

Home Spun Home Funerals: History Repeating

by Gerald W. Kowalski, Jr., BSCSc, MSN, MPH, CNS, ST

Perhaps we were old fashioned or perhaps we were ahead of our time. The rituals and practices of 'home funerals' were a natural part of my life, spanning a generation or two before and after my youth.

In retrospect, the 'continuity of care' always came full circle, primarily due to the fact that I come from a close knit family of nurses and funeral directors. This was women's work versus men's work that melded beautifully when it came to the care of a loved one approaching "The Threshold."

After preparing for my apprenticeship in embalming, I announced to my funeral director family that I would instead become a nurse, much to their disappointment and, ultimately, their support.

My early nursing instructors were nuns. From day one they instilled the value of the unique privilege of being with those before, during and after their 'crossing'. The nuns were so right. As nursing students, we were taught to understand that no patient should die alone.

And so it was in my family. Every capable member, young or mature, took pride in participating in the continuum of care of our beloved at home. When I was twelve years old, I recall asking my grandmother Peg, "When will Great Gramps (her father) die?" She shrugged her shoulders and with a twinkle in her eye replied, "It's not for us to know, but if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

Long before great scholars and theologians bent our thoughts and will, and often our trust in our intuition, we shared an innate belief that during times of dying and death, inactivity spawned anger, fear and depression. So, fearlessly, we kept on task, always sharing love out of common service to our beloved and each other.

The verb "to die" simply means 'to end'; the respective gerund, "dying", means 'ending.' Dying was a word that we did not couch in clichés. It was reserved for moments of family spirit and dignity and self-awareness. Honest questions deserved honest answers. Despite the context, my family's sole mission was to support our beloved in 'living their death' as they had lived their life.

At the heart of our home spun continuum of care was our best effort to remove the veils and filters between here and there, for Great Grampa to live a good death fearlessly and in clarity. He crossed with dignity and grace while introducing us to his mother, father, siblings and friends long passed through his death bed visions. This has always been an unquestionable reality for us—being surrounded by grace and the palpable energy of guides.

I recall the house my grandparents, Papa and Nana, owned, which was built and originally occupied by my great grandparents. In fact, Great Grampa built it to his own specifications—a large and stately duplex with dual large bay windows extending out to an enclosed

three season enclosed porch to be enjoyed by family with family. Great Grampa designed the homes for his succession of sons and daughters. One daughter, Aunt Dora, purchased the left home immediately and raised her family there, while my Great Grandparents occupied the right.

The Mansion, as I called it as a little boy, was a brilliant white clapboard with bluish-gray window trim, peaks and flower boxes. The large shake porch façade was painted similarly. Each side was equal in design and size. The parlor was open to a large dining room through a sweeping archway. It was a home fit for the largest family gatherings.

In time, my Great Grampa suffered a debilitating stroke that rendered him bed ridden. Three generations of nurses converged on him, and a hospital bed was placed in front of those massive bay windows providing indirect light and an amiable view. He required twenty-four hour nursing care, which Nana administered with loving devotion day and night.

Despite his inability to speak and eat, his indelible spirit more than made up for other losses. As the long retired first chief of the local fire department, he was revered by all; the house was a happy one always bursting with firemen, policemen, friends and family.

We “little ones” kept him cheerful as he lived his dying. Nothing mattered except that he crossed the threshold with grace and dignity, surrounded by those closest to his heart. Nursing measures were finally exhausted, yet we continued to care for him in a seamless fashion.

When his time came, Nana called Uncle Les and Papa to share the news. Both were at work at their funeral home, caught off guard by Gramps’ swift turn. I remember Nana saying, “Dear, he passed on. We’re going to keep him here at home for several hours. There are a lot of people still here.”

Uncle said, “Keep him at home as long as you like, but we need to be there with family.”

The doctor was called and pronounced Gramps dead, according to the time—hour, minute, second—that Nana told him. He stayed a while, too. The family doctor was a kind soul who, off to the side, reminded me, “We are not bodies with souls...we’re souls with bodies.” I politely thanked him but explained to him that I already knew that. My family believed that. Didn’t everybody?

Papa and Uncle Les, the family morticians, arrived in the hearse. This was not unusual to us, as they often stopped by in the hearse for a quick lunch. Papa and Uncle Les lovingly placed Gramps on the gurney. Nana and the rest of us covered him with a favorite blanket, gave him a kiss and off he went for more bathing, features setting, and dressing by Papa and Uncle Les back at the funeral home. His face was not shrouded in accordance with tradition. Papa said, “I’d get the usual team here to empty the house.”

Gramps never wanted embalming, nor was he keen on a wake. However, his casket was modified so that bunting could remain as the visible lining of his casket. Family lore reveals that under the bunting was a “cooling blanket” that enveloped him underneath, and when

my grandparents took their respite, the "cooling blanket" would tuck him in except for his face. The goal was to maintain a constant sub freezing temp within the casket, which was closed save for viewing. These blankets have always been available within the medical community. Large enough to wrap around a body, they create a constant flow of very cold anti-freeze solution that is automated and adjustable, negating the need for dry ice. If no blanket was used, air conditioners ran both day and night.

