

ABSTRACT FOR THE 25TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON SHAMANISM
AND ALTERNATIVE MODES OF HEALING

During the course of a year's time I have been honored to smudge with sage the bodies of two amazing people, before watching them be placed into the oven to be cremated. Prior to this I felt an incomplete feeling of receiving a box or having a ceremony with a box of ashes. Where did this come from and how did this happen? I had no idea that you could participate in a cremation. If not for Mali Burgess I would not have had the experience with Ruth Inge Heinze, and it prepared me for doing it again with my son's grandpa from the Philippines some 9 months later. My talk will be about the two cremations and the differences in the approach to death in different cultures. Without judgment, I'll compare what it is to die when you have a directive as Ruth did because of Beverly Rubik's help, versus Grandpa Romulo and his last three months of life with no directive. What is the cremation at a Mortuary like compared to the factory crematory? I will speak about some of my personal experiences with other people surrounding their death, my sensitivities, and different approaches I have viewed in other cultures such as Huichol, Philippine, Haida Indian and Mongolian, surrounding death.

Death and Cremation

Gail Hayssen

I have been having experiences with death since I was a young. My clearest memory is looking at my grandfather as he was leaving to work and calling my Dad up to say, "Grandpa Is Going To Die."

"But he is fine," was the response. Two weeks later grandpa was hospitalized with colon cancer that had spread in his body and he passed away.

My own experience has to do with *near* death obviously, since I am talking to you now. I was 21 years old giving birth at home to my daughter and was having a medical situation called toxemia and pre-eclampsia. On the drive to the hospital, after 36 hours of laboring at home without a doctor, I was above my body watching the whole scene going on and seeing my body lying back in the seat. No words would come out of my mouth. I was trying to tell everyone I was fine and would give birth to this baby, but no one could hear my words. When I looked in their faces, my husband and Dad looked quite serious and concerned while my Mother remained positive and energetic during this time the doctors referred to as my being "in the woods". I never felt scared – I felt like I was going to give birth to this child and nothing was going to hurt us.

When I gave birth I was on the thresholds of death where there is a very thin line between

life and death. I was hearing beautiful music, with lights and high voltage electricity, and feeling sizzling all over. The closest feeling I could relate to it was like an LSD experience from my flower child days.

I thought that all birth was like this. Not until I gave birth two more times at home, in what the midwife called clinically a perfect birth, when I realized the first experience was truly out of body and how close in the doorway of death I had stood. Those two births just involved pain and contractions – no music, lights, or electricity. And when I spoke the words came out of my mouth.

I have so many stories with death involved in different ways. Sometimes I just see death coming on a person I do not even know.

A woman who worked for me in my catering business was being picked up by her husband. I saw him -- a handsome tall, blonde, well built guy who looks like the Marlboro Man. Anyway that night I had a dream and saw in the dream he was going to die.

Within two weeks (always seems to be two weeks or less) he was helicoptered from work to a hospital with what turned out to be a rare heart virus and he died.

I catered the funeral as my gift to the family. I felt guilty some how for knowing the information ahead of time.

I have also experienced a connection with my body and another during the time they were dying. In these 3 examples I was not told that the person was dying, but the day I had the experience they were in fact dying as I felt.

Ricky

I was in Hong Kong in Vegetable carving class and I started feeling like I could not breathe and I had to leave the class. I hopped alone into a cab and told the driver to take me from temple to temple so that I could pray for the soul of my friend Ricky who I know is dying. When I called home I was told everything was fine there had been no calls from Ricky's family. But when I returned home to California sure enough there was a letter from his mom and he had died the day I felt him, and he passed away after he was disconnected from the respirator.

My Mother

My mother gave me away at birth and I met her only a few times in my life. But during her last months of life, during which I had no contact with her, I had a very bad illness that came over me and I could not hold food or water. In the midst of this two month long ordeal, where doctors could not exactly diagnose what was wrong, I sat up in bed in a very weak condition and knew my biological mother had just died. I prepared a

ceremony for her and kept saying over and over again, “Let your soul be free. Go towards the light. Go.”

