

Quaker Burial Societies:

Departing in the Company of Brethren

by Ashana Marie Larsen

Every organization calls itself into being as a belief that something more can be accomplished by joining with others. At the heart of every organization is a self reaching out to new possibilities.

Life opens to more possibilities through new patterns of connection.

If we can be in the world in the fullness of our humanity, what are we capable of? ...What could we accomplish if we worked with life's natural tendency to organize? Who could we be if we found a simpler way?

— From *A Simpler Way* by Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers

All religions speak of being in communion with others in some way. As social beings, there are no greater times to be in union with others than when we reach seminal moments in our lives—births, weddings, deaths—that stir emotions larger than ourselves and call for the company of others to share our joy and our grief. There is a growing movement to return death, our last ritual, to the care of the family and our religious congregations, allowing us to depart this world, not in the hands of strangers,

but in the company of our like-minded brethren. Congregational burial societies are being created all over the country. Pennsylvania, in particular, has become an influential location in this new burial movement, with various denominations creating burial societies. Among these are the Old Order River Brethren, the Old German Baptist, the Fellowship Church, Rabbi Wasserman's Chevra Kadisha, the Schwenkfelders, the Bhutanese Hindu Community, and in the forefront, the Quakers.

David Morrison, a plain-clothed, conservative Quaker with a long, white beard and broad-brimmed straw hat, could easily be mistaken for Amish to the casual eye. A quick-witted elder law attorney and long time advocate for family-directed deathcare, he is not surprised by the growing interest in burial societies among many religious organizations. It feels both natural to him and the obvious choice. Morrison is a lifelong member of the Lancaster area congregation, Lampeter Friends.

The Lampeter meeting house was a well-used stop on the underground railroad and hasn't changed much since that

time. It still functions without electricity, running water, and heat. Its cemetery has always been green and, due to the work of Morrison and other friends, has recently been revitalized. Keeping it natural has been the priority. "We follow William Penn's burial guidelines from the 1600s—no funeral directors, hand-dug graves, shrouds or simple Amish-style coffins no more than 14 inches high to minimize dirt displacement," Morrison explained.

Morrison has been doing burials without a funeral director for more than 30 years. "I learned from Quaker Ernest Morgan," he recounts, "who took over his meeting's burial group in 1955." With an incredible memory for detail, Morrison knows everyone and sometimes talks so fast his mind seems ten paces ahead of his words. He keeps up an active law practice, is devoted to the Funeral Consumer Alliance and, despite how busy he is, somehow always has time to answer questions related to deathcare.

When I emailed Morrison about my father's impending death, his response came through a half hour later, detailing all the legal information I needed to know. He carefully numbered the steps in the process, one through eight. The last included the following advice: "If threatened by an FD [funeral director] just smile and say nothing. Pretend you are Elizabeth Cady Stanton."

In the beginning of his involvement with deathcare, Morrison worked with Mary McLane, a registered nurse, midwife, and fellow Quaker. Morrison took care of the green burials and McLane helped with the cremations and pacemaker removals. One of his life-long missions was, in his own words, to "empower and educate families to be able to direct their own funerals with the participation of all generations." After more than 30 years leading the Lancaster area deathcare movement, Morrison knew he couldn't continue without more help. He found the support he was looking in the soft-spoken, enthusiastic Debra Raudenbush, a member of the progressive Quaker Lancaster Monthly Meeting, which had an active environmental committee.



David Morrison and Debra Raudenbush at their local green cemetery

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Morrison and Raudenbush brought Penny Rhodes and Cheryl Clark to speak to the Lancaster Monthly Meeting. Rhodes and Clark are members of Natural Undertaking, a nonprofit advocacy group offering education on home and green funerals.

Clark, a member of Schuylkill Friends Meeting in Phoenixville, PA, was a founding member of Natural Undertaking. Because of the cathartic personal experiences she had caring for family members, she felt led to help religious communities learn to care for each other. “I believe that death is at the heart of every religion and it is in that threshold experience that we find the seeds to our humanity and our divinity,” Clark explained.

“Quakers are a society of friends who are part of an experiential and mystical religion. We were meant to bear witness to each other’s joys and trials. We have testimonies of simplicity and integrity and, to me, integrity means doing what needs to be done. Death is very fertile ground for growth, wisdom, and experience of the divine. I want to empower congregations to participate in this sacred threshold surrounded by friends who know each other and spiritually support each other instead of giving this sacred opportunity away to a funeral home.”

“I was really touched by Cheryl and Penny’s presentation,” Raudenbush explained, “and by the stories they told of what brought them to the ministry and the home funeral movement.”

Around the same time, Raudenbush learned about the film *Departures*, a moving story of an out-of-work Japanese musician. This young man takes a job out of desperation as a funeral assistant and finds a new vocation that changes his life. The movie portrays the ancient art of body care—performed in Japan for centuries—in which the body is prepared in a sacred ceremony at home. Raudenbush teamed up with Morrison to show the film to the Lancaster Meeting.



Terry Wallace, keeper of the grounds, Lampeter Quaker Meeting House

After these two events, Raudenbush had what she refers to in Quaker-speak as a *leading*, a sacred and divine calling to help families care for their loved ones at the time of death. “I was having almost daily ‘envisionings’ of me caring for deceased bodies of my loved ones,” she explained. “I processed this with some of the elders of the Quaker meeting and was invited to be the convener of a burial committee to investigate green burial, home funerals, and cremations.”

Initially, Raudenbush began to hold bimonthly meetings with about a dozen interested people, and the group composed a mission statement. They created a body preparation team and invited Rhodes and Clark to come again for a more detailed workshop on caring for the body. They held several sessions to practice what they learned, put together a body prep supply kit, and moved on to creating a body removal team. “I have a gift for organizing and facilitating,” Raudenbush explained, laughing.

