Continuum - Multicultural Practices in Grief and End of Life

Citizen Folklorists & Field School Participants:
Juana M. Ambrose, MSW *
Kristine Bentz, Life-Cycle Celebrant & Home Funeral Guide
Gail Bornfield *
Natalie S Brown *
Anne Mayer Dalton, MPH & photojournalist *
Elena Díaz Bjorkquist *
Alfredo Escandon
Stephanie Frederick, M.Ed., RN
Maria Garcia
Mary Kay LeFevour, M.A., Hospice Chaplain
Terry Mack *
Rose Laborin Madrid, mental health professional (retired) *
Annie Maier
Martina I. Mejia, M.Ed. *
Karen Metcalf, RN (retired) *
Melissa T. Norris *
Daniela Ontiveros
Therese Perreault, MBA
Selina Ramirez, MSW *
Dianna Repp, Ph.D. *
Zohreh Saunders *
Penelope Starr *
Debra Thornley-Barbré
Anonymous, LT *
* submitted fieldwork report

Southwest Folklife Alliance Mission
We build more equitable and vibrant communities by celebrating the everyday expressions of culture, heritage and diversity in the Greater Southwest. SouthwestFolklife.org

Continuum Coaches and Staff
Maribel Alvarez, Ph.D., Continuum Journal Editor
Nic Hartmann, Southwest Folklife Alliance, Folklorist in Residence
Leia Maahs, Southwest Folklife Alliance, Program Manager
Monica Surfaro Spigelman, Continuum Journal Managing Editor

Continuum Project Objectives
- Train a small group of “citizen folklorists,” empowering them to mine the rich deposits of cultural knowledge among Southern Arizona folk and ethnic communities. The folklorists researched culturally-specific beliefs, expressions and practices of everyday life used to cope with end-of-life issues, death and grieving. The folklorists documented what they saw, in their own voice.
- Build the basis for a multidisciplinary resource that supports families, health care workers, institutions and community groups involved in a better understanding of grieving, advanced care planning and end-of-life issues in various cultures.

Our Thanks
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Continuum: A coherent whole characterized as a collection, sequence, or progression of values or elements varying by minute degrees (Merriam-Webster dictionary).

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Introduction

Maribel Alvarez, Ph.D.

A few years ago, an article came across my desk that challenged many of my assumptions. The article described how a person’s ethnic background and identification influenced their reported experience of pain; how one perceives, labels, responds to and communicates pain was shown to be relatively similar across cultures, at least 65% of the time. The other 35% was largely influenced by a category the authors called “emotionality,” which included the attitudinal responses to pain based on either one of two culturally-based elements: stoicism or emotional expressiveness. For example, according to the research Puerto Rican patients in the study were more likely than others to admit “losing control of themselves” when describing to others in their social circles how their pain felt. Black patients were more likely than Irish patients to indicate that complaining about their pain did not do any good, therefore they tried to bear it since “it’s something nobody else can fight” for you.

I confess that even with all my training in anthropology, my first reaction to this article was of surprise. Is it truly possible that our cultural ways of being are so fine-grained as to influence something as universal and pan-human as pain? And to what degree are these alleged “cultural” reactions also not yet another form of stereotype? Aren’t human beings, first and foremost “human?” The lessons to confirm the importance of culture in how we deal with pain, grief and end of life have come to me in small increments of experience. When my mother was dying, she opened up for the first time ever in her life to talk about the painful toll of exile in our family’s history. Our mother-daughter dialogues by her bedside were solely focused on cultural dimensions of our family’s “losses” and “gains” for having been uprooted from our native land. And yet, there we were: a mother and daughter like thousands others who have sat together at the moment when death nears.

In this publication, and through the community-research process that yielded the data we present here, two poles of reality appear as a continuum ---humanity at large on one end and the specificity of cultural ways ever present on the other. This continuum is both instructive and filled with tension. Ethnography is a method that teaches us to look into others’ experiences ---to learn empathy at the most intimate levels of everyday life. The field workers whose work is represented here entered this fraught terrain with the greatest sense of dignity and responsibility. Yet, we all recognize that this is barely the tip of the iceberg. There are always truth that were not spoken; fears and joys that were kept private. We are grateful, though, for what we learn here, today. One’s unique experience (based on ethnicity or faith or lack there of, etc.) does not preclude the other truth: we are all in this together. That sense of democratic pluralism runs through this publication: we are all living and dying—together—in our multicultural cities and neighborhoods. We hope this journal helps you face that reality a bit more informed, confident and positively.

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1 James A. Lipton and Joseph Marbach, Ethnicity and the Pain Experience, Social Science Medicine, Vol. 19, No. 12, pp. 1279-1298, 1984.

“Everyone must leave something behind when he dies, my grandfather said. A child or a book or a painting or a house or a wall built or a pair of shoes made. Or a garden planted. Something your hand touched some way so your soul has somewhere to go when you die, and when people look at that tree or that flower you planted, you're there.”

— Ray Bradbury

“Be careful, then, and be gentle about death. For it is hard to die, it is difficult to go through the door, even when it opens.”

— D.H. Lawrence
End of life is a distinctly personal time in the rich tapestry of our existence. It’s also part of a universal, familiar conversation – one that comes by facing our individual mortality, mourning a lost loved one, memorializing a community member, or supporting others who are near death in an upheaval of multiple health-related settings.

How we find our way in this conversation is greatly influenced by our specific values and cultural traditions.

Culture is an anchor of all life processes. Particularly in end of life, culture defines rituals to guide us through an accepted tradition-filled space, where one finds comfort, self-awareness, respect and inspiration. Culture structures the path where tradition validates beliefs and gives meaning to those left behind.

Although we mourn universally, culture does not mean blanket stereotype. In Southern Arizona, a melting pot of hundreds of ethnic and folklife groups, there is wide variety in the expressions, behaviors and rituals that underlie this end-of-life period. These range from rituals for preparing the body and adorning those in mourning, to cooking foods for funeral pot lucks and conducting prayer or memorial ceremonies.

The greater our understanding is of the impact of culture on end-of-life activity, the easier it becomes to embrace our own mortality as well as respond to the diversity of our region’s variable cultures.

**Population Diversity**

According to U.S. Census (Southern Arizona Indicators Project1 2010 data), 36.3 percent of the United States population belongs to an ethnic or minority group. According to the Pima Association of Governments, Hispanic or Latino comprised 29.34 percent of the Tucson population, with Black/African American 2.85 percent, Native American 2.59 percent and Asian 1.97 percent.2

With so many cultures having their own ways of expressing grief and mourning, it becomes imperative to understand cultural issues and traditions involving this critical transitional point, and to help communities form a context to support positive pathways for the living and those near death.

**Origins of the Continuum Project**

During May 2014-May 2015, the Southwest Folklife Alliance and Tucson Meet Yourself engaged in a year-long project to research, document, interpret and present cultural practices involving end of life, grief and mourning. This project, called Continuum, was supported by the Shaaron Kent Endowment Fund held at the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona. The team included a group of citizen folklorists who attended an ethnographic field school to learn about exploring place-based grief, death and end-of-life traditions.

The Continuum project brought together compassionate people from a range of backgrounds to share ideas about the mysterious totality of culture and health in life and death. After training, the citizen folklorists reached out to the community through field research, speaking with everyday people about their traditions and experiences – from Mexican-American seniors and refugees, to funeral directors, bikers and nurses. This Journal and accompanying web resource (SouthwestFolklife.org) share the knowledge gathered, in order to provoke conversation and support those already involved in advanced care planning.

