' true purpose. If the site and the owner sound promising I then invite them to become a provisional member of the Association of Natural Burial Grounds. This starts a relationship that I hope will be mutually beneficial between the owner and the needs of both the public and wildlife. New members can tap into the communal knowledge and hindsight of existing members and also get help and support which will tighten their learning curve.

I would not want to give the impression that existing providers are riddled with cowboy fly-by-nights but there are elements that the public, celebrants and undertakers need to watch out for.

CONTINUED



## Complicated pricing structures

What some sites are doing is providing posh plots and less desirable spots - priced accordingly! This smacks of the snobbery of the Victorian era to many and is not in the spirit of 'we are all equal in death'. Worryingly, a few seem to have made up the rules as they go along for example stating "plots can be individually consecrated." This of course is nonsense. Some too are advertising that you can be buried with your pet; again this is only possible if you have stringent licensing from DEFRA and only a handful have achieved this. Interestingly it is more complex, bureaucratically speaking, to bury animals than humans! So watch out for the few sites that don't know what they are doing, it may indicate other more serious flaws.

Our Association of Natural Burial Grounds member sites are spread between Aberdeen and Cornwall. They vary tremendously in landscape and style, and reflect the ethos, passion and individual vision of their owners. We welcome this diversity as what suits one family about a particular site may not satisfy the requirements of another. For example, for some the desire to have a tree planted over them is paramount, for others the need for a small permanent marker may be crucial. Some sites offer both, many one and not the other.

**// if anything happens to me, I'll come here //**

When they get it right, managers can expect the most wonderful job satisfaction. It should be a win, win, win situation for the public, wildlife and the owner. I also know from experience that the vast majority of mourners attending a well run site for the first time will be blown away. The whispered nudge and comment of "if anything happens to me, I'll come here" is quite normal. Whilst I mention normal, that is something that is apparent from the variety of families choosing a green funeral. Also gone are the days when the majority of decent funeral directors regard this as exclusively burial for tree huggers or atheists. It is mainstream now, actually it always has been. I believe this will continue, although I wonder how many years before it equals the level of cremation.

Rosie Inman-Cook  
Editor



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# DEATH AND CAKES

Have you ever considered going along to a Death Cafe? It is a wonderful way of meeting people who are experiencing the grieving process too..

[WWW.DEATHCAFE.COM](http://WWW.DEATHCAFE.COM)

**The Universe has a beautiful way of slipping little meaningful things into our lives and waiting to see if we notice... This week, for me, it was the unlikely juxtaposition of death and cakes. Not once, but twice.**

Last Wednesday our family gathered to say goodbye to our mother – one of the world's best cake makers. No family gathering ever took place without her producing a cake of some kind; no visit to friends ever went unaccompanied by a coffee sponge cake, or a batch of chocolate brownies. When



my brother half-jokingly suggested that, instead of flowers, he wanted to bring a cake to her funeral, it felt absolutely right. The cake accompanied her coffin to the catafalque - but not into the cremator; we retrieved it, took it to a café and ate it together as we talked about her life and her death.

Five days later, in another café, there was more cake. This time, the conversation was less personal, but no less intimate. Instead of family, I sat with 40 strangers in Covent Garden, all of us taking part in a two hour session specially created as a space to talk about death. It was a Death Café – the latest event in a new phenomenon that is spreading across the UK, led by Jon Underwood. Death Cafés are a simple concept – a comfortable environment, delicious refreshments and the time and opportunity for people to talk and think about death.

We don't really do death as a conversational subject here in the UK. When it makes an unwelcome appearance, trailing behind someone who has recently been bereaved, we don't know how to acknowledge it. Do we mention the death or would it be better to not bring the subject up? Does the bereaved person want

to talk about it or would they rather 'act normally'? We tiptoe around the enormous, death shaped elephant in the room in an embarrassment of not knowing what to say or do for the best.

//

all of us will die.  
All of us will have  
someone close to  
us die.

//



Death is not a dinner party topic; it makes for uncomfortable small talk, veering as it might into a very un-British display of emotion.

It is a desire to challenge this aversion to talking about death that has fuelled the growth of the Death Café movement. As Jon Underwood says, "Death is a very rich subject, and talking about it is important and helpful, but we don't make time to do it. Death Cafés are safe places, dedicated to increase our awareness of death with a view to helping us make the most of our (finite) lives."

CONTINUED...

Each Death Café is different, although they are all run on a similar model. Free to attend, they are all non-profit making, although donations to cover expenses are welcome. They are free from ideology, safe and nurturing (including offering nice refreshments), accessible to all, and confidential. The events are led by the people organising the Cafés, but it is the experiences, observations and insights of the people attending which makes them so unique.

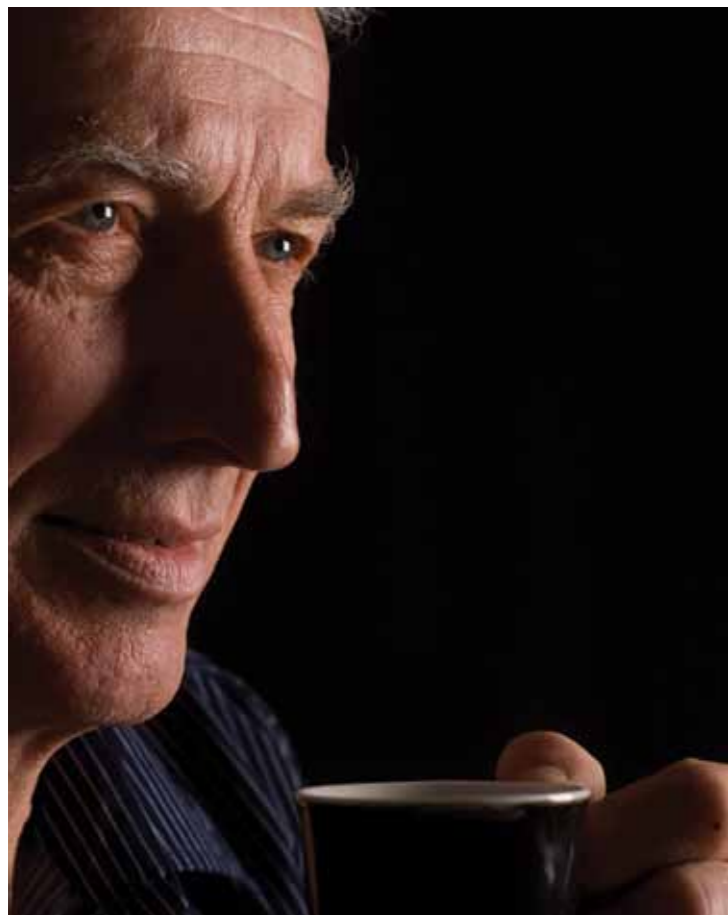
"It is the one subject that unites us all", said one woman at the Covent Garden Death Café. "All of us will die. All of us will have someone close to us die. It is so liberating to be here with a whole group of people knowing that it is ok to talk about death without anyone feeling awkward."

**//** all kinds of people sat together last night, eating, drinking, talking and laughing **//**

All kinds of people sat together last night, eating, drinking, talking and laughing. All kinds of experiences were brought to the tables; people who had lost close relatives or partners, people who were approaching the ends of their lives, people who had someone close to them dying, people who worked with terminally ill patients and with bereaved families, and people who just wanted to talk about death for a myriad of other reasons. It was an extraordinarily vibrant, enriching and enlightening evening – we talked about death for two hours, and came away feeling that we had learned so much from others. The glimpses into other peoples' lives and emotions were a privilege, and through discussing our experiences and feelings about death, I think all of us felt less alone - and more conscious of the joy of being alive.