I called my Dad and told him the woman he loved so dearly had just died. He said, “How do you know?” I said I just know.

The next evening her niece called from Florida to tell me she had been very sick for two months and had died the night before. I told her I knew last night when it happened.

Uncle Willie

I was sleeping in California and I woke from a dream and started throwing up – projectile vomiting – and when it was finished I laid in bed saying, “I am not sick, this is not me,” and again a feeling like I’ve connected with the dying person and tell them to go into the light. I turn to my husband in bed and say Uncle Willie just died. A few hours later a call from NY comes in from my sister – Uncle Willie was throwing up his guts and he was rushed to the hospital. He told my cousin I am going to die now and she left him for 15 minutes and he passed on.

Conscious Death:

I just heard of a wonderful death which I personally feel is a reflection of the person’s spirit and life. Morris was in his 80’s and he had been living a very simple life for many years. He was lying in bed and his wife came in and he said “Marcia, I want to Thank you for the wonderful life we had together and now I am going to die.” She did not believe that and of course he passed on immediately knowing that his time was up.

Fearing Death

In a 7day retreat on The Spiritual Care of the Living and Dying with Sogyal Rimpoche, who wrote “The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying”, I sat in front on the floor and asked him, “Have you ever been afraid of death and dying?” To my surprise he replied, “Yes there were times in my life when I have been filled with fear of death.” I was so relieved to hear this from a man who was a spiritual teacher and believes in reincarnation, when I figured he would never have this thought.

It took away this feeling I had when I did find myself filled with fear in the night – of the thoughts I would never see my family, I could not touch them, I would be dead and gone – how can I not be filled with anxiety and fear that that is what will happen one day? Yet I had experienced so much that I thought I had no fears of death, and that I would be connected still to loved ones – just not with my body. How could I be scared? From his wisdom I now know that it is only human to have fear rise up in the mind but it is all part of a process.

CULTURAL DEATH EXPERIENCES

When asked “What is your conception of death?”, Batbayaar, my friend in Mongolia who is with us today, answered “In Short, Death is the separating of the soul and body.”

I have had three different experiences being in other cultures and having someone die: two with the Huichol Indians in the Mountains of Mexico, and One with the Haida Indians in Hydaburg Alaska.

On my first visit to the Peyote Ceremony Dance of The Deer, in The Sierra Madre Occidental in the sacred ceremonial grounds of Las Latas at about 9000 feet elevation, I was attending this most sacred ceremony, which goes on for five days and nights. Drumming and dancing by the peyoteros never stops. During this time I was brought over to an adobe room, and there was a 6 year old peyoteros lying in bed in terrible pain. From what I could understand he had not eaten in months and to move was very painful. I brought him some miso soup and he was able to drink it. Out in the ceremony there were many Huichols but I heard a doctor was there watching the ceremony.

I thought, Why don't they bring him to the child? After some translating they agreed for this Mexican doctor to look at their son. He told me later that the boy had spinal meningitis and if they would get him down to the hospital they could treat him. The father said not now because the ceremony has to come first. The child was in a temple the next day and I went to see him. His eyes were so pleading – but what could I do? I was in another culture where ceremony is more important? So the next day I went to bring some food to the child and my friend stopped me and said, “The child is no more.” They gave him a shot of penicillin and he died the next day. Did the penicillin kill him or the spinal meningitis?

I was devastated at how this could happen and I had to learn to respect another cultures' way.

On another visit, my friend Cuca had a few months old baby who was not getting any food as she had no breast milk or money for formula. When I arrived I bought the supplies but I was a few days too late as the child was so weak.

The child and only son to Emilio and Cuca was crying all night long. The next night in the middle of the night the crying stopped. When I dressed and came out of the adobe hut the men had gone off with a Shaman, who had come earlier that night. They took all the possessions the baby had – the clothes and blankets I had brought in the few days before – and the child was buried in a sacred burial grounds while the mother and sisters stayed behind. Cuca spoke only Huichol so we communicated directly with our hearts. I held her and her daughters and we all cried.

