

It has been over twenty years since Josefina Speyer, and her husband Nicholas Albery, along with Christianna Heal, first created The Natural Death Centre charity. It has been eleven years since the sudden death of Nicholas, and over eight years since the publication of the last edition of the handbook.

Many of you here tonight are key pioneers in the movement, and we welcome you as friends. Tonight is about celebrating our journey so far. It's about realising what we have achieved, and what we still have to do. These are exciting and fraught times for us. Commercialism, greenwashing, corporate disregard and faux spirituality are everywhere in funeralworld. Never has the work of the charity seemed more relevant or urgent.

Tonight, we are inaugurating new patrons, a first for the charity. We are so honoured to have Josefina and Lucy and Maggi agree to become our patrons. These three strong, talented and trailblazing women will provide an appropriate public face, full of courage, depth and integrity, and their names will considerably raise the status and profile of the charity. On behalf of The Natural Death Centre, thank you so much for agreeing to join us.

We are also inaugurating two ancestral patrons, Nicholas Albery, Josefina's husband, and Michael Young, Lord Young of Dartington, and we are very grateful to their families, particularly their spouses for allowing us to do this. This is a first for any charity worldwide.

It is a tricky area. Neither Michael nor Nicholas are alive to give us their permission, and our motives could be misconstrued. Let's be clear, by making these men our ancestral patrons, we are not trying to make a point about any possible afterlife. Ancestral awareness is about gratitude and understanding our origins and influences, about knowing where we are coming from in order to see where we are going. Our ancestors are so much more than just our genetic forbearers, they are the people who influence and shape our lives.

Because of this, these two men are my ancestors also. Their values and beliefs around death and funerals are ours and their influence continues through our consciences and our imaginations strong as it ever was.

I never met Michael, yet his belief that things can be done better, for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways is at the heart of the natural death movement. Without his rigorous and compassionate intellect, much of the practical framework of how to change the experience of dying and the funerals that followed, might have taken decades to form.

Nicholas change the course of my life forever in just three minutes of television airtime. I saw him, heard what he had to say and called him the next day and ordered a copy of the third edition of the Natural Death Handbook. The possibilities it opened up for me, the wide open spaces filled with courage and creativity helped me to find some peace after the rigours of my own turbulent grief, and allowed me to help others by passing on this news: loss and how we react to it, affects every single aspect of our lives, but radical involvement in all that surrounds dying and funerals, is one way to reach acceptance and peace. Reading the handbook inspired me to become an undertaker. Good ideas change lives forever.

In the west, the idea of celebrating our ancestors has weakened along with our religious beliefs. We are less sure of our place in the natural order, less sure of an order at all. Our graveyards are untended and shunned, and our sense of self becomes just as neglected.

I believe that we don't become ancestors when we die, we become them when we are born, and it is our duty to all that came before and all that will come after to realise this. Ancestors remind us that the baton is often passed to us from out of the darkness, from out of the past, and that we need faith to grasp it, and faith to hand it on, gifting our beliefs out into nothing, trusting that other hands not yet born will pick it up.

We're all absent friends in waiting. We die, yet our ideas and values can be immortal.

That's why we are honouring the memory of these two men today. We are honouring everything they stood for, and all they achieved. Their voices are still strong, their message clear, and we reach out to them across the distances of time to say "we hear you, still."

The Natural Death Centre has always operated in a difficult area. Most people quite understandably give death and the issues around it a wide berth. What we have to say makes us unpopular with those who would rather diminish the experience for their own benefit, but as events like the Levenson inquiry, or the Dispatches expose, or the Archbishop of Canterbury expressing his disgust at societies imbalance show us, speaking truth to power is our moral duty, as sure as it is in the nature of power to resist our attempts to break through.

We believe that no authority, religious, medical, cultural or worst of all, commercial, should be allowed to define and package and limit our experience of dying and what may come after. These rituals are for us all to re-imagine, this mysterious frontier is for every individual to cross in their own way.

Seize the day is just one of the forty books that Nicholas Albery wrote, one with tips for living for every day of the year. I found one for December the 14th which I think neatly encapsulates what the Natural Death Centre is all about. It is by another ancestor, and a somewhat unlikely one, the American rock critic Lester Bangs who died in 1982. He said. "You may say I take liberties, and you are right, but I will have done my good deed for the day if I can make you see that you should be taking liberties too. Nothing is inscribed so deeply in the earth that a little eyewash won't uproot it, that's the whole point of the so called New Wave, to reinvent yourself and everything around you constantly, especially since all of it is already the other thing anyway."

So in celebration of this idea, and as a way for us all to welcome our new patrons I would like to propose a toast. I would like it to be in honour of our patrons both living and dead and in honour of us all, the ancestors we will one day become. Philip Larkin, that most unlikely of optimists once said that what will survive of us is love. I ask you to raise your glasses to this sentiment, and to us all, the living and the dead.

