
Call the death midwife

A new breed of spiritual guide helps families mourn the loss of a loved one

BY ANNE BOKMA

Richard Griebel believed the way he handled his death was the last great lesson he could give his four adult children.

When the cattle rancher from Castor, Alta., was diagnosed with terminal thyroid cancer five years ago, he carefully considered how he wanted to depart this earth. He hired Sarah Kerr, a 48-year-old Calgary “death midwife” who offers “nature-based spiritual support for illness, death or loss” to help plan his final exit.

Griebel died at home on the night of May 16, 2014, at age 62. That same day, Kerr began a four-day ceremony to help his family and friends mourn his passing

with a series of rituals that let them say goodbye in an intimate and profound way. Griebel’s wish was to die at home, on the family farm where he had been raised. In the wee hours that night, his wife, siblings and children gathered to wash and dress his body. The following evening, about 35 people gathered for a storytelling circle to share what they loved and would miss most about him. On the third day, his body was placed in what they called a “prairie canoe” — a platform made of poplar and spruce trees and lined with a bison hide — and he was carried among a procession of 120 to a service held at a location on his farm known as “The Rock,” where there was an enormous boulder that had been the site of many family celebrations. (His ashes would later be buried there.) On the fourth and final day, 400 people attended a public service held at the local community hall and presided over by Kerr.

“By the time his wife and children went to that large gathering, they had had enough time to process the grief and come to terms with his death so that they could

receive the love and support being offered in that public funeral,” says Kerr, who charged \$5,000 for her services, far less than typical funeral costs, which can easily top \$10,000. “People put a lot of money into hearses and caskets and flowers, but that doesn’t bring healing. What brings healing is being with the process of death emotionally and spiritually.”

Death midwives like Kerr are advocating for a new approach to dealing with death. They are part of an emerging social movement that encourages people “to reclaim the experience of dying — much the way baby boomers did with home births and home schooling,” says Kerr.



Sarah Kerr is a death midwife in Calgary who helps people prepare for life’s end.

These practitioners, who are unregulated and unlicensed, come from various backgrounds: some are medical professionals; others are therapists or healers. Their role is to create meaningful death experiences and memorial rituals by planning home funerals and vigils, facilitating end-of-life discussions and offering bereavement support. They can also assist with practical matters, including “disposition consultation” and dealing with legal paperwork such as death certificates. Kerr says death midwives like herself fill the void for people who don’t belong to a faith community but still yearn for an ending infused with meaning and ritual. Although she eschews the billion-dollar funeral industry, she says she’s willing to provide her services alongside funeral directors — and clergy. “The rituals I use can be adapted to any spiritual tradition,” Kerr says.

Only about two-dozen death midwives are active in Canada, but their number is growing. The Canadian Community for Death Midwifery was launched this year and administers a Death Midwifery in Canada Facebook group with more than 1,500 members. BEyond Yonder, a new program providing death midwifery training in Canada, is launching this fall with a 12-week, \$2,000 online course.

Rayne Johnson, 60, is a death midwife and massage therapist in Edmonton. She provides workshops on end-of-life issues to medical and palliative care professionals, as well as coaching for \$80 to \$100 an hour to those who

are dying and to their caregivers. She says her 20 years of experience in palliative care have shown her that while 80 percent of people want to die at home, the majority end up dying in institutions. Misconceptions around home funerals abound, she adds. For example, most people don’t know you can keep a body at home for up to 72 hours. Death midwives will provide dry ice (in plastic wrap) to keep the body cool and prevent it from decomposing, and you don’t need to hire a funeral director to transport the deceased to a cemetery. When a close friend died 18 years ago, Johnson was among those who drove the woman’s body to the gravesite in a station wagon.

Death midwives say grief is a normal response to loss. Instead of tamping it down, we should embrace it fully. Healing rituals — such as washing and anointing the body, singing, drumming, storytelling and chanting — can help the living cope with their loss. “We have neutralized and sanitized our practices around death. Denial is the name of the game,” says Kerr. “I can’t tell you how many grieving spouses have told me the first thing they are offered to cope is prescription medication.”

Rochelle Martin, 42, a registered nurse and death midwife in Hamilton who offers “death care” workshops for health-care, religious and community groups, says people benefit from the services of death midwives “because culturally we have forgotten how to grieve.” She blames protracted bereavement and depression after the loss of a loved one on an inability to come face to face with death. When patients die in the hospital, Martin encourages the families to hold the body

of the deceased and wipe their face tenderly with a washcloth that she provides. “It’s an invitation to touch their loved one,” she says. “Families will describe these moments as an invaluable final expression of love, one that is imperative in the process of saying goodbye.”

For some, touching a dead body or displaying a corpse may seem too macabre. But these ideas aren’t new. Until about 100 years ago, funerals were a community undertaking with the family preparing the body and welcoming guests into their home. Today, in many of Canada’s Indigenous communities, this is still a normal practice.

When Johnson’s father, who attended Third Avenue United in North Battleford, Sask., died 14 years ago, she and her five siblings built his casket while he was still alive, searing it with the cow brand he used on his farm. The family kept vigil next to his body for two days at home and took his body out for one last drive around the farm in the back of a pickup truck before he was buried. “It made his death very real,” says Johnson. “We have to face it, rather than deny it.”

Anne Bokma is a journalist in Hamilton.