FINALITY: FORMAL
FAITH & BEYOND
Religious or alternative approaches to grief & death
This booklet is part of the Southwest Folklife Alliance Continuum Program – an ethnographic documentation of expressive practices in Southern Arizona communities as they relate to end of life. Prepared by a cohort of citizen folklorists who researched everyday life in local multicultural communities during 2014-2015, this booklet outlines both formal religious and alternative ways the community seeks comfort in end of life.

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ABOUT SOUTHWEST FOLKLIFE ALLIANCE
The Southwest Folklife Alliance (SFA) is an affiliate non-profit organization of the University of Arizona’s College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The SFA is housed in the College’s Southwest Center, and the Public Folklorist at the Center serves as the SFA Executive Director. Our programs serve communities throughout the Border region corridor to maintain and preserve folklife practices in the southwest, support the economic development of heritage and folk artists and artisans, and build awareness of diverse folk and heritage practices.

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What bolsters us and our loved ones as we cross thresholds into end of life? While death is universal and transcends culture, the ways to handle it are as diverse as our neighborhoods. For many, spiritual rituals shed meaning on death’s unanswered questions. Yet, for the marginalized, secular, or those who do not believe in a supernatural Deity – the interpretations or ways to seek understanding can be independent of formal faith practice. For these in our community, peace in end of life must be resolved in unique ways.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die…”

-- Ecclesiastes 3

1 Psalm 23, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil...Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”
2 Lingpur, Gen Kelsang, Principal Teacher, Tucson Kadampa Meditation Center, Continuum Journal, p. 8
3 MacDonald, Rev. Karen, ordained minister, Co-chair of The Pima County End of Life Care Coalition, and staff member, Interfaith Community Services (ICS), a faith-based organization partnering with 88 congregations in the Tucson area.
Followers of organized faith believe in life after death and a framework to process our last days. For example, in Christian faiths, a rosary, or blessed string of beads, is used to recite prayers with a grieving family awaiting a loved one’s death. In performing the sacrament of Extreme Unction (anointing the sick), a Catholic priest administers last rites to the dying, by anointing the individual’s forehead with blessed oils as a form of deliverance into grace upon death. In Kadampa Buddhism, a powa practice is performed both for someone close to death as well as for someone deceased. Simple rituals are performed by an assembled community, with offerings such as water, flowers, candlelight, perfumes and foods traditionally placed at a shrine, which often also contains a photo of the deceased.

Organized faith helps the living and the dying find their personal path to discovering end-of-life meaning. The clergy, wearing their stoles or liturgical vestments and carrying their prayer books or other sacred objects like the holy water and the crucifix, bring a simple and profound presence that helps honor the immensity of the event, and helps narrate a community’s approach to death. Clergy and spiritual leaders help the dying prepare for their passage and we console those left behind. Through our practices and our duty of praying for and preparing souls – our role is to facilitate the most comforting and appropriate spiritual care in end of life.
LAMENTATION

From requiem hymns to the chant of the Kaddish during Jewish ceremonies – There is deep, healing nature in our traditional sounds of mourning. There also is a place for silence in helping us exclaim our sorrow. All the sounds, or lack of them, soothe us while helping us share grief and mediate death. There are references to wailing in the Bible: “Call for the mourning women that they may come...let them make haste, and take up a wailing for us.” (Jeremiah Chapter 9:17).4

Singing and mourning aloud are important and dramatic expressions in many cultures, often called “keening.” In African American funerals, including in a New Orleans Jazz funeral procession or Harlem funeral house wake, death is most likely viewed in celebratory, respectful ritual. Mourners, wearing white (a symbol of resurrection), with ladies in gloves and church hats, vocally respond during a preacher’s service with demonstrative exclamations, prayer and hymn.

The modern African-American funeral industry had its origins in slave communities that were allowed to congregate to bury their dead. Then, post-slavery, in segregation, the African American community founded its own industry because it could only look to its own to properly honor its dead.

“Well, all my lifetime, when a black person died they’d go find the black undertaker. They know better than to go anywhere else because they knew they wouldn’t be served…”

-- Willie Mae Owens Ross, in Homegoings, documentary.5
(As of this writing Willie Mae, 99, still works at Owens Funeral Home in Branchville, South Carolina)
Secular Paths

Those who abandon more traditional organized faith do not define themselves through scriptures or religious belief. They approach both life and death more philosophically, with ethical systems based upon science and logic that do not concede to a belief in an almighty God. These may proudly embrace and affiliate with certain cultural values of an organized faith, but they reject conventional teachings as they apply to organized religion. While their sphere of influence is scientific, their approach is to an ethical, good life that affects a good death.