The first UK Death Café was held just over a year ago in the basement of Jon's house in London. Inspired by the Cafés Mortels set up by Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz, Jon was determined to offer similar events in England. Since that first gathering of just six people in September 2011, over 400 people have attended Death Cafés around the UK, with new events being organised almost weekly.

For more information about organising a Death Café, or to find an event near you, visit <http://www.deathcafe.com/>



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FROM THE

FOUNDER OF

THE GOOD FUNERAL GUIDE

# CHARLES COWLING INTREPID EXPLORER

There are consumer guides to everything... consumers must live by their wits and make the effort to make empowered choices.

[www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk](http://www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk)

**W**hat do you do?" people ask at parties. "I'm an explorer," I say. "Oh," they say, "how lovely, I didn't know there was anywhere left to explore." And I tell them yes there is, there's this undiscovered country peopled by a tribe whose culture, customs and language are exotic and weird, repellent and admirable. "I report back to civilisation," I say, "on a blog." "Gosh," they say, their dander well and truly up, "what's it called, this undiscovered country?" "Funeralworld," I say, and I seamlessly tell them how lucky I am to have all this virgin territory to explore, all these sights to see, all these fascinating people to meet. And they may or may not go with it. Most do, actually.

I've learned that if you tell em straight, you lose em just like that. I've learned that "I run a consumer guide to funerals" is the biggest turnoff in the history of small talk.

There are consumer guides to everything and everyone uses them. Consumers must live by their wits and make the effort to make empowered choices. In our economy, a fool is easily parted with his or her money.

It doesn't work that way with funeral shoppers yet – but I've got to admit it's getting better. It has to. Some of us buy cars, some of us go to the opera, some of us buy trampolines for the kids. All of us die.

When I started blogging back in 2008 there was very little consumer scrutiny of the funeral industry and not a lot of appetite for it. It was a bit like blogging into a black hole, to be honest. And as I tapped at my keyboard, the words of the many publishers whom my agent had tried to persuade to publish my book, the Good Funeral Guide, haunted me. "Oh yes, there really ought to be a consumer guide to funerals," they said, "and we like what Charles has written. Only problem is: no one'll buy it." In the end, Continuum,

the unworldliest publishers in London, took it on. Sure enough, no one bought it. For reasons which have now flown from my memory, I blogged. Perseverance, you may flatteringly call it. Obduracy, more like. That, and a conviction that we live in interesting times. I wanted to be an active and vocal commentator on the evolving culture around death and funerals.

// *Consumers must live by their wits...* //

CONTINUED

I wanted to help it on its way, if I could. I wanted to track the changes in the way we mourn now, in the ways we farewell our dead, as we transition from a stiff-upper-lip grieving style to something more expressive. We have the emotional luxury to do that, these days, to show it how we feel it. It was the Diana funeral that pointed the way.

That, and the Natural Death Handbook, of course. It broke down the Berlin Wall that kept us out of Funeralworld and taught us that it belongs to all of us. The spirit of Nicholas Albery and those early pioneers lives on. They deserve our homage.

“ *Some of us buy cars, some of us go to the opera, some buy trampolines for the kids. All of us die* ”

There's a downside to blogging. You need an ego to sustain you, but you mustn't get too big for your boots. All the world hates a self-appointed expert. And let's not lose sight of the fact that it's the people who make things happen who get things done, not snarky little critics like me making notes on the touchline. I can't count the number of times I've been on the point of calling time of death on the GFG. There are upsides to blogging. You make connections with all sorts of people all over the world. You can put them in touch with each other, bring them together. If I have served any purpose in enabling this, I shall consider my time well spent.

Back in 2008 the GFG blog was a lonely voice in a void. It counted its monthly visitors in tens. Now it registers 65,000 visitors a month and is just one voice in the midst of a creative, comradely, internet hubbub. Funeral shoppers are shedding their low expectations and waking up to the emotional and spiritual opportunity offered by a really good funeral. The industry has passed from bitter, resistant resentment and begun to embrace change.

If the GFG has played a supporting role in this, it's been worth it.

Charles Cowling  
Good Funeral Guide



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“This has to be the most interesting trend...”

# THE RISE OF DIRECT CREMATION

“JUST PICK ME UP AND GET IT OVER WITH”

## Do they really mean it? Is it respectable? Are they just being cheap skates?

This has to be the most interesting trend over the last year. Is it being driven by the economic situation or is it another symptom of evolving dissatisfaction with 'traditional' funerals? I feel the answer is a combination of a few factors and certain circumstances.

For example there is the elderly couple, worked all their lives, not eligible to benefits, minimal savings, scared sleepless about the approaching expense of two funerals. When the simplest of 'high street' quotes they have been given will set them back £6000, is this surprising?

Then there is the elderly lady who phones me for a chat. "I have no family left dear, most of my friends are gone too, I don't envisage anyone being around when my time comes so I won't need a ceremony"

Of course there are families who simply want time to arrange a fitting, bespoke memorial service and don't feel the need for a funeral with the body present.

Another example would be an executor instructed to carry out a disposal at the best possible price.

### WHAT IS THAT PRICE?

Well it can be as little as £995 inclusive. That includes the disbursements – cremation fees and doctors', 'ash-cash', payments.

How can these specialist companies find this financially viable? Well for a start they arrange these cremations around their other work, some have also negotiated beneficial rates for unpopular time slots at some crematoria.

### WHAT DOES THE CUSTOMER GET?

Collection of the deceased from anywhere on the UK mainland, paper work completed and all arrangements made, provision of a basic coffin, the cremation and return of the ashes if that is required.

What they don't necessarily get is the choice of crematorium, or of a time of day convenient for attending, there is no minister and no ceremony. Any request for this is nudging the whole affair back towards a 'normal' basic funeral and will of course increase the price significantly.

### WHY CAN'T ALL FUNERAL FIRMS OFFER THIS SERVICE?

Many do, but not at this price. There are independent undertakers who will offer something similar but who may be in areas where there is no discount available at their local crematoria. In some areas cremation fees are £800 so you can see that it would be impossible for them to compete with the 'under one thousand pounds' firms. However, most can oblige with fees varying between £1200 and £1900, so still half the price of the best offers from the large corporate firms.

COULD

DIRECT BURIAL

BE AROUND

THE CORNER?

A E Stoodley and Sons, funeral directors in Crewkerne, have noted a rise in the demand for Direct Cremation, and have just introduced a new Direct Burial service, offering a similar low cost provision for families who prefer burial.

Damon Campbell from Stoodley's said "We understand that there are many for whom simplicity is the preferred option. We feel that our direct burial will offer the simplest of services, informal, natural and environmentally friendly".

They are offering residents of Devon, Somerset and Dorset either service for £1595 inclusive of all disbursements.

CONTINUED

Poppy Mardall is a rising star of the progressive funeral movement. I asked Poppy to write a few words about her approach and she has also shared the experiences of two families that she recently helped.

