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Threefolding and  
Natural Death Care



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biography and social art

# Three-Folding and Natural Death Care

SANDRA CRATER LAGREGA

## Karmic Meetings, Honoring the Path, Answering the Question

In contemplating how to write this article about biography, social art, and natural death care, I realized that coming to this point has been a biographical journey for me. It began when, as a little girl, I was living in the foothills of North Carolina, running around and playing with cousins while my great-grandmother lay in vigil in the parlor after her passing. An abundance of food was brought by community members, and sprays of flowers, mostly carnations, surrounded the coffin. For me, death unconsciously became part of home and community life at that time.

Many other points and moments in my biography had a similar impact, but none were as powerful as when my maternal grandmother, Isa, died, long before I knew that natural death care was still possible. I was in my early thirties when I went to a funeral home with my mother to view my grandmother's embalmed body. My mother wanted to check to see if everything was alright in the way grandma looked. We entered the cold

sterile room and I noticed that my mother went over and gently touched my grandmother's hands to check her fingernails, and she lovingly tightened the braids encircling her head. I don't think the impact this had on me came to full awareness until several years later. To my mother, this was not just a cold, dead body lying there on the gurney, but her mother, whom she still loved and so gently touched, even in death.

Another path that came together around the same time was my discovery of Anthroposophy. I joined an Anthroposophical study group led by Janet and John Hampton, who had just returned from the School of Social Development at Emerson. Out of their character and training, they created a warm, safe place where biography and social art were studied and practiced in community. Although I was a beginner, John and Janet helped me feel welcome and safe. Each member of the group was respected, no matter their level of knowledge of Steiner's work. The group made striving for the ideal of social art a practice and reality. Many years later I would care for John and Janet after their deaths in a loving home setting.

A few years after joining the study group, I followed another leading toward the study



“ FOR FAMILIES TO PLAN FOR A DEATH, CONVERSATIONS NEED TO BE HELD THAT ARE NOT ALWAYS EASY.



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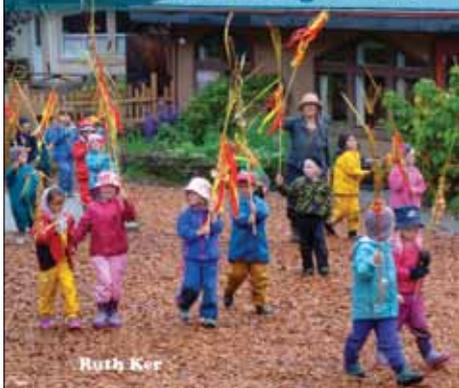


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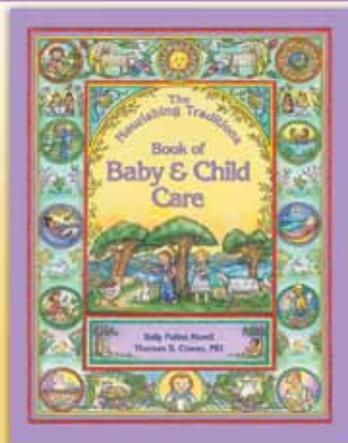
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of Waldorf Administration and Community Development with Christopher Schaefer, Robert Schiappacasse, and Mara White at Sunbridge College. After reading Chris Schaefer's article, "The Highest Art; How We Are Social Artists (and Social Scientists)" *Global Education Associates Breakthrough* (Winter/Summer 1990), the love and understanding of the idea and ideal of social art as truly the highest art, became a guiding principle for my future work.

Gradually, I came to understand social art as a way of simultaneously helping to create and enter into a sacred space where each person can speak

I was able to deepen my practice of social art when the study group branched out to found the Sophia Center for Life Studies ([sophiacenterfor-lifestudies.org](http://sophiacenterfor-lifestudies.org)), which is dedicated to the sacred service of working to educate, inform, and facilitate natural home death care, empowering families to serve as their own funeral directors. We strove to practice the tenets of social art as a way of working together in the creation of our newly formed non-profit organization. That was evident as we studied Bernard C. J. Lievegoed's, *Forming Curative Communities* as a basis for our Board Norms, which described the way we would work

