

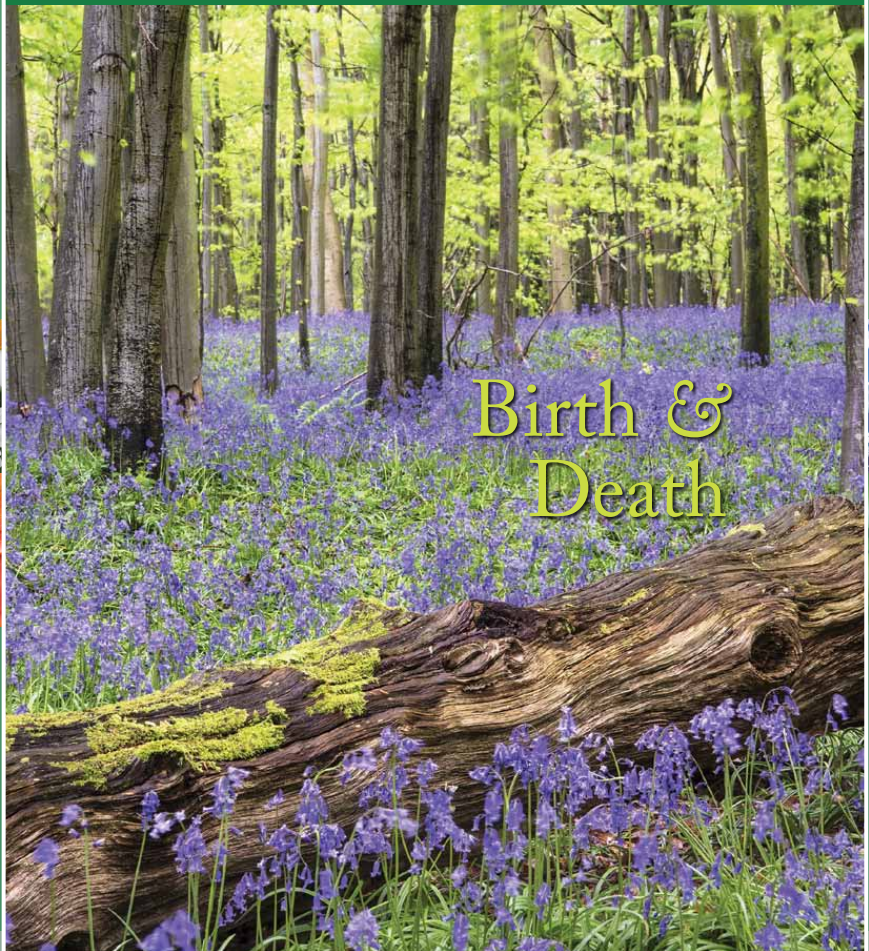
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Birth & Death



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Down to Earth

OneSpirit minister JEAN FRANCIS takes us on a journey from inception of a funeral through to burial

Birth, life and death are interwoven so we can't expect one without the other.

An entire life could be spent collecting and recycling milk bottle tops. Yet this good deed can be undone instantly by making a thoughtless funeral choice, simply because we haven't investigated the possible environmental impact our funeral may have on our planet.

Although death is a taboo subject, it will happen to us all. I sincerely recommend that we pre-plan our funeral or that of a loved one, allowing time to investigate the many options available. Otherwise, when someone dies a call is made to a funeral director who takes over and presents an often unaffordable bill at the end. The death of someone close to us is an enormous shock but life must continue. Taking responsibility and being aware of our choices means that contrary to belief, funerals do not have to cost the Earth, and the way we choose to depart can make a huge difference to our well-being and that of our planet.

Funerals do not have to cost a fortune

There are many ways in which families can take part in the care of a loved one and arrange the funeral themselves, with or without the support of a funeral director. Awareness of the many options available and a bit of forward planning will mean that you are less likely to end up with an impersonal, costly, production-line funeral.

It is also possible to carry out a funeral without using a funeral director. Many independent companies are open to supporting families who wish to be involved themselves, to whatever degree.

Some points to consider

A green burial offers the opportunity to plant a tree in memory of a loved one instead of a headstone. Such places become a haven for wildlife and a place of natural beauty for future generations to enjoy, kept safe from developers. To locate a natural burial ground in your area see: www.naturaldeath.org.uk

Cremation has become more popular in recent years. Should you consider being cremated, do be aware that, in spite of strict government legislation, many carcinogenic pollutants in the atmosphere come from crematoria. Bear in mind also the enormous amount of energy required to fuel the cremators.

A few green guidelines for both burial and cremation:

- Embalming fluids are toxic and should be avoided wherever possible
- Choose a biodegradable coffin made from natural materials – there are many choices available
- Ensure that the deceased is dressed in natural fabrics
- Choose flowers from the garden or another local area instead of imported or hot-house blooms
- Be aware of carbon footprints when arranging transport

There are many decisions and choices to be made; it is my passion to offer people guidance gained from many years of research and my deep desire to ease people through this process.

