



# Naturalizing Death

For at least the past 2,400 years Western culture has been engaged in the denial of death. The first part of this project was to deny the spiritual reality - the death of our individual consciousness - and to invent an imaginary afterlife better than this life. The second part, which progressively came to dominate the death industry over the last century, was to mask the physical reality of death.

The pantheist, reverent naturalist approach reintegrates these two aspects of death into the context of nature.

Originally our Western root cultures in the Near East, Greece and Israel, all had a very negative view of the individual afterlife for ordinary mortals. Although our consciousness survived death, life after death was a miserable shadowy existence in a dusty underground. Homer's underworld is a grim landscape. There is no judgement of souls, no reward for virtue, no penalty for vice. The common fate of all is to become gibbering shades, as insubstantial as dreams. Only the faintest trace remains of perception and intelligence. When Odysseus calls up the spirits of the dead, the ghost of Achilles tells him : 'If I could live on earth again, I'd rather be a serf in the house of a landless peasant, than king of all these dead men who have done with life.'

One by one each of these cultures, during times of mass mortality, war, disease, famine or persecution, created the idea of a desirable afterlife far superior to life before death. Once adopted, this idea offered an attractive escape in times of individual or communal troubles, but denying

death led inevitably to denying life, and the overvaluation of the afterlife devalued this present life.

The medicalization of death over the last century or so has further alienated us from the realities. Surveys show that seven out of ten Americans wish to die at home. In fact only one person in four achieves that wish - half die in hospitals, and 20-25% in a nursing home.

The biological process has been taken out of the hands of the dying person and their loved ones, expropriated by medical professionals. The patient is taken from home and

placed in a sterile and alien hospital environment, then subjected to expensive medical interventions designed to prolong life and avoid lawsuits. Contact between the dying person and their loved ones may be constrained and rationed. Death may occur among total strangers in a dehumanized technological jungle.

The commercialization of death by the funeral industry adds a final wall of alienation. The body is whisked out of sight, refrigerated in a morgue drawer, pumped full

of toxic embalming chemicals, and then reappears coiffed, painted with cosmetics, and immaculately clothed. The funeral often follows a set pattern, conducted by a funeral or religious professional, with extremely limited time for grieving. It becomes difficult for survivors to attain closure, acknowledgement of and reconciliation with death and loss.

There is a growing groundswell to reform each of these areas, to reclaim ownership of death for the dying and their loved ones, to acknowledge the physical reality of death. Nature-reverent pantheism embraces all of these aspects in

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*We are taught that death is an accident, a deplorable punishment for the oldest sin. But let children walk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods, plains and mountains and streams, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life.*

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**John Muir, Thousand Mile Walk**

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## Preserving Memory

In the times of our ancestors portraits modelled in wax were arranged, each in its own niche, as images to accompany the funeral processions of the family; and always, whenever someone died, every member of the family that had ever existed was present. The pedigree, too, of the individual was traced by lines to each of the painted portraits. Their record rooms were filled with archives and records of what each had done.

**Pliny, Natural History, xxxv**

a re-naturalization of dying and dying.

Perhaps the core of this approach is acceptance of death. Pantheism sees death as a natural process that is indispensable to nature and evolution. Sex and death evolved hand in hand as means of allowing faster adaptation to changing environments. Sex permitted greater variation, while the death of older individuals made room for offspring that were better adapted. So in a sense death is the price we pay for the privilege of parental and sexual love.

Pantheism's stress on our unity with nature and the wider Universe also means that we are never totally separate. We emerged from the whole, we are a part of the whole while alive, we remain part of the whole after death.

## A naturalistic afterlife

For people with a naturalistic outlook, mind and body are one: there is no independent soul that could survive the death of the body. Hence, most naturalists do not believe in survival of our individual consciousness after death.

However, many of us still harbor a need to feel that we will persist in some way. The desire for persistence is instinctive, it's a part of the drive for survival that helps us to stay alive. Naturalists must find naturalistic ways of thinking about persistence. There are plenty of these available. If we embrace them consciously and elaborate them into family traditions, they provide an "afterlife" that can satisfy our survival drives without sacrificing our reverence for reality and evidence.

Mentally – as complex intellectual emotional and active social beings - we survive in memories and records. We are present in the minds of all of those who knew us, positively where we were kind and loving, negatively where we fell short. The preservation of memory is a cultural norm in some societies – as with ancestor reverence in South East and East Asian religions. Halloween, All Saints, or the Day of the Dead can become times when we communally honor and remember the dead.

We can transform memory into tradition by maintaining archives of family records, autobiographies, photographs and other memorabilia. There was a time when this would have become



## Lucretius

Death matters not a jot to us. When we shall no longer be, then nothing at all can happen to us or stir our sensation, not even if earth dissolves into sea and sea into sky. . He who is not, cannot be unhappy. Nature would say: "Why do you groan and weep at death? . . Why not like a banqueter fed full of life, withdraw with contentment and rest in peace. Come, depart with dignity, thus it must be. The old order always gives way to the new, and these generations, when their lives are complete, will follow you. So one thing will never cease to arise from another. No-one has freehold in life - all of us are tenants. Look back and reflect how the ages of eternal time before you were born are nothing to you. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the times to come after our death. Is there anything terrifying in that? Anything depressing? Is it not more peaceful than any sleep?"

**De Rerum Natura iii: 830-939**



I was not.  
I was.  
I am not.  
I care not.

### Roman epitaph

very cumbersome after only a few generations, but computers and hard drives make it very easy today.

We can preserve and pass down significant mementoes of our ancestors. I have a painting by my Grandmother who was an art teacher, a walking stick given to my great grandfather when he retired from his job as a printer, a sports trophy of my father, my mother's school prizes.

We also live on in physical ways – through the genes of our children or family, so often visible in similarities of appearance and character. We live on through our actions and creations, which continue to spread as waves through the world, interacting with all other waves in complex swells and surfs.

Finally we persist through the atoms and molecules that make us up. If we make sure that our bodies are disposed of in ways that allow natural recycling (see the article on Green Funerals) then our elements will be reabsorbed into new life forms, and our gaseous remains will circle the globe on the winds. If our bodies are buried in green burial areas, then we can help to create wildlife habitat and help to leave the earth more hospitable for other species.