*"I launched Poppy's funerals in June to provide families in the Greater London area with a simple, affordable alternative to the traditional funeral. The service I provide is called Simple Cremation and costs £1750.*

*I wanted to separate the cremation from the ceremony, giving families the freedom to hold a funeral, memorial or celebration of life wherever, whenever and however they choose and most significantly away from the crematorium. We meet the family at home to talk the process through and complete paperwork. We collect the body of the person who has died and care for them in a small mortuary. We use a simple wooden coffin lined with calico. We wrap the body in the same calico cotton. We do not embalm or undertake any invasive procedures. The idea is to leave the body in the most natural state.*

*We do not use a hearse but a simple silver vehicle, which has been specially fitted to transport the coffin to the crematorium on the morning of the cremation. About 50% of the time, close family and friends will come to the crematorium to say goodbye. They gather around the coffin, often bringing flowers, photos and messages to lay down on the coffin. The rest of the time, the family do not want or need to come to the crematorium, and are entrusting us to undertake the responsibility on their behalf.*



*We then deliver the ashes back to the family at home so they are free to hold a personal ceremony, celebration of life, memorial or thanksgiving in their own chosen environment and style.*

*The ceremony can be at home, in the garden, on a hilltop or on a boat. It can be in church, in the village hall or at the pub. It could be a memorial bike ride or a picnic. Ashes can be incorporated into the ceremony – scattered, buried or transported abroad. Once the body has been cremated, families can take as much time as they like to plan the ceremony. The ceremony can be led by a vicar, a celebrant, a friend or a family member."*



**These two stories of families we have helped demonstrate how it can be - and has been - done.**

**Pauline was a down to earth woman who did not value formality or pomp.**

**When she died**, her daughter Mary knew a traditional funeral at the crematorium would have been her mum's worst nightmare. Mary wanted something simple, respectful and private for her mum's body, which could be followed a few weeks later with a big celebration of Pauline's life led by the family, at the local hotel where they had gathered for other important events over the years.

Ten close family members and friends came to the crematorium to say goodbye to her. They gathered around the coffin, weeping, praying, laughing and telling stories. Pauline's 9 year old grand-daughter then pressed the button for the committal. It was very beautiful and very personal.

We delivered the ashes to Mary at home. Three weeks later, extended family and friends gathered for the celebration of Pauline's life.

Mary's family wanted a simple cremation because it would allow them a private goodbye at the crematorium. They wanted Pauline's ashes, rather than her body, to be present at the celebration of life. They wanted to hold the ceremony in a place that reminded them of Pauline's life rather than her death. It was not a choice dictated by money but by personal needs.

**Andor and Izabella moved to London from Hungary with two young children. When Izabella died in her sleep with no medical explanation, Andor was devastated and terrified.**

With no childcare, he could not stay in the UK and wanted to return home to his family in Hungary as soon as possible. He had very little money and no wish for a traditional funeral at a crematorium in a foreign land, without his friends or family.

Andor wanted a simple, affordable cremation so he could return Izabella's ashes to Hungary where her family were planning a ceremony for friends and family. We were able to hold the cremation and bring Izabella's ashes home to Andor within five days of meeting him. He returned to Hungary to hold a meaningful ceremony for his wife where her ashes were scattered on her father's grave.

**Families want simple cremation for many different reasons. Many people are looking for a simple choice and simplicity can be very beautiful. Most of us also want value for money. We should all be able to access something simple and respectful for a reasonable price. But every family we meet is looking for an alternative to the formulaic, expensive model of the traditional funeral - the hearse, limousines, embalming and undertakers in black.**



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# THE CHURCH AND THIS SACRED EARTH

MORE TO DEATH ASKED BBC'S 'AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 FAITHS' - PETER OWEN JONES FOR HIS THOUGHTS ON NATURAL BURIAL DEVELOPMENTS AND CHRISTIANITY.



*Land is not just sacred because human beings happen to be buried within in it, it is sacred in itself*



It seems like an age ago that we all tagged along behind the then Bishop of Ely as he consecrated what had been a barren little corner of what was then part of the agricultural desert which makes up the largest part of Cambridgeshire. The Arbory Trust was very fortunate really on two counts. First of all the then Bishop, Stephen Sykes, was supportive of what was at the time very much 'the idea' of woodland burial. Secondly, the Diocese of Ely had some land that was suitable.

The Arbory Trust was officially opened in the year 2000 and like many woodland burial sites it has been a huge success. The Arbory Trust was the fifth woodland burial site to open in the UK, since then there have been many hundreds more. Whilst this is nothing other than wonderful and each one of them will leave behind their vision of a humanity in conscious symmetry and harmony with the natural world, it sadly, I think, is still very much the case that a large proportion of the Christian community and the Church of England in particular just don't get it.

Really what we are witnessing is a complete transformation of how 'the sacred' is being expressed and thankfully the environment, the natural world is now beginning to be seen as intrinsically important and resonant with our cultural understanding of the sacred. This perhaps is testament to a new understanding of ourselves as very much part of the natural order rather than separated from it. Whilst the then Bishop of Ely and others might have thought that it was important that the Arbory Trust woodland burial site was consecrated, that very act of consecration confirmed at the deepest level the separatedness of what is holy and what isn't. It drew a line in the fields and by doing so indicated that one field was more holy than another. The location and sense of the sacred is very important to all of us, including atheists, a sense of the numinous; a sense of the mystery and beauty of existence. But the latter is not more present on consecrated land than it is on unconsecrated land. The woodland burial movement, because of its setting both visibly and geographically, does not reinforce an idealistic separation between one field and another. It proffers the new and the very old idea that land is not just sacred because human beings happened to be buried within it, it is sacred in itself. Whilst

the act of consecration offers protection to land in law, it is becoming within our cultural context increasingly spiritually divisive. One solution would be to send the Bishops off with their staves to consecrate the earth; the whole of planet earth. I am being serious. The other is simply to opt for the reality that acknowledges all of the Earth as sacred in itself. With the ever increasing rise in popularity of woodland burial, many Christians are now beginning to cross the line between consecrated and unconsecrated land and choose a woodland burial. Also, with the ever increasing numbers choosing woodland burial and despite the meteoric rise of 'the celebrant', Christian priests are increasingly being asked to lead woodland burial funerals which is a very welcome development. It will probably take at least another twelve years at the minimum for the Church of England to decide in which field it stands. That decision is probably one of the most important it will make this century.

In the mean time, it is quite clear that the woodland burial movement will continue to grow. Whilst the theological and philosophical divisions will remain, most families will choose something and somewhere that they feel comfortable with, somewhere that reflects their sense of peace and of completeness. One of the greater things about woodland burial is that it provides a neutral setting, it is in that sense truly multi faith and ecumenical. That a man or woman can choose in effect to be buried within the context of the sacredness of the natural world whilst honouring his or her religious tradition is a huge step forward. The biggest and most exciting question of all I think is how, in time, each will inform the other.





PERSONAL

EXPERIENCE

# OUR SON DAN

**David Spiegelhalter shares the experience of losing his 5 year old son Dan to cancer and how he chose to celebrate his son's short life.**

---

On the 2nd November Rosie and Lara were exhibiting at the Wellcome Trust in London. A visitor to the stand declared that he had been meaning to write to the NDC for the last 15 years. As requested that evening, here is how his family coped with the funeral of their little boy, Dan.

Our son Danny died fifteen years ago when he was five. It is the most important event in my life and, perhaps remarkably, my memories of the immediate period after he died are surprisingly positive. Much of this I owe to the Natural Death Centre.

