

For the full hour long phone conversation and to hear Chuck's wonderful voice go to [this link](#). The unedited version of our conversation includes: the history of when / how home funerals fell out of popularity, Chuck's work as a hospice volunteer, the story of his own fathers death and funeral, the importance of care and concrete actions when supporting a grieving person... and more.

Georgia: So I wanted to start with just asking you to introduce yourself and the work you do and how you found your way into this work

Chuck: Okay, my name is Chuck Lakin. I'm seventy-seven years old and I live in Waterville, Maine. And right now, I consider myself a home funeral educator and a woodworker. And I started getting into this idea of the home funeral, education was a result of my father's death. And in 1979, he died of metastatic lung cancer and he was home for the last six weeks of his life and I was lucky enough to be able to be there for the last four weeks of that. And so when he did die, he was in his own bed with his wife and four kids touching him. And it had been such a personal experience up until that point, and it wasn't until that point that I even thought about what was going to happen next. And I didn't know what to do because this was 1979 and there weren't any of the resources there are now. And so we called a funeral director who did what I assume he thought we wanted him to do, which was arrive promptly zip my dad in the body bag and 4 days later we got ashes in the mail. I hated that and it wasn't until almost twenty years later that I found a manual written by a woman in California, [Jerrigrace Lyons](#), who was making her business to help people take care of their own dead. And so, I started talking to people about home funerals... but by the way, I'm a retired College reference librarian and so you'll see how that comes into what I do... And so I started talking to people about home funerals and I wasn't trying to talk people into doing them. What I was trying to do is to say if you want to have the experience I wanted to have when my father died, here is the information you need in order to be able to have that experience. And so it started off pretty small but this was early 2000s but you learn more and eventually everything just grows or particularly if it's a thing you're supposed to be doing, which I'm quite convinced that this is exactly what I'm supposed to be doing right now. And so the other part of that is the woodworking. I got out of the Navy when I was twenty-six and discovered Woodworking and it's been a part of my life ever since. And I remember early on I had a project, I had just bought a few basic tools and I was going to make a dining room table out of some 2x6's for some friends. And the night before I was standing outside in the clear Maine fall looking at the stars and I could feel in my hands all this energy and my fingers were long and strong and you know it was just this amazing feeling and I knew I was going to be a woodworker for the rest of my life and no matter what. I've worked full-time. But I've also been doing woodworking all along. And just growing that skill because I've been doing it for fifty years and I'm still learning every time I make something, I learned something new and I think that's true of most people than in most situations. And so of course, if you're a woodworker and you talk about home funerals, you're going to make coffins. I try to just describe what I do is make simple, functional graceful things. And so, that's my attitude towards coffins too. And I

like to do things (Phone is ringing in the background) Sorry about that.

G: No worries. Do you want to get it?

C: Nope. I want to put it under a pillow...
And there we go.

So, what I do with the coffins is make things that have a broad flat surfaces that are smooth and so that they kind of invite decoration, you know, and they're relatively simple. But, you know, just a few small tricks, like, even just rounding edges or putting the gentle curve in there. It's calming or it's soothing to be able to look at something and to see that there were a few additional things done, but I also hope that they invite decorations because the woman who wrote that manual about home funerals, described decorating a coffin as a healing act of art therapy, And I have found that to be absolutely true. And so that's where the woodworking and the funeral and the home funeral education, part combined.

G: Well it certainly does sound like you have found this very unique place where you stand. you have so many different kinds of skills that you embody and they have found their expression, which is always so, Beautiful to hear

C: I know that this is what I'm supposed to be doing.

G: and how lucky it really is, I think maybe the biggest gift of life is when people find that thing that they know they're supposed to be doing and then have the ability to do it.

C: I agree completely.

G: And share it! I think you what's so amazing about the what you're doing is there is so much Education. you're standing in your place but you're reaching out and there's such a ripple effect. I think it's really a lack of imagination or a lack of information that leaves people kind of doing the thing that is most commonly done. For you to be able to open up the possibilities of what that could look like, caring for the dead. So profound and important because it does feel like it's a lack of knowing what's possible.

In the text you sent me by [Dani LaVoire](#) she said something about how too often when the body is quickly taken away and we are left mourning in the abstract, not having a physical experience of the death and this can make it harder to integrate. That seems so obvious and yet it's really rare that people get to be with a body for an extended period of time. Let alone touch the body, feel comfortable being in physical relationship with the body of someone who is no longer.