### Re-empowering the dying and their families

Dying at home remains most people's ideal, but modern life makes that more difficult: extended families are split up, housing may often be smaller than in the past, more people work full time or do more than one job. All of these make care at home difficult.

The hospice movement has been a very significant step towards returning power to the dying and their families. Terminally ill patients who enter a hospice agree that they will not receive any treatment for their terminal conditions. In return the hospice provides material needs, emotional support, pain alleviation, and easy access for family and friends.

There is a growing move to encourage and support dying at home, including "death midwives" who provide care and emotional support for the dying and their loved ones. Priests have traditionally filled this role, but people outside of traditional religions have similar needs.

Another important aspect of re-empowering the dying person is the growing practice

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**If you live each day as if it were your last, it's certain that one day you'll be right. But the odds are that on 14,999 days out of 15,000, you'll be wrong. Figure out what that means for your life strategy.**

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of advance health directives indicating how you wish to be treated if you have a terminal illness and are mentally unfit to take decisions. Advanced funeral wishes specify what kind of ceremony you would like and how you want your body disposed of.

### Home-made funerals

The final part of this picture of natural death is a still small but expanding movement for home funerals designed by the deceased or their loved ones.

Family members or friends act in lieu of the professional funeral director in washing and dressing the body. The choice of casket can be based on ecological, economical and social needs, free of commercial pressure and persuasion. The casket may be made and decorated by loved ones.

Visiting and viewing the deceased happens in a familiar environment and is free of time rationing. The ceremony can take place with full respect of cultural and personal beliefs, honoring a life passage and a life-changing event for survivors. The whole occasion creates a spirit of community, a safe, loving place to discuss life and death and to express grief and loss. Children can learn that death is a natural part of the life cycle.

Conventional commercial funerals often involve time-rationing of funeral homes, crematoria or places of worship. They may involve the intrusion of unfamiliar professionals, inappropriate and generalized services.

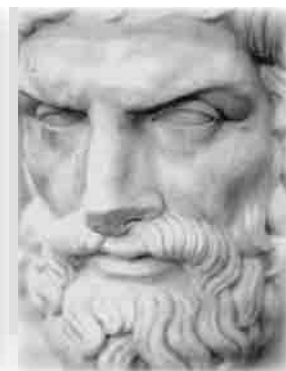
Home and self-service funerals allow for full absorption of the facts of death and the reality of loss, and a full process of grieving. Instead of leaving loose ends and an air of unreality and impersonality, they allow for full grieving, full closure, full honouring of a life, and full return to emotional wholeness in acceptance of death as a natural part of life.

**Final Passages:** <http://www.finalpassages.org/>

### Epicurus

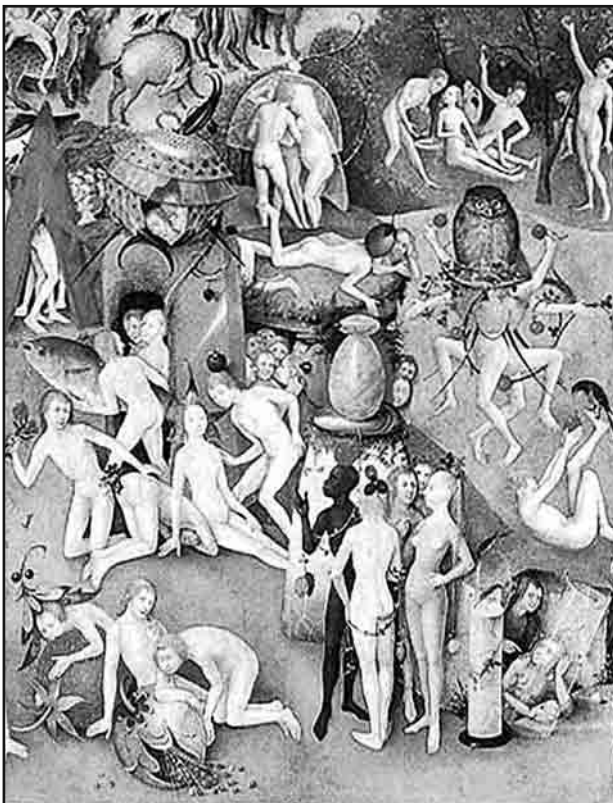
Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing [redacted] good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. When we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead.

### Letter to Menoeceus



# Visions of the Afterlife

*All the major world religions have imagined an afterlife that is in some way or other superior to this life. Some, like the Christian and Buddhist afterlives, present an end to suffering and a promise of incorporeal bliss. Others, like the Jewish and Moslem versions, suggest more physical states. Mark Twain, who complained of the straight-laced Christian heaven, may have found the Moslem version far more interesting.*



**Top: Adoring the Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven, in Gustave Dore's version of Dante's Divine Comedy.**

How long could you keep this up?  
An hour? A day? A month? All Eternity?

**Bottom: Which is more exciting?** Hymning the Trinity and Mary with the angels, or cavorting in Bosch's visionary and enigmatic Garden of Delights?

## Christianity: Spiritual Bliss

In death . . . the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. The souls of all the saints and other faithful who died after receiving Christ's holy baptism . . . have been, are and will be in . . . the heavenly kingdom and celestial paradise with Christ, conjoined to the company of the holy angels. . . This perfect . . . communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and the blessed is called "Heaven." Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness. . This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description.

After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The Universe itself will be renewed. . . We (do not know) the way in which the universe will be transformed. The form of this world, distorted by sin, is passing away, and we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling in which righteousness dwells, in which happiness will fill and surpass all the desires of peace arising in the hearts of men.

**Catholic Catechism, 997, 1023-4, 1042, 1048**

## No sex, gambling or drink please – only prayers, hymns, and adulations!

Heaven has been thought out and constructed upon an absolutely definite plan . . . that it shall contain, in labored detail, each and every imaginable thing that is repulsive to man, and not a single thing he likes. . (Man) has imagined a heaven, and he has left out of it the supremest of all delights, the one ecstasy that stands first and foremost in the heart of every individual – sexual intercourse!

**Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth***

## Hell? I thought that was just for other people!

There is a price to pay for belief in the Christian or Moslem Heaven - it's that there's also a Hell. Islam suggests that most faithful believers will go to paradise unless they have committed heinous crimes. Christianity is less clear. A deathbed repentance may get you off the hook, but some gospel texts suggest that it's very difficult to gain entry to Heaven.

In post-Christian Britain only 32 per cent of people believe in Hell, and even among Christians only 40 per cent hold this belief. In America the overall figure is 72 per cent, 77 per cent among Protestants and among Catholics 80 per cent.

However it seems that most people think that Hell is for other people. In a Harris poll in 2003, 84% of the public believed in the survival of the soul after death. Almost two-thirds expected to go to heaven. Six percent thought they would go to purgatory. Only 1 per cent expected to go to Hell.

However, new research among over-60s suggests that traditional afterlife beliefs may not always be comforting. People who are moderately religious (who are not sure they will avoid Hell) fear death more than people who are either very religious (who expect to get to heaven) or those who are non-religious (who have no fear of Hell and may have found alternative ways of coping with the fear of death, eg survival through family, memory, works).



## Judaism: Bodily Resurrection

'Many of those who sleep in the dust of earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. . . But the saints of the most High [martyrs] shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever.'

**Daniel, 12.2-3; 7.18**



## Islam: Gardens of Sensual Luxury

[In Eden they live in] palaces of pearls, in each of which are seventy ruby mansions, in each of which are seventy emerald rooms, in each of which are seventy beds, on each of which is a wife who is one of the large-eyed houris. And in every room there are seventy tables, on each of which are seventy varieties of food. In every house are seventy servant girls. Every morning the believer shall be given strength enough to enjoy all of this. . . A single man in Heaven shall wed five hundred houris, four thousand virgins, and eight thousand deflowered women, and shall embrace each one of them for a period equal to his lifetime in the world. . . The last man to enter Heaven, who is the least of them in degree, will be given to see all that he owns for the distance of a hundred years' journey, all of which is gold and silver palaces and tents of pearl. Morning and night they shall be served with seventy thousand gold platters, in each of which is a dish different from the others; The taste of the last shall be as delicious as that of the first.

**Al-Ghazali, The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife**



## Buddhism: An end to suffering

There is, monks, that plane where there is neither extension nor motion, nor the plane of infinite ether, nor that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, neither this world nor another, neither the moon nor the sun. Here there is no coming or going or remaining or dying or rising, for this plane itself is called Nirvana, without support, without continuance, without mental object – this is itself the end of suffering.

There is, monks, an unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, and because there is this, an escape can be shown here for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded.

**Udana, 80-82**



# What do we tell the kids?

*Tony van der Mude asked the Community List: My daughter Alana said she had problems as a fourth-grader with thoughts about what happens after we die, because both her parents, being atheists, said what amounted to "when you die, you rot." How do we satisfy that hunger for a response to death for a little one who is not spiritually weaned?*

factory answer for them, they were all having Christianity forced down their throats at school. Though I was engaged in a personal quest for my own truth I was not sure about anything, so I usually just answered, "I don't know, really, nobody does". Which must have been frustrating at best for them.

How I wish I had been clearer in my mind at those times. How I wish I had been able to answer them more along these lines:

"Your body is made of all sorts of things that hold it together, to stop it falling apart, things you can see, like your skin and your hair and your nose and things that you can't see with your eyes, things called atoms. These things called atoms are very clever little things, each of us has lots and lots of them, we will never run out of them.

When you die, all these things that make up You do something wonderful. They decide to let You, who they have been so busy holding together, change into hundreds of other things, all at the same time. Isn't that amazing? All

I have three children, all now young adults, and finding their own way. My eldest son is in training to be a Tibetan Buddhist monk. The other two, boy and girl twins, are, respectively, an atheist and a Pantheist-in-the-making-if-she-but-knew-it.

The question fell from their lips too, at various stages of their childhood. At the time I had no satis-

those atoms very softly and gently go back home. Where is their home? Ah...now that's another wonderful thing. Their home is the rivers, the streams, the winds, the mountains, the sea, and the earth. So you see, when you die, all the things that now hold You together won't need to do that job any more, because they will make You part of All the world. A little bit of what you are now will be the wind, a little bit will be the earth, some will be the sea, and some will be all sorts of other things.

You are ALREADY really part of all that, of the wind and the earth and the rivers, it's just that your skin and your atoms are doing such a good job of holding you together that you FEEL separate from them. But you're not, really, in fact we are all part of them right now, and when we die, we will be part of them still, but just not have the feeling that we are one separate little person. And it will be very wonderful. But we can't just chose when this will happen. Our atoms will know, so we can trust them to take us there, to let us be part of all those things, when it is the right time to happen. So there is nothing to worry about at all."

Sue Williams

A couple of weeks ago my 21 year-old daughter and I were talking about religious beliefs and death. I told her that I don't believe in an afterlife, that we just go back to nature, living on through our deeds and our family members, etc.,

She was really surprised, but mostly she was sad. She said that seemed very depressing. In fact, when I first realized I didn't believe in heaven (or hell) or an afterlife, I DID feel depressed. It seemed like what was the point of being here for such a brief period of time if this was all there was? And what happened if you blew it and made a mess of this life? No hope of another chance? And what about all those people that did terrible things? They just got off free and had the same fate I had?

I argued with myself over it quite a bit. She asked me those questions, too, just a couple of weeks ago, and I told her I now accept that I come from nature, and when I die I



## Giordano Bruno

When we consider the being and substance of that universe in which we are immutably set, we shall discover that neither we ourselves nor any substance doth suffer death. for nothing is in fact diminished in its substance, but all things, wandering through infinite space, undergo change of aspect.

## De Infinito, Introductory Epistle.



return to nature, just in another form, and I find that very comforting. It's like I have always been home, I always am home, and I always will be home. Now instead of filling me with fear and sadness, the thought of returning to nature instead of having an everlasting individual soul makes me feel peaceful and gives me a sense of belongingness that I never felt in the more traditional Christian religion of my childhood and young adulthood.

