

‘Not like chicken or fish; something new’

Meet the people behind Canada’s death revolution

By Nikki Wiart

MY UNCLE RICHARD died exactly the way he wanted to. He died in the bed he and his wife had shared for 33 years; in the house where he grew up; on the homestead his ancestors had farmed. He died in the spring. He died when the velvet buds began to form on the pussy willow trees, when the cattle were giving birth, when the snow was melting, and when the geese were coming home from a winter in the south.

It happened four weeks before he turned 63, at around 9:30 on a Friday evening. The sun was down, and the coyotes were howling.

Richard’s wife, two daughters, newborn granddaughter, two sons, daughter-in-law, and brother sat beside him. They held his hand and touched his face and stayed that way for a long time – well after he drew his last, rattling breath – crying, deciding what to do next, and doing nothing.



At 2 a.m., they washed his body, and dressed him in his “Praise the Lard” shirt and favourite pair of jeans. Then his wife, youngest daughter, and cat, Ginger, crawled into bed with him and stayed like that until the rooster crowed and the farm needed their attention.

Richard’s body stayed on the left side of the bed – the side he weakly insisted on being placed just hours before he died – for the next three days. His extended family and close friends were in and out of his room through that period. At times, there were 10 or more people inside, just looking at him, crying, laughing, and saying goodbye. Other times, it was one person, with the door shut, saying his or her own, private words to Richard’s body.

Although there was a sense of gravitas in the room, there was also a feeling of lightheartedness. Richard’s face, so long wrinkled in pain, was calm. In the three years that he battled cancer, he aged 20. But in his death, he was back to how we all remembered him: jolly, youthful, and smiling.

He had been angry in the last months of his life. He knew he was dying, but that’s not what bothered him. He was angry about ignorance and violence, and angry about consumerism and apathy. He was angry the bees were being killed off, and the land wasn’t appreciated. He was angry the aboriginals had been mistreated and that they were still being mistreated. He was angry that I didn’t want to eat the fat on my steak, and that I wouldn’t stick my hand inside a dead chicken.

In the last months of his life, we were all subject to his angry lectures. His face would get red, and his body – which at that point was more skeletal than jovial – would shake.

Why weren't we paying attention to him? Why weren't we making use of the knowledge of a dying man? Though he never asked us those questions directly, we knew it was the real reason for his anger.

Richard was angry because his knowledge had an expiry date. And it was that, not death, that terrified him.

He might have been prepared for his death, but we weren't. What if we didn't listen to him? What if the bees all died? What if the aboriginals kept being mistreated?

That's what terrified my uncle Richard.

But when he died, on May 16, 2014, he left us with one last lesson, and it was the most valuable one: the purpose of death.

THIS IS WHERE Sarah Kerr comes in. Kerr is a lot of things. She's an artist, an academic, and a cat lover. But, more than anything else, she's an expert in dying. Death midwifery is a relatively new phenomenon, and as birth midwives bring birthing home, death midwives bring dying home; they give families a way to be more involved in the process.

Kerr met Richard three weeks before he died. He told her he wanted to die at home, and that having a good death was his last gift to his family – so we would understand that without death there is no life.

“We have this belief that life goes in a straight line uphill,” Kerr says. “No aging, no diminishing profits – and we don't live in a very healthy way because of that.”

Kerr's Calgary home is welcoming and bright. She leaves her front door ajar, letting the cool, fall air circulate through. Her walls are covered with colourful art, which she made herself. Ruby, a grey cat with a white nose and piercing, green eyes walks on the counter tops, chiming in with a meow every so often.

She's in her late 40s. Her nose is pierced, and she refuses to take a picture without lipstick on. "My mother would kill me if I didn't," she tells me.

Kerr is the only death midwife in Alberta, and one of maybe a dozen in the country. And while many of her colleagues focus on one aspect of dying, she carries a family through the entire process.

"The way I practise it is as a spiritual support for people from the time that death first knocks on their door," she says. "I don't know anybody else that's doing it with my focus on ritual.

"Death is confusing and it's overwhelming and everything is turned up-ended. A set of rituals gives you a path. It creates this container for people to process – at really deep interpersonal,



social, spiritual, emotional levels – what’s happening so you get through it. It doesn’t make it go away. It doesn’t make it less sad. But you find a way to get through the other side where you’re actually a stronger, more resilient, more capable person, for having endured this hard thing.”

Kerr has always worked in social justice and social healing. She has a PhD in Transformative Learning from the California Institute of Integral Studies. Four years ago, Kerr’s dad suffered a massive stroke, and in her grief, she became angry. Though he survived, she became angry because no one, not one person, had prepared her for death.

“He’s alive now,” she says. “But he’s going to die. And other people I love are going to die. So I’m going to be better prepared. I decided I wanted to take that and make it available to other people, too.”

LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE in his life, Richard wanted his death to be holistic and nontraditional. This attitude toward dying began after he watched the National Film Board documentary *Griefwalker*. The film follows Stephen Jenkinson, a spiritual activist and death advocate in Eastern Canada. He runs a school called Orphan Wisdom in both the Ottawa Valley and on Cortez Island in B.C., where he teaches people, what he calls, the “unauthorized history of the West.”

