

Raving Not Drowning:

Exploring Green Burials and Conscious Funerals

By Rupert Callender



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Ten years ago, scarred by early bereavement and the unsatisfying funerals that followed, I had an epiphany; I would become an undertaker and join the fledgling alternative green funeral movement. I would help people to avoid sleepwalking, as I had, through the numbness of fresh grief, create with them ceremonies that both honoured the person who had died and truly enabled those who were left to begin the next stage of their lives. The clarity of this illumination was quite unlike anything I have had before, or since.

There is remarkably little legislation in the U.K. around becoming a funeral director, largely because you are not legally obliged to engage one. A relative can collect a body from a hospital and keep them at home, do the paperwork, order a coffin, hold the service, even bury them in their own back yard if they want to. To set up as one all you need, as I discovered, was luck, naivete and gumption.

When you've found what you are meant to be doing, things can move fast. I babbled to everyone I knew, read some books, and arranged to see my first dead body. I put out a press release, agreed to take a ceremony as well as deal with the practicalities, and within what seemed like minutes, found myself talking about love and loss around the bodies of the newly dead to congregations of people. A friend of mine named Claire became intrigued, joined me, was initiated with similar emotional immediacy and soon became my wife. A decade later, and our life is steeped in what Mary Oliver calls "the black river of loss, whose other side is salvation, whose meaning none of us shall ever know." It doesn't even feel that weird anymore.

We call ourselves undertakers rather than funeral directors. There is an implicit commitment in that word, a sense that this is an experience we will go through together, that we *undertake* to see you through it. Old school funeral directors direct; they inform you of the rules, the dizzying world of etiquette that you, stunned by grief, are now subject to. They introduce you to a priest, murmur approval, show you stationary bordered with lilies and

doves, explain how it's done.

We do it differently.

We employ no bearers, no team of old men to literally shoulder the burden, so at the very least, between us, we have to carry and lower the coffin together. We don't divert the eye with expensive vehicles, or matching livery's or overtly extravagant displays of anything. It's not about the car, or the orders of service or the flowers. Distractions. We think that what is said is of more importance. We don't believe in replacing sorrow with celebration, and we have no template, other than a belief that secretly, we all long to turn our faces to the truth, that there is a liberation in its presence which we feel absented from in our increasingly artificial world.

We believe that if possible, seeing the person who has died, naturally and unembalmed is a crucial step towards acceptance, and makes the difference between knowing something in your head, and knowing it in your heart. For these reasons we avoid euphemisms of all kind. More often than not we take the service ourselves, which more often than not is outdoors, in a circle, around a grave. We try

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to raise hope, but temper it with the truth, so we don't airbrush out all someone's faults, or grossly inflate their virtues either, as if death somehow makes us better people. We talk about their dying as well as their living, as it is the last, crucial piece of the puzzle of our lives. We avoid any strong reference to the afterlife, not from any personal conviction one way or the other, but because it's so clear that the point is not where they are, but where they are not. Honesty, appropriateness and participation is what we are aiming for, and when they come together, it works.

Our influences are varied. My wife's tribe is punk, so she brings a healthy disregard for tradition and authority. I have Quaker leanings, tinged with acid mysticism. Neither of us are religious in a conventional sense, though we are open to hope and wonder. Both of us believe strongly in people, and from time to time we like to dance all night. I like to think these are linked.

PPeople always ask us how we cope, how we live our lives surrounded by such sadness, and in truth we have many strategies and resources to pull on; good friends, a healthy emotional relationship, a fairly twisted sense of humour, and a few years of therapy under our belt, but it's time we also acknowledged our debt to MDMA and dance culture, both in how we free ourselves from the weight of other's pain, and how we construct and hold our ceremonies.

Raving and MDMA have been a part of my culture since my early twenties, and has formed much of my adult self. It has marked birthdays, midsummers, midwinters; even our wedding celebrations, and although as time has passed my enthusiastic consumption has naturally leveled out, and my idea of a rave reduced to a few friends shuffling and giggling around a fire, we still reserve it as a spiritually warming treat.

The core experience of MDMA—empathy, surges of happiness, dissolution of fear, and the feeling of re-inhabiting your body—are not what any serious psychonaut would describe as a testing drug ordeal. Other psychedelics offer much weightier insights into the nature of existence and non-existence, with less predicability and certainly more challenge, but almost immediately upon beginning this work we were regularly dealing with trauma such as suicide, and all the currents and rip-tides of emotional contagion, despair and fear that swirl around it.

Coping with the family of someone who has killed themselves, or whose life has ended in an equally intense moment of peak tragedy is itself a peak experience, and requires awareness and perspective so as not to succumb to emotional vertigo. Bad things happen to good people for no reason, and having this reinforced almost daily is enough to make the most

optimistic soul tremble with a sort of morbid anticipation, but the joyful, uncomplicated exuberance that MDMA gave us kept us sane in the shock of entering this new life, and helped the grief and pain to run off us like water. It kept reminding me that we were blessed, in our friendships, our lives, in ourselves. It allowed us to feel the grief but not become it, and this was a much better way of dealing with it than the traditional professional response to repeated exposure to trauma; numbification through alcohol.

Despite its tendency to almost unconditional positive regard I don't believe that MDMA has given us a false perspective on bereavement, and it hasn't been our only influence in attempting to reframe the rituals around our dead, but the message that we have taken from it, the message that lay at the heart of rave culture—that all we really need and have is each other—has proved a profound and subversive one to bring to the funeral rite. Organized religion is wilting fast in this country, but a sense of the numinous still exists everywhere.

The challenge faced by those willing to step into the shoes of the priest is how to hold onto these impulses while staying true to the emerging culture. For me, these truths were revealed again and again in the swirling mass of a rave; that human beings are fundamentally good, bright beings, that faith and hope and love are not the preserve of the religious, that they are a part of the human condition, the best part, and that by daring to remove the traditional ritual props that surround a funeral, and face the darkness together with nothing but honesty and intention we reveal this, and edge ever closer to the previously unthinkable; a religion without God. To get there though, we need to stand together in the presence of our shared truths, ditch the things we disagree on, namely what happens after we've died, and see what remains. It's a risk, but we have nothing to lose and all to gain.

I am so grateful for the optimism and hope that MDMA has enabled me to feel, for the part it played in healing my own grief and for the opportunity to take the best of that experience back into the straight world. All who work with the dying and the bereaved would benefit from the sheer, death-defying physical pleasure that MDMA gives, if only for an hour or two. As thirty odd years of authoritarian hostility towards psychedelic culture begins to thaw, maybe they'll get the chance. •