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1 Arizona Indicators, a project managed by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy: Arizonaindicators.org/
2 Pima Association of Governments data: Pagnet.org/
“As long as we live we are the sole custodians of our own memories, and we have a responsibility to protect our own as well as those of others as another element of the awakening, transmutation, and connectiveness of the human condition. Ritual behaviors are sacred transformations that usher participants safely across unknown boundaries of apprehension.”

- (Jackqueline S. Thursby, Funeral Festivals in America, University Press of Kentucky, 2006, The Final Passage, p.48)

**Perspective: Cultural Competency Mandate**

Because culture as a factor in end of life is most deeply personal, the cultivation of cultural competency is urgently needed in the quest to eliminate health care disparities, improve social services and meet regulatory mandates in our multicultural world. Dying in America, a consensus report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), points to the need for person-centered health care that is aware of a patient’s social and cultural context and social needs. It recommends, as a national priority, an approach that honors individual preferences and promotes quality of life through the end of life.

- In 2013, the Office of Minority Health and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued enhanced National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards in Health and Health Care.
- The American Hospital Association is now focused on palliative care, and on creating delivery models that meet the social, cultural and linguistic needs of patients.

Health equity is the attainment of the highest level of health for all people, although achievement often is difficult due to language barriers and cultural differences. The National CLAS standards focus on dignity and quality of care as basic rights, and act as a cornerstone for building health equity and understanding of how cultural practices impact the overall grief experience.

**The Path Ahead**

A growing body of knowledge about the relationship between culture, grief and bereavement is emerging, as a result of the Continuum project. The Southwest Folklife Alliance acknowledges the efforts of hundreds of Southern Arizona organizations and individuals also involved in end-of-life issues – from family preparations, to new palliative care options, to grief support, funeral arrangements and beyond. It’s all part of end-of-life planning efforts that underscore the importance of continuing to normalize the conversation about death and dying and advanced care planning.

Patterns of behavior surrounding death and bereavement, especially in mourning rituals and behavioral expressions of grief, are among the most enduring of any cultural tradition.

Culture promotes well-being and connects us to our essential self. What cultural practices are meaningful to you? Because end of life may appear unexpectedly, the question is worthy and immediate… and is explored in many ways throughout the following pages of this Continuum Journal.

**Memorial Day at Evergreen Cemetery**

“Understanding the cultural lenses by which patients and family members hold about death and dying is a critical component to successful outcomes in clinical encounters in health, mental health and social service arenas and the design of culturally sensitive service delivery models.”

- (Alice Yick Flanagan, PhD, MSW, faculty member at Capella University, School of Human Services and Canyon College, Department of Social Work, Cultural Meanings of Death and Dying Course Notation)

**CONTINUUM PROJECT COMPONENTS**

1. **Research and Documentation:**
   Representing the work of a cohort and citizen folklorist team, compiled October 2014 – January 2015. The September 2014 Field School offered training in documentary skills and folklife, and set the stage for the documentation.

2. **Community Dialogue:**
   Involving a one-day community forum to present field notes, hear educational speakers and engage in dialogue about role of culture in healing practices that involve end of life, death and grief.

3. **Journal and Workbook:**
   Journal and Workbook: Published to highlight aspects of field documentation and include other relevant cultural content and resources.

4. **Sustainable Components:**
   - Samples of citizen folklorist reports on cultural practices encountered, as well as other media, are collected on the Southwest Folklife Alliance website: SouthwestFolklife.org/Continuum.
   - Future Tucson Meet Yourself folkways exhibits will present relevant folklife practices and material culture.

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3  Institute of Medicine of the National Academies report on honoring individual preferences in End of Life: Iom.edu/
4  The Office of Minority Health produced ThinkCultural-Health.hhs.gov/, as guidance in implementing the CLAS standards.
5  American Hospital Association’s Circle of Life program recognizes commitment to inpatient and outpatient palliative care, and end-of-life and palliative care research and education: Aha.org/
Eighteen reports were prepared by citizen folklorists and staff as part of the Continuum project, exploring how Tucson ethnic groups and folklife communities express their cultural essence in ways that honor the cycle of life and death. Southern Arizona practices and beliefs are as numerous as the cultures themselves. Tradition and rituals do make a difference in how people outwardly express their needs during end of life. With its infinite wisdom and rich complexity of practices – Culture should continue to have a strategic role in the important, end-of-life conversations.

This Journal includes excerpts of many citizen folklorist reports, with the full content of fieldwork by citizen folklorists online: SouthwestFolklife.org/Continuum.

Perspectives from Mexican American Community

Anne Mayer Dalton

Initially, Ann interviewed Mexican-American residents in the Southpark neighborhood, but later broadened her fieldwork to include a Tucson nursing home resident as well as hospice staff whose work focused on Mexican-Americans utilizing their facilities. What were their experiences with death of family members and their own attitudes and preparation for death? One interview is excerpted; the full report is online.

Some of Anne’s reflections on matters of death during the fieldwork process:

“I found it easy to relate to some of the rituals because they were so like what I grew up with, being raised within this religion (Roman Catholic). Last Rites from a priest just prior to death, a wake held for the survivors in the deceased’s presence, a mass led by a priest and burial the same or next day in a cemetery are some of these.

“Death is identified with life and Latin American culture encourages imagining your death, preparing for it and living intensely until death arrives.”

“The belief that the dead stay or return from beyond to help survivors or at least visit occasionally to deliver a message and watch over them was intriguing as was the practice of combining folk-healing and modern medicine in medical settings.”

“In many Hispanic cultures, burial begins a new phase in which the deceased can help those who are still living. Many Hispanics believe that their loved ones’ bodies have died but that their spirits live on. They pray to them, talk to them and turn to them for guidance and support.”

Hospice Staff Interview (Excerpt):

I received a broader viewpoint on traditions from two staff people who have dealt with many families of this culture for over 10 years.

A hospice minister and hospice social worker (who requested names and place be anonymous due the sensitivity about privacy for their patients) find that Hispanics and Mexican patients in their facility seem more at peace with death than the general population there.

Another marked characteristic is the significant family support in times of crisis like illness and death through the physical presence. Even though relatives may not have had conversations with each other over long periods of time, they come together in a crisis. Sometimes this can be a crowd of 30-70 relatives showing up at the hospital - “a collective organism,” is how the minister described it. Some families will insist on the body of the deceased remaining in the house if they died at home for out of town relatives to visit prior to the funeral.

Traditionally, it is the youngest daughter whose duty it is to take care of parents in their later and trailer years. If there is no youngest daughter, a female family member will be identified to fill this role. This may mean quitting a job to be closer geographically to become the caregiver. When the rest of the family arrives to be present for the final days and funeral, this multiplies the caregiver’s job tremendously because she is then expected to feed family members also.

These Hospice staff members make the effort to educate the family that the caregiver needs their assistance more than their demands on her stretched time and energies and find that this is generally received and heeded. The large turn-out is meant as a show of respect for the person who is departing.

The staff also observes more often what they term “magical thinking” beyond what is habitual within the general population. Although most people have some superstitions and cross their fingers while making a wish or “knock on wood” to ward off bad luck, Mexican-Americans take this a step further around the issues of death and they say it is quite ingrained in the culture. This
is reflected in the hesitance to talk about death, feeling that it would cause the death to come sooner. This makes it less likely relatives will make plans for funeral arrangements ahead of time and for intergenerational discussions to occur so that survivors know what their parents’ or relatives’ wishes when they die.

