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## *Personal Perspective*

# The Industry Take-Over of Home Birth and Death

*Merilynne Rush*

### ABSTRACT

The generation in the United States who renewed interest in home birth is also returning to the tradition of funeral care at home. Caring for your own dead at home is legal in all 50 U.S. states.

In the last three to four generations, the event of childbirth has been removed from the American home and become a medical event. In a similar fashion, funeral care that once was performed by the family in the home has been taken over by a large, powerful, and costly funeral industry. It used to be that when someone died (usually in the home), the family washed and dressed the body themselves, and the loved one was laid out in the front parlor where family and friends came to pay their respects and say good-bye. However, with the development of modern embalming techniques that began during the U.S. Civil War, the rise of the funeral industry that occurred shortly after, changes in family structure and dynamics, and lack of knowledge, we

lost the art of caring for our own dead. In fact, we have departed so far from tradition that most of us now consider being around a dead body to be morbid, dangerous, or illegal. Gone are the family, cultural, and religious traditions of honoring our loved ones through meaningful and personal death care at home.

There is a group of people, predominantly women, working hard to change this and bring death care back home. They call themselves death midwives, death doulas, or home funeral guides, and they preach that not only is it possible to have a home funeral, it is beneficial. Those who have attended a home funeral (sometimes called a "green funeral") have consistently spoken about how meaningful and healing the experience was. Caring for the body of your loved one after death is an extension of the love and attention that occurred during life. Seeing the small changes the body goes through helps one to understand in a visceral way that death has occurred, which in turn leads to acceptance and less complicated grief. When people are directly involved and have control and knowledge of the death care process, they move through the pain of loss in an empowering way.

Home funeral educators offer presentations and workshops that teach families how to have a home funeral. Some educators also make themselves avail-

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**Merilynne Rush, BA, BSN**, is a Midwife and Nurse, a Member of the Board of Directors of the National Home Funeral Alliance and the Michigan Doula Connection, and the Owner of After Death Home Care home funeral and green burial consultation service, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, [mrush@afterdeathhomecare.com](mailto:mrush@afterdeathhomecare.com). ©2013 by *The Journal of Clinical Ethics*. All rights reserved.

able to families at the time of death to guide them through the process of having a home funeral. They spread the word that the home funeral option is healthy, natural, simple, inexpensive, and uplifting for the family and their community.

The same baby boomers that brought back home birth are now embracing home death, home funeral, and green burial. They are discovering that embalming is very rarely required. They are learning about environmentally friendly alternatives to cremation and conventional burial. Previously, those who did not want the expense and grandiosity of an expensive funeral and environmentally damaging burial thought that their only alternative was a direct cremation, an approach that eliminates the ability to say good-bye in person and can lead to deep pain and loss. As people gain accurate information about home funeral, they lose their fears and grasp on to its simplicity. Home visitation encourages personal expression and community involvement. There is no need to attempt to make a generic funeral home seem homelike.

Natural birth and home birth are safe, empowering, and beautiful experiences that honor the woman and her family and welcome the baby into a loving, low-tech, and personal environment that encourages lifelong health for the family. A home funeral respects the dignity and individuality of the deceased, provides a loving and honoring way to say good-bye, empowers family and friends to be involved, and helps the bereaved on their grief journey.

#### RESOURCES

[www.AfterDeathHomeCare.com](http://www.AfterDeathHomeCare.com)

[www.homefuneralalliance.org](http://www.homefuneralalliance.org)

[www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)

[www.homefuneraldirectory.com](http://www.homefuneraldirectory.com)