Final Wishes Workshop

Freddie was one of 10 people who signed up for my Workshop. Delegates worked steadily through the questionnaire, discussing the options around planning their funerals from beginning to end. Would they choose burial, cremation, medical donation, direct cremation, woodland burial? The consequence of each choice was discussed. Freddie lit up and became especially intrigued when he learned that it is possible to be buried in your own back garden or on private land. We discussed the few legalities involved and there was no stopping him!

By the end of the day delegates were in possession of a personalised folder. This contained their Last Wishes and also many useful hand-outs that would support their next of kin at the time of death. The day ended on a high with much banter and laughter. My own funeral plans change like the weather; I expect theirs will too as, with awareness, new and different ideas come to mind.

Freddie valued this initial stage and we met privately to continue the process. I am a OneSpirit minister, who specialises in creating heart-felt and meaningful funerals. Together, we designed a ceremony that gave Freddy comfort knowing that when he 'Pops his clogs', using his words, his nearest and dearest would have little to do. At my suggestion, he left a few decisions for them to make, feeling comforted that he had taken steps to ease any potential strain or trauma.

The ceremony we created together reflected Freddie's beliefs, passions and philosophies

Freddie followed no particular faith; his roots were firmly in Nature and the beauty of the natural world. He had a deep fascination for Native American culture and was enchanted by magic. He worshiped the goddess, although only a few of his friends were aware of this fact. We therefore honoured his feminine side by subtle references to the moon.

Three years had passed

On the day of Freddie's funeral, as he'd imagined, we gathered beneath an old oak tree to await his arrival. He had chosen a willow casket, decorated with a tangle of contorted willow, blackberry brambles and wild flowers. Freddie was carried to his final resting place by six good friends.

Wearing green wellies beneath my long purple skirt and carrying a lantern containing a burning candle, I led the procession through a wooded area to the graveside. Freddie had chosen this place because of its spectacular views across rolling countryside, where he had spent many happy hours roaming as a boy. His casket was placed gently on supports over the grave as family and friends gathered.

In Freddie's chosen words, everyone was welcomed. We acknowledged that we were going to say farewell to Fredrick Andrew Bates, known to all as Freddie; to mourn his passing but more importantly to celebrate his life. Having explained the significance of the ceremony, I suggested that anyone with differing beliefs should say their goodbyes in a way that would bring them peace and comfort.

Having introduced myself, I explained how Freddie and I had co-created this occasion and his concern over not wanting to burden others with having to make decisions on his behalf. Besides, he had taken responsibility for his life, so why not his death?

In Native American tradition, a circle was cast using cornmeal; creating a sacred space around the grave. As requested, people had brought treasures from nature: pebbles, leaves, cones, berries, flowers and much more, which they added to the circle.

Facing each of the four directions in turn, we invoked the elements, respectfully requesting that they join us: the element of earth from the North, air from the East, fire from the South and water from the West, without which there would be no life on Earth.

Invocation

“Our Father, the Sky, hear us
and make us strong.
Our Mother, the Earth, hear us
and give us support.

Spirit of the East,
send us your Wisdom.
Spirit of the South,
may we tread your path.
Spirit of the West,
may we always be ready
for the long journey.
Spirit of the North, purify us
with your cleansing winds.”

- *Of Sioux origin* -

I spoke about Freddie's interest in Native American culture and several experiences that had touched him deeply.

Freddie's daughter read The Native American Ten Commandments, which personified the way in which Freddie had lived his life:

“Treat the Earth and all that dwell thereon with respect.
Remain close to the Great Spirit, in all that you do.
Show great respect for your fellow beings.
(Especially respect yourself.)
Work together for the benefit of all Mankind.
Give assistance and kindness wherever needed.
Do what you know to be right.
(But be careful not to fall into self-righteousness.)
Look after the well-being of mind and body.
Dedicate a share of your efforts to the greater good.
Be truthful and honest at all times.
(Especially be truthful and honest with yourself.)
Take full responsibility for your actions.”

A pause for reflection offered a time of silence as everyone said goodbye to Freddie in their own way; a silence broken only by distant birdsong and the buzz of a bumble bee.

Harry, Freddie's younger brother, spoke with humour about their childhood and some of the crazy pranks they got up to as lads.

I read the following words from a dog-eared book found beside Freddie's chair:

“Oh, Great Spirit,
whose voice I hear in the winds
and whose breath gives life
to all the world, hear me.
I am small and weak.
I need your strength and wisdom.
Let me walk in beauty and make my eyes
ever behold the red and purple sunset.
Make my hands respect the things you have made
and my ears sharp to hear your voice.
Make me wise so that I may understand
the things you have taught my people.
Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.