Families tend to return to the same funeral home and cemetery used initially for other relatives’ ceremonies because “the sentiment is there.” Much effort is made to be sure the dead are buried in an elaborate fashion regardless of the monetary resources needed and available.

The belief that the spirits of the dead do return to communicate with the living is strong regardless of educational levels. They feel this comes from a person’s “internal” life vs. their intellectual life. Those who do have visions or “visitations” report that they are usually comforting and help them face death more easily. Hispanics and Mexicans also believe that the spirit of the dead often visit through animals.

When someone actually dies, there is much more emotional expression than from Anglo survivors and it is not uncommon to have wailing, usually from women but is also accepted from men. When this occurs, it is not seen as something that needs to be “treated” or “resolved and stopped.” It is a sign of respect for the person who has passed on and the enormity of the survivor’s loss. In general, Hispanics do not feel there is as wide a gulf between the living and the dead as other populations. Other times, professional training and acculturation override traditional beliefs.

Reverse acculturation does have an impact. When there is interaction between American-born Hispanics and long-term Southwest families in this country, the hospice workers often see adoption of Mexican traditions. They see many cultural traditions between the American Indians and Hispanic populations. Although their cultures and beliefs are quite different, they have spent much time in the same geographic locations and have similar philosophies on respect for nature and the land and health remedies. They share languages as well.

40th Anniversary, Los Vatos Traditional Memorial Run

Martina Mejia

There were less than a handful of Hispanic men riding Harley Davidson Motorcycles in Tucson in 1969; two of these men were brothers Marcos Antonio Diaz and George Diaz. George went off to fight the war and the brothers reunited again in 1972 when he returned from serving our country. By this time a total of six men were riding together, besides the two Diaz brothers. The group identified themselves as the Southside Guerillas, which stood for someone that comes in, then, disappears. In 1974 while the brothers were riding up Mount Lemon a drunk driver struck Marco’s motorcycle which left him paralyzed. He told his brother George that the accident would not stop him from riding a motorcycle, and built a three-wheeler Harley Davidson. The ridership group continued to grow. In May 1974 George Lopez was murdered and was the first member to die. Then, in November, two more Guerillas died. Marcos wanted a way to honor the fallen members and created the Memorial Run which took place the Saturday following Thanksgiving. In 2006 the Guerillas riders became an official motorcycle group called Los Vatos (the dudes) which had 40 members’ patched by now, and the memorial run had been a tradition for 32 years. This 2014 photo commemorates the 40th anniversary of Los Vatos original memorial run, which started off at Los Vatos clubhouse with coffee, menudo, and mariachi music. The mother of the Diaz brothers is always there to enjoy the tradition. Los Vatos visit every member’s grave that has fallen. The full report is online.
Tucson Refugee Communities
Natalie Brown

After college, two trips to four African nations provided Natalie with insights and experience at what it is like to be not only an outsider, but also not part of the majority culture:

Small projects in Agua Prieta, Sonora provided a taste of this, but not to the degree of unfamiliarity that Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan did. To not only lack understanding of rituals, traditions, foods, music, local histories, and shared experiences, but to also lack understanding of language, systems, and ways of interacting within necessary structures, is daunting and overwhelming on a whole other level.

It is from this experience and place of limited understanding that I reflect upon the refugee and asylee communities that I have been privileged to get to know in Tucson, and the additional challenges that they face when a loved one passes away during those first few years in the community.

Tilahun Liben Interview: Ethiopia, Orthodox Christian (Excerpt)
Tilahun graciously agreed to come to my home for this interview. As we talk, he becomes animated, pausing to ensure that I have understood, that I have taken sufficient notes, before he moves on to his next point. Ignoring offers of pen and paper, he periodically emphasizes a description by tracing an outline of the object with his finger on a couch cushion, the indentation of his touch lingering just briefly.

In Tilahun’s words:
At the end of life, if there is a serious sickness, then after the mass, the priest will come from church with the deacon, both wearing robes, and will bring the holy sacrament or communion, the blood and body of Jesus, to that person’s house, to the place where he sleeps. This must be the person’s own priest, not just any priest. Everyone has an Amharic name and a Christian name, but a person is only ever prayed for using their Christian name.

The dying person tells his will to the priest, who essentially becomes the executor of the will. The priest will subsequently tell the family how the person wanted his/her belongings divided, and that they should honor his/her wishes and not to defy that person by doing otherwise.

After death, the family will cry loudly, wailing, moving from room to room in the house. Neighbors will hear and come to join them. The wailing will last part of the day, until the priest tells them that it is time to stop. After out-of-town family members arrive, the loud wailing will take place again.

Community Insurance
The concept of community insurance was intriguing, and Tilahun explained it this way: Everyone pays weekly into the communal fund, approximately $5, so that when someone dies, that money is used for the funeral expenses including the coffin, tent, food, beverages, and flowers.

In addition, someone from the community will go from house to house to announce when the funeral will take place. The Chipashum is the person whose duty it is to publicly announce a funeral by going from door to door.

Family members wear significant colored garments (linens) called tilet. This is a special cloth. It’s the folding / way in which the tilet is worn, not the wearing of a tilet, in general, that indicates that a person has passed away. If the decorative edge is worn at the top of the body, it indicates a death. If the decorative / colored edge is facing down, then it’s just a normal day. (This clarification came up after I said something along the lines of, “This fabric is so beautiful and it’s only worn when someone passes away”), which led to the explanation. All who see you wearing it the specific way will ask you, “Who died”? Family members wear it the certain way for two weeks. After two weeks, they wear dark or black clothing, which they wear for 2-3 months. All the community brings cabbage, lentils, and injera. The family stays in the house, isolated, for 15 days.

Burial
Someone from the community is also sent to dig the grave; this cannot be someone related to the deceased, and is always someone from community insurance group. In our culture, it is never acceptable to cremate a body, says Tilahun. At the burial, the priest recites important words, burns incense, and puts the ashes from the incense into the grave.
The priest tosses three handfuls of soil into the grave to represent the Trinity. The family members then do the same. After this, a shovel is used to fill the grave. All must help to cover the coffin. Afterward, a wooden cross with the deceased's name is placed on the grave. There is no music involved. After the funeral, all return to the house, wash their hands with water before entering in a ritualistic way to remove the soil that was thrown into the grave.

If the family has money, they will slaughter an animal, but most do not. So, they cook lentils and cabbage. The community women's group will help by preparing lentils, injera, and cabbage, and serving this to all at the deceased person's house.

Nefro is eaten, a mixture of chickpeas and wheat. The family sits outside, all eat together, and the visitors bow to the family before they leave. The neighbors will then bring food to the family for three days, consisting of dishes cooked in their own homes and ready to eat.

A big tent /tarp is set up outside the family's home for three days, during which time the family stays under it, sleeps on a mattress on the ground outside; people including neighbors come and sit and sleep there also. After the third day, at approximately 5AM, the people wake up. The family cries, everyone comes and cries with them, for a long time, then the priest comes and tells them to stop crying. He preaches about the deceased, and then they take the tent down.

**Remembering**

After 40 days, the family cooks a large meal and takes some food to the mass at church, which is given in the name of the deceased person to the priest and the deacon, as well as congregation. After 80 days, 6 months, and one year, this is repeated, but the first one (after 40 days) is the largest and most significant. After 40 days, a tombstone and headstone are placed, with a ceremony involving the priest speaking as well as family members.

**How do Refugees in Tucson uphold these traditions?**

The community fund concept does not exist here, so things are very hard and expensive. The tilet traditions are continued. In the past, everyone was required to walk to the burial site. Everyone present, four at a time, would take turns carrying the coffin from the funeral site to the burial site. Now, it is acceptable to use transportation.

