

We Are All Just Walking Each Other Home

by Jennifer Downs

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I met for 90 minutes with a couple facing the terminal illness of the husband. The man in his mid sixties was bald from chemo and looked a bit weak though clear eyed. His wife, an earnest and friendly woman in her early fifties sat with him. The couple asked to talk to me after a walking tour of the new conservation burial site in Northern Maryland. It is quite possible it won't be ready for him before he dies, though he has picked out a spot.

I met with them in my acupuncture treatment room on a sunny, cool fall day, after they heard a talk on caring for our own at death. They were confused and overwhelmed after the talk that focused mostly on the details of what to do for a home funeral. It took me awhile to give the couple space to talk about what they are facing now, with him still working, though really not feeling well. The doctors say there is no more chemo or treatment for him.

My background as an acupuncturist makes it natural for me to explore the feelings and reasons behind what they express to me. It is part of assessing where clients are now and gaining rapport so as to be helpful as they move forward.

I started out by asking them about their emotional state and what seemed most important for the moment. It was clear that they need to decide about his work, whether or when to retire and have more time, or as he says, keep working for a money stream to pay for things. These practical concerns are so at the forefront of their minds that they cannot turn in the direction of "home funeral." They simply aren't ready.

They are committed to green or conservation burial and to finding out about home funerals, yet there are many things that need to get sorted out before they can dive into the details of the final stretch. This is a really important aspect of the kinds of situations that home funeral guides (HFG) will find as we make ourselves available to coach people about after death care. All of these various aspects are tied together and can't be disentangled.

I talked about the unspoken expectation that people are supposed to "fight" the cancer in every possible way to achieve an "honorable" outcome. I think of it as people feeling they must "die with their boots on." By the time I mentioned this he had already shared that he was quite at peace with dying. He considered he has had a good life. He felt he

should do whatever he could to live for his wonderful wife and young daughter. It was important, though delicate, at this point in the conversation, to acknowledge that it is important to allow himself to accept what is actually happening even as he and they seek more avenues to healing and remission. We wandered into an open conversation about how they see talking to their young daughter.

It is important, I believe, for us to talk with each other about these situations that will inevitably come up and begin to refine how we will talk and listen to people. There is a long and winding road to the subject of actual home funeral with a possible green or conservation burial. Being comfortable with this stage of the process is a vital part of what we as HFG's need to do and provide.

Since this is such a new and groundbreaking arena, we must stay willing to learn as we go, become mindful of our primary role as educators, and stay in conversation with each other and with people we come in contact with who are already in the arena of end of life and after death care.

I am not sure how this will unfold for NHFA and I'm sure many others are more at the forefront of the conversation. I just need to say that it is a really important conversation. We talked that day about practical considerations like the importance of having a financial advisor review options with various scenarios. Once they know more about their options, they can relax and make decisions. Even choosing whether he should retire is unclear until they have that information. NHFA must clarify its own role in the financial arena. Until HFG's are clear about what we are offering and how money will be handled, we will not have a path for this movement to grow. Guidelines would be helpful.

The husband is researching other options to find out-of-the-box help for his condition. He is and stressed in his desire to do everything he can. By this time I felt comfortable exploring that question with them. Remembering the film *Griefwalker*, which they have seen, I recalled that it is important to also say to the daughter, that if and when I die, I know you will be OK.

Another idea was to have a "healing circle/gathering" in which they play the music he likes for his memorial service and he gets to be there and hear it. It can be a time to tell stories, play music, or cry together. This was a comforting idea for them. Another gathering could occur after he is gone.

Much like people in the healing arts, spiritual guides, or religious leaders, we must keep our own growth a priority. These huge core issues that people are facing in preparing to deal with death are worthy of respect and awe. The hunger is there. The interest is there. We are part of a paradigm shift that will evolve more over and beyond our lifetimes. Setting an example of courageously exploring these big issues that remain questions even as we come to some answers is challenging and difficult for us, while also rewarding.

After the conversation with this couple, I felt deep affection and gratitude for them in their willingness to grasp this time fully. I was awed by how time took on another quality that afternoon, with the sun streaming in the south-facing windows of my large treatment room. As we spoke, we all relaxed and shared openly. After all, as the song of the Threshold Choir goes, “ We are all just walking each other home.”

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