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THERE IS A KNOWING THAT COMES FROM CARING FOR THE DEAD.

and be heard, and each one holds the wholeness for themselves and all. This sacred space can live and weave between two or three people or an entire group holding the space together. "The healing social life is found only found when in the mirror of the human soul the whole community finds its reflection; and when in the community the virtue of each soul is living." (The Motto of the Social Ethic, Rudolf Steiner) The anti-social aspects of consciousness, antipathy, and critical intelligence, are held back; and a consciousness of being with others in the mutually held sacred space is called forth. Within the sacred space, a sense of equanimity and mindful presence are present. This is especially important and helpful when one is working in a room with a group of people with someone who has died.

together. The art of listening so that each person would feel seen in a safe circle was one of the norms we practiced, sometimes more successfully than other times; and this too related to the growing sense of social art in our working.

While I continued in the study group and the Sophia Center for Life Studies, the deaths of the parents of group members were occurring, and led to the group members' learning about and taking a workshop with Beth Sanders Knox. Beth, with Jane Johnson and Pat Hogan, founded Crossings: Caring for Our Own at Death after Beth's six-year-old daughter, Alison, was killed in a car accident in October 1995. Pat's account of Alison's death and how she was cared for naturally at home by her family and friends is recounted in his book, *Alison's Gift*.

At that time I was also enrolled in the School of Spiritual Psychology founded by Robert Sardello and Cheryl Sanders-Sardello. For a final project in a Sacred Service class, I shared my interest in natural death care and set up a vigil room for the group to experience. I was stunned at how class members felt the sacredness of this “make believe” vigil room. It was a quiet space of reverence and beauty, right in the middle of a large basement. Classmates were affected. A colleague in that class, Ruth, asked if I would help her family do natural home death care for her. I did not know at that time that Ruth was sick. Ruth died a

work. There is a knowing that comes from caring for the dead.

Beth Knox had shared in her “caring for the dead” workshop the importance of listening to the one who is crossing, and to “let love be your guide.” I have held this advice in my mind and heart with each crossing I have attended. It is the advice I give to others when they are planning home death care for a loved one. When I let love be my guide, fear falls away. I feel that I am able to be of support to other crossings care helpers in holding the space, and to family members in their time of grief.

“ UNRESOLVED ISSUES OF THOSE PRESENT MUST BE LAID ASIDE DURING THE TIME OF WORKING BOTH WITH THE DECEASED AND HOPEFULLY, WITH THE LIVING.

few months later. Ruth K. Pelley was my first real teacher. I, along with some other members of the Sophia Center for Life Studies created a safe place for the vigil. Ruth’s husband, some other members of the Sophia Center, and I cared for her body, and afterward assisted in a three-day vigil. It was the most natural thing to do, and I am thankful to Ruth for the experience. Only after caring for Ruth, at her death, did I know that I was called to do this

Another marker on my path was when I received a notice of a new session of Biography and Social Art at Sunbridge College in New York State. On seeing the notice, an image of a three-fold lemniscate appeared in my mind’s eye with birth into the physical realm and death as a birth into the spiritual world meeting at the intersection/crossing point. Rudolf Steiner said that the death experience may be the most important event in

a life, and it stays with us through the journey through the planetary spheres to a new birth.

The crossing point indicates the intimate connection with the individual's biography, the death experience, and the journey between death and new life. This became more apparent and poignant as I continued my work with natural death care. I saw overlaying the three-fold lemniscate of birth, living, and dying, the three-fold image of the human being: thinking, feeling, and willing. I saw the framework for my future work with the Sophia Center for Life Studies in Crossings Care. I love it when the abstract becomes a living reality.

## Biography, Social Art, and Natural Death Care

So these three paths came together in my life. Each presented itself at a critical time. What do three-foldness, biography and social art have to do with death care? Biography, social art, and natural death care is where all paths come together. As a coworker exclaimed when talking about our work in caring for the dead, "It includes the whole world." Yes, and I would add, the whole cosmos. Three-foldness, biography, and social art are integral parts to the planning and carrying out of home death care at every step of the way.