**Recalling a recent death of an Ethiopian man in Tucson:**

Here, we cannot take three weeks to mourn, but we do what's possible, we take as much time as we can to mourn with the family. We prepare the food for the family, even if we cannot do some of the other things I described. He recounts scheduling around his work and his wife's classes to find times to be with the mourning family, and how much shorter the visits to the home were than they would have been in Ethiopia. It is hard to go home (to Ethiopia) if someone dies, so we mourn here. If someone in Ethiopia dies, they will not call the relative; they will call a friend of the relative. Then, the person will choose a day to tell the family member of the deceased. For example if some family member of an Ethiopian in Tucson dies in Ethiopia, and I get the call, I will not tell him that day. I will wait until the weekend, when he does not have to work, so that we can be with him when he mourns so he does not miss work and is not alone.

In the U.S., everything is hard because we do not have the community insurance. Also, if someone passes away back home, we cannot go. That is very hard.

**Children and Grief**

*Selina Ramirez*

We can only imagine the emotional pain for children who experience the death of someone important in their lives. After the loss of her own daughter (Soleil Jolie Ramirez, born May 9, 2008 and passed away May 17, 2008), citizen folklorist Selina Ramirez needed to grieve as well as to help her children express themselves and mourn in their own way. She received support from TuNidito, the local non-profit which has created "a community of acceptance, support and understanding regarding children in grief". Selina's son, Tristen (now 13), started out in a Littles program, then moved to Middles, before completing his participation, as part of Tu Nidito's Children to Children Grief Support Group. Selina videotaped her three boys (Tristen is pictured) for her report on children and grief. The full report/videos are online.
Prayers and Practice for the Deceased in Kadampa Buddhism
Kadampa Meditation Center
Gen Kelsang Lingpur

Opened in 2002, the Kadampa Meditation Center and Temple offers programs and classes for the community as well as guided meditation, children’s classes or studies in Buddhist practice. It is the spiritual home and welcoming space for Tucson and surrounding communities, with outreach to Oro Valley, Green Valley and Sierra Vista. A new Temple is currently under construction at 5326 E. Pima, opening this summer to serve as the main center for the state. Gen Kelsang Lingpur is the principal Teacher, and describes here the Powa, one traditional ritual supporting the grief process, and end of life:

When someone is dying, or has recently died, we often feel there is little or nothing we can now do for that person. The practice of transference of consciousness, known as ‘powa’, is the most meaningful gift we can give to the deceased. It can be done either by a group of practitioners or individually. The purpose of doing this is to lead countless deceased beings to the Pure Land of a Buddha.

We understand that throughout this world millions of humans and billions of animals die every day from so many different causes. If these living beings have the opportunity to take rebirth in a Buddha’s Pure Land they will attain permanent liberation from suffering and experience pure and everlasting happiness. Our practice of this powa offers them this precious opportunity.

We perform this powa practice on behalf of those who have recently died, traditionally within forty-nine days of their death and involves some simple rituals described in the book Living Meaningfully, Dying Joyfully by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, or in the prayer book (sadhana) called Powa Ceremony. Traditionally a shrine is set up with offerings (for example, food, flowers, candles). These are ideally purchased with money from the estate of the deceased or by someone with close karma on their behalf. It is helpful to have a photo of the deceased on the shrine as an object of focus.

When we engage in this practice in a group, it can begin with a senior Dharma teacher giving some practical teachings about how to develop compassion for all living beings. When we engage in this practice individually, we should generate compassion for all living beings by remembering how they experience immense suffering. Then, with compassion for all the deceased throughout the world, we perform the following stages of the ceremony:

1. On behalf of the deceased, we accumulate a great collection of virtue and merit. We do this by making prostrations and extensive offerings, so that the deceased gather the necessary conditions to take rebirth in the Pure Land.
2. On behalf of the deceased, by sincerely making requests to Buddha Vajrasattva with the recitation of the hundred-letter mantra, we purify the four main obstacles to their taking rebirth in the Pure Land of a Buddha.
3. Through the power of our compassionate intention, strong prayer, and concentration on the practice, we transfer the consciousness of the deceased to the Pure Land of the Buddha of Compassion so that they will experience pure and everlasting happiness.
4. Through the power of our concentration on the final special ritual practice, together with the mantra recitation, we create a special auspiciousness for the deceased to attain permanent liberation from samsaric rebirth.

We then conclude this powa practice with the dedication prayers.

If you would like more information, or wish to schedule a powa ceremony for someone, please contact Kadampa Meditation Center Arizona at 520-441-1617.

Worksheet: African American Family
Juana Ambrose

As part of her fieldwork, citizen folklorist Juana Ambrose used worksheets (provided as part of the team’s September 2014 Field School training) to investigate cultural practices. The worksheets presented a framework for collecting Juana’s notes in a systematic way, developing a full picture and defining focus for topics of her investigation. This worksheet outlines an example of observances and experiences from Juana’s interviews with an African-American family, who had experienced hospice and death of a husband/father.

Worksheet: African American Family
Juana Ambrose

Life is not a Dress Rehearsal: Some Atheist Views on Death and Dying
Terryl Mack and Karen Metcalf

Several citizen folklorists decided to work in pairs to investigate their topics. Terryl and Karen comprise one Team, exploring atheists...
in Tucson, their beliefs and needs around death and dying. Portions of the Team’s Introduction and interviews are excerpted here, with the full report online:

We wondered if there was a commonality in their perceptions of death, and if they had rituals, beliefs or specific preferences regarding the care given to them before dying. With the help of the informants who were generous with their time and their very personal narratives, we hope to make this culture more intelligible to the broader Tucson community.

We began the process of exploration by defining what atheism is and what atheists believe. We watched several movies and videos, read numerous articles and book excerpts, and wandered around the web. We conducted four interviews and discussed what it means to be an atheist, their considerations, fears and preparation about reaching end of life, and what dying means to them. The informants included Gil, 67, a podiatrist and member of the board of Freethought Arizona; Tom, 72, a retired professor and musician; Penelope, 69, a writer, artist and founder of Odyssey Storytelling; and Kristine, a certified Life Cycle Celebrant, Hospice Chaplain, and member of the Tucson Threshold Choir, (who was not an atheist but interviewed) … because we felt her work as a resource guide to people during the dying and after death process and her observations on end of life atheist ceremonies were complementary to our topic.

What do atheists believe?
Atheists have no gods, no rules, and no afterlife. There are no proscribed rituals, no prayers, and no secret handshakes. They believe this life is it.

Gil: “Atheism gives me a sense of peace. It gives me a sense of feeling that I’m an actual human being, that I’m not dependent on something that is imaginary. And it makes me cherish this life more because as far as I know, it’s the only one ‘round; this is not a dress rehearsal for something else. Any time I feel something outside of myself I just chalk it up to a heightened human awareness or heightened understanding.”

Tom: “I believe life got started a few seconds after the ‘Big Bang,’ and I’m okay with that. It’s called the universe. Our individual lives on this planet are just a small part of the universe. This is all there is to it, do the best you can in this life. We should do well for each other.”

Memorials
Penelope: “I definitely don’t want to be embalmed in a stone room crypt. It’s up to my family to make the choice about my body and a memorial. I think it’d be great to have a big party. I’m going to be 70 next year, and I think how much time do I have left? What do I get to do before I’m dead?”