I seek strength, not to be superior to my brother,
 but to fight my greatest enemy – myself.
 Make me always ready to come to you
 with clean hands and straight eyes,
 so now my life has faded, as the fading sunset,
 my spirit will come to you without shame.”

- *Chief Yellow Lark, Lakota, 1887* -

As a country lad, Freddie had a deep knowing that birth, life, death and rebirth are all part of the wheel of Nature. This we honoured, asking for his safe transition into spirit as we laid his human remains to rest into the elements from which he came.

We committed Fredrick Andrew Bates to a retreat of peacefulness. As the coffin was lowered into the grave, together we said the following words:

“Freddie, with beauty before you, we let you go,
 With beauty behind you, we let you go,
 With beauty above you, we let you go,
 With beauty below you, we let you go,
 With beauty around you, we let you go.”

How perfectly Mother Nature has prepared herself to receive you; overlooked by Father Sky, the sunshine by day and, at night, by Grandmother Moon with a canopy of stars overhead. We commit you to the oneness of Nature whence you came, to reconnect with the flow of all that is natural. “Freddie, we place you gently into the embrace of Mother Earth to hold and nurture you into new life as you re-connect with your ancestors. Behold the harmony of the universe.”

We tossed the treasures from Nature into the grave followed by a hand full of earth as final farewells were said.

Freddie’s passion for magic had not been forgotten. We turned to the four directions, acknowledging their elements; earth, air, fire and water, the sources of energy on which magicians have always called. We gave thanks and honoured their presence.

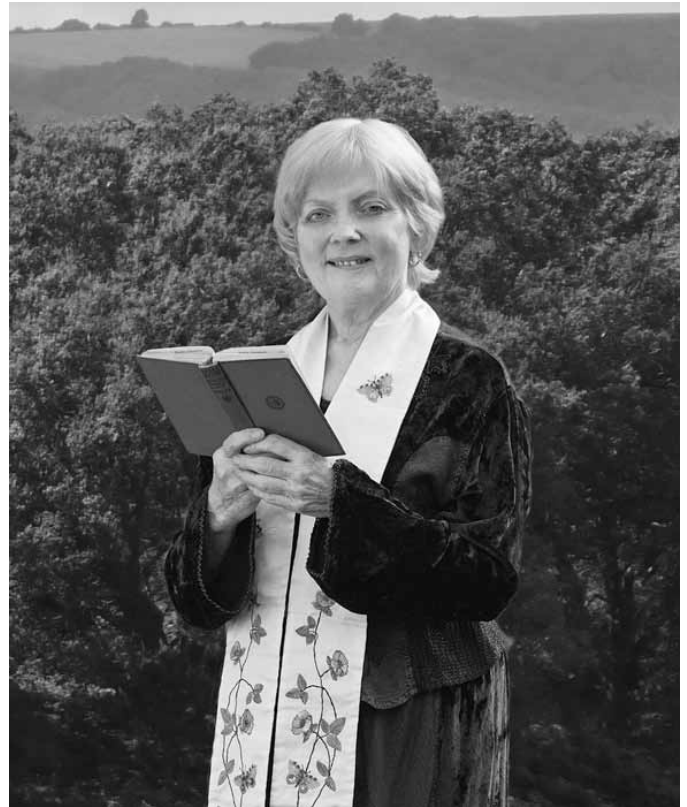
Closing blessing

“Deep peace of the flowing water to you
 Deep peace of the quiet Earth to you
 Deep peace of the shining stars to you
 Deep peace of the magic moon to you.

Blessed be.”

* * * * *

Everyone met at Freddie’s ‘local’, where fond memories were shared amongst tears of joy and sadness. I felt I’d known this amazing man all my life – we had shared so



Jean Francis

much during the time spent planning his funeral. Knowing that his wishes had been carried out, exactly as he had requested, was of great comfort to all those who knew him.

Freddie’s legacy and final act of kindness was to give back to the precious environment that sustains us all.

You too can have a unique send-off that reflects your passions, lifestyle and philosophies.

Last Wishes Workshops:

www.circleoflifecelebrations.co.uk/last-wishes-workshop/

On-line Funeral Planning:

www.circleoflifecelebrations.co.uk/my-services/

Jean Francis is a funeral arranger and OneSpirit minister. Jean’s inspiration comes from Mother Nature and the beauty that surrounds us – equally honouring people of any faith or none. She works with people to create heartfelt and meaningful ceremonies that celebrate all life events, from birth through to funerals.

Jean is author of four books and winner of a major national award: the ‘Most Significant Contribution to the Understanding of Death’ for her work on pre-need funeral planning, awarded at the Good Funerals ceremony in Bournemouth 2013.