Bringing Ceremony to the End of Life

Penny Allport does a variety of ceremonies marking the various stages of life. But it was the Canadian woman's venture into a new type of ritual that is getting her a world's worth of attention. ***Steve Cronin reports***

The New York Times and a newspaper in western Canada have chronicled Allport's efforts to create ceremonies for those who choose to end their lives under Canada's Medical Assistance in Dying program.

These include living wakes, which allow the person who has chosen to die and their loved ones a final chance to say goodbye, as well as ceremonies she performs for the dying person and their loved ones at the time they choose to end their lives.

While Allport acknowledges her efforts might not be appreciated by all who hear of them, as someone who has had "a lifelong care for rites of passage," she feels compelled to act when asked for help.

"I'm not doing the procedure. My care is honoring every individual's right for their own experience and choice," Allport said. "When they wanted to include ceremony, I want to participate, because I know everyone involved will be changed by their experience."

Medical assistance in dying has been legal in Canada since the summer of 2016.

The law allows adults who are mentally capable to request medical assistance in dying if they are suffering from a serious, irremediable medical condition, are in an advanced state of decline that can't be reversed, are suffering and are at a point where their natural death is foreseeable.

Penny Allport has conducted living wakes and end-of-life ceremonies for people choosing to end their lives through Canada's Medical Assistance in Dying program. (*Photo courtesy of Penny Allport*)

With such dry and clinical criteria, and the somber but professional approach medical personnel take to the procedure, there is a need to return emotion and impact to the event, Allport said.

"Ceremony returns us to the reality and humanity of what is happening and the weight of the experience. This is the person's last day on the planet," she said. "I feel there is a need to slow down and

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participate in end-of-life with more consciousness and care, which can allow emotions to be felt and the impact of death to be digested and integrated as a part of human life."

Allport has been what she calls a "life-cycle celebrant" for two decades now. She also calls herself a home funeral guide and has had an appreciation for the ceremonies that accompany death since she was in seventh grade and participated in a course called Cemetery Study.

The class started in October and ended in spring. Students were required to map a Canadian pioneer cemetery located behind the school and learn about the people buried there.

Students studied the ages of the people who were buried there. Learning that a good number of them were children left an impression that the 53-year-old Allport still remembers. The course also had participants design their own tombstones and write their own epitaths.

"It is what informed me and gave me a deep care of end of life and death," she said. "I feel that one of the big losses in Western culture is that children are not being exposed to death. It is tied up in a tidy bow and kept from them."

After growing up, Allport settled in western Canada, operating a spiritual bookstore, running retreats on a small piece of land and creating and presenting "a plethora of ceremonies" ranging from weddings to modern-day rite of passage events for teenaged girls to funerals and green burials.

Allport was staying in Victoria, British Columbia, when in May 2017 she was contacted by John Shields, a former Catholic priest who went on to become an activist, environmentalist and the president of the British Columbia Government Employees' Union. Shields, 78, was dying of a genetic disorder, and he and his wife asked Allport to create an end-of-life ceremony for him.

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>
> – Penny Allport

She agreed. But then Shields' wife called to say that he'd decided to take advantage of Canada's assisted-suicide regulations, and Allport found she had a decision to make.

"I had to sit with myself and ask 'Can I continue with this?'" she said. After some soul-searching, Allport decided that "if this is this man's choice, and he wants ceremony" to accompany it, she would assist him.

Allport had never presided over an arranged death, but she knew that the first step to planning anything was to have a conversation with Shields.

"I have no idea in the beginning what the person needs or wants. I'm a blank slate," she said. Allport spent a lot of time listening to Shields, learning about his background, his views and his wishes.

Being a former priest, Shields understood and appreciated ceremony. He and his family believed that consciousness went on after death, and Allport created ceremonies with those thoughts in mind.

"He was in charge. We listened to what his wishes were and then we facilitated it. In many ways, the person is in charge of their journey … and we honor the passage they are making," Allport said.

Two days before he was scheduled to die, Shields also decided he would like to have an Irish wake for himself before he died. Allport was asked to assist in planning for the event.

That event would be covered by the New York Times, which was doing a story on the Canadian law and Shields' decision to die.