Kristine: “The most important thing is that with families and communities who hold atheist and secular humanist beliefs, there’s no less reverence for life. I think there may even be a deeper sense of reverence for life, in a way that you can’t readily attach language to. Something I notice is silence is welcome and silence is not awkward; silence is valued during or as part of a ceremony.

“In my experience with atheist families, their end of life and after death considerations are very simple. Oftentimes it can be as simple as death at home; the family does the washing of the body and the transport of the body and witnesses the cremation and that is it. That is the ceremony. It’s simple. There are so many times people want to ask why. There is no why. People who are talking to some kind of divine often say, ‘God, why did you let this happen, I thought you were a merciful God.’”

Beads of Courage
Glass Artist Margaret Zinser
Beads of Courage was created to help document and honor the journey children take when they are diagnosed with life-threatening illness. The program was founded by Jean Baruch, a nurse whose experiences as a camp nurse inspired an innovative arts-in-medicine supportive care pilot program at Phoenix Children’s Hospital in 2003.

Courage beads give even the smallest children a voice and outlet for creative expression during their treatment. Although some children are buried with their courage beads, in many families, the beads are retained as remembrance of their loved one.

Margaret Zinser began flameworking in 2001, when she was working as a lab scientist, preparing for graduate work in Entomology. In 2008, Margaret started an event called Bead Challenge, with Beads of Courage as co-organizer (Jean Baruch). Beadmakers in over 15 studios across the US now provide the over 100,000 Act of Courage beads that are sent out each year, for children when they need an extra boost of courage. Margaret explains one bead of personal significance: “We honor the families of children who lost their battle with serious illness by giving them a butterfly bead. Having been used through many cultures as symbols of transformation and change – butterflies make sense as a symbol to help a family bereave their lost child. Much of my work draws inspiration from the insect world, but it wasn’t until I got involved with Beads of Courage that I started making butterflies in glass. Now, I make lots of butterflies- with…intention to honor the strength of children in our programs.”
FOODS AND MOURNING

Food’s Role in Funeral Customs
Zohreh Saunders

As citizen folklorist, Zohreh explored the role of food in the funeral customs of her Tucson friends, who represent a variety of different backgrounds. Zohreh explains:

I was interested in this subject, not only because of my general interest in food and food preparation, but because in my personal experience food seemed to occupy a prominent place at the end of life.

Excerpted here are portions of two interviews:

Interview: O, Iranian/(Tabriz) Muslim Funeral (1990s)
O is a young attractive woman who moved to Tucson about five years ago from her home in Tabriz, Iran when she married her distant cousin who was already living in Tucson.

O attended two funerals in Tabriz, Iran (near Azerbaijan) that she can recall: the first for her grandmother when O was 12 years old and the second for her aunt when O was 21. In preparation for the interview, O had skyped her mother in Tabriz to fill in details of the customs for the funerals because she had not attended the burial of her grandmother.

Her grandmother shared a house with them, but died in the hospital in the early 1990s. When a person dies at home, there is a brief prayer and the body is turned to face Mecca. Holy water is sprinkled on the face while the Koran is read. A paisley woolen cloth is placed over the body and the family stays with the deceased saying prayers until the body can be taken to the morgue (sard khaneh) where it is washed in a ritualized fashion by the person who washes the body (mordeh shoor). The family of the deceased provides the 9 meters of white cloth (kafan) used wrap the body. The body is placed in a coffin and carried to the cemetery by only male family members, excepting husbands. Burial must take place within 24 hours of death, but may be delayed since burials are held only during the day.

At the cemetery the body is removed from the coffin and placed on its right side directly on the ground facing Mecca. People often place a rock or thumbstone called sang eh ahlad on top of the grave. They believe when the soul leaves the body the first thing it will encounter is the rock and this will awaken the soul to realize that it is freed from the body.

… O remembers that after her grandmother’s funeral, family and friends who were at the gravesite were all invited to her grandmother’s home for a meal of stewed chicken and cumin rice. Other family members and a hired cook prepared the meal. Halvah, a traditional rich cake like pudding made with a flour roux, water, sugar, saffron, cardamom, and rosewater was also… (given)… to mourners along with dates, and tea. O remembers that though the occasion was sad, she was happy to be reunited with her large extended family that had come from afar to attend the funeral.

In the more distant past, on the second day after the death, neighborhood children would pass a flyer around announcing the death and inviting people to a dinner. A picture of the deceased was included in the flyer, but only for a deceased male. In the case of O’s grandmother, some 400 family members and friends were invited to a dinner at a restaurant on the third day, but in each case the men and women must be seated separately. The menu was extensive and included barley soup, lamb tongue, jujeh kabob (rice with chicken kabob), kuku (similar to a frittata), kashk e bademjoun (eggplant birani with sun-dried whey) as well as fruit, halvah, dates, preserved fruits, and tea.

The seventh day (hafteh) and the 40th day (cheleh) are also a time for the family to visit the grave and offer participants special meals. … In Tabriz, the family of the deceased would also host an open house for neighbors … The open house was held every Thursday during the 40-day period after the funeral for a scaled down menu of chicken and rice, and the ubiquitous halvah, dates and tea.

Each year after the death, there is another dinner and memorial service held for the deceased where prayers are read. When O’s aunt died recently, they held a memorial service in Tehran instead of prayers said by the mullah in the mosque, they opted for a more personal commemoration of instrumental music and a reading of a poem written by one of her relatives.

Interview: S, American/Jewish Funeral, Tucson (2013)
S grew up in Queens, New York and moved to Tucson about 13 years ago with her husband. S retired from her career as psychiatric nurse practitioner and worked in a number of settings including hospice. Her master’s thesis was on death and dying. She is an active member of a Reform Synagogue where she officiates as a volunteer at Jewish funerals.

S has attended many funerals as a result of her volunteer responsibility as an officiant in her Reform Congregation and is thus very familiar with traditional Jewish funeral customs and practices.

Once death occurs someone must stay with the body until the undertaker arrives. The eyes are closed and a candle is placed near the head. The dead should be buried within 24 hours except on the Sabbath. Funerals may also be delayed to accommodate family members who have to travel great distances.

The body is wrapped in a shroud and placed in an unadorned coffin as is now required by law. Before such regulations, the body was buried simply in the shroud. And at the beginning of the service a black ribbon is pinned over the heart on the clothing of first-degree relatives (children, siblings, spouse, and parents of the deceased) and then slashed.
The most intense period of mourning referred to as Shivah (seven) is the 7-day period following the burial that begins with the Meal of Condolence. After the burial mourners return to the home of a family member of the deceased and a volunteer committee of the congregation provide the Meal of Condolence. This is usually a “dairy meal” which may comprise hard-boiled eggs (symbolizing the circle of life), bagels and cream cheese, lox, tuna fish salad, noodle kugel, fruit, cakes & cookies and tea and coffee.

Kaddish, is a sacred custom, where a prayer is said on behalf of the deceased petitioning God that the deceased was a good person. It is said every day during shivah (usually at home) and then weekly at the synagogue for the next eleven months for Reform Jews, but daily for Orthodox Jews until the anniversary of the death, which is called the yahrtzeit. Kaddish is then said each year on the yahrtzeit and on certain Jewish holy days during the year. For Orthodox Jews, ten males (a minyan) must be present for the kaddish. Generally, kaddish is said for one’s father or mother, or child, but if a person dies without children another relative may assume the prayer ritual. …

After S concluded her description of the Jewish way of death and remembrance she said, “Even when the death is painful and unexpected, I find meaning in these traditions that have endured the centuries. They provide comfort by addressing the psychological needs of the mourners and help(ing) to bring the community together.”