In Tucson, there are many communities embracing nonreligious values – From the Secular Student Alliance at the University of Arizona\(^6\), to the Secular Humanist Jewish Circle\(^7\) to FreeThought Arizona and its affiliates across the region\(^8\). Celebrants who have supported memorials or celebrations in our Atheist community see nature and personal traditions as common factors in ceremonies performed:

\(^4\) Biblicalencyclopedia.com/M/mourn.html
\(^5\) Homegoings, documentary about the African-American Funeral Director: PBS.org/pov/homegoings/african-american-funeral-director/ and homegoings.com
\(^6\) Facebook.com/ssawildcats
\(^7\) Secularhumanistjewishcircle.org/
\(^8\) Freethought-az.org/index.html
“Folks who don’t have a formal spiritual practice or no longer belong to the church/synagogue/mosque of their youth may still have a highly developed spiritual path that may include some of their root tradition, cultural rituals, and/or beliefs and practices from religions they have studied… However, there are many, e.g. humanists, who don’t believe in an afterlife and comfort may be more challenging or elusive. They need to establish meaning in life and death that doesn’t paint a picture of consciousness surviving the body’s death. They may look to the natural cycle of life and death and cultivate acceptance of all the gains and losses inherent in human existence.”

The Atheist viewpoint of life gives context to the Atheist culture in death and dying:

“Atheism gives me a sense of peace. It gives me a sense of feeling that I’m an actual human being, that I’m not dependent on something that is imaginary… We have to create our own meaning and purpose… This is all we have and we have to make the best of it, as opposed to religious people who feel that this is more of just a transition, and the main goal is to ensure eternity… The Atheist view on life and living is unlike that of religious people. We do not feel we are here divinely for an ultimate purpose; non believers look at existence as tremendously lucky, quite mysterious, and very difficult to explain. It’s a profound question as why we are here now… I feel that dying would be similar to having anesthesia, a sense of slipping away… When you die, you no longer exist; when you die, there is no active brain. And by definition, you are what you were before you were born: nothing….”
Expressive Arts

Creative arts also are an access point for many who seek a better understanding of death. Music, poetry, meditation, dance, storytelling and hands-on expressions help us explore and celebrate emotions and resolve perceptions on death. Tucson hospice nurse, Kaitlin, believes that “encouraging creativity in self-expression at the end of life forms a positive pathway for finding joy, feeling accomplishment, and leaving a unique and enduring legacy... Creativity, in any form, can be a healing tool for people who are living between worlds. It can help open consciousness and appreciation of the little things that are often taken for granted in life which increases a sense of satisfaction and comfort.”

Creativity as a ritualistic healing tool – whether that be through oral legacy or a story quilt – allows individuals to re-envision loss, and also leave messages in tangible objects to create meaning of death. In Tucson, this one Hospice nurse conducts workshops in creative healing for those either personally in end of life, or encumbered by loss:

9 LeFevour, Mary Kay, TMC Hospice Chaplain and member of 2014-2015 Continuum cohort
10 Comments by Gil (member of FreeThought Arizona), reported by Terryl Mack and Karen Metcalf, 2014-2015 Continuum report, p. 2 – 5
11 Bornfield, Dr. Gail, Continuum Journal, p. 16
“Kaitlin has spent her life working as a hospice nurse. As a child, she was a “sitter” which in traditional Irish culture is a person who sits with those who are dying. She has witnessed the passing of hundreds of people. She believes that with support, the end is met with peace; relationships (positive and negative) are released, and life itself is then gracefully released. For family and friends, she finds it important to recognize death as a part of life, not holding on to the one passing but allowing them to transition peacefully… She finds it important to discuss the process of dying and the related fears. The dying person should finish their story … Perhaps a letter to a person lost to a conflict or argument would suffice. Allow creativity to flourish. Death is comparable to leaving your cloak by the side of the road. Once left, you will make the passage across.”