I remember when a friend, Rachael, took her last breath in a hospice facility, as her brother and I stood with her saying, "You are safe Rachael." We waited in silence before we called the nurse and family members who were waiting outside. When the family and friends came into the room, after some quiet time, we set to work lovingly saying a prayer of blessing before washing and dressing Rachael. Each person in the room took on a role in which Rachael and the space were held. The calm, unrushed atmosphere let Rachael's spirit shine out into the room, and I believe it helped her with

the work of leaving her physical body. To focus on working with the dead at the time of crossing: "Through reverent, heartfelt presence with those who have died, we inherently help them find their way." Cheryl Sanders-Sardello, PhD. ("Connecting with the So-Called Dead," *Natural Transitions Magazine*, Vol 3 # 1)

As one enters a room where death is present, time slows down. Reverence, beauty, and awe can be experienced in the room. There are things that need to be done to care for the body in a timely manner while holding the sacredness of the space.

Jan Richardson speaks about this in her book *Circle of Grace* when she explains about blessings, "Such blessings help open our eyes to *kairos* time and draw us into what Celtic folk have long called

### Why natural death care?

1. Opens up discussion in families about death.
2. Takes place in family and community
3. Empowers and strengthens individuals involved.
4. Helps with the grieving process.
5. Respects individuality of family.
6. It is earth-friendly (no embalming, formaldehyde, methanol, phenol used. When the body goes back into the earth, the spiritual effects may be different.
7. It is legal in most states without use of funeral director.
8. Caring for one's own is less expensive.
9. Being part of a natural home death care changes one's views about death.
10. Beauty, reverence and respect can be brought to care of loved one.
11. "A sacred act; taking care of a loved one at death calls up the highest in oneself." (Beth Knox)

‘a thin place’—a space where the veil between worlds becomes permeable, and heaven and earth meet.” One is simultaneously in *kairos* time {time beyond time}, and *chronos* time {chronological time}. A palpable presence is felt of the being of the decedent as the physical body is cared for. The social art is the practice of holding the whole of the group while being aware of the individuals present, both living and so-called dead. Awareness of all aspects of body, soul, and spirit is important. It is about holding a space for the spirit where there is an awareness of more than the physical realm, but where the spirit shines through. This type of consciousness is a journey of developing capacities to see the other, to lay aside one’s own egotism and to hold oneself in the present moment holding an open space in oneself and with the others present. Unresolved issues of those present must be laid aside during the time of working both with the deceased and hopefully, with the living. This was evident in the death care of Rachael, who I mentioned earlier. Rachael had been estranged

from her family for many years. Through her illness and death, it was the family members who took the lead in preparing her body. Working together may even bring forgiveness, if needed, for those present. Consciousness is of utmost importance in the presence of death.

Our biographies provide the content for the process of social art.

Looking at one’s biography or doing a life review helps people stop and think about their past: looking at patterns; seeing relationship issues that need resolution; realizing what tasks are not done; and becoming conscious of the legacy they are leaving. Untangling the thread of our lives is immensely important in being able to work with each other and with those who are crossing the threshold of death. Because of this, I like to begin my workshops on The Art of Natural Death Care by giving the participants a simple “bath tub” life chart developed by George and Geisel O’Neil, with the premise that every experience or choice one has made has led to this moment in time. The

“ I REMEMBER A FRIEND TAKING HER LAST BREATH AS HER BROTHER AND I STOOD WITH HER SAYING, “YOU ARE SAFE RACHAEL.” WE WAITED IN SILENCE BEFORE WE CALLED THE NURSE AND FAMILY MEMBERS WHO WERE WAITING OUTSIDE.

participants note a few experiences that led them to being at a natural death care workshop at this time. Participants record these incidents on their life charts. The sharing brings many memories of both good death experiences and negative ones. People instantly connect through their listening and sharing. A new community is beginning.

When thinking about having natural death care, people often ask “Who will do this for me?” Another biography/social art exercise has proven to be helpful in answering this question. I ask the participants to look again at their life charts, and using different colored pencils note any people in their life, starting from the time they entered into their life until the present, who would support them in any situation (not focusing on death care). Biography work has the power to help people see their lives more objectively. It never has failed that participants see there are people in their lives who would carry out their wishes at the time of death. One participant came to me in tears because she realized through this exercise that she needed to do more for others. A simple biography exercise can be life-changing.