El Rio Neighborhood Center
Rose Laborin Madrid

This center is located in the Barrio Anita in Tucson’s Westside. There are close to 90 registered attendees but mostly women attend the senior program. Rose observed seniors attending every day of the week mostly for the purpose of socializing and camaraderie. The majority of the ladies live alone, however, there are some that live with their adult children. Upon arrival the seniors receive a breakfast snack and also a lunch before going home. The seniors are picked up by Handi-Car and transported to and from the center.

Margaret F. interview (excerpt)
The lady is a 73 year-old woman, who was born in Hayden, Arizona. Her parents moved to Tucson when she was 6 years old. I told Margaret that today we needed to talk about the losses she may have had in her life. She became teary-eyed. I assured her that all she had to do was to raise her hand and we would stop the interview. She said she was OK.

Margaret went on to tell me that she was the caregiver for her husband who had prostate cancer. He was treated at the Veteran’s Hospital where he had surgery. Soon after the surgery, the cancer spread throughout his body. Her husband refused chemotherapy and radiation saying that he just wanted to die in peace at home. They did accept Hospice home services though. Her daughters assisted with the care in order to give their mother an opportunity to go grocery shopping or even for her to go to the movies which is one thing that Margaret loves to do.

Margaret’s husband lived another four years which gave the couple a chance to have sincere talks between them. During the last years of his illness, Margaret spent many hours by his bedside. They asked each other for forgiveness for any bad actions or thoughtless, hurtful things that they might have incurred on each other. They were truly at peace.

The couple had left the Catholic Church and started attending a Protestant Church. They didn’t know the members of the congregation well but the female pastor would come to their house to visit and pray with them.

One morning Margaret’s husband died at 6:00 am. The daughters helped make all the funeral arrangements. Following the burial, the ladies from the church held a luncheon at the clubhouse. This kindness meant a lot to Margaret. And soon after, Margaret accepted the fact that her daughters had to return to their homes and take care of their families and to resume their jobs.

Margaret says she missed her husband greatly. For two years she grieved privately and alone in her house. In a way, she preferred it that way, as no one was around to try to talk her out of her sadness and grief. She refused to wear black, in the “luto” tradition because she was already so sad. Sadly, she added that she almost drowned in her tears.

She visits her husband’s tomb at least 4-5 times a year and takes him silk flowers. And on the Dia de Los Muertos, on November 1, she honors and remembers her husband by placing a pumpkin empanada and sweet-bread on the tomb.

After much healing took place, Margaret returned to the Catholic Church. She says she is very happy about that. She says she is also happy to attend the Senior Center which fills a void in her life and gives her a sense of purpose.

In a subsequent interview, Margaret elaborated on how her mother and grandmother did seek the help of a curandero (healer): She remembered that when her mother developed arthritis on both knees her mother made contact with a curandero who would massage her legs and recite prayers. When I asked Margaret if she ever considered seeking the help of a curandero for her husband’s ills, she said, “No!” She and her husband did not believe in that tradition.

The discussion ended by her telling me that she did rely on some remedies handed down to her, such as, using warm olive oil with “ruda” for earaches. Also she prepared “Yerba Buena” for her children and that the peppermint tea was soothing whenever they had a tummy ache. Unlike her mother, she didn’t attribute her children’s maladies to any curses or evil spirits. She readily sought professional medical care for her children.
Natural Burial Practicum
Dianna Repp

This is a synopsis of Dr. Repp’s citizen folklorist report on natural burial practices in Tucson, and the growing movement of home funeral care and natural burials in the metropolitan area. The extensive report, including photos, footnotes on research, resources and field notes, is online.

Although I have a longstanding interest in home funeral care (and helped prepare my deceased sister for burial), my desire to document home funeral care for the Continuum sprang from my participation in the “Planting Seeds for a Natural Death” Intensive, held on September 27, 2014 and facilitated by Kristine Bentz, Cindy Whitehead, and Barbara Rose.

The next week, as I shared information with my students in the Death and Grieving Across Cultures class (Pima Community College), I thought about how difficult it was to illustrate such presentations with photographs of actual home funeral body care. The Continuum seemed the perfect opportunity to create an experiential practicum, with a proxy, to photograph and document these practices in a detailed manner, without intruding on a grieving family. It was my hope that the resulting images and other data from such a Practicum could be utilized in a variety of ways, for teaching and sharing about end of life care and practices.

I also wanted to research desert burial more thoroughly. Although I have photographed "natural" burial sites in cemeteries in Canada and in Minnesota, I had not photographed sites in the Tucson area. In addition, I was interested in further documenting the diversity of ways that individuals and corporations define “green” or “natural” burial, and how such burial plans are being developed and carried out in various terrains and ecosystems, and within diverse cultural settings.

How do varying individual and group ideas of “ecology,” “nature,” and “natural” impact and shape the way people envision, plan, and then carry out a natural or green burial?

For the desert burial research, I was curious to see the similarities and differences between two styles of green/natural burial that are being practiced in our community: berm burial on private property, and a level-ground burial, as seen at Marana Mortuary Cemetery.

Interviews: During the course of the field work, I spoke with eleven people: Ten people participated in the experiential Practicum on October 24, 2014: Kristine Bentz, Aaron Calhoun, Jessica Gimpel, Cameron Jones, Kia (pseudonym; chosen by participant), Mary (pseudonym; chosen by DR), Barbara Rose, Terri (pseudonym; chosen by DR), Alyssa Vanderwood, and Cindy Whitehead. I also interviewed Mr. Larry Van Horn, the General Manager of Marana Mortuary Cemetery.

Formats: With the support of the Continuum, I was empowered to organize an experiential practicum, “Another Way Home,” calling on knowledgeable community members to act as facilitators and workshop leaders, and held on the grounds of a farm near Tucson, Arizona. During the Practicum, participants gained practical experience in caring for a deceased loved one (volunteer proxy) in a home setting; preparation of the body (fabric bodyform used) and gravesite for a “natural” earth berm burial; and interment in an ecologically sustainable manner, especially suitable for our desert environment.

During the week of the Practicum, I spent a lot of time looking for just the right fabrics for the Practicum and the “body proxy.” I went to three different stores, and finally found the right materials the afternoon before the Practicum. The fabric bodyform was crafted from unbleached 100% muslin. The shroud fabric was golden colored, with embroidered flowers. The tulle was a similar golden color. The fabrics were luminous – they glowed. I would want to be buried in them. I would wear them now!

I spoke with the owner of the farm by phone and in person (on October 17, 2014 to take photos of the burial site). I documented the Practicum activities, which took place over a period of four hours on October 24, 2014, in four audio recordings and over 450 photographs. I was able to revisit the burial site in January, 2015, to document environmental changes to the berm burial. The farm owner reviewed my notes; the corrections and additions have been incorporated into the Practicum materials, including a table highlighting similarities and differences between berm burial and level ground burial (embedded in the notes for Mr. Van Horn).

My interview with Mr. Van Horn, at Marana Mortuary Cemetery, was not recorded. However, we walked the grounds and I was allowed to take photographs of the green/natural burial grounds (I refer to this as level ground green/natural burial) and cas-
kets. We sat together after the interview and went over my notes. I also sent him a draft of my notes after they were written up; his one addition has been incorporated into my final notes for this interview. I augmented my research with online searches for related materials and by exploring the Marana Mortuary Cemetery website.