C: Yep, a lot of people don't even know that it's possible. they just call a funeral director. But you'll also notice that, for example, the Jewish have always... their ritual involves -every synagogue has a group of people male and female, there's two separate groups and when

somebody dies, there is a ritual washing that takes place. But there's so many changes happening right now, more and more funeral directors, will tell you that people are asking even if the funeral director came and picked up the body up, that the family wants to come in, to the funeral home and do the body preparation themselves.

G: What do you think being with a body and touching a body of someone who is no longer living teaches us about death?

C: You know, I have no idea but I know it works. you know in some cases, you need to wash the body but in some cases it's more of a ritual thing. And you know, you're touching this body you've known for a very long time, and there's something about that connection. And that is so personal and that's so profound, and I have no idea. I can't describe it better. But I'm sure there are people that I could find somebody who could describe it to you.

G: Well, I'm seeing that image that you offered earlier where you're sitting or standing with that piece of wood and had a very profound experience of feeling the energy of that wood. That image just came to me. I wonder if there is something similar, just the energy of a body even if the person is no longer alive. In the way the person is no longer inhabiting the body in the way that we're used to. I don't know. I actually haven't touched the body of someone dead body before so I don't know but I wonder if there is something similar to the wood of a tree you know, the wood is no longer alive in tree form. So if the body doesn't have the person in it, what else is it holding? What is it communicating? What can we find within that touch even if it's coming from us?

C: Oh yes. everything is made out of energy and we're all made out of just energy and everything in this world is connected to everything else by this energy and everything has its own energy expression and particularly, you know, something that was living and was really close to you. You are used to that energy and the living energy isn't there but the soul or the spirit of that energy is still around. The energy doesn't necessarily just disappear immediately. I mean, when my wife died, at first very clearly her spirit was still here and just, you know, tapered away or it sort of gradually left over a long period of time because she was helping me adjust, helping me make that transition.

G: For some reason I'm thinking about this idea... well as you know I spend a lot of time with babies... and there's like this idea of the transitional object, like a stuffed animal or something that a baby can use to separate from the mother or parent, guardian. And when you were describing that relationship to the body, I thought, oh the body is perhaps left in some divine plan, for the use of the living, to transition with. You know, like that body is an object for us to use as we transition our relationship with our loved one, from them being alive and with us, to them being in a new form. And how unfortunate it is that often dead bodies are swept away and commonly people are a little scared of them and don't know how to handle them... When really,

maybe, they are the exact thing that's needed to be the bridge in the in the process of mourning

C: You are much smarter than me but I think you're exactly right. I think that taking care of that dead body yourself is helping with that transition or as they're there to help make that transition for you. You just really taught me something that I'm grateful for.

G: I'm just hearing what you're saying and I'm so grateful for this work and I don't know that much about it but I know it is so important. It's really unbelievable to me that we all walk around living. And this huge thing is going to happen to all of us a which is death, but in our culture it doesn't feel like it. It honestly feels like it should be the main topic of conversation because it's happening to all of us. So I think it's just so incredible, to have death be a topic of conversation and to have that conversation have within it - what were your three words you used?- grace simplicity. functionality.

Well, I have one more question for you: In your time working as a home funeral educator and coffin maker, is there an experience of touch that you've witnessed that you hold with you that you'd like to share?

C: My real experience with it would be my wife's death. I had a friend here with me when my wife died who was experienced at home funerals, a friend from New Hampshire. And then we asked two of Penny's friends to come over to help us with preparing the body. the experience of that, of all of us of doing this together for her was a very moving experience, but in addition to that, I had made the coffin and it was in our living room. We kept the body here for three days and there was a jar of magic markers right there so anyone who came through the door and I offered to let people to write, draw something on the coffin itself..

Nobody was around at the time when I wanted to be able to move Penny from the back room to the coffin in the living room. And so I asked a couple of friends to come on over and so we had four people, two of whom I didn't really know well And so we carried the body out and put it in the carpet, in the living room. And all the three people who came over Thanked me numerous times for honoring them by asking them to be part of that process.

G: Because you're inviting them into an experience of being close to death, which I think is an experience of being close to one's own humanity and feeling of use. Being of use is maybe another kind of innate human need. And like you're saying, I think death offers up just so many ways to be of use. Thank you Chuck for this conversation and the work you do.