## Practicalities of Natural Home Death Care

Natural home death is called *natural* because there is no embalming; because “green” materials are used whenever possible; and because it is the most natural thing to do for a loved one. One of the best descriptions of natural home-based death care (or what some people refer to as a “home funeral”) is from *Undertaken with Love: A Home Funeral Guide for Congregations and Communities* by The Home Funeral Committee Manual Publishing Group:

A home funeral is a noncommercial, family-centered response to death that involves

### Three-Fold Model



Adapted From "Waldorf Administration and Community Development Program"  
Christopher Schaefer, Robert Schiappacasse and Mara White

the family and its social community in the care and preparation of the body for burial or cremation; and/or in planning and carrying out related rituals or ceremonies, in the family home or not. It is differentiated from the institutional funeral by its emphasis on minimal, noninvasive care and preparation of the body; on its reliance on the family's own social networks for assistance and support; and on the relative or total absence of commercial funeral providers in its proceedings.

This description of natural death care speaks about the time of death. But when I began helping individuals and families care for their deceased

through education, consultation, and hands-on work, I quickly realized that the work begins in planning for one's death much earlier than when death knocks.

For families to plan for a death, conversations need to be held that are not always easy. In our materialistic times many want to avoid the subject.

We commonly act as if we, and those we love, were going to live forever. But we are wrong, for all must die---nor can we know when this will happen. In our culture we tend to avoid the subject of death. This is unfortunate, for death is a normal and necessary part of life. Until we learn to face it honestly and accept it, we are not living at our best.

— Earnest Morgan, *Dealing Creatively with Death; A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial*

In the planning phase, we realize that death is inevitable for all, so it is never too early to think about how we want to be cared for at death, and by whom.

## Threefolding and Natural Death Care

The three-fold model, which I have used as a template for helping families plan and care for their own at death brings some clarity to the different areas of death care planning and practice. Three-foldness is based on the concept of the three-fold human being. It views thinking, feeling, and willing as discrete realms. I would say that the art of natural death care is the whole of these three areas. It encompasses the ones on either side of the threshold of death and our connection and interaction with them, as well as our planning and working together with the living.

Areas to consider for natural death care which include biography and social art:

### Thinking *spiritual and cultural realms*

Thinking is where each has individual freedom of belief. In natural death care, the plan is very individualized to suit the individual's wishes and beliefs.

- A spectrum of beliefs can be accommodated through natural death care.
- Contemplating what death means falls in this area.
- Thinking about how one's death care plan will reflect views on spirit, nature and earth care. (Cremation, green burial, conventional)
- Thinking about the legacy you want to leave.
- What are one's beliefs concerning after death?
- Preparing for one's death through meditation, virtue work, or other spiritual practices helps one let go in the end.

### Feeling *includes basic rights and social-relational considerations*

- Work with the life review in Steven Levine's book, *One Year to Live* is helpful, as well as working with a biography and social artist to review one's life and notice any unresolved issues.
- Begin a conversation with loved ones that will make everything easier when there is a crossing. (Ellen Goodman's "The Conversation Project")
- Work with one's family to prepare a living will or the "Five Wishes." This will get families talking about end of life.

[ continued on page 22 ]