While Shields had wanted the event held at Swiss Chalet, a family-style chain restaurant, his medical condition made that impossible. Instead, family, friends and Allport gathered in the solarium at the hospice center where he was staying. A chicken dinner was served, then chocolate cake, and then Allport led the crowd that had gathered in a ceremony to say goodbye to their friend and loved one.

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"He wanted to gather his colleagues and his friends. He wanted to offer them his own blessing in his own way and to be blessed by them," Allport said. "I think it's a very human desire."

"People came and sang. Young people bought musical instruments. It was like the old wakes, where people are coming and going with food," Allport recalled. "There was this air of deep respect and honor for the life of this person."

Allport was also there the following morning, when a doctor arrived with the medication that would end Shields' life. She led those in the room through a ceremony she and Shields had designed. It provided Shields and his family members one last opportunity to say goodbye, to show their love, and to help usher him into whatever came next.

Allport, one of five people in the room, led the participants as they called on Shields' dead relatives and friends to help guide him on his new journey. Then, after the group sang "Who Could Ask for Anything More," the doctor administered the drugs for the lethal injection.

While Shields' death was the first Allport had conducted a ceremony for, she felt it provided both the dying man and his family what they needed at his life's end.

"Ceremony does not mean something has to be overly solemn and serious. At the same time, there can be this joy of celebration of honor and deep respect," she said. "That's what a celebrant can offer. A holding of the space as sacred and important that indicated something profound is happening here. It's like birth: When someone is arriving, we prepare for their coming."

Allport was called on again earlier this year to preside over an end-of-life event.

Syd Valentine, 59, lived in Roberts Creek, a small seacoast community in British Columbia. She'd been diagnosed with cervical cancer and chose a medically-assisted death.

Valentine, owner of the local video store, was a single mom with no family other than her 24-year-old son. She wanted Allport's help preparing for her death.

"It was shocking to me when Syd told me she had never experienced a ceremony that she'd attended for someone that was meaningful and important," Allport said.

Allport worked with Valentine for several months. While the dying woman originally did not request a ceremony, she eventually came to realize that she wanted something more to mark her passing.

"I was walking with her for six to eight months. As the days got closer, things just changed," Allport recalled. "She knew she had really made a difference in her community and she knew that she was loved.

"I believe it's important that we are deep listeners and ... collaborate with the person that is passing that honors their wishes and does not impose any of our beliefs or wishes," she said. "I could not have come to her with this agenda, 'We are going to play this music' or 'We are going to say this prayer.' But then, all these beautiful things happened."

On Jan. 28, the day that Valentine died, about 40 friends gathered to share food and memories. Valentine gave a couple a banjo as a gift and music, including "Amazing Grace," was played.

"If I had put that in, she would have killed me. You can plan and you plan, but things happen. I like the spontaneity of it," Allport said. "Someone had made a playlist. Someone had gathered flowers. Everyone did what they felt called to do, and everything got done."

"That is the role of the celebrant. It is someone who is not necessarily of the family, but has a deep, deep care for the passage and can hold the space for what wants to happen," Allport said.

When it came time for Valentine to die, Allport again knew that she "had honored Syd's wishes and assisted the community in honoring her life and death."

"She got to experience a ceremony that was respectful and sacred and joyful. It was profound," Allport said.

Allport continues to offer her services as a celebrant and home funeral guide. She is working with an 80-year-old woman who has cancer and is planning her own living wake while still living life "with grace and gusto," Allport said.

"Right now, she is still at home and she has a lot of vitality, but she knows it is coming. She is also registered for MAiD," Allport said.

With this woman, Allport is doing the same as she has done with the others: listening, letting them guide her planning, providing suggestions but letting them have the final say.

"It is so humbling to have these people trust you with the last moments of their life. It isn't about you. It is about them, it is about their wishes," she said.

"I don't have a background in the funeral business or industry, but what I understand is that people started to let go of ceremony because it lost some kind of meaning for them," she said. "These kinds of ceremonies are part of a reclamation – reclaiming ceremony as a human need, a biologic need. It isn't easily articulable, but there is this need." •

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