I know if I make a mistake or a mess that doesn't relegate me to "hell" - likewise if I act loving or kind, that doesn't earn me a special seat in "heaven" either - we just live our lives and pay the consequences for our choices in the here and now. Bottom line: I didn't convince her. Maybe someday she will come to a different realization, or maybe she won't. I'm glad we can talk about it, and I'm glad she has the freedom to make her own choices.

*Sharon Dobrovic*

When my son Alex was about seven he developed an intense fear of death. So did I at around the same age. I

### Marcus Aurelius

Pass then through this little nature, and end your journey in content, just as an oak leaf falls off when it is ripe, blessing nature who produced it, and thanking the tree on which it grew. Every part of me will be reduced by change into some part of the universe, and that again will change into another part of the universe. and so on for ever. And by consequence, such a change I too exist, and those who begot me, and so on forever in the other direction.

**Meditations, 4.48; 5.13**



remember almost sweating with terror especially at night when there was nothing to distract me. I almost died of fright!

We told Alex our own ideas - that when you die you make sure your body or your ashes are placed somewhere where they can become part of plants and animals, so that in this way you give life to the trees and birds and squirrels and become part of them. That you always live on in the memories of those who know you and especially of those who love you. That however long or short your life you will have contributed something unique to the world that you will leave behind.

But at that point this wasn't good enough for him. He became attracted to the idea of heaven, and began to think that believing in Jesus might just get him a place there. Since his fear was great, and this was his way of coping, we

Zu Li went to see Zu Lai who was dying.

Leaning against the door, he said, 'Great is the Creator. What will he make of you now? Will he make you into a rat's liver? Will he make you into an insect's leg?'

Zu-Lai replied: 'The universe gave me my body so I may be carried, my life so I may work, my old age so I may repose, and my death so I may rest. To regard life as good, the way to regard death as good. . . . If I regard the world as a great furnace and creation as a master foundry, where should anywhere I go not be all right?'

When Zhuang Zi was about to die, his disciples came to him with their wish to give him a grave and earth for my coffin and its shell; the sun and moon for my two round symbols of jade, the stars and constellations for my pearls and jewels; and all things assisting as he mourners. Will not the provisions for my funeral be complete? What could you add to them?'

### Zhuang Zi



**Zhuang Zi, Book vi.**



## Spinoza

A free man is one who lives under the guidance of [redacted] who directly desires that which is good. . . Therefore such a man thinks of nothing less than of death, but his wisdom is a meditation of life.

### Ethics

just left well alone and did not attempt to talk him around. And with a year or so so he did grow out of it and reverted to something similar to our way. *Paul Harrison*

If I were to die and find myself at the gates of heaven, knowing that I would be “me” the individual, for eternity, standing by God and praising him forever, I would then know I had entered Hell. The concept of eternal life with my existing conscience depresses me a great deal more than any conceivable form of soulless death.

What was really born on the day of my birth and what will really die upon my death? Almost all of the cells in my body have been regenerated at least twice by now in my 38<sup>th</sup> year. I believe only certain cells of the brain and heart stay with you your entire life. Except for these only my memory maintains a constant existence between my birth and death. If it were not for my memory, I’d probably believe that I was born every time I awoke in the morning.

How do I know that the skin cells I lost last year are not the feathers of the eagle flying overhead, or a cup of my blood wasn’t amongst the rapids of a great river? Every moment of our existence contains birth and death, and only the constant recording by my memory deceives me to believe that life is a linear movement through time, hence the illusion of a start and a finish. Life is not about a beginning or end but about a constant dynamic change, which happens before our eyes every moment. How cool would it be to track down every molecule that has been

attached to my memory from my conception to now and see its path? I’m sure if we could we would be a little freaked out, and at the same time amazed.

One day my 2.5 year old will ask me about this, and I will keep it simple for her, as one should for a young child. “My daughter you will always be alive, today as a little girl, tomorrow as a teenage girl and then a beautiful woman and beyond that, perhaps as a blue bird, or a waterfall, or both.” I have faith in her ability to figure things out as you and I have. She’ll more than likely ask me how it will feel after she has died, and my answer will be a question, how did it feel before you were born? Kids are attracted to the concept of heaven because it is simple and it is safe, so your explanation should also be simple and safe. My bet is they’ll ponder the question for their entire life.

*Jay Cavanaugh*

For my ten year old, I used a story I read repeated by R.W. Emmerson and some Buddhists and Taoists:

All life is like one big ocean.

When you are born, you are a cup of that water scooped up.

When you die, this water is poured back in.

So, “you” and “I” are really ONE, that were always here, and probably always be.

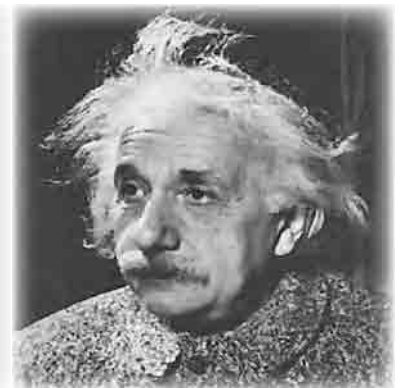
*Esteban Barturen*

## Einstein

I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the kind that we experience in ourselves. Neither can I nor would I want [redacted]

physical death; let feeble souls, from fear or absurd egoism, cherish such thoughts.

### The World as I see it.





# Funerals are for the living

My mother was a wonderful mother. In my childhood, she was supportive and encouraging. In my teens she allowed me a wide freedom and scope. After that we grew very far apart - she was very clever in a mathematical and verbal way but lacked emotional depth. I found it difficult to communicate with her - the things she wanted to talk about seemed very superficial to me, and the things I wanted to talk about were too deep for her. In later life she focused on negatives rather than positives - especially on forty-year old hurts from a disastrous marriage, and her acute pains from arthritis.