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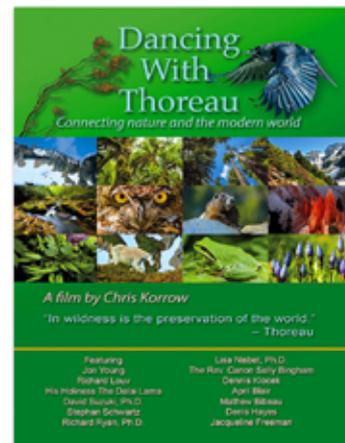
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- View and discuss movies, documentaries, games with interested family and friends.
- Find a Death Café to attend.
- Decide who your support group is and who will carry out your wishes.
- Form your personal death care group, which can be part of a larger crossings community.
- Put your wishes in writing and share them with that group.
- Look at different roles needed at a time of death and who can function in each. For example: Who will set up vigil a schedule if one is wanted? Who will get dry ice? Who will wash the body? Who will take care of the kitchen and any food that is brought? Who will let the extended family and friends know of your death?
- Make a plan for a “singing out” ritual, which happens at the end of the vigil.
- Build a good relationship with a funeral home if your plans include using a funeral home for any part of the plan; that is, paperwork and/or transporting the body; or cremation, or when body needs extraordinary care.
- Death care communities and families can meet and share stories.
- Explore rules and regulations of your state. (see Josh Slocum and Lisa Carlson, *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*)
- Legal forms and contracts need to be finalized.
- Someone may build a coffin, sew a shroud or make an urn.
- A beautiful book is needed with an assortment of colored pens for visitors to sign.
- Plan what kind of burial, whether conventional, coffin, green, environmentally safe, cremation.
- It is helpful to have a body care kit assembled before a death with sheets, pillows, wash cloths, oils, candles, beautiful scarves and fabrics, special quilt for coffin, reading materials, vigil instructions.
- Decide where vigil will be held.
- Dry ice, flowers, food for family, will need to be bought at time of death.
- Plans for memorial service made.
- Set up room for vigil.

## Willing *includes economic and physical considerations*

- Make a plan: complete a living will, Five Wishes, DNR order, write biography and obituary. Put it in writing and give to a death care committee.

## Why choose natural death care?

Time after time people who have cared for a loved one at death have told me that they could not have handled their loved one’s leaving without having cared for them at home.

Recently I spoke with Heath Slane, whose father and mother were cared for at home a few years apart. Heath commented, “It was so beautiful that my father and mother were in the bosom of the home. The whole house was a sacred space. I can’t tell you the amount of times in that seventy-two hours that I went into the room to talk to him (and her), to cry, to just be. At death there is a cognitive dissonance. It takes a while for it to become real.”

When asked about how the home natural death care affected her grieving process, Heath exclaimed,

It is everything! It is everything! Going in there with Mom and Dad for the three

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“NATURAL HOME DEATH IS *NATURAL* BECAUSE THERE IS NO EMBALMING; “GREEN” MATERIALS ARE USED; AND BECAUSE IT IS THE MOST NATURAL THING TO DO FOR A LOVED ONE.

days, I had seventy-two hours of shifts and changes in my own realizations, my own reality, my own states of being, my state of consciousness. It helped my consciousness, my soul, my emotional body to still go touch her physical body and view it thru these eyes and ingrain it in my being that she has gone on. And the fact that I can see how well-tended she is, how beautiful she is, and how at peace she is, helps. I get to cry in her physical presence although all has gone on. I get to go through my stages of grieving for those extra days, in my own moods and changes in any given day, and I bear witness to that. As far as grieving, I don't feel incomplete on anything the way we did it. We celebrated it beautifully in those three days.

From the contemplating of the inevitability of death, talking with family and friends, to the actual death care and vigil, through the “singing out” social art, which provides safety, is the thread that runs through natural death care. Seeing families and friends come together in the planning and carrying out is a joy. It is truly the highest art which

has immeasurable ripples in families, the earth and those on the other side of threshold. It has been an honor to let love be my guide in helping many people continue their journey in life and into death.

Working with the dead for the three days of crossing has been a blessing for me and, I believe for all involved. Special gratitude goes to those spirits on the other side of the threshold that continue to be inspirations for me.

John and Janet Hampton  
Ruth K. Pelley  
Rachael Rocomoro  
Amanda Stubbs Hoback  
Charlotte Linder  
Noel Berent  
Barbara Vincent  
Marsha Slane  
Cheryl Sanders-Sardello  
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Kirsten Savitri Bergh 

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**Sandra Crater LaGrega** earned her BS degree in early childhood education and her Master's of Education degree in curriculum development. She completed the Biography and Social Art Training at Sunbridge College, NY, and is currently co-founder and president of the Sophia Center for Life Studies in central North Carolina. In 2007, Sandra and her daughter Katelyn LaGrega co-produced a 27-minute film titled *The Art of Natural Death Care*. Find it on Vimeo here: [vimeo.com/220346382](https://vimeo.com/220346382)