Observations: I am intrigued by the differing ways to bury individuals in what is being presented as “green” or “natural” burials. The definition varies, but generally speaking, minimally means an unembalmed body buried in a biodegradable shroud or coffin, with no concrete vault or liner. The diversity of opinions reveals a variety of cultural, ecological and economic concerns. In the Tucson area, I have come across two ends of a “green/natural burial” spectrum: on the one hand, the berm burial seeks to work within the existing landscape; it alters it slightly, but uses existing rainfall to water the plant life. On the other hand, the larger cemetery is a hybrid, with a green/natural section as well as regular burials (with outer containers/vaults). The ground was completely cleared of vegetation, and then desert landscaping was being reintroduced, along with irrigation to help support the plants.

I think there is a tension inherent in the definitions and cultural meanings of ‘natural’ and ‘green,’ as these concepts hold differing values, depending on the context and individuals involved. I would add that for some people, who have few financial resources, the idea of a ‘green’ burial may be desirable but out of reach, even though the current option (compared to regular in-ground burial) is more affordable.

The Experience: I was surprised by the focus on saving money with a natural burial. Although ecological aspects were important in both settings (berm and level ground), both also included the importance of saving money. In the publicity for Marana Mortuary Cemetery, it was partly presented specifically as a way to save on burial costs. I had thought mostly of the ecological factors, but the pragmatism is also important, as this is a good marketing tool, and a way to garner support for this idea in the public.

I was also surprised that the berm burial will purposely alter the landscape. I had thought of natural burial as a way to inter a body into the land without permanently altering the surrounding land. I think that was a bit naïve on my part. It does make sense, while working with the existing drainage, to add to the flora of the land and create new areas for plants to flourish with natural rainfall.

It can be difficult to document a ritual in action. What is the line for the researcher, in photographing private, deeply felt moments, without being intrusive? I had hoped to address this by creating a situation where the goal was documentation of a proxy enactment. I think this was successful, but it was surprising that as the afternoon progressed, the participants became more attuned to the care of the body. It became more “real” for them. I had assumed that the experience would be powerful (especially for the proxy), but I was surprised by the depth of the impact expressed by several participants. The proxy told me (weeks after the Practicum) that the experience still deeply impacted her.

‘Natural’ care of the dead has a place in the way our communities pay tribute to the deceased. Older practices such as home funeral care are being revived, and can facilitate expressions of grief. Natural burial, however one defines it, can also provide a way to honor a loved one’s wishes for a more ecologically sustainable interment, and act as a rite of passage for the physical body. In a time when people want to live sustainably and leave only footprints, natural care of the deceased and natural burial may provide another way to send our loved ones home, with a smaller, greener, softer footprint.

Project Visibility—LGBT healthcare
Penelope Starr

Sandy Davenport greeted me warmly when we met in her office at Pima Council on Aging (PCOA.) In addition to her duties as a Caregiver Specialist, she is also the Coordi-
ator of Project Visibility, PCOA’s program that trains healthcare providers to design a safe environment for their LGBT patients.

“There is a history of stigma and discrimination and older adults have reasons for their concern. They have grown up at a time when homosexuality was considered a mental illness, they were harassed or fired from jobs or put in mental hospitals. That was their experience. It is hard to assure people that they will be safe in vulnerable situations, given their past experiences. [They are] fearful of discrimination, being neglected, misunderstood, and are frustrated by a lack of awareness.

“The (Project Visibility) training includes a 50-page booklet with a very practical checklist for facilities. They can look at how they phrase their intake questions and at how inclusive initial assessments are. What do they have in the facility to assure this is a safe place? How is that communicated? Do they have signs that are saying this is an inclusive place that include sexuality and gender expression? Does the nondiscrimination policy state those things?”

Project Visibility has been presented to many Tucson agencies and over 1,000 individuals since 2012. The PCOA program’s mission is to change the culture of care. When asked about specific issues that are different for LGBT elders, Sandy said:

“If you are a caregiver, you might be the only one that the client has contact with. If you do not create an environment where the person feels safe to tell their true story, they can be isolated from normal processes in aging. For example, if their partner dies and they do not feel safe talking about it, it could lead to disenfranchised grief, a situation where they have nowhere to tell, ‘this was not just my friend, this was my life-partner.’ They cannot really express their grief so their healing is impaired which leads to greater depression and health issues.”

“Elders need assurance that they will be safe in order to come out of the closet. LGBT seniors are five times less likely to access seniors services because of fear and uncertainty about safety issues.”

Sandy had some good advice for LGBT seniors: “Make sure you have your advance directives in place. They will determine who can talk to the doctors and have input with medical staff if the person is incapacitated. Your medical Power of Attorney (POA), in writing, financial POA, financial will, living will – all these must be written down. The advance directives for healthcare are available from State Attorney General’s office. You have to spell it all out so there are no assumptions.”

“Our culture has not healed from prejudice against LGBT elders,” she continued. “Studies say because they are less likely to have a partner, children, or a biological network of support, they are more isolated and at a greater risk for depression and self-neglect. There can be issues with substance abuse and self-medicating. They might be afraid to approach medical providers which creates more severe problems because of the wait for treatment.”

Mourning Beloved Pets

The Humane Society Pet Loss Bereavement Group

The Pet Cemetery of Tucson

Tucson includes a strong community of pet guardians (owners is not a preferred term) who are deeply impacted by the loss of a beloved animal friend. There are veterinary services for palliative pet care and end of life consultation, as well as crematory services, burials, markers, keepsakes, memorials and blessings, which reflect the spiritual and cultural practices of the guardians. The Pet Cemetery of Tucson has provided services and a resting place for thousands of Tucson pet animals, since 1986. The cemetery also contains monuments to animal folklife – including one statue memorializing “Milton Burro,” a Fort Lowell neighborhood folk hero who supported those mourning pets and who died in 2003. The Humane Society’s Pet Loss Bereavement Group has offered comfort to those in grief for more than 10 years, with twice-month support gatherings. With more than 170 million dog and cat guardians in North America alone, the human-animal bond certainly forms a strong and devoted social community with its own traditions.
CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS
IN END OF LIFE

O’odham Family Healing
Melissa T. Norris

This ethnographic reflection in no way, shape, or form refers to all O’odham families and their ways or traditions of burial, rituals, or any forms of coping with death. These actions, opinions, and coping methods are based on my own perceptions and do not reflect or speak for neither the Tohono O’odham Nation nor any of its sister tribes. (MTN)

Death is a sensitive subject in any culture. There are many terms used to describe death, some are blunt and others are words or phrases usually expressed with soft tones. In any sense we all deal with the loss of a loved one. But it is how we deal with those complex and difficult situations from beginning to end - our grief - that is rarely talked about. But it is remembered.

Most times people avoid confronting their emotions because it is a hard thing to do, and easily overshadowed by day-to-day activities. Some people are accepting over time; some seek professional guidance, and others have personal ways of healing. Each achieves survival in his or her own way.

Over the years our family has lost many close relatives; in some instances we were given time to prepare ourselves for what was coming, but with others were unexpected and sudden. Our families and communities come together to help the family prepare and fulfill the deceased’s wishes as much as possible. We all share the preparations for the wake and/or funeral.

In reflecting on how my family has dealt with these losses, it seems as though the emotions are still there for each individual family member. The longer the time has passed, the easier it seems to be less of an emotional subject. During our family conversations, I learn more from the memories and emotions shared, particularly when we recalled times leading up to family member deaths. In my family, we all seem to be at different levels of coping with those deaths. It is easier to talk about the good memories of that person. We have all admitted to shedding secret tears at some point. The important thing is that we are able to laugh and enjoy the good memories we shared.

