

The Dying Year

Full Moon Funeral

by Marilynne Rush, 2009

The moon was full and brilliant on the night I first attended a home funeral. It was in the home of my friend Audrey, whose mother Carol had died of cancer. Audrey and her sister Anna cared for their mother at home with the help of hospice. They didn't have the money or the desire to send her body to a funeral home.

I had met with Audrey and Anna three days earlier. They realized that they needed to make some plans for what to do when their mother passed. Audrey's little apartment was transformed into a sick room, with her mom's few possessions and her medications and equipment taking up the whole living room. Boxes and furniture crowding Audrey's living space. Carol's brother and the hospice chaplain were also visiting, so Audrey, Anna, and I sat at the kitchen table and had a cup of tea and talked, while the others sang hymns and prayed in the adjoining "bedroom."

Audrey and Anna said, "We don't know what to do when our mom dies." I replied, "Well, there's really very little you have to do. You don't have to do anything in a hurry." This seemed to be a big relief to them. I explained that when their mom passed, it wasn't an emergency, that they could learn what was involved in the process of caring for Carol's body at home.

I explained the steps. The first thing would be to thoroughly wash her body, similarly to how they had been giving her bed baths. Then they would need to pick out some clothes and dress or swaddle her. They would adorn her and arrange her body in the way they wanted her to look for the next few days. Her body would remain on her marital bed that had been moved into the apartment to be her resting place and give her a sense of home. A few pieces of dry ice would be wrapped in cloths and placed underneath her body to cool it and delay decomposition. This could be replenished as needed. I assured them that, if they wanted to, they could call me and I would guide them through the process in person.

This all sounded good to them. They wanted to be the ones to care for their mom. They knew that Audrey's home was the right place for Carol to remain with her own things and the people who knew and loved her surrounding her. After Carol died, Audrey and Anna could decide if there was anyone else they wanted to visit and if they wanted to have a gathering or ceremony.

They already knew that Carol wanted to be cremated. I explained that I would refer them to a funeral director who would help with a home funeral and would facilitate the transportation to the crematory. We arranged to get together again in a week to go over more details, and they planned to call me at the time of death.

Three days later, before we had time to talk again, Audrey called me to say that her mother had stopped breathing. "We had just gotten off the phone with Anna. Anna told

The Dying Year

mom she loved her, and mom opened her eyes for a moment. When I was getting ready to let the dog out, I heard a breath, and then I realized that I didn't hear any more. I turned and looked at her, waiting for it, but it didn't come."

"How are you doing?" I asked. "I'm OK, I guess. What should I do?" I replied, "You should call the hospice nurse. She'll want to come over. But other than that, there's nothing you have to do right now. Just be with your mom. Do you want me to come over?"

"No, Anna is on her way. I don't want to bother you."

"That's OK, you're not bothering me," I said. "Just call me when you're ready."

It was 10 pm. I had been in bed reading, and I knew I wouldn't be sleeping that night. I had so many thoughts and questions. When would she call me back? Should I just go? Did she really need me now but not want to say it? What supplies would I need?

I got up, got some clothes ready, checked my bag, and prepared a snack. After an hour, Audrey called me back to say that Anna was in transit and would be awhile. She was having car trouble. She wanted me to come over.

As I drove to Audrey's apartment, the largest full moon I ever saw illuminated the highway directly in front of me. Grandmother Moon provided a brilliant beacon, a path. For many years I was a home birth midwife and called my practice "New Moon." Now, as I left to attend my first home funeral, I was being led by the full moon.

Audrey's apartment was on the ground floor of an old Victorian mansion. I thought, "There have probably been other deaths in this home over the years, and probably home funerals, too." In the old days, most people died at home and were cared for by family. It has been only in the last three to five generations that people have stopped doing this.

Audrey greeted me at the door and gave me a little hug. She led me to her mother's bedside. Carol looked peacefully asleep. The lack of movement made me stop and wait, as if I had to check for myself to believe she was really not breathing.

Audrey took my coat and I squeezed her hand. At first we just talked as Audrey moved around straightening things in the tiny apartment. Many thoughts and memories were coming to her, and she wanted to share them. After a cup of tea, we took the dog out and looked at the moon while she had a cigarette. It seemed that this kind of visiting and chatting was exactly what Audrey needed right then, as if telling me the details helped her believe them: "I went to work, I came home, I had dinner, my mom died."

Anna arrived after about an hour. It was time to begin washing Carol's body. I knew that if we waited too long, the body would be very stiff, making washing more difficult. Anna immediately sat on the bed, caressed her mom's hair, and talked to her. We got a bowl of warm water, picked out some nice-smelling soap and some linens, and Anna began to carefully and lovingly undress Carol. It was slightly difficult because her arms didn't bend very well. But Anna was not daunted.