She called herself an agnostic but was basically an atheist, with an unemotional view of death which she referred to as "snuffing it." For her last five or six years, from the age of 86 or so, she actually wanted to die and would have accepted euthanasia if available.

and the animals there. She seemed to like the idea. I hope she held it in her mind as she passed away.

Pantheist funerals should be the celebration of a life, free of talk about "passing to a better place," so I gave a eulogy focusing entirely on the positives of her life. At the wake I got together an exhibition of photos and testimonials of her life, and put together an illustrated biography which I sent to her friends. A couple of months later I drove up to the Lake District with her ashes in a green cardboard box. I took them to Watendlath, and found a spot by a gushing brook, close to a short waterfall where we picnicked in my childhood. There was a little sapling growing through the grass and moss, and I spread her ashes around its base. I brought back three beautiful stones from close by, one for me and one each for her grandsons Sam and Alex.



Phyllis Harrison  
aged 4, 14, 25,  
47 and 84

In her last months, after two falls and three months in hospital and then nursing home, I knew the end was coming. On my very last visit I could see that she was very weak and might not last much longer. I thought it was important to say some last things while I still could. I told her of my love and gratitude. I told her that if none of her close family were there when the time came, still she should imagine that we were there in spirit, holding her hand.

She had chosen cremation. I asked her where she wanted her ashes put. She said, somewhat typically: "I don't care, chuck them in the bin." I felt it would help her to think in a positive way of death, so that as she passed away she could have peaceful calming images as her last experience. I asked her to think of a beautiful natural place she had loved all her life.

She entered into the spirit of the suggestion, and thought of the English Lake District where she had spent many walking holidays as a young woman full of joy and hope. She chose Watendlath, a little village above Derwentwater, with a pond and a rocky stream. I suggested that she should imagine herself sinking into the earth and becoming part of the trees

When people die at a ripe old age, especially when they clearly want to die, death is not so traumatic for the living. The whole process of the eulogy and the placing of the ashes was a liberating therapy for the alienation that had existed between us for over forty years. I found that the very positive image of my childhood returned and the negative image dissolved, I was left only with the puzzle of the difference between the two. It was a tremendously healing experience for me and pulled back together parts of myself that were discordant. *Paul Harrison*

My father died almost two and a half years ago, two weeks before celebrating his 60th wedding anniversary with my mother, who lives on. I still grieve. His funeral was Christian, in a conservative Methodist Church in Conway, Arkansas, but there were elements of interest to Pantheists. A strong element was a celebration of his life, especially his courageous and active fight for social and racial justice in his home area, the US South from the 30s on. The minister said that "Tom Slinkard did what

we knew we should have done, but didn't have the courage to do." From a pantheist perspective, the connectedness of all life is elemental, and therefore commitment to equal dignity and rights should be a cornerstone of our social and religious commitment. I believe my father exemplified that connection, which could be a point of connection with other faiths that share the commitment to equality and justice.

My brother, Thomas, arranged a slide collage of photos from his life which were shown with Benny Goodman's music playing in the background. The whole memorial service was a celebration of a life well lived, and of my father's connection to the people and the life of his community.

His will indicated that he wanted his ashes scattered in the Pacific, where he had been a sailor during WWII, and felt an enduring connection. It wasn't until last July that we were able to get all of the family together at the same time and on the Pacific coast. The event was the sudden and unexpected death of my brother Thomas. We held my brother's funeral in the afternoon and scattered my father's ashes over the Pacific that evening, followed by a memorial dinner for both at a restaurant on the Berkeley marina. It was a sad time, but emphasized the connectedness of my father's and his son's life. The whole affair had a profound impact on me, and probably most of the other members of my family. An aunt who has been emotionally distraught for a

while announced recently that she too wished to have her ashes scattered over the Pacific. My sister called me up and told me to go warn Dad that our aunt was coming to live with him! Connections...

**Karl Slinkard**

Since, I believe, my consciousness will permanently cease when I die (or before when I enter a terminal coma, if that be my fate), what happens to my corpse is no concern of mine. I won't be waiting on the other side, looking down on it with pleasure or displeasure. I want my salvageable organs donated to help some other human being. Organ donation, is a way seeing to it that other humans suffer less and enjoy life more. But it is not a way of somehow remaining a little bit alive after death. A durable power of health care attorney and a living will are ways of seeing to it that I do not suffer a needlessly prolonged process of dying, or in the event I am completely unconscious and unable to suffer, that my financial resources are not being drained keeping a vegetable alive, but rather that as much money as possible will be left to my heirs. Whatever form of disposal my heirs are most comfortable with is fine with me. I won't be around to experience it. Whatever is done with my corpse, the atoms that were me will persist, but they will no longer be me. Funerals are for the comfort of the mourners, not for the dead.

**Walt Mandell**



## A Death in Nature

*There is a willow grows  
aslant a brook,  
That shows his hoar leaves  
in the glassy stream;  
There with fantastic  
garlands did she come  
Of crow-flowers, nettles,  
daisies, and long purples.  
There, on the pendent  
boughs her coronet weeds  
Clambering to hang, an  
envious sliver broke;  
When down her weedy  
trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook.  
Her clothes spread wide;  
And, mermaid-like, awhile  
they bore her up . . .  
like a creature native and  
indued  
Unto that element.*

**Shakespeare, Hamlet**

## *Elemental death*

*Like the curlew's twilight cries  
curling over the silvered bay.  
four deaths draw me*

*To lie in earth, a heavy sleeper  
in an old bed, slowly melting  
like late snow in shadow.*

*To drift on the flow of a river flooding  
seaward, then to roll with tides  
and thunder with the surf.*

*To burn with the fierce crackling  
updraught of a fire of dry leaves  
roaring into bright air.*

*Or to be scattered on the wind,  
and sail the clouds  
or ride the hurricanes.*

*Elementally we live:  
solid and soft as earth, fluid as water,  
light as air, bright as fire.*

*Even so we pass away:  
wave to the waves, breath to the breeze,  
element to the elements we give.*

*As long as it is so -  
whichever way - I won't be sad  
when it's my time to go.*

*Just so the curlew's cry  
echoes and fades in the moonlight  
over the curving bay.*

**Paul Harrison**

# Green Burials

**The Natural Death movement aims to make our final footprint on earth a benign one. Booming in its home base, Britain, it is spreading to many other countries.**

Traditional funerals are damaging to the environment and Nature. They use hardwoods, chipboard and metals, toxic glues, stains and embalming chemicals. Cemeteries take up increasing amounts of land. Petrol mowers and herbicides may be used to maintain the grounds.