Before Gramps returned from the funeral home, flowers began arriving in truckloads. Uncle Les hurried to the funeral home and returned with stacks for floral arrangement. As beautiful as they were there weren't enough. A call or two later resulted in other funeral directors delivering countless flower stands and their own flowers in condolence.

The home funeral preparations were well underway and all were consumed with their roles. Under Nana's direction, each able bodied person moved all of the downstairs furniture into the three garages at the rear of the property and all was completed in two hours! Papa arrived with Gramps in the hearse, followed by Uncle Lesley and other assistants in a dark windowed SUV. We were all aware of how labor intensive a home funeral could be and we faced the challenge head on.

Logistics: they came from memory of the many beloveds who came home before, always to the same home. Gramps, in his casket, would have to enter through the widest but still narrow front porch door, in order to make a straight away entrance to his previous position in the bay windows where he crossed over. Nana supervised as the funeral home assistants turned the casket on its side as they barely squeezed through the front door and then returned the casket to its normal position. She exclaimed, "For the love of God! He's probably face down by now!"

When the casket was placed in the bay windows and opened, Nan was pleased to see that all of the bunting kept Gramps in perfect form. Then arrived the equipment: cosmetic lights, candle holders, air conditioners, the kneeler, chairs for the dining room, now arranged for viewing and contemplation, heavier drapes for the bay windows and an endless list of must-haves for a home funeral. After all, Gramps was a revered local hero and his passing was a happening!

Word of mouth spread swiftly. It was two o'clock and the news announcement in the paper that day meant a lot of visitors. His lengthy obituary simply ended with, "Home wake to begin after twelve noon and at your convenience."

My family always preferred the word "wake" to "viewing," though the word "wake" came from the Victorian and Edwardian Era which involved keeping watch over the dead in case they would wake up, which the person sometimes did, and prevented burial of living people.

Gramps' wake lasted at least four or five days. Day and night, people came in droves to pay respects and share company. Aunt Dora's adjoining home is where visitors found food and, yes, drink. In my grandparent's kitchen, where lots of folks congregated and regaled the legends of Gramps, it was tradition that a silver tray with a bottle of Seagram's and Seven-

Up be available for a high ball or two...or three. Hence, high balls flowed in great quantity throughout the evening hours.

I was twelve years old—old enough to stay the night and help with vacuuming, flower watering, etc. I remember waking one night to great laughter downstairs at nearly three in the morning! I wandered downstairs in my PJs to discover a lively group of people enjoying their high balls, toasting Gramps where he lay. He was literally the centerpiece in a sea of flowers of every type and color from floor to ceiling, leaving a narrow path to him. I slow danced with Nana to country music. She cried for a minute on my forehead and then rejoined the conversation. This was a homespun celebration of life. Well done, Gramps! Thanks for sharing your living and dying with us.

The day of Gramps' funeral was filled with pomp and circumstance. Two ladder fire trucks backed in opposite directions and extended their flag-bearing ladders in such a way as to form an arch over the front walk way. As his flag-covered casket was carried out the front door (yes, sideways again!), the bearers paused momentarily under the massive arch and the current fire chief removed his helmet and bowed to Gramps in deference and reverence. It was a thrill never to happen again. As the bearers, all sons who were firemen themselves, reached the hearse, the fire engines spun their service lights and blasted their air horns for all to hear. Gramps heard everything. And, yes, he saw everything; he was there.

From the Author

Prior to Gramps' death, the deed to the house was passed to my grandparents with the caveat that my Great Grandmother, Hope, could remain at home. She was herself in a state of dis-ease yet to manifest. Soon, she would take her place in the bay windows at home.

There were other home funerals at Nan and Papa's home before and after Gramps' death. For each home funeral, everybody knew exactly what to do and did it with grace, gratitude and precision. We believed any problem could be solved with a spiritual solution. We also realized that we cannot take someone's pain away, but the suffering is optional. Any one of us would gladly walk with you to the threshold. No one 'goes home' alone and there are no regrets at the last moments of life.

If you have had the privilege of walking someone to the 'threshold', you know about death bed visions or visitations. I have long realized that my Spirited Soul is 'limit-less' but my biology is 'limit-ed'. Nobody 'goes' before their time, no matter what the manner of death. Unfortunately, our EGO is the ruler of fear, the mother of all negative emotions. No matter when we begin our final journey we all have choices – many choices. Don't miss the opportunity! One must remember that when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.

Webster's Dictionary often limits our ability to express the inexpressible. But our inner images—pictures—can best describe profound experiences in life. To best cope with the unexplainable and often devastating, we choose random acts of kindness. We expand our self-awareness by inviting momentary lapses into nothingness, where the EGO shuts its mouth! It is so relevant and equally important to know that energy (the Soul and Spirit) cannot be destroyed; it can only be transformed. That's Physics 101.

Finally, I have learned this that I pass on to you: Don't die with the music still in you! On behalf of myself and my amazing family, most passed over now, thank you for reading this private story of our amazingly beautiful homespun home funeral.