Emilio returned shortly and the next thing I knew we were off to go somewhere and the

children were given a privilege to ride on the mule and their Dad Emilio was pulling the rope and everyone was smiling and happy and you could see in their heart they felt the child went to a better place and there was no need for anything more than the cry – completion and they move on. This was not putting on a front. They truly let go.

The third one was a psychic combo. I had been invited to assist in a healing workshop with a group of Haida Indians in Hydaburg, Alaska. My friend Edna is a Canadian Haida woman who had been doing healing workshops for the Haida Indians and she had never brought a white woman to participate. I was definitely not welcome at first, but by time I left the president of the Haida Indians presented me with 3 eagle feathers. The Haida Indians were known for wood carvings and totems and for having the finest navigators in the world. They are also known for their wailing in death.

We visited with a friend of Edna's, a wonderful woman who teaches the children the traditions and language of their people. We met with her in Juneau, Alaska while she was working in the Council Of Tlingit and Haida. During lunch I just looked at her and said, "You know, last night when you were talking about your mother who had died when you were young, it felt like you were talking about now – like it just happened." We walked her back to the office and her cell phone rang. She let out such a yell, wailing and crying. It was her husband. His mom was found dead in her bed – totally unexpected, as she had been fine. She had been her second mother.

These people let out the deep heartache associated with the pain that comes with this unexpected death. There is no holding back and I felt so at home in this culture as it is how I would have responded.

Well, when we attended the funeral a few days later I was very surprised at how it was handled. First off, everyone attends so there are hundreds of people. Anyone who has disputes with each other or family puts it to the side and attends this. But due to the effect over the years of Christianity, there is a division of culture during the funeral. So they performed both death rituals: the Christian one and the Haida Indian one. Oddly, the young people like this teacher are the ones who want to keep the culture intact, while it is the much older who want to forget the ways of death and ceremony and only follow the Christian route. They have been brainwashed of course.

My friend referred to the Haidas as people of the death.

Esteme, a Huichol Shaman, was visiting me, and a friend of mine's lover was dying in the hospital of AIDS. I asked if we could go see him. When we arrived and Esteme is dressed in his full Huichol Outfit and feathers. All the nuns just stare as we enter the room. Esteme pulled back the sheet that covered him and his naked body, which lay there in a fetal position. He was in some state of not being conscious and I assisted and watched as the Shaman tended to this man who did not know we were there.

I could understand everything he was doing even though it was invisible. He was waving his wands with feathers over his body and up to the heavens he was letting the young man's spirit know it was safe to go – you could just see it. Then some minutes later he said, "Finished."

I covered up the young man's naked body in fetal position, kissed him and said good bye. Later that evening his lover arrived and he said that His friend just woke up as clear as can be and said I should have learned Spanish and that " Everything Good In The Name of God has been Done Today. Everything is bueno." A few hours later he passed away.

Kevin and his death

It was quite a few years ago and another friend of mine was dying of AIDS and when we went to visit him in hospice he was shaking and looked very terrified. I have learned everyone dies differently just like they are born differently. He never wanted to speak of death or AIDS – just as if nothing was happening and you had to respect this and know each person chooses what they want. Well I followed my heart but I was scared I did the wrong thing. I was sure he was dying – it was quite obvious – but the fear and panic in his face was terrifying.

Following my instincts, I leaned over and held him and whispered in his ear. "You are dying let go let go and fly like a bird . Take wings and fly this is dying now."

I did not know I was going to say and do this, and when I left I felt bad like maybe I should not have told him and somehow he could get better and live....

He died that night in the wee hours.

When I attended his memorial the entrance was filled with oil paintings he had done and what were they – BIRDS FLYING – white birds – and I somehow felt confident I did a good thing.