Traditional practice is also out of tune with nature-oriented spiritualities. One aspect of the pantheist “afterlife” is the recycling of our elements in nature, into new life forms. That recycling is made impossible when the body is embalmed and encased in caskets that do not biodegrade.

The growth of environmental awareness and nature-centered spirituality is now creating dramatic changes in funeral practices. A crucial driver of this shift has been the UK-based Natural Death Centre. It was set up in London in 1992 by a visionary social innovator, Nicholas Albery. Albery died in a road accident in 2001, aged only 52, but the Centre is still providing inspiration and information to a growing and world-wide movement.

The NDC began its activities in 1993 with a comprehensive handbook on death, worldwide funeral practices, grieving, burial, and cremation,

including a directory of low-cost and flexible funeral companies. At that time there was only one green burial site in the UK.

In 1994 Albery started the Association of Natural Burial Grounds to help farmers and

according to sound ecological principles.

- Members must guarantee the long-term security of the graves and the wildlife, and have a satisfactory plan for when the site reaches its capacity.

- Members accept bodies only in environmentally acceptable biodegradable containers such as shrouds, cardboard or wooden coffins.
- Members will not require that a funeral director be used. Clients will be informed that they may organise the funeral and service themselves, and dig and help fill the grave subject to safety and

training requirements.

The Natural Death Centre now lists 200 working or planned natural burial sites in the United Kingdom – many more than the rest of the world put together. The reasons for this phenomenal growth lie partly with the profound British love for animals and nature, but the speed is explained by the catalytic and educative effect of the NDC itself.

Of these burial grounds, no less than 115 are run by local authorities, 57 are run as businesses by farmers or private individuals, and ten are run as charitable or non-profit concerns. Others are still on the drawing board.

The Natural Death

## *Fundamentals of Green*

- *Burial ground is or be a natural habitat*
- *It is managed to conserve wildlife*
- *Only native plants are permitted*
- *Only biodegradable containers*
- *No chemical preparation of bodies*
- *Only small or flat stones or plaques*
- *When full, the burial ground is converted into a nature reserve.*

landowners with problems of planning, reassuring local neighbours, getting funeral supplies and so on.

The Association has a Code of Practice that enshrines several of the key aspects of green burial:

- Members agree to take all reasonable steps to conserve local wildlife and archaeological sites and to manage their projects



*When I die,  
I want to be buried  
under an apple tree.  
I think of death as  
like a leaf falling off  
a tree.*

**Nicholas Albery  
(1948-2001)  
founder of the  
Natural Death Centre**

Centre also encourages people to complete Advance Funeral Wishes and Advance Healthcare Directives, and provides online forms for these.

The concern for sustainability embraces the preparation of bodies and the materials used for caskets and coffins. Green burial sites will not accept bodies that are embalmed, or housed in toxic or non-degradable containers.

A small number of companies now offer green coffins and caskets. The Natural Funeral Company in the UK sells woven bamboo coffins with organic cotton shrouds lined with a biodegradable plastic derived from corn and potato starch. They also sell the “eco-pod” – a container shaped like a seed pod made from recycled paper and natural earth minerals. Other suppliers sell coffins made of unfinished pine, woven willow or recycled cardboard.

One interesting issue is whether cremation or green burial is more environmentally friendly. Conventional burial is very environmentally damaging: The impact of each individual burial may be on the decline, as there is a trend towards re-using graves or “stacking” burials one on top of another. On the other hand many people may be unhappy with the idea of their remains being dug up or stacked and those who can afford it may prefer more expansive luxury memorial parks.

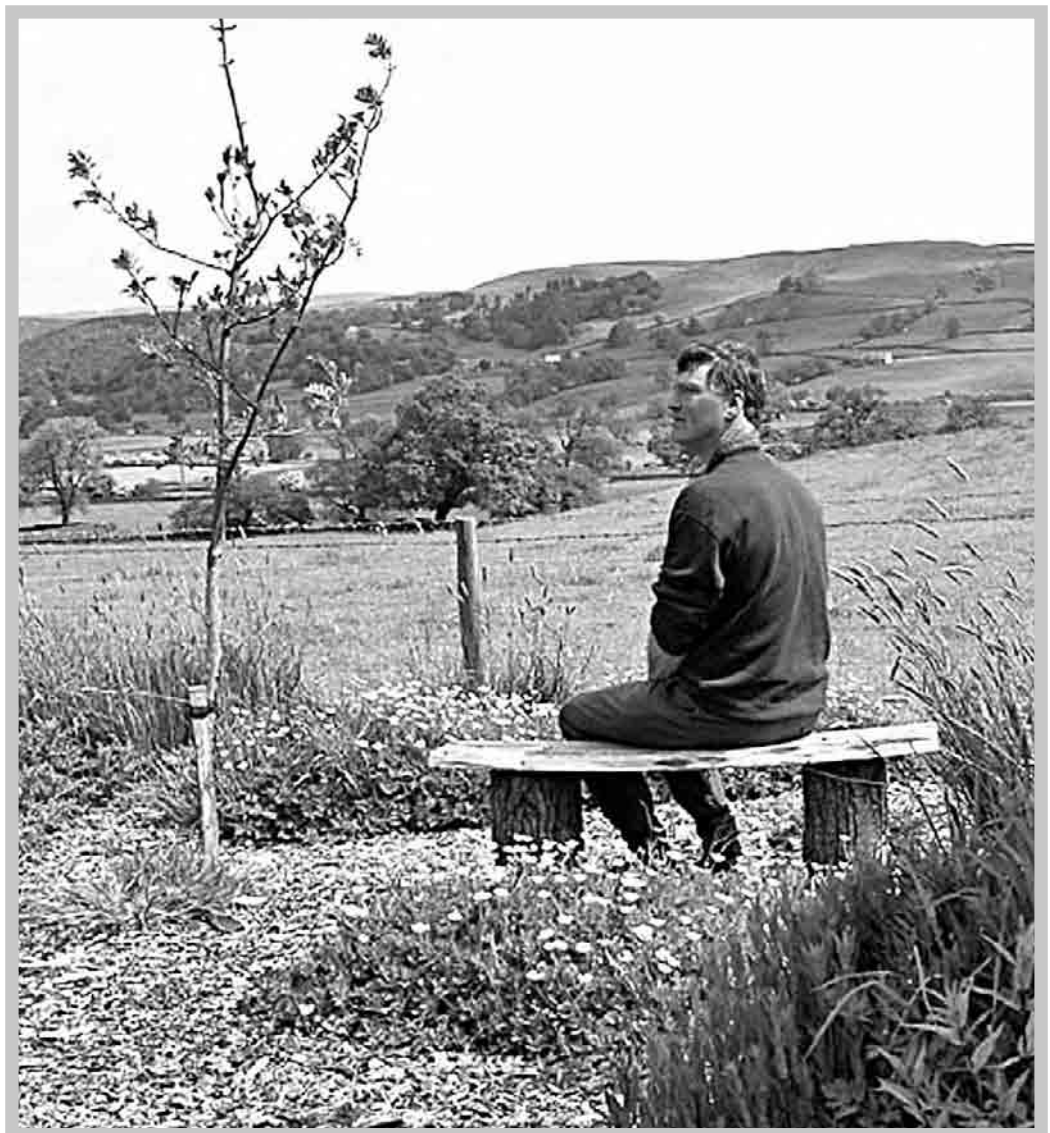
Cremations do not require land, but in other respects they seem to be more damaging. Mostly non-