The Dying Year

“Oh, her arms are getting stiff,” she said. “I guess that’s what happens when you stop breathing and you die. Oh, mama, you’re not breathing anymore.” Anna continued talking as she gently washed every inch of her mother’s body, tears streaming down her face.

“Look at her beautiful hair. She was so proud of it. Remember how she did our hair when we were young? Her lips are so dry; can we put on some ointment? Oh, mama, you washed me so many times when I was a little girl. Thank you for caring for me and for giving me life. With these breasts you nurtured me. With these hands you guided me. With these arms you rocked me.” As Anna gently turned her mother over, she said, “Look, her back is still warm. Oh, I want to hold you just a little bit longer and feel that warmth. I love you. I’m so glad we are taking care of you now and not anyone else. I don’t want anyone to take you away yet. This is so special. I will take good care of you now, mom.”

At the end of the bath, Anna and Audrey chose some special scented oil and took turns rubbing it on her feet and hands. I can’t begin to describe the reverence in the room, the love and honor and emotion flowing all around.

Audrey and Anna were in the haze of extreme grief, openly crying, talking, and processing. To feel one’s mother’s body turn cold and become stiff requires a great deal of strength and will. At times I thought it was almost too much. I began to feel a little afraid. Was this really a good thing? Should these daughters be doing this? Were they going to be all right?

Although I had studied how to be a home funeral guide, I had never done this nor witnessed these actions, this kind of extreme, raw emotion. All the memories of my childhood, when I was told not to cry, to keep my distance and not break down, came flooding back to me. I had no model to reassure me that this was okay, that these daughters would make it through. I had to trust in myself and in these friends. I had to trust that they could handle it. And I had to trust in the wisdom of our foremothers, our great grandmothers and aunties, who must have done this for their own kin.

When I first heard about home birth when I was pregnant with my first child, a light bulb went off. I gave birth at home then became a midwife to help other women birth at home. I consulted with hundreds of women and their families, attending them through the night while their healthy bodies did what they were made to do — push a baby out into the world.

Five years ago, when I learned it was possible to attend the dead at home, another light bulb went off. As a hospice nurse, I had accompanied family members as their loved one died; as a midwife I had been with parents as they said goodbye to a dying newborn child. I had seen overwhelming and all-encompassing grief, and now I learned that you could be at home during the time immediately after death as well.

The Dying Year

Being with Audrey and Anna after their mother died was so much like being with a woman in labor. I attended them, but it was very clear that this was about what they needed to do. Like a midwife, I was there to reassure them that this was natural. When we got scared, I told them it was all right.

Audrey and Anna cared for Carol at home for more than two days. On the third morning, they arranged for the funeral director to retrieve her body. As they lovingly helped place her on a sheet on the floor, they tucked flowers, love notes, and mementos in her arms and wrapped her up. They escorted her body to the waiting black van.

We got in my car and followed the van the few miles to the crematory. It was an industrial-looking place, about the size of a large garage. It had a cement floor, high ceiling, and metal walls. A technician in work clothes opened the door for us. There was no family waiting area or place to sit.

Audrey and Anna went directly to the open cardboard cremation box on the cart where their mother had been placed. They touched her one last time, lingered a few minutes, and then wrapped the sheet over her face and placed the lid on the box. The lid had been at their home the last two days and had been decorated by visiting family members and friends. It was adorned with loving phrases, well wishes, and expressions of grief, poetry, and art. It was beautiful.

The box was pushed into the retort, with Anna and Audrey's assistance, and the doors were shut. The technician asked them if they wanted to be present when he pushed the button; they said yes. We heard a whooshing sound, paused a moment, and then slowly walked out into the cold winter day.

In the driveway outside, Anna looked at me and said, "That was really difficult, but I feel relieved." She continued, "We were with her all the time; we never left her body. I'm kind of glad to know exactly what happened. We saw it all through. I don't have to wonder where she was or what happened to her."

Later, Audrey told me, "It's as if we just waded right into it. We didn't skirt around the edges, dipping our toe in just a little; we walked right in."

Audrey and Anna have made their way through. Now, several years later, they reach out to other families, helping to teach about home funerals and sharing the precious photographs of that time at home with their mother.

Since that full moon, I have found a new calling. I educate families who wish to care for their loved one at home after death. And I have good teachers – the families that I serve. Anna, herself a midwife, had been a student model for me at a midwife workshop thirty years ago. Audrey, using the gifts of her mother's journey, became my assistant and helped several other families care for their own dead. We all teach each other. The circle continues. And the moon, our ancestors, guide us.