CREMATION STORIES

During the course of a year's time I have been honored to smudge with sage the bodies of two amazing people, before watching them be placed into the oven to be cremated. I felt it was important to talk about this after watching and participating in it. Prior to this I felt an incomplete feeling of receiving a box or having a ceremony with a box of ashes. Like, where did this come from and how did this happen? I also had a lot of fear, thinking it was like an Auschwitz experience, dark and horrible and filled with terror.

I had no idea that you could participate in a cremation. If not for Mali Burgess I would not have had the experience with Ruth Inge Heinze – and it prepared me for doing it again with my son's grandpa from the Philippines some 9 months later. I saw the difference, without judgment between what it is to die when you have a Medical Health Directive as Ruth did (because of Beverly Rubik's help) and what Grandpa Romulo and

his last three months of life were like when there was no directive. And, what the cremation at a Mortuary is like compared to the factory crematory.

I spoke with a man at the Valley Memorial Park Mortuary about cremation. He said 20 years ago, less than 50 percent of the people in Sonoma and Marin County were cremated. Now close to 80 percent of the people cremate. But *witnessing* cremation is done by only 3 percent of these.

Vietnamese and Buddhists all have their family – 50 people or so – outside, while inside they allow 3 people max and the Buddhist priest. My friend's sister in law, a Vietnamese woman, was cremated completely nude and with no possessions. When the oven door was opened her body was completely intact and was very fragile. Her sister touched the form with her finger and it collapsed. This happens some of the time, depending on the temperature in the ovens. It is the law that a body be in a combustible cremation container, which is the cardboard box.

Grandpa Romulo

Grandpa Romulo was a happy, loving man who taught my Rich son how to kill a live chicken and cook it, and how to prepare the finest adobo and asian soup. He was a good man and my son had 18 years with him as he immigrated to my house for his first stop in America while I was pregnant with Rich. He was a wonderful grandpa.

He had a third severe stroke which sent him off to the Kaiser hospital in Redwood City. I had been there some months before with Ruth Inge Heinze. It was uncomfortable that the place felt familiar.

After one of our visits, my son and I were driving home quietly in the night, this being the third time we had rushed there being told his grandpa was going to die. I turned to Rich and said it was so sad watching his grandpa be tortured like this and kept alive for months on machines. He said to me, "To me it was like watching a science experiment. It is not like seeing my grandpa. The grandpa I remember is the one we were with weeks ago in the restaurant, with his walker and the food flying out of his mouth, and teasing me with the parmesan cheese being sugar, and his laughter. This was the last time I remember Grandpa. What I see now is not grandpa and it is like he is not even there. "

After 2 months of hospitalization or torture, Grandpa Romulo went home to die amongst his Philippino family. Richard went to see his Grandpa, who had not been able to swallow or communicate with words during these months. It was a Saturday night. Romulo's bed was in the middle of the living room and he was surrounded by 25 family members, all partying drinking and eating lots of pork and rice. He died the next day surrounded by his loving family.

Rich and I arrived at 3080 Horton Street Emeryville to participate in the ceremony and

cremation. We were told to be there at 11 and when I saw on our way Rich was dressed, in jeans, I said we have to pick up black pants and shoes so you will look dressed respectfully to your grandpa's funeral. He said they will all be in Jeans and I said no, this is a funeral. They will be dressed up. Quick stop at Ross and we were still on time.

Well we are driving around and there are no signs of a mortuary or any of the family there, and only big warehouses all around and down the block from a giant Best Buy sign. There was a door with a bell that read "Families Ring Bell Here". The giant warehouse door was open and no one responded when we rang the family bell.

Peeking around we went inside and it started to feel like a Seinfeld episode. Sounds of a saw maybe a table saw or possible other electric saw, and stacks of flat boxes ready to be folded into a casket shape for bodies to be put in. Folded up triangular American flags in plastic zippered bags. The shelves went up to the ceilings with instructions on ashes' placement. "Helloo? Helloo!" and no one appears.

The ovens were stacked so high and had glass windows so it looked like a cremation factory. Not like the cremation I attended for Ruth at a mortuary. Many small sized boxes, all lined up ready to receive the 6-9 pounds of bones we call ashes.