CONTINUED

## HOW TO MAKE A FUNERAL A

## BEAUTIFUL EXPERIENCE

**H**is death from cancer was anticipated and there was time to plan. I had a fear of the funeral being dominated by other people's expectations, but somehow we got hold of the Natural Death Handbook and it opened up another perspective. From then on we took complete control. I remember vividly talking to a very kind and sympathetic council official about a place in the cemetery we wanted, and him giving his condolences on my loss, and then being rather surprised to hear that my son was still alive and sitting next door watching Lion King.

He died at home, in our arms. We laid him out upstairs, and by the next day we were braced to receive over 100 people who trooped up to see him, including many of his primary school class. In fact the five year-olds handled it all much better than many adults. We had the local vicar saying prayers, Buddhists chanting, and got through a lot of wine and tissues. Then we banned any more visitors from coming and being miserable all over us, and set to work to make his coffin. This bold decision was totally due to the plans in the Handbook and the accompanying encouragement that huge skills were not needed. I measured Dan and adapted the plans, borrowed tools from a friend, and went to the building suppliers for the MDF – I told the man in the timber area that it was for a coffin for my son, and he simply assured me it would be strong enough and got on with sawing the lengths, completely unfazed.

The weather was fine and with some friends we worked away outside and produced a very serviceable and robust coffin, with rope handles and a well-fitting lid. The plans even showed how to make the classic coffin-shaped bend around the shoulders, and we were very proud of the result. Deeply therapeutic – I was so grateful to have this task.

Then the decoration team took over. A friend of ours found his father's old gold leaf in a tobacco tin, and another friend used

it to do the calligraphy on the lid. Then the inside was cushioned, the outside was adorned with everything imaginable, and it all looked so cosy. Meanwhile Dan had been kept cool at the undertakers, who throughout were the epitome of courtesy and support for our slightly strange ideas, far from the negative image I had previously had. They put him in our coffin, we added favourite toys, letters and so on, and then we personally screwed him in – this was a very difficult time. It seemed very final.

The funeral was extraordinary. Masses of people gathered outside the house, and Dan's uncle played 'Danny Boy' on the violin ahead of the coffin as we all walked down the street to a local hall, stopping the traffic. We had put the whole ceremony together ourselves, with friends doing readings and short speeches, and the place was full of children, who throughout were amazingly attentive and impressive. We took him off and buried him, filling in the grave ourselves, and then came back and finished off troughloads of food and wine.

Fifteen years later and Dan's friends are big and beautiful twenty year olds, but they still remember the occasion. We have no problem at all in bringing Dan into conversations with our friends, since they all participated at the time of his death and they share in recalling it as something difficult, done well. And it was the inspiration of the Natural Death Handbook that made it all seem possible.

**If you want to see more about this, have a look at ;**

**DAN'S WEB PAGE and HOW WE DID THE COFFIN**

Everyone at the NDC wishes to thank David Spiegelhalter for sharing this experience with us all.



The funeral was extraordinary. Masses of people gathered outside the house and Dan's uncle played 'Danny Boy' on the violin ahead of the coffin.

His death from cancer was anticipated and there was time to plan... somehow we got hold of The Natural Death Centre Handbook..





# VIDEOS

If you are considering planning a funeral for yourself or a loved one, the following videos will give you an idea of how a natural burial is conducted and show how peaceful, beautiful and natural the whole experience can be.



**EMMA RESTALL ORR** welcomes the gathering at the War Memorial Dedication Ceremony at Sun Rising Natural Burial Ground on 6 March 2011. Emma is a director of Sun Rising.



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The NDC website continues its poll on funeral pyres. Here Ru Callender explains his interest..

# NATURAL CREMATION IS NOT JUST FOR HINDUS

I never anticipated wanting to be burnt on top of a hill when I died, but then again, I never anticipated becoming an undertaker either. Such is the transformative, inspirational power of The Natural Death Centre. Once you start thinking outside the box, and puns aside, what I mean by that is once you realise that how we deal with our dead in this country is not as prescriptive as you once imagined, then the imagination races.

Don't need to have a vicar hold the ceremony? Then do it yourself. I can bury my dad in his garden? Let's start digging! Finding out about these things, through my now battered and worn copy of the third edition of The Natural Death Handbook, changed the direction of my life, and led me to set up as an undertaker and celebrant, spreading the word that a formal religious funeral was only necessary if that was what you wanted, otherwise, well, how would you like to say goodbye? What would serve you in your grief?

The media focuses on things it considers wacky: specialist coffins, themed funerals filled with jokes and laughter, everyone wearing pink, and while things like this are all part of throwing off the shackles of convention, of personalising what had become a one size fits all ceremony, there comes a time when we have to get serious again. For all of the insistence that funerals become a 'celebration,' truth is, for most people, death is still not to be celebrated, it is one of the saddest moments of their lives; they are starting to let go of those they love, starting a process of grief that may never leave them. Insisting that everyone only focuses on the positive can make the bereaved feel lonely and guilty, emotions that hover eagerly in the wings to exploit our vulnerability at the best of times.

Most of the funerals I direct and take are non-religious. This means that we have to do without some of the familiar comfort and beauty that religion offers.

There is a temptation to fill that space with lots of other stuff; music, poems, slide shows of photographs, and while all of this is good and helpful done in the right way, sometimes, simplicity is best. That is why burial is so profoundly moving. Whatever else happens in the ceremony, there is a moment when it gets real, when a coffin or shroud is lowered into the earth, and at that moment, everyone is paying attention, everyone gets it. That's what we aim for with our ceremonies, a moment of shared reality, an experience that is as genuine and honest as anything in human life can be. By doing this, by sharing together a moment of truth, our grief can progress naturally, instead of wrapping itself around regret and missed opportunities. We can begin to actually feel it. Creating the same effect in a crematorium is more difficult.

// for most people, death is still not to be celebrated, it is one of the saddest moments in their lives.. //

Don't get me wrong, we do as many cremations as we do burials, and the ceremonies we create with families and perform there we feel just as proud of, but keeping it real as Ali G says, is more difficult when faced with the municipal feel of most of them, not to mention the ridiculous time restraints.

When I heard about Davender Ghai's campaign to re legalise outdoor funeral pyres my heart leapt. When I researched it more, and discovered that outdoor cremation is not just a Hindu ritual, but something from our own cultural heritage, a way of dealing with our dead that stretches back to Stonehenge and beyond, I knew I had found a way that I wanted to go. It merged all the things I love about burial; the elemental honesty, the simplicity, a shared ritual with some of my other loves; drama, an all night party, a spectacle, a bloody great bonfire.

So, although I know it's not mine to arrange or perform, that falls to my children, should they find themselves able to, but since you're asking, here's how I would like it to be.

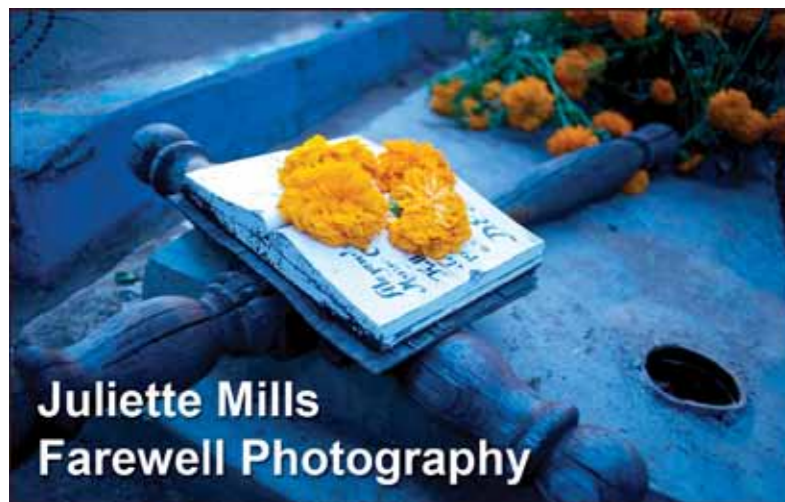
Summer, midsummer, the time of my birth. On top of a hill. Carry me up as dusk falls. Put me on top of an enormous pile of dry wood, built by someone who knows about fires. Make it from different types of wood, chosen for its aromatic smell, or its colour when burning, or its heat. Remember aesthetics at all times.