In a short time, under her careful guidance, the Lancaster Friends Care Group for Death and Dying created six subgroups including a cremation team, a green burial team, and a vigil team with a roster of 30 people including eight men. At the heart of these is the visitation team, a group of members who do outreach to community members approaching the last stage of life. Before a person is actively dying, visitation team members visit and get to know the person so, at the time of death, they can help provide a more intimate experience for all involved.

Raudenbush knew she might not always be available when a call came about a death. She wanted to make sure as many others as possible were prepared to jump in when needed. “The understanding is that, when the need arrives, we have a call list and whoever is available can come forward,” Raudenbush explained. “If you are on the body removal team, then you are likely not to have the energy to do the body preparation, so that is a separate group. If you have worked to prepare the body, you might not have the energy to be present through the vigil, so we have another team that does that.”

When the first call came in, both Raudenbush and Morrison were out of town, but because of the careful planning, all aspects went smoothly. “Everyone involved said it was truly amazing,” recalled Raudenbush. “Although we didn’t have everything worked out, the pieces that weren’t in place just seemed to come together when needed.”

“The second call was for a man who was very large. We really needed strong men to carry him. Someone on the removal team started going down the list and calling people, and before we knew it, we had more than enough help.”

The teams called on Morrison’s expertise to help them with the myriad of details. They formed a research library, made contact with a local crematorium, and worked out special pricing for their members. For further research and inspiration, Raudenbush attended the National Home Funeral Alliance Conference in October 2010.

What advice would she give to other congregations starting out in this work? “Just do it!” She replied, smiling. “Personally for me, I like to keep things simple. Basically, we just worked with the information Rhodes and Clark shared with us and used their book, *When a Loved One Dies: Things You Should Know*, as our reference. I think the whole idea that we live in an Amish community where we have always taken care of our own gave us the confidence that we could do it. It is all very simplistic and in line with the Quaker testimony. This has kept us grounded and feeling pretty comfortable with the process. If you are just starting out, don’t worry about having a big plan. Just start learning everything you can and see who is interested.”

Raudenbush stressed the importance of not pressuring anyone since so many people today are not comfortable with the topics of death and dying. The visitation team is available for anyone dealing with a life-threatening illness, not just people who want a home funeral or a green burial. She feels our society in general has desensitized people, and so these ideas often need to be approached slowly. Within her working care group, the process of being able to talk openly about death and dying has brought them much closer to each other and helped build strong relationships. “It has raised the awareness of how death is a part of life.”

As both the interest and comfort level spread, she was asked to hold a study session for an hour each Sunday at Lancaster Meeting, which she has called “Conversations on Death and Dying.” “This really speaks to how the awareness has broadened and people have a desire to become comfortable with the whole idea of the death process.”



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This fall Raudenbush stepped down as convener for the group, but she had laid a firm foundation, and the group continues to fine-tune its workings with such things as an obituary group, now in its formative stages.

For Raudenbush, this work continues to be her focus. For the time being she has been led to join Final Arrangements, a neighboring Mennonite community that started a deathcare study group. “Final Arrangements” at the Akron Mennonite Church is a course designed by Don Zeigler and Jerry Shank to investigate all the deathcare options available, with a special emphasis on exploring options for body care. Now in its third session, they have 30 attendees and have opened up the group to outsiders for the first time.

Although still a Quaker, Raudenbush is highly involved in the Mennonite community and has a long history with the church. “I planted the seed and got things started at Lancaster Friends and now I am with this group. I am just blown away by the interest level. People are coming with such gratitude and, I would say, even excitement. There is really a special energy created by claiming your own process, in being able to talk about death, embrace it, and plan for it.”

These two communities, working on similar missions, have found many ways to combine their efforts. The Mennonites have their own casket-making team and have made caskets available to the Quakers. The shroud-making committees of both groups have combined in a shroud burial support team. One man has created a body removal apparatus out of wood, and the two congregations have made themselves available for each other’s services.

The Quakers now maintain two historic green burial grounds in the Lancaster area that once belonged to the Amish, one in Lampeter and one in Cambridge. These cemeteries are open to other congregations as long as they are willing to abide by the natural burial rules. In February, Final Arrangements will be offering a class by Dr. Richard Weaver, a retired internist and surgeon, about natural dying.

When we begin to honestly look at what it means to be on this earth for a finite amount of time, embracing what we have and what we know we will eventually lose, we learn what it means to be in communion with others. The patterns of connection that are interwoven among people as they work together illuminate the healing that can come about when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable together and join together with integrity to do what needs to be done. As Raudenbush considered everything that has been accomplished by these two congregations in supporting both the physical side of death and fostering its spiritual side, she exclaimed, “It is really alive! It is birthing!”

Mission Statement

Lancaster Care Group for Death and Dying

We, the participants in the Lancaster Friends Care Group for Death and Dying, desire to “wrap our arms around,” while being present to a dying Friend and the family of the Friend, during the time of the Friend’s transitioning through death, to the final disposition of the body, according to the Friend’s wishes.

Our ministry may include helping to process and prepare the details of one’s final arrangements; home and/or hospital visitations; removal of the body; preparation of the body for vigil, burial, or cremation; preparing and holding a vigil; organizing a green burial or cremation; notifying Care and Counsel for a memorial service—all without the use of a funeral director.

This ministry embodies the sacredness of death. It is spiritually led, reflecting and practicing our Quaker beliefs of simplicity, community and green consciousness, and fostering “conscious dying.”

Ashana Marie Larsen is a freelance writer homesteading in a 240-year-old crooked house in Pennsylvania. She is a founding member of Natural Undertaking, a nonprofit organization offering information on home funerals and green burials. <http://naturalundertaking.org>.