With our eyes open wide starring at all this, a very large man about 350 pounds with only one eye and the other just layers of folded skin, comes out and in a very kind voice says "Are you here for the cremation?" Igor took Rich and I by surprise as he walked us into a narrow room shaped much like a coffin, with some aged linoleum on the floor and a box of tissues on the side tiny table.

Fifteen minutes later the family started to show up. They required everyone in attendance to sign their name and it took 4 pages as there were 25 family and close friends in attendance. I was the only white person there of course, among all the Phiilippinos. As Richard suggested only one man was in a suit and everyone else was in Jeans. But he understood my need for him to look respectful. This is not in the family's mind. These silly things that mean so much in our culture are not at the least bit important in theirs.

We held each other and cried, in between little boys running around using the cala-lilies we each held as swords and fighting in fun with each other. Jokes were made and we waited for my son's Dad and his wife who were 45 minutes late. Igor was very kind and patient and unlike the Mortuary with Ruth, he waited as even the priest could not find the place.

Richard's Uncle Hector went in the next tiny room with yellowed linoleum floors and saw a box checked the number and said "This is DAD in here." (actually DE is what he is saying.) So they just lift the lid and there wrapped in the same cotton cloth over the plastic wrap that they put him in when he left their house was his father's body.

(They had been told it was 600 dollars to view a body so they did not do that.) But here in the shroud with the smell of death rising from the sides of the card board box is every family member just lovingly stroking what remained under the cloth of his body. Tiny boys 3 years old saying goodbye to their great grandpa. All the family together, some crying here and there, me of course crying, and everyone loving this body, this man, with all their hearts.

I took my abalone shell before the priest came and they let me smudge his body with sage while a candle burned. I took the shell with the smoke and candle flame and went over his body twice – up and down, down and up to the heavens. The sage was a welcomed smell over the smell of death. I felt like I have to do this and was happy they had let me.

The family is so close and everyone placed cala lilly flowers inside the box and then His son Hector helped put the box into the ovens and then you could see through the glass the fires burning him. They all peeked in the windows to see the fires burning. They normally do not cremate but this way then can bring his ashes back to the Philippines. This was the first time for all of them to experience this. They filmed and photographed everything. I had never seen this at a funeral. They include me in their culture and family and I am the only white person there mourning the death of their Father. Richard was handling everything well and I was so glad to be there.

The children and family stroked his dead body wrapped in a shroud so there was no face and everyone was so close and loving and the whole time they are filming every minute of it. Before the priest came to do the holy water thing I took my abalone shell candle and sacred sage and smudged his whole body. It felt right and good and the family was pleased I did it and it helped with the smell of death to have the sage.

I was sad for him to go but happy he is no longer suffering. Glad to be who I am – the person each one could hold and let out their crying .

I wrote my friend Dr. Dean Radin one day after feeling overwhelmed by my death experiences and knowing my Dad was coming closer to his finally stages in life and could not stop my crying. His response gave me some comfort. He said “Gail sorry to hear about your dad.

You have often experienced the upside of psychic awareness. It sounds like you are now experiencing the downside: Extreme openness, sensitivity, and empathy. All hallmarks of the natural-born psychic.”

Ruth Inge Heinze

I offered to give Ruth a ride to the Institute of Noetic Sciences, where I was doing experiments and Dean Radin. Ruth and I participated in an experiment where we were

both Sender and Receiver . I learned in that moment watching on a monitor that we could read each others' mind, send a message and only having met that day. She spoke of this experiment at this conference, saying that I was going ahead of her thoughts and she was very impressed with this and so our friendship began.

It has taken me a while to be able to write of the experience of being one of the medical Durable Power of Attorney for Ruth Inge Heinze. It has been a journey which involved dealing with a group of people wanting to work together and do the best for her as well as the nightmare of dealing with the screwed up Kaiser health system, shuffling her around and then watching her go through all the transitions in dying.

My job as I saw it was to HONOR everything that Ruth wrote on her Health Care Directive that she and Beverly Rubik wrote together. She wanted cremation and her ashes spread over the Pacific Ocean.