MARGINALIZED & MOURNING

Stigma and discrimination may be stumbling blocks in end of life. In marginalized communities, including the LGBT community, members use end-of-life services less frequently because of their fears. Legal systems may surpass personal wishes, placing end-of-life processes, including burial, in the hands of estranged family members, rather than following a chosen life partner’s wishes. LGBT seniors are five times less likely to access senior services because of stereotyping and uncertainty about safety issues.

12 Bornfield, Dr. Gail, 2014-2015 Continuum report, p. 8
13 Starr, Penelope, 2014-2015 Continuum report, p. 13
14 Comments by Sandy Davenport, PCOA, reported by Penelope Starr, 2014-2015 Continuum report, p. 13
15 Tucson Death Café Facebook page: Facebook.com/TucsonDeathCafe/
16 Amorous, Isabel, Tucson Death Café Facilitator, MA Death Education and the Arts, Death Educator, member of Association of Death Educators and Counselors
“If you are a caregiver, you might be the only one that the client has contact with. If you do not create an environment where the person feels safe to tell their true story, they can be isolated from normal processes in aging. For example, if their partner dies and they do not feel safe talking about it, it could lead to disenfranchised grief, a situation where they have nowhere to tell, ‘this was not just my friend, this was my life - partner.’ They cannot really express their grief so their healing is impaired which leads to greater depression and health issues…”14

Discovering Death Café

In Tucson, communities are beginning to touch the mystery of death through more informal, contemporary gatherings. Death Cafés have been active in Tucson since 2011, providing a way to share stories about death in an unstructured, relaxed experience. The group currently meets monthly on the first Wednesday of each month at Bookman’s15:

In my participation with Death Café in Tucson I have noticed attendees range in age from teenagers coming with parents to young people in their twenties to octogenarians and everyone in-between. Grief and loss cross cultures and ages and although expressions of it are varied it is an egalitarian experience. As an example, I was in a local Tucson cemetery once and met a woman and her family there who were from a very different culture than my own. We did not share the same language yet somehow understood each other and connected intimately in our grief over the loss of our mothers.16
End-of-life community programs placed outside a formal religious or health care structure also include death “doulas” (a form of midwife or transition guide to accompany a dying person into death). Doulas and a variety of alternative resources help the community find a way to carry through to death:

Bring it on! Death Cafes, death doulas and anything or anyone that brings this society out of its death denial is welcome! There is so much fear about death, that modern society has, that is…relatively new. When death was a part of a family (and community) there was more acceptance of this part of the natural cycle. Now we hide it in nursing homes, hospitals and assisted living facilities. I’m not saying that these institutions don’t play an important role of care-giving for us, but they do remove us from the “everydayness” of dying and the tenderness of this transition. This is why I think hospice has had such a significant impact on our communities – it gives back to a family the sacred time of being with a dying loved one through supporting that process in their home.17

--- PET LOSS AND GRIEF ---

The bonds between individuals and their animal companions are as strong as human-to-human connections, with grief felt at the loss of a pet most mightily. The Humane Society of Southern Arizona facilitates a support group and a hot line to help individuals cope with end of life as well as loss of a beloved critter friend.18
In addition, there are veterinary services for palliative pet care and end-of-life consultation, as well as crematory services, burials, markers, keepsakes and blessings, which reflect the spiritual and cultural practices of the pet guardians. Rituals, especially for children, help memorialize the companion, and the Pet Cemetery of Tucson has provided services and a resting place for thousands of Tucson pet animals, since 1986.19

This is our shared certainty: Death awaits us all. While some believe that life fulfills a divine purpose, others accept that there is non-existence after the transition. Whatever our conviction, the beauty of culture helps us to celebrate end of life and process our grief via unique practice. Culture is a way to anticipate universal death, while embracing our differences.

“I am not religious but I cannot believe there is not something else. To be born is miraculous. Maybe to die is miraculous...I do not know what to do in this in-between stage of being in decline...”20

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17 LeFevour, Mary Kay, TMC Hospice Chaplain and member of 2014-2015 Continuum cohort
18 Hssaz.org/our-services/end-of-life-services/
19 ThePetCemeteryofTucson.com/
20 Comments, reported by Penelope Starr, 2014-2015 Continuum report, p. 5.
In Loving Memory of

Colton Robert Richards
10/4/89 11/20/93

Mother & Grandpa Rits