renewable energy sources such as natural gas are used. Increasingly stringent emission standards demand more complete combustion – and much higher energy consumption. At present better local air quality is being bought at the cost of increasing greenhouse gas output. Because a crematorium is not financially viable if it serves only a small niche market, it’s not likely that we will see thoroughly “green crematoria” for a long while.

Green burial offers many

advantages. The materials used are biodegradable and from sustainable sources. The sites are managed as nature reserves and so increase rather than decrease wildlife habitats. However, many of them are situated in rural areas a long drive away, so the energy savings over cremation may be eaten up in greater petrol consumption for the funeral and for later visits.

The ethos of the green burial movement is already changing conventional funeral practice. Funeral directors are increasingly



*At Brocklands Woodland Burial site in Lancashire, UK, a tree is planted on each grave. No vases of flowers, statues or other artificial objects are allowed. “This is not a cemetery,” say the owners, “it is a place where graves become a part of the landscape.”*

having to cope with clients who do not wish embalming.

An increasing number of city cemeteries in the UK are setting aside natural burial areas managed in a similar way to green burial sites. The London Borough of Croydon emphasizes the value of nature in improving the grieving process: "A singing bird, a beautiful tree, or a colourful bedding display, are all therapeutic and symbolic of new life."

Older sections of cemeteries are already wildlife resources – they usually contain the oldest trees in the locality, and provide habitats for mammals, wildflowers, insects, bats and birds, while old stone memorials offer a home for rare lichens and mosses. The wildlife value can be increased by reducing mowing regimes, introducing bird and bat boxes and plant species that attract birds and butterflies.

The movement is slowly spreading to other countries. In New Zealand the city of Wellington is opening the first municipally owned green burial site outside the UK. In the Netherlands, a 16 acre forest at Bergerbos is attracting custom from neighboring Germany also. Plans are afoot in Canada, Italy, Sweden, Poland, but still on the drawing board.

Possibly the furthest advanced outside the UK is the USA, though there are still only a small handful of sites including Glendale Nature Preserve, Florida; the Ethician Family Cemetery, San Jacinto, Texas; the Circle of Life Eco-burial site in Massachusetts; the Ramsey Creek Preserve in South Carolina and Forever Fernwood, Marin County, California.

**Natural Death Centre:**  
[www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk)

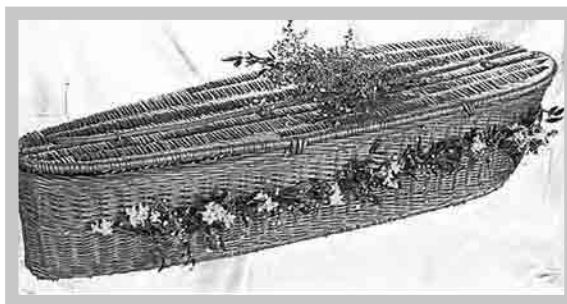
## *Natural caskets*



Conventional luxury stained hardwood casket with metal trimmings.



Sanded pine coffin from eco-coffins.com, sourced from certified sustainable forests, using no plastic, metal, stains, varnishes, oils, or animal products. Only biodegradable, non-toxic glue is used.



Handmade willow coffin from UK funeral directors A. Abbot



Bamboo coffin from Friends of Nature Burial Ground, Graveyard Farm, Cheshire, UK.



The Dolphin inner cardboard coffin for cremations, from Australian company My Way Funerals, \$30. The outer coffin is simply hired, and re-used.



## NEWS OF WORLD PANTHEISM

# The many ways of getting together



Dean's meteoric rise and was working very well for the WPM. Now it seems to be in serious trouble, and there are questions about how useful it is going to be in helping people form local groups.

Panthelist Meetup was growing very rapidly indeed early last year at 10 per cent per month. Increasing numbers of people were managing to get meetups to happen and it seemed set to become our best way yet of forming local groups.

Then Meetup changed its system. It shifted away from the original automated self-regulated system, where a meeting happened as long as enough people said they were going to turn up. The position of "Organizer" was created, which the first person to volunteer could commandeer. The organizer decided whether and when to have meetings. If you didn't have an organizer, you didn't get a Meetup.