I feel very grateful that the night before Ruth died I took sage, and her abalone shell, and I saged the doorway and said from my heart that this is to protect her spirit in its departure and that no negative spirit may enter her door. I did this over her body in circles and over her windows and bathroom windows. Earlier that day I was on one side holding her hand – Jo Coffee on the other – and we said something and Ruth Inge lifted her head and laughed. Her face lit up and her sound was a laugh. This is the last memory I want to hold.

The next morning when I woke I knew she would pass as I had lots of diarrhea which I always have in conjunction with the day of death. The following day I signed the papers for Ruth's cremation. She died July 20, 2007.

One week later, Mali Burgess and I sat in front of Ruth's body, took the incense from the Mongolian Temple I had brought back just one year earlier, and I smudged her body. Then we stood by her as she was placed in the crematory oven. We sat outside as her body burned and Mali and I both had a similar vision of Ruth being a young girl in a field of flowers. Hours later they opened the door in front of us and all the remains of the brilliant, wonderful teacher of mine Ruth Inge Heinze was swept into a box.

But it was not like ashes. It is actually large pieces of bones. Due to a recent law, the ashes have to be placed in what I best could describe as a large cuisinart and then ground to a fine powder. The reason for this is because people had been spreading ashes all over in nature, and other people were coming across pieces of bones. The ashes weighed roughly 9 pounds. The cremator said some people burn hotter than others and in this case with Ruth she was one that burned hotter. I held her warm ashes pressed to my body, a gift that will remain with me forever.

Mali and I held hands. I felt like we were in Egypt and were Ruth's guardians and

protectors.

The amazing people who surrounded her at this time were a very beautiful collection of her friends, who cared for her from their hearts, and so we all got to know each other through her.

It was an unbelievable journey caring for her and seeing her soul be set free from the body. She has taught me in life as well as in death. I am eternally grateful for all that she has done. Her accomplishments and life story should be a movie or book.

As Ruth Inge requested, her ashes went into the Pacific Ocean. As we flew over the Odeon Buddhist Monastery, the stuppahs were glistening gold shiny colors and energy. Her ashes were sailing down in the wind at the ocean across from this. I drummed her drum, Mali flew the plane, the co-pilot Arthur, who had done this a month earlier, held a special homemade tube for the ashes as Bett Martinez sang.

The next night Bett sent me this in an e-mail:

“Ruth-Inge encouraged and supported us to always be our largest possible selves. There was nothing too big or too wild for her. The only sin in her eyes might have been for us to be smaller than ourselves.”

We have a beautiful bond to share forever in being together for meeting Ruth’s final wishes, to be spread in the Pacific Ocean. Taking off with Mali’s hands at the yolk. Seeing the great stuppas and the odeon buildings glowing in the sunshine. What a lovely vision and location Arthur had picked.

I have never done this but I spontaneously drummed last night and the sound took me traveling. After I read Ruths life book and I am in awe at the amazing full life Ruth Inge Heinze had, and what she accomplished after she was fifty. She is INSPIRATION and continues to be.

A week later I watched as deer went swimming across the lake. I had never seen deer swim and felt it was Ruth, who loved to swim, going across the lake.

Last year at her memorial here at the Santa Sabina Center, many people spoke of how deeply she touched their lives and how strong and fierce a being she was. There was a candle procession; we walked into the garden here and Akasa played beautiful drums and sang. We walked to the chapel, went to the altar and everyone sang. Then we all sat together cozy and shared stories, where Linda Braga and Lucy Lewis had set up another beautiful altar filling two tables with Ruth’s degrees, photos and accomplishments. We all joined in a large circle outside and gave offerings to a plant that was placed in the garden here in Ruth’s honor and then we sang, drummed and sent her spirit to the sky. It was very beautiful.

And lastly, I will never forget Marilyn Schlitz's words to me when I told her I was going to pick up this woman a Ruth Inge Heinze. She looked at me and said, "She will change your life forever." She has.

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