Have me in a coffin or a shroud. This isn't about forcing anyone to see my body burn, I don't want to disgust people; I want to move them.

Light it as it gets dark. Let the people who love me the most light it. Have someone in charge of logistics, to feed the fire with fuel, manage its controlled collapse. Stay all night. Sing, dance, cry, laugh. Party. Drink and eat and stay warm. Say what you want, but let the flames do most of the talking. Come the next day, when it has burnt for hours and hours, have someone with a big heart and experience of death collect my bones. Bury them if you want, or throw them into the sea, or turn them into art, I won't mind, I won't be there.

Since you're asking.





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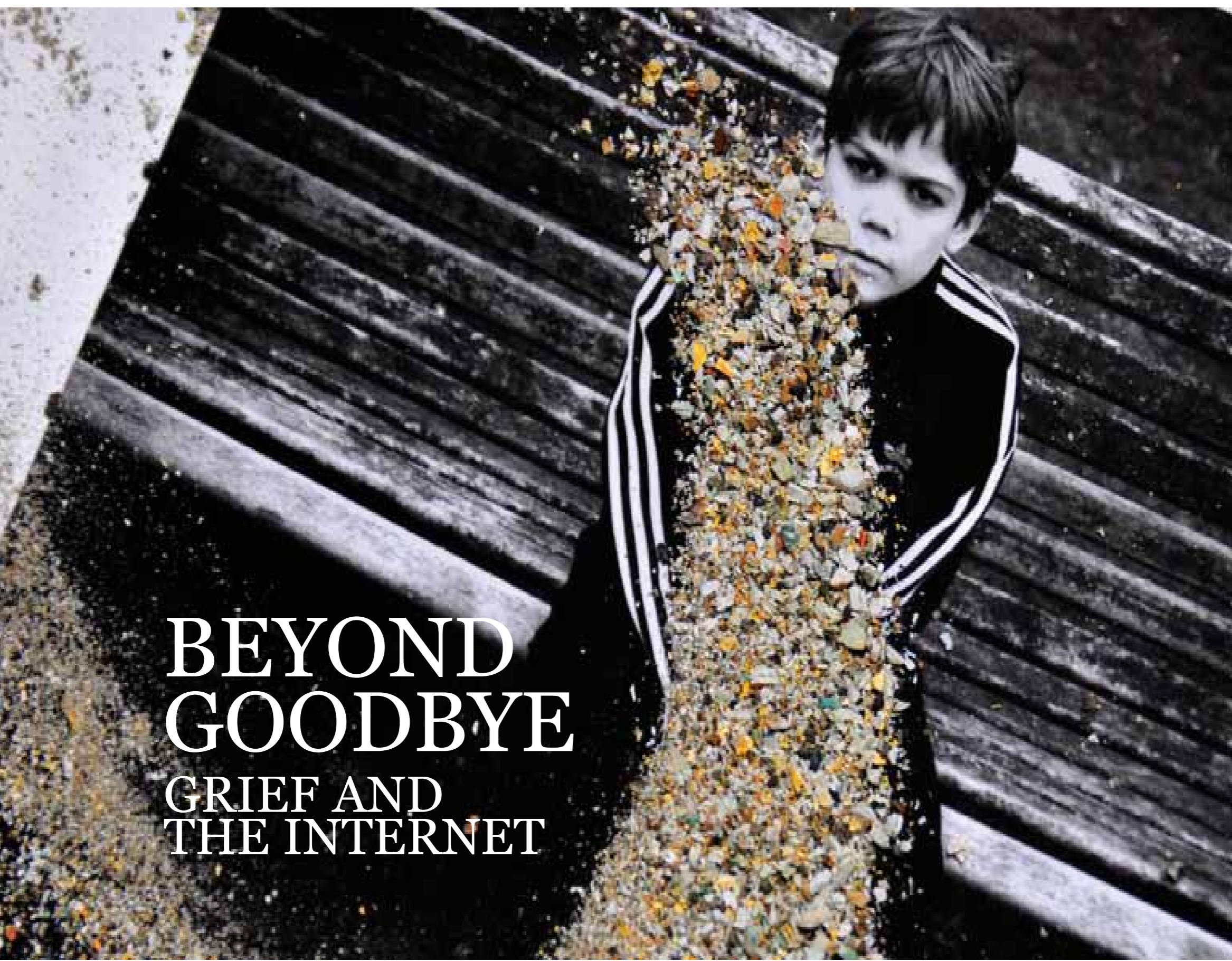
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# BEYOND GOODBYE

## GRIEF AND THE INTERNET

PERSONAL

EXPERIENCE

When film maker and author Jimmy Edmonds and Jane Harris lost their son Josh, they found strength from keeping his memory alive in the most creative and unique way imaginable. This is their experience of profound loss, it will touch you deeply.

“People don’t really die on line.” It’s three months after the funeral and Jessica, a long-standing friend of our son Joshua, has come to see us. Although close playmates through out their childhood, they had grown apart since we moved away from London, their friendship still strong but mainly exchanged via Facebook. They probably hadn’t seen each other in the flesh for over a year when Josh was killed in a road accident whilst travelling in South East Asia. He was 22.

CONTINUED

Now we are standing by Josh's tree, a young copper beech, planted in his memory and for which Jessica had performed a song she had specially composed for the occasion and which talks of her sadness of not making more of an effort to stay in touch. We share her regrets but in her remark we also realise that in some ways, life after death on the internet is not that much different from life before. Josh's Facebook page for instance is still very active; although he can no longer contribute, his on-line identity is still such that messages to him and postings on his 'wall' are an almost everyday occurrence.



JOE CARRIES HIS BROTHER'S COFFIN -  
HOMEMADE AND ADORNED WITH MESSAGES

Time was when photography was the principle way of keeping memories of our loved ones alive – their living likeness in snapshot or portrait helping us to recall a moment, a story, a life. Now alongside these visual traces we have an internet and a cyberspace in which it seems their very spirit can continue forever... a technological heaven in more ways than one.

The day after Josh died, a work colleague of his blogged about how he was on the train to work when he heard the news. "It wasn't long before my feed was full of shocked comments from friends we shared..." wrote Tom Kihl. "Many in society will take some convincing about this new way of dealing with death and grief ... grief aired publicly, immediately, emotively..." But for all the scare stories about social networks eroding cultural values, Kihl believes they still offer a very traditional form of support during difficult times. "The number of people who changed their profile picture to one of themselves and Josh was a silent but incredibly powerful statement."



JOSH'S FUNERAL - A COLLISION OF GRIEF AND HAPPY MEMORIES



A MESSAGE TO MR JOSH FROM HOLLIE



JOSH'S FUNERAL AT THE MATARA CENTRE, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Looking back now on Josh's timeline, reading again all the posts in the days and weeks that followed his death, we get a sense of a huge community carrying a collective grief and a collective memory. But it is the way in which his friends (how we all) now message him – always addressing him as 'you' – that is so striking.

