

So what's it really like to be a *Death Midwife?*

What does a death midwife do?

A lot of people are familiar with a birth midwife, who supports a client during pregnancy, guides her through the experience, and does follow-up care. That's exactly what a death midwife does with respect to a person's death.

I can have minimal or maximum involvement. I do everything from helping people get paperwork in place to planning a home funeral. A lot of people haven't even had a conversation with their loved ones about what death looks like to them or how they want to see it happen. Death is a coyote; it's a trickster. It does not always come at the end of a long, well-lived life surrounded by those we love.

What kind of training do you receive?

People definitely need training and education about (their) state's laws, rules, and regulations. I say you need a minimum of six months doing the actual work, lots of peer support, and you need to be exposing yourself as much as possible to end of life. They say the art of becoming is being.

Is there a process that you follow in your work?

Different people need different things from a death midwife. Some people just want to get paperwork together. Some say, "I just want to know how to handle this grief." Or they just want to know if they can bring a body home.

To prepare for a home funeral, we can hang tapestries, put out pictures, flowers, play soft music, and try to make the room almost like a temple. It's really beautiful, so sacred and profound, and people come away truly moved. Kids totally get it. They're not afraid of death at all. Society's taught us to fear death as a ghoulish, freaky weirdness.

Death isn't done like this anywhere else in the world, where everybody shows up in public, in clothes you're not necessarily comfortable in. You have to contain your



NAME: Nora Cedarwind Young

TITLE: Death Midwife

LOCATION: Pacific Northwest; also serves clients nationwide and virtually

RATES: \$100 consultation and visitation fee for serious on-site inquiries; other services a la carte

CREDENTIALS: Trained by home funeral movement pioneer Jerrigrace Lyons and certified by the nonprofit organization Final Passages.

behavior because you're in public. You can't scream or cry. You take a few days off from work, come back, and everything should be better.

Is there a case that sticks with you?

I had a patient, a very elderly man with paper-fine skin. I was instructing his family in how to bathe, bless, and anoint his body; the wife starts going in and out of laughter, crying, laughter, crying. I couldn't figure out what was up with her. She finally looked at me and said, "It's been a year since I could touch him without him screaming out in pain." How simple, and what a little thing. But so meaningful.

Can anyone have a home funeral?

Not every family makes a good fit. I have to assess the physicality of place, the logistics. There are details people don't think about. For example, I educate people about handling dry ice, which is totally legal in all states for refrigerating the human body.

I've heard your work also involves helping spirits cross over?

I have definitely helped people cross over the threshold. When we build a relationship, we get the chance to have those conversations. The thing I'm more conscious of is not holding someone back. But I'm also not always there when someone crosses over. —BRITTANY SHOOT

"Ask a Practitioner" explores the world of alternative therapies. Is there a practice you're curious about? Email editors@spiritualityhealth.com.