



A home funeral for her husband



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On a winter's night in March 1981, Vermont housewife Lisa Carlson, mother of two young children, was in terrible straits: Her 31-year-old husband was dead, and funeral homes were asking impossibly high cremation fees. One home charged \$750; another said she would have to pay \$350 for paperwork, even though she had access to all that was needed: a death certificate and permits for transport and cremation. Finally, Carlson called a crematory herself. To her surprise, they said that to cremate her husband's body would cost only \$85, and the coffin could be cardboard or homemade. Carlson bought a cheap box and a friend drove her in his pickup to the crematory. There, with a screwdriver from under the front seat, she pried the lid off the coffin to say goodbye. Only then did she realize what it had meant to her to stay with her husband's body and forgo the embalmer's magic. "When I opened the box, he was very white. If he'd been made to look alive, I would have bargained with God to wake him. To see a body that looked so dead made it easier to let go."

Moved by her experience, Carlson wrote *Caring for Your Own Dead*, a book that launched a home-funeral movement that has taken root around the country. Organizations like the Natural Death Care Project in California inform people of legal requirements, which are few: In most states, no undertaker is required. The groups teach people how to keep a body at home for a few days using ice, salt-water washes, and oils. Since most home funerals are for someone who also died at home, family members are accustomed to washing the body, NDCP Director Jerri Lyons says, and most don't mind the task.

Making it harder. Mourners who opt out of using funeral homes are sometimes bullied. Karen Leonard, head of Redwood Funeral Society in northern California, says the group's members are often refused access to crematoria or forced to pay an extra "nonfuneral-director charge." Jan Berman of Martha's Vineyard wanted a home funeral for her husband, she recently told National Public Radio. She had a burial permit, but when the hospice nurse saw her homemade casket, she called a funeral director and gave him the death certificate, making it impossible for Berman to proceed. (Though hospice and home-funeral movements share a common ethic, many hospices

have funeral directors on their boards and do not support alternatives.) The funeral director told Berman, falsely, that it was illegal to bury a body without going through a funeral director and that there had to be a hearse, which alone would cost \$1,900. When Berman called the state funeral board, the chairman, who owned 14 funeral homes, threatened to report her, though he wouldn't say to whom.

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