Here are no 'sincere' notices of condolence as would previously be found in inobituary columns – no, these are direct, spontaneous and intensely personal messages often abbreviated into text speak, but which represent a continuing outpouring of love and sadness that somehow connects all who grieve for him. And we are not so much writing but talking to Josh – talking to him as if he were still alive on the 'other side' so to speak – and this is very much a shared conversation; the 'you' singular has somehow become 'you' plural.

This way of communicating is something we have come to know only since Josh died. It has massively informed the way in which we have been able to grieve for our son. It started with his funeral. To receive so many 'instant' messages from Josh's friends, most of whom we hardly knew (and many not at all), meant that in order to honour him and to remember him in a way that would respect this sense of his still being around for so many people, his funeral had to be as inclusive and as celebratory as possible.

But it was more contemporary ideas about how to arrange a ceremony, as much a funeral rite as a celebration of life, that helped us create an event that would be properly meaningful for both young and old, for family and for friends. The first of these ideas is that you don't need to stick to convention – there are actually 'no rules'. The second idea is that creative participation, collective as well as personal, is the key to something that we hadn't fully appreciated at the time; by creating our own special ceremony for Josh, call it a funeral or a celebration of life or whatever, we were ensuring that the day became part of the start of a mourning journey rather than an act of closure.

There were solemn moments and there were joyous moments, many tears and much laughter, contributions in song, word and deed. We built our own coffin, designed so that we could tie on ribbons with our own personal messages: we made video tributes and photo slide shows: the event itself was split into three distinct sections with portage of the coffin marking each stage and creating a symbolic journey as Josh was carried into, through and out of our presence. Then there was the viral candle lighting ceremony in which we, Josh parents and his brother and sister, lit and passed a flame to our neighbour who then passed it on, so that within minutes the room was filled with tiny lights each symbolising a desire to carry Josh's spirit with us and to keep his influence alive in our lives.



# BEYOND GOODBYE

## GRIEF AND THE INTERNET

Beyond Goodbye recently won the Award for Best Internet Bereavement Resource at the Joy of Death Festival 2012  
Jimmy Edmonds and Jane Harris © 2012



The decision to record and make a film about Josh's funeral was prompted by our need for a lasting tribute to Josh, as well as providing a container in which our feelings of loss could be expressed. 'Beyond Goodbye' seemed like an appropriate title, given that we had had no opportunity to actually bid farewell, but we also chose it because of the possibilities that the internet offers as a means of staying in touch with all who knew him and in whom that spark of Josh still exists.

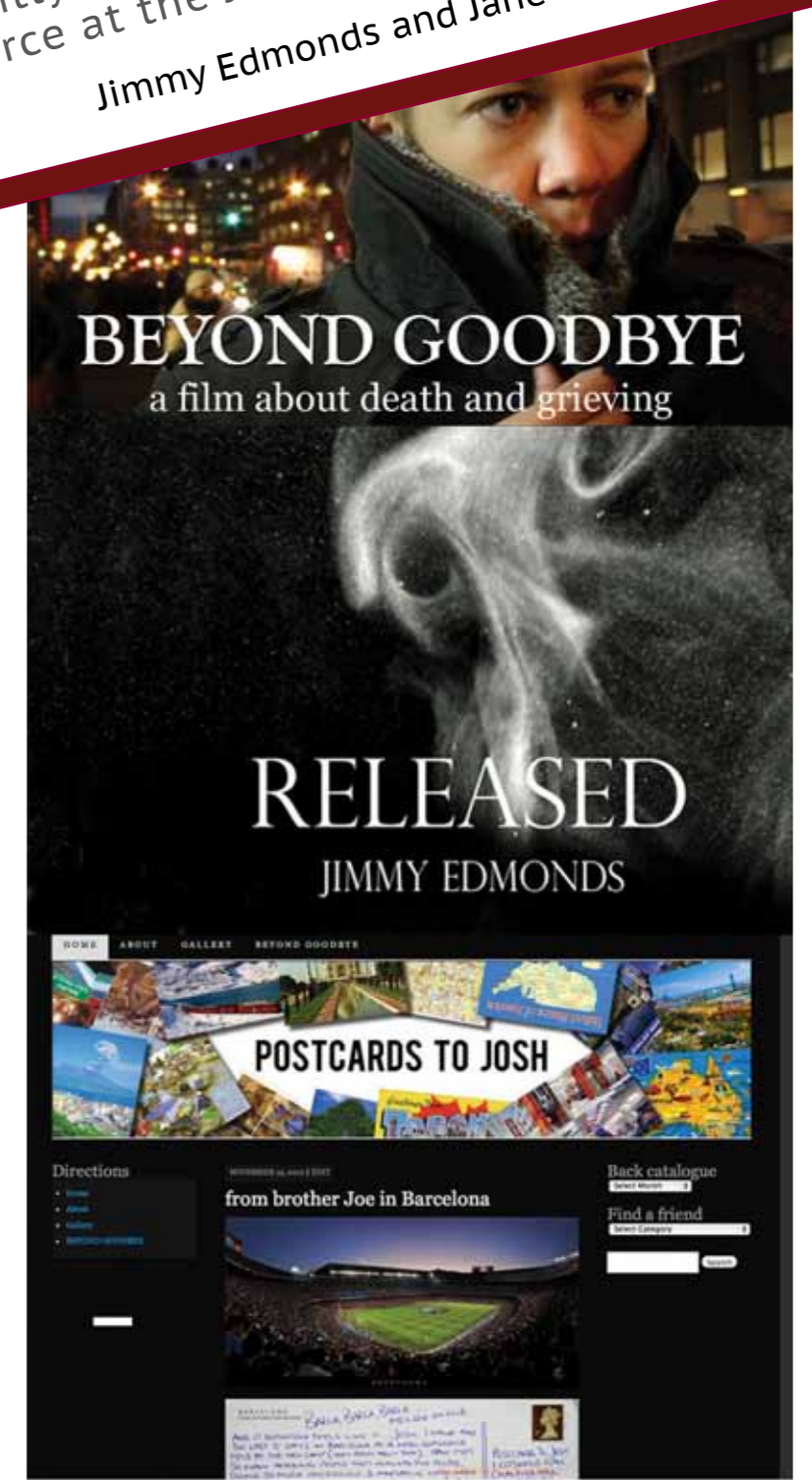
Don't shy away from this film because you're afraid it will remind you of your mortality and make you cry. Because that's exactly why you need to see it. Death is part of life and by averting our gaze we deny ourselves the chance to really live it' (Nicola Dela-Croix)

Beyond Goodbye is now a website, a blog, and a place where we can host the film, collect photos, poems and various musings. As such it has become a vital part of our journey through grief. For us this is a necessarily creative journey as we re-invent our relationship with Joshua.

As well as the film, Jimmy has also self published a photographic essay **Released** in which he has used photographs of Josh to reflect on the way we use the medium in the process of mourning. Again this has only become a possibility as we have entered the digital age, but it is the on-going exchanges that seem to have most power.

Josh was in Vietnam when he was killed, and in our parallel website **Postcards to Josh**, friends and family are invited to send old style snail-mail greetings from their travels. Nearly two years down the line and Postcards to Josh, has a constant flow of messages from all five continents. It's a place where we can tell Josh what we're up to and to share stories and memories with one another.