Panthelist enrolments slowed from 50 a month to ten or less, perhaps due to the withdrawal of Meetup's advertising with Google for all its many topics. This slowdown seems to have affected many or most topic groups. On top of that it is now harder to make a Meetup happen. From April organizers have had to pay a monthly fee of \$9 per month for the privilege. This is scheduled to go up to \$19 a month - a hefty \$228 per year. Organizers with large ongoing groups were able to recoup the fees from people attending the meetups. But the high fees have created an impassable hurdle for new and small groups, as many pantheist groups are. Many organizers in many topics have quit.

Underlying all these shifts was the fact that Meetup never found a working business model. Their first approach - making money from cafes, bookshops and other recommended venues - did not produce the goods. Meetup tried to fill the gaps with a premium service, Meetup Plus, but that did not suffice. It's highly uncertain whether their new business model will work either.

It's all very sad for grassroots-driven political campaigns, and also for people like us. Alternatives are planned, like the open-source CivicSpace, but they are not up and running yet. Political campaigns are developing their own in-house alternatives. Got ideas for us? Post them in the Community list.

## The downfall of Meetup?

Meetup, the web-organized contacts group that leads to face-to-face meetings, was the engine of Howard

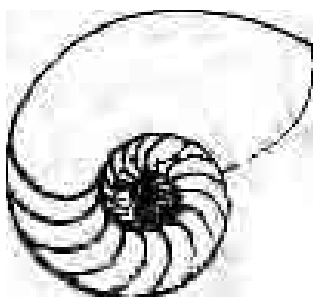
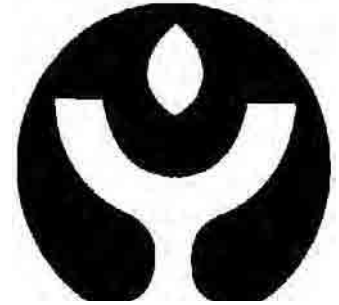
## Using the UU path

One of the most promising avenues for the next few years appears to be Unitarian Universalist congregations. Unitarian Universalism is a spiritual organization without a creed, that has attracted atheists, humanists, pantheists, pagans and liberal theists. The most recent large scale survey of over 8,000 Unitarian Universalists in 1998 found that 46% described themselves as Humanists and 19% as Earth or Nature-centered. The World Pantheist Movement neatly spans these two, which between them account for two thirds of Unitarian Universalists. Christian, Jewish and generic theists made up only 24% combined. There are over 1000 UU churches in the USA, within reach of most larger towns.

The WPM has many members who also belong to UU congregations, including some ministers and congregation board members. We affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association two years ago - for \$100 a year we can now sponsor one event each year at the annual general assembly. In 2004 at Long Beach we ran a stall. This year at Fort Worth Paul Harrison gave two lectures on Using Nature as a Focus for Spirituality to large and enthusiastic audiences. A number of members have given pantheist services. Some of them give several each year. Some have groups that meet on a regular or occasional basis.

We will give every possible assistance to anyone who is interested in pursuing the UU avenue to local pantheist group formation. We now have a special section of the WPM website for UU resources, flagged from our front page (top right.) There you will find material on how UUism and the WPM relate, how to form and run a local group in a congregation, and also a growing collection of UU sermons and services given by members, some of them complete with choices of songs and readings. You can request copies of our color leaflets and print out copies of our trifold leaflet on World Pantheism and Unitarian Universalism.

We also have a yahoo group for UU pantheists, currently with 90 members. This is aimed at UUs who are interested in forming pantheist/nature-reverence groups in UU congregations, as well as at pantheists who are interested in checking out Unitarian Universalism with a view to local group formation



## Do-it-yourself with the WPM

We shall continue to explore other ways of encouraging and facilitating local groups. One approach is to use the members' data center (<http://members.pantheism.net>) to search for members with reach of you - you can search by city, zip code and area code, and you can use wildcards (eg ^91 would return all members with zips starting with 91, ^818 would return all members with phone area code 818). You get to see their city and their email and can create an email list. Another is to use our local WPM yahoo groups - a full list is available at <http://www.pantheism.net/localgroups.htm>. There are lists for most US states, for UK/Eire, Australia and Canada. UK and Southern California pans have successfully used their yahoogroups to organize get-togethers large and small for many years now.





**Direct hit:** On July 4th, Comet Tempel I collides spectacularly with NASA's Deep Impact probe at 23,000 miles per hour, throwing up a cloud of fine powdery material and leaving a 250 meter wide crater. The comet is about three miles wide and seven miles long. When the data is analyzed, Deep Impact will provide information about the composition and formation of the early solar system. The rocket was launched in December last year.

Photo © NASA

## Membership: Join or Renew

The World Pantheist Movement depends on the generous support of its members to sustain, improve and expand its activities and services. If you would like to join or renew by check in US \$, please fill in the form below and mail check and form to us. Otherwise please renew at <http://members.pantheism.net/imdms/> or join at <http://www.pantheism.net/join.htm>. Please tick as applicable if this is an address change and if you wish us to correct the database entry for you.

Name			
Address 1			
Address 2			
City			
State etc			
Zip code			
Country			
New?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Change it?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	I'll do it	<input type="checkbox"/>
Membership level:			
Basic (\$30)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Family (\$60)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Low Income (\$12)	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Other amount	_____		

Please mail this form with your check (US \$ only) to:

**World Pantheist Movement**  
P.O. Box 103, Webster, NY 14580, USA

## Calendar & Almanac

### Special events

#### July

11th World Population Day  
12th Birth of Henry D. Thoreau  
14th Storming of the Bastille  
20th Moon Landing

#### August

1st Lughnasadh/Lammas  
6th Bombing of Hiroshima  
9th International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples  
12th: Peak of Perseid Meteor Shower  
26th Eruption of Krakatoa

#### September

8th International Literacy Day  
21st International Peace Day  
23rd Good Neighbor Day

#### October

1st International Day of Older Persons  
2nd Birth of Mohandas Gandhi  
4th Birth of Francis of Assisi

### Equinoxes & Solstices

#### Autumn equinox

September 22 22;23

#### Winter solstice

December 21 18;35

### Full Moons

July 21 11:00  
August 19 17:53  
September 18:02  
October 17 12:14

All times Universal time =  
Greenwich Mean Time