I can reflect on the traditional “Man in the Maze” symbol with all its twists and turns in the maze, its mysteries, struggles and joys, which strengthen us. At the top of the maze is I’itoi, our creator, who is there to guide us in our journey and waiting for us as we complete our journey.

Along the way in our journey we all come to that point in life when we lose someone. Moving forward does not mean that you have forgotten, it simply means that you realize you have to continue your own journey of life. For us, we will never be 100 percent healed from the losses we have encountered. The pain remains. There are those days that we stop and remember - birthdays, holidays and death anniversaries. When those days come, it ignites that spark of sorrow for those lost, but at the same time we are able to appreciate the loved ones we still have.

We visit our lost loved ones frequently. With respectful distance I have photographed this place of rest, in memory of those who have completed their journeys. Knowing that this is where I will be laid to rest someday gives me peace because I will be with my family.

Comadres Interviews
Elena Díaz Björkquist

Gail Bornfield and I collaborated on this project to video-interview members from Sowing the Seeds, a collective of women writers, about end of life issues in the form of poetry, essays, memoir, obituaries and eulogies. Our goal was to condense the videos into a short film and the writings into an anthology. Elena and Gail interviewed seven Comadres of Sowing the Seeds with a video camera while taking notes. Gail developed a list of questions, which we both agreed to, and I did the video-taping. As the interviews progressed other questions also came up because of the interviewees’ responses. I also researched end of life issues and developed a board on Pinterest of articles, essays, and quotes related to end of life. We both made personal observations about the interviews, the interviewees and where the interviews were conducted.

The following is an excerpt from one interview. The full report, including poetry and eulogy, is online.

Nanette Longchamp, about the traumatic death of her five-year-old son (excerpt):
“I guess I haven’t recovered from that loss.

Nanette Longchamp, about the traumatic death of her five-year-old son (excerpt):
He died 22 years ago. I’m trying to talk so I don’t get into that space. There’s a space as a mother, as a parent, you get into when you’re talking about losing your child. It literally was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. It’s unparalleled, the tragedy. The pain was so physical for me, that I was debilitated for years. I performed, I was able to go to work, I was able to go to church, I was able to have this façade for society, but the inside was just decaying. There’s a feeling of the pain so powerful, you feel like you’re hitting your body against a brick wall trying to make sense of the tragedy. Because he wasn’t sick, it happened so suddenly. . .he was hit by a car, so one minute you have the child and the next minute you’re burying the child.”

Creativity and End of Life

Gail Bornfield

Kaitlin Meadows, a hospice practitioner for three decades, shares the importance of developing creativity in those nearing the end of life. It is her belief that tapping into creativity in the final years of life helps to reduce and dissolve the self-critical and self-limiting messages that are imposed by the expectations of others across the years:

Creative activities often provide a sense of freedom and joy. Creativity, in any form, can be a healing tool for people who are living between worlds. It can help open consciousness and appreciation of the little things that are often taken for granted in life which increases a sense of satisfaction and comfort.

Participating in creative ventures can include a variety of activities, such as crafting stories, painting, sculpting, quilting, and performing. Engaging in these activities helps individuals to leave something imbued with their love, spirit, and stories after they depart. It often becomes the most treasured part of their legacy.

Kaitlin believes that the benefit of encouraging creativity in self-expression at the end of life forms a positive pathway for finding joy, feeling accomplishment, and leaving a unique and enduring legacy.

Substance Abusers and End of Life

Nancy P. Masland

For her report, Nancy excerpted comments from interviews completed 2009-2013, for the final chapter of a book project on end-of-life issues in group homes. The following is a quote from the research, by a 60-year old female group home resident:

I have experienced my own child’s suicide 1 year ago, am being supported through this, and have gone to Grief Groups. The Pima County Judiciary Council (was) called in by the police, & they paid for the cremation. The D.A.’s office, Victims Service Division, came to the scene & (was) very helpful. A pamphlet: Experiencing Grief was given along with names of mortuaries. Also, they gave a number of community resources, including Compassionate Friends (which meets: 2nd Wednesday of each month at the Catalina Methodist Church on Speedway), as well as (information on) how to boost your immune system. The hardest part was waiting for the autopsy four weeks, and not knowing if it was foul play or suicide. I believe that the dead are always with us, with an angel guiding them.

“End of life” topic is seen as taboo, and avoided or mentioned in jest. Just asking for interviews was very stressful but two individuals were willing to share their stories. Listening and writing about my interviewees’ thoughts have given this topic relevance and reverence toward my interviewees’ perspectives on end of life, spirituality, and religion.

—LT, citizen folklorist, field report

Tucson Ghost Bikes

Nic Hartmann

Andria Ligas, a 19-year old Flinn Scholar at the University of Arizona, was riding her bicycle near the intersection of Euclid Avenue and Adams Street, when she was hit by a car whose driver fled the scene. Ligas died of her injuries, and local bicyclists built this “ghost bike” as both a tribute to a fallen bicyclist and a reminder for drivers to be aware of bicyclists.
Death Markers in the Desert
Jim Griffith

In 1783 Antonio Reyes, Bishop of Sonora, complained about the popular custom of placing a cross beside the road wherever a traveler had been killed by the Apaches. This, he argued, led to profanation of the holy symbol of the cross, and was a chilling reminder of the stark realities of travel on the frontier. Over two centuries later, the crosses remain, although the automobile has replaced the Apaches as the major cause of roadside death.

The original purpose of the crosses was simple: they showed where someone died suddenly and without the preparation afforded by the Catholic Church, and passers-by could respond to their unspoken plea and pray for that person’s soul. Such interactive sites had been part of the roadside scene since the arrival of the Spaniards in Mexico. In fact, they might be much older. Prehistoric trails in the desert have small rock piles by them, and some are still added to by passers-by.

As our region’s population has grown in size and diversity, sudden death markers have remained a part of the landscape, but they have changed in many ways: in what they look like, in what they mean, in how they are regarded, and in the reaction that they elicit from passers-by. The basic form of the cross remains popular. There was even a time in the 1950s when the state Highway Department placed crosses at fatal accident sites as warnings to motorists. However, the crosses we see nowadays are usually placed by grieving friends and relatives…I suspect as a way of doing something to ease the pain of loss.

Today, not all the sudden death markers are crosses. I was recently shown a photograph of a Star of David marking a death site on Highway 87 near Sells. By the same token, the crosses need not be requests for prayers for the dead, but are simply commemorative monuments. Many are carefully tended by those left behind. I know death markers where the color of the artificial flowers placed on them changes with the seasons, or where special, seasonal decorations appear, such as ghosts or scarecrows in the fall. Others may start as simple crosses, and then have niches, photos, and benches added to them over time. Most give the name and dates of the deceased in easy-to-read form.

The latest manifestation of this old, old custom may be the “ghost bikes” placed by members of the Tucson cycling community to commemorate the traffic death of a fellow bike rider. These stark reminders are painted white and equipped with the name and dates of the deceased. Flowers are often placed nearby.

Whether they be invitations to prayer, acts in memory of loved ones, even reminders to both cyclists and motorists of the dangers of bike riding, these public memorials to tragedy and sudden death continue a long-standing tradition, and seem to be meaningful to an increasing number of people here in our desert.

*Death marker on Indian Agency Road, Tucson. This marker has grown by increments, with the niche, the brick platform, the bench and the crosses being added at different times. The most recent addition to my knowledge is the bird on the white post in the center. Note the cross made of horse shoes. Jim Griffith photo, 3/15*
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