As a resource the internet is infinite or so it seems. As a dimension it has added powerfully to our lives. But our deaths have been enhanced too. If our website and Josh's Facebook page provide an ever evolving testament to his life they are also a conduit by which we can all come together in new relationships that have Josh at their centre. We suspect this is what Jessica meant when she said "People don't really die online."



# BUYING A FUNERAL CAN BE A TRICKY BUSINESS

JOHN UNDERWOOD EXPLAINS HOW WE NEED

TO BE CAREFUL WHEN PLANNING A FUNERAL...

**More to Death asked Jon Underwood to explain himself and share his vision for a consumer led change to the funeral industry. We hope everyone reading this will remember to refer every friend and family to [www.funeraladvisor.org.uk](http://www.funeraladvisor.org.uk) helping to establish it as a essential guide to better service.**

Buying a funeral can be a tricky business.

In our culture we are not often presented with death as most of us experience it. When we read about death in the newspapers or see it on TV it is often 'extreme death', such as gory horror movies or terrible accidents.

But statistics show that we sometimes shy away from looking at death as it affects most of us. A survey by Dying Matters shows that less than 29% of people have discussed their wishes around dying, so when looking to buy a funeral, people can often find themselves unprepared.

Most people buy funerals when they need them rather than planning ahead. Many of these people are worn out from the emotional turmoil that death can bring. Often people would

prefer to be spending time with their loved one who has died, and organising a funeral is the last thing they want to be doing. And people buying funerals often lack experience - the average person only organises two funerals in their life.

The situation is further complicated by the funeral industry, which is completely unregulated. There is huge variety between funeral directors, from those who are completely amazing to those, unfortunately, who are awful. In the past year we've seen both sides presented on TV. The BBC ran a series called Dead Good Job that showed undertakers from a range of backgrounds acting with care and sensitivity. But there were also a couple of programmes about undertakers showing really ghastly bad practice in the industry.

For example in Undercover Undertaker, which appeared on Channel 4, reporters used hidden cameras to look behind the scenes at Co-operative Funeralcare. Many viewers didn't like their industrial scale refrigeration units for bodies. Pretty much everyone was shocked by the blatant up-selling and deception of people looking to make arrangements for their dead.

This matters because funerals matter. A funeral is a one-shot deal; if it goes wrong there is no going back. A good funeral can be a profoundly moving and healing experience. A bad funeral can compound the pain of losing a loved one in a way that is almost unbearable.



There can be economic implications to your choice of funeral provider too. There can be significant variations in price between undertakers. And, as the Undercover Undertaker programme showed, it is not beyond some unscrupulous operators to add additional costs for unnecessary procedures like embalming to the bills presented to unsuspecting consumers.

I experienced this myself recently. A woman I know who works as a cleaner had to organise a funeral for her father-in-law. I asked her how much she had been quoted and she said around £4,000. She told me about what the funeral involved and it was very similar to the funeral for my own father-in-law which had taken place six months earlier – and which had cost £1,800. It seemed to both of us that an unscrupulous undertaker was charging an unnecessarily large amount.

I personally have been aware of these issues for some time and in 2010 decided to do something about them. It seemed to me that people needed more information to be able to make the right decisions about which funeral director was right for them. I was aware that in the hospitality industry the site Trip Advisor had had a transformative impact. This was a 'review site', which enabled people to write their experience of staying in certain hotels for others to read. Would the same model work in the funeral industry?

I decided that there was only one way to find out and decided to ask the Natural Death Centre to partner with me on this work. I contacted them to see what they'd say and was surprised to hear that they were already thinking along the same lines. We loosely agreed to work together and off I went with a name for the project – Funeral Advisor – and the task of creating a website.

This was slightly complicated by the fact that I had no idea how to do this! Such was my determination and belief that this resource was needed I learned how to do so from scratch, which took around a year and a half and countless hours of head-scratching frustration.

**And finally the website was born! It's at [funeraladvisor.org.uk](http://funeraladvisor.org.uk).**

At this site anyone who has organised a funeral in the last three years can write their opinion of the funeral director they worked with. The objective is really to help the best funeral directors stand out from the crowd so that funeral consumers can benefit from their help and experience. So far the reviews we've received have been overwhelmingly positive. Hopefully in time the website can help make organising a funeral a less tricky business.

[WWW.FUNERALADVISOR.ORG.UK](http://WWW.FUNERALADVISOR.ORG.UK)



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# THE GIFT OF DEATH

The word gift came to mind in a BBC news report from Wiltshire in 2012 regarding a hospital memorial erected to honour organ donors. This was inscribed "The Gift of Life". No sooner had the words reached my ears than I had created a correlation; a memorial inscribed "The Gift of Death". More to the point, it would read "The Gift of Decomposition" but that is perhaps too blunt for the British. Forgive me, I was harping back to natural burial again, a familiar problem.

A recent book by two academics, **Professor Douglas Davies and Dr. Rumble** entitled **Natural Burial: Traditional-Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation** suggests that if natural burial is chosen then the body represents a gift to nature. The authors even draw a parallel with donating the body to medical research and point out that the gift is complex with charitable, ecological and social influences. In truth, the gift by many is a supplication to their new Gods of the environment or recycling. These Gods are promoted by natural burial sites through slogans such as 'let your last footprint be a green one' or 'leave this world a better place'. The gift is felt to be especially strong in those who pre-register whilst alive, people who are donating their body to benefit society. In this way the natural burial site becomes a significant repository of memories, life, beliefs and love. It is this symbolism which celebrants use to create spiritual secular services. Feel sorry for the sterile, functional crematorium, with no relationship to an individual's life, love and beliefs. That is why so many people call cremation a conveyor belt process. The place has no Gods! Neither do the unnatural processes like Promessa, Resomation or Cryomation offer a way forward because they are too reliant on technology and deny the body's higher purpose within natural processes.

It appears that as fewer people believe in the resurrection, they have replaced this with a belief that the soul 'goes on' in some way. As a Humanist I am guilty of this and I will go on but only as atoms, as part of an ecological process. Others might see themselves as political activists, using the body to save the planet or to be embodied spiritually into a tree, the final bark, as it were. The authors of this