“I guess I’m trying to teach a sense of wonder to replace the sense of entitlement or certainty about things,” he tells me. “Really, what should death be – your own personal death be – but a deep iteration of how you lived, the things you were able to learn, the things you’d like to make sure are available to people who are going to live beyond you.”

We're all going to die. No anti-aging serum or magic potion can stop it from happening. Death is the only thing we can know in life with 100 per cent certainty. It's an inevitable, unavoidable conclusion, yet it's also one of our biggest fears.

"It's absolutely terrifying, because it bears no resemblance to anything you've lived," Jenkinson says. "Dying is not a continuation of what you were doing when you were 16, or 27, or your first job, or your first date, or your last date.

"There's no parallel you can bring to dying and say, 'Well it's like... fish, but more like chicken.' There's no comparison with dying. It's a stand-alone thing."

This "death phobia" exists because North America is an orphan culture, Jenkinson says. It exists, because 500 years ago our ancestors spontaneously migrated from Europe. And it exists in all aspects of our culture – in our language, in our traditions, and in our education.

"You just have to know how to look for it," he says. "You just have to listen carefully and pretty soon you start to develop kind of a sad ear for it. And you hear it a lot more places than you wish you did."

Jenkinson calls North American culture a kind of poverty because he says when people leave the bones of their ancestors behind, they leave the stories behind, also leaving behind what could have informed them when their dying time comes.

Kerr says this fear can also come from the way we have built everything on the premise of a physical world – what you can measure, what you can weigh, and what you can see – but none of that matters in death.

We have a story that death is a light switch. It's on, then it's off. You exist, then you don't. End of story.

“There's nothing that the human psyche needs more than to feel connected,” Kerr says. “The idea of being lost – in the most fundamental, existential, forever more in eternity there is nothing – is the most terrifying thing to the human mind.”

That's why she practises ritual. To give death, and grief, and energy, a structure to flow through.

When Richard died, Kerr helped us openly express our grief to one another through a series of rituals. And through that expression of grief, we were able to be OK with his death. We knew we weren't going to bring him back... so we were fine with it.

“Death is a process, and we need time to adjust. The living need time, and I believe the dead need time, to move through that process,” Kerr says.

Humans ritualize by nature, but the rituals aren't always meaningful. Boxing Day Sales, Grey Cup Parties, birthdays – they're all rituals, but they're not what Kerr calls “soul-feeding rituals.”

“We've taken away all those structures that make [death] about being connected, and said, Nope, done, lost,” she says. “So people are terrified at a really foundational, psychic level, terrified, to go into that abyss. And who wouldn't be?”

Kerr uses a medicine wheel as a map for the rituals. It has four directions on the physical plain – north, south, east, and west – and realms above and below. She says once someone is connected to the centre of that, and in right relationship with all of the directions, everything is available.

“One of the things that is common in all ritual practices is the idea that we open a sacred space,” she says. “Or another way to say it is we change the dial on the radio. So instead of being tuned to this world, we just tune ourselves to the other world.”

DEATH MOVEMENTS, like what Kerr and Jenkinson endorse, aren't just on the fringes of society. Eden Tourangeau, a funeral director in south Edmonton, is also joining in on the death revolution – but a bit more conservatively.

Tourangeau has been in the business for more than 25 years, and for the past eight, has practised as a licensed funeral celebrant. A funeral celebrant falls somewhere between funeral director and death midwife. And he says, after eight years, people are finally becoming more open minded. He deals with around 150 funerals every year, and while he does offer alternatives to the traditional Christian service, change hasn't come easily.

“Change in funeral services is like turning the Titanic,” Tourangeau says.

He says there's a lot of confusion about what death is and what it isn't, and it's a confusion that has been fed by our culture's lack of communication about the subject.

“We've done things behind closed doors for so long, nobody really knows what happens, and it is a mystery,” Tourangeau says.

“When you leave things as a mystery, people get to make stuff up.”

Death has never been a mystery to me. Human death, maybe. Not death. I grew up on a farm, and on farms, death is a recurrent part of life. Cats rarely lasted a year before they were run over

or were killed by a coyote, and there was a good chance the meat that sat on our table every night had been a pet at some point.

I always knew death had purpose. It fed us, and it fed the land. Jenkinson says death, in a way, should be a banquet, and that the dying person should be both the chef and the food. Maybe it's easier to justify death of any living thing when it has a purpose, like Richard feeding us with wisdom. But as much as I knew about death – or thought I knew about death – it didn't make it any easier when he died. What it did do though, was make me appreciate that process.

Kerr believes death – like the Death card in the tarot deck that lay on her side table – isn't negative; it's simply the end of one phase and the beginning of another. It's transformation, renewal, and a necessary process.

“The mark of a good death is that it's a village making event,” she says. “Death is not a mistake. It's not something the world shouldn't have; it serves a purpose; it brings people together – when it's done right.”