

THE INTEGRATIVE HEALTH COACH

By John Davidson

EXTRAORDINARY PASSING, NEW BEGINNING

It is before sunrise in the San Luis Valley of south central Colorado.

The sky is clear in predawn light. There is no wind.

The cold is intense – just below freezing – on this Sunday morning in late March.

Fifteen or so people are gathered into a small circle on the valley floor about a mile west of the foot of the Sangre de Cristo mountains that rise to pinnacles over 14,000 feet.

In the center of the circle is a funeral pyre. Constructed of block, concrete, steel and stucco, the pyre is laid out with firewood, ready for the body that awaits in the back of a station wagon parked on the county road about 40 yards away. It is three days after the death.

As if on cue, a family of coyotes a bit south of the circle sings a refrain familiar in this valley.

On that plaintive note and just before sunrise, the body – clothed and covered with a simple white shroud – is lifted from the car on a plain wooden stretcher lovingly crafted for this moment. Led by a man playing a Native American flute that is the only sound cutting through the remarkable silence of this remote place, the stretcher bearers walk a sandy trail to the circle and place both body and stretcher on the steel frame in the center of the pyre.

Family members first, everyone present comes forward to place juniper and pinon boughs on top of the body. Firekeepers place more wood on top of the boughs.

A firekeeper has fashioned a torch from cotton cloth soaked in kerosene and tied with string to a stick. He invites a family member to light the bottom of the woodpile. A small amount of kerosene has already been poured onto the wood below the body to accelerate the fire, which ignites quickly at the touch of the torch. A fragrant and dense white smoke rises up. In a few moments, the fire gains momentum, and the smoke gives way to intense heat and tall flame.

Few words are spoken in this particular ceremony. The family chooses its own way, its own ritual, to express love, honor, respect and farewells. The ring of experienced volunteers who have facilitated this process stand in mute support, simply and powerfully present to the family's wishes in this most ancient of ceremonies.

Having said what needs to be said, the family departs. The firekeepers tend the fire until the fire's work is done, carefully and respectfully removing bits of bone as those appear among cooling embers. The hot ashes are mounded and protected, so that a volunteer may return on the following day to recover the remaining ashes in a ten gallon bucket, which is made available to the family to do with as it wishes.

The Crestone End of Life Project (CEOLP) came into being about three years ago. Since that time, it has facilitated about fifteen "open air" cremations. CEOLP is a Colorado non-profit corporation. Families able to do so ordinarily make a contribution to CEOLP in recognition of this service, which is provided to residents of the Crestone community who have registered in advance. The service includes assisting the family

in preparing the body for repose and assisting with planning for the cremation ceremony.

While CEOLP defers to the needs and desires of the family, its volunteer members have developed a base of experience that allows the family to elect an established procedure that lies outside the conventional funeral home embalming or cremation approaches. Most often, this process consists of washing the body and sitting with it for the period of three days until the cremation occurs. Because this “sitting with” is no longer common in American culture, the volunteers gently help the family accommodate the process that the deceased person has requested.

CEOLP’s service is unique within the United States. Because its vision is unfamiliar in modern times, it took considerable effort to obtain the approvals necessary from the agencies having legal jurisdiction over burials, fires, and environmental concerns. Following tentative approval from these various agencies, CEOLP’s consistently professional service eventually won both respect and support from the regulating agencies.

In a culture that has departed from being with the departed, CEOLP’s service is resonating with those who wish an alternative to the conventional process that – despite the professionalism of its practitioners – remains a distant and hands-off engagement with the event of death. Open air cremations clearly restore an intimate and personal engagement with the death of a loved one.

In addition to this personal service, CEOLP is developing a resource that provides information regarding advance directives – sometimes called “living wills” – and other estate planning tools that lay the groundwork for electing such a service long

before the moment of death comes.

For myself – at an age when I find myself attending more and more funerals – I felt it a rare privilege to witness the birth of what promises to become a movement. To stand beside the fire in the light of the rising sun, to witness the solemn and joyful rites of passage presided over by those whose hearts are most connected to the soul passing on, to experience the elemental engagement of the fire returning tissue and bone to the earth – filled me with the awe that arises in the knowing that we stand in direct relation to a vast history of human experience that is met once again in such a moment.

For the future, CEOLP's vision is to awaken people to the alternatives available and the rights – and responsibility – they have to choose their own path, including conventional approaches. CEOLP has a collaborative arrangement with the local mortuary, in the spirit of its central value of supporting community efforts that serve the broad range of services and choices – an approach that seeks to compliment and not compete with existing services.

CEOLP's present fund raising is directed toward the cost of a permanent adobe-like wall to surround the ceremonial area.

You can find out more about CEOLP and make contributions through its website:

<http://www.crestoneendoflifeproject.org/>.

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