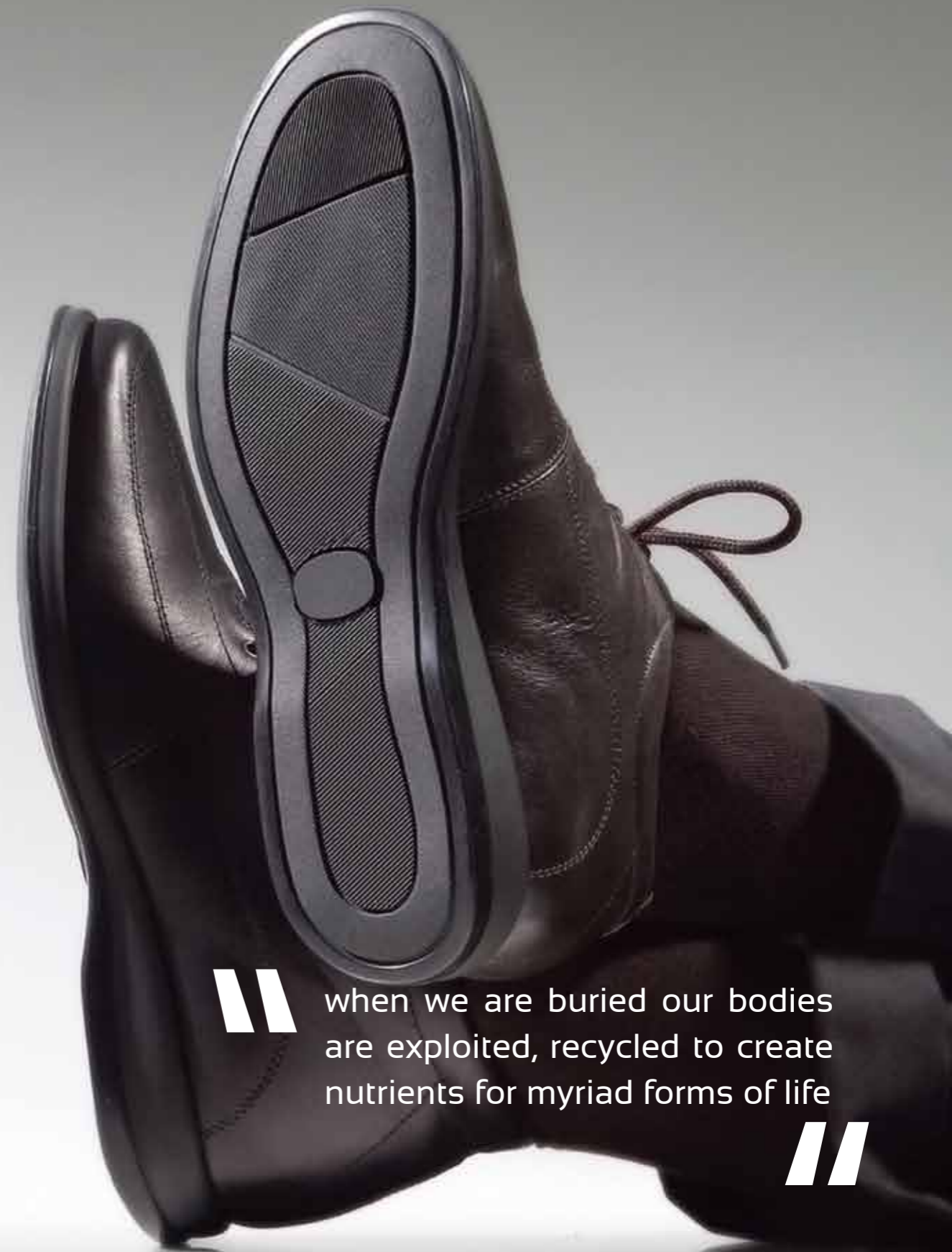
book are unequivocal, that the natural burial site is an earthly paradise, a place of life within which numerous natural systems interact. It's as if the bible was written with natural burial in mind, what with the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge. But unlike what the bible says, the corpse is not dead and waste material. It represents an animate and fecund gift to the site, decomposing and fostering new life. It is not about mortality but vitality. It also poses a profound question; whether the dead die at all. There is continuity and people feel bonds to the site, which reinforces the feeling that death is not in vain and that it has purpose.

The negative influences of religion are also reversed, the grave no longer the return to inert dust, the rotting skull invested with worms. That's all promotional blurb to market a supernatural paradise. Natural burial proves that decay is ecologically sound and the soil the matrix of life, animate and fertile, craving our decaying body. Consequently, the authors suggest that the church itself needs theologies of nature, a liturgy that relates to the cycle of life.

Let's not become too romantic! The fact is that when we are buried our bodies are exploited, recycled to create nutrients for myriad forms of life. To be exploited in this way we have to die, perhaps in pain and most usually with considerable anguish. But the science is amazing, a complex transition yet to be understood by science. Nonetheless, the fact is that the atoms presently in our bodies will be found in a tree or a wildflower in just a few years. Some might even consider that the whole purpose of life is to stop breathing and that we are at our most valuable as dead organic material. So honour the dead, all working positively for us – but only in a natural burial site!

**Ken West OBE**  
Author of  
**A Guide to  
Natural Burial.**

Available on  
Amazon.



“

when we are buried our bodies are exploited, recycled to create nutrients for myriad forms of life

”

# OUR MOTHER BECAME A TEACHER

FRAN HALL shares a very personal experience with MORE TO DEATH readers about her beautiful mother Gillian Mary Hall 1936-2010



Quite an ordinary phrase, nothing unusual about that statement, one might think – but our mother became a teacher who never met her students, a teacher who offered them profound knowledge in absolute silence.

For some 20 months, she gave six young people unique and immeasurable insight into the beauty and complexity of life, without uttering a word. She showed them things that could never be found in text books or computer programmes. She gave them a gift that has altered their lives, a gift that they will use to change the lives of hundreds of others in the future. Our mother donated her body for medical research.

On a damp October morning, my brothers and I gathered with our children at a bleak crematorium in South London for the third – and last - goodbye to the extraordinary woman who had been the centre of our family. It was a formality to be present for the cremation of her body – our real farewell had been at a huge celebration of her life held eighteen months earlier, with 250 friends, music, flowers, balloons and cakes. The second tribute to her life had been at Southwark Cathedral the following May, when we joined 800 others, families and students at a moving and emotional ceremony to give thanks for all those who had donated their bodies the previous year. This third gathering was simply to pay our last respects, as her body was finally disposed of.

As a family, we had all known for many years that our mother had made the choice of bequeathing her body when she died. My brothers and I had witnessed her signature when she completed

Every year, around 1,000 bodies are needed by UK medical schools. They are used for a number of possible purposes - Anatomical Examination, Research, or Education and Training. For information about how to donate your body, visit <http://www.hta.gov.uk/bodyorganandtissuedonation/howtodonateyourbody.cfm>

the forms, and had all agreed that it was a great idea, and a good thing to do - and then we had thought no more about it. Our mother was fit and strong, and her decline and death was something that lay long ahead in the future, or so we thought. In 2010, however, the vague symptoms that took her on a rare visit to her GP were diagnosed as symptoms of a malignant brain tumour, and sixteen weeks later she died peacefully at home.

Her body was collected the following morning and taken to the teaching hospital which had accepted it. We were left with a strange void – the normal activities following a death were not needed, no funeral arrangements were necessary, no planning of ceremony or ritual, no organising of a gathering of friends and relatives around a coffin. Instead, we had time, as much time as we needed, to decide on a way to commemorate her life. This was a gift to all of us, a gift that gave each of us space to grieve our loss, before we embarked on organising a huge event that would be a fitting tribute for such a special lady.

Looking back, I know we would never have been able to create such a special day if we had had to do it within the normal time frame of a funeral. I know also that one of the things that made the day so special was the knowledge that while we gathered to celebrate her life, our mother was continuing to give to others, as a result of her decision all those years beforehand. I had spoken to her only once about it during her illness, when I asked if she was still certain that she wanted to donate her body. "Oh yes darling," was her reply, "If I can help save just one life, it will be worthwhile."



**“** If I can help save just one life, it will be worthwhile **”**



EXCERPT FROM A TRIBUTE TO AN UNKNOWN DONOR, BY CAMBRIDGE MEDICAL STUDENTS.

‘The sacrifice made by our donor has made our start in the medical profession unique. We never knew our donor in real life but we would like you to know that we do respect her and we will never forget her, she gave her body for our sakes and for the sake of those we will treat in the future. We are sure that we will be better doctors for having received

the help of your relative, and we all feel sure that the memory of her will focus and help us in continuing our studies. This will not just be due to the unparalleled level of anatomical knowledge that she has afforded us, but the example that her selflessness has set us. We will work to be worthy of this lady’s sacrifice and it will not have been in vain. Thank you.’

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