

Podcast 341 Bareham Transcript

Karen Wyatt: Hello everyone and welcome to End of Life University Podcast where we share real talk about life and death. I'm your host Dr Karen Wyatt. Thanks for joining me here today for episode number 341. In just a moment, I'll be sharing with you a conversation I had with Olivia Bareham about the work she does in alternative end-of-life rituals including full body burial at sea, which I was very interested to learn more about. So stay tuned and you'll hear our very interesting and informative conversation. Before we get started with it, I just want to say a big thank you to all of my supporters on Patreon who have been making monthly contributions to keep this podcast on the air. I just released last week the End of Life news update for the month of February. My supporters on Patreon receive those updates every month where I curate interesting topics in the news that are happening each month. So if you'd like to join the team and receive that news update and other bonuses, you can go to Patreon, patreon.com/eolu to learn more about it. I also have an announcement to make that coming up on March 24th, that's a Thursday at 1 pm Pacific, 4 p.m. Eastern, I will be hosting a Q and A session with William Peters about his book at Heaven's Door. So if you have an opportunity to read the book, you can join us for that Q and A and get all of your questions answered by William Peters. It will be recorded. So if you can't join us live, you can receive the recording later and there will be a link to register for this free Q and A session in the show notes for this episode. Go to eolupodcast.com and look for episode number 341. If you'd like to register and come to the Q and A with William Peters on March 24th. So now we'll move ahead with my interview with Olivia Bareham, and remember to stay tuned afterwards. I'll come back with a few takeaways and to say goodbye.

But first let me tell you a little bit more about Olivia. She is a certified death midwife, home funeral guide, interfaith minister and funeral celebrant. She created the sacred crossings institute with a mission of changing the culture of death and dying through education, death midwifery, and home funeral support. In 2016 Olivia partnered with graduates of the death midwifery training program and together they created the sacred crossings funeral home and we'll be talking all about that. You can find out more at her website which is sacredcrossings.com. So here we go with the interview.

Karen Wyatt: Hello Olivia and welcome to the podcast. It's nice to talk to you once again.

Olivia Bareham: Oh it's great to be here with you, Karen, thank you.

Karen Wyatt: I thought we could start by having you just tell us a little bit about your backstory for anyone new who hasn't met you before and how you first got interested in death midwifery and home funerals.

Olivia Bareham: Um yes, I'd love to. So it really began when my mother died and I went back home to England to take care of her, and she was really my first teacher on what it means to die, consciously witnessing her courageously move into this process without fear. She put all her things in order. And it was, it was a real teaching to stand beside her

and escort her to the to the other side, that's what it felt like. But it was after she died when the hospice nurse asked me to help her take care of mother's body and bathe it and prepare it and wash it and dress it in her burial trousseau, that I actually, cinematically fell into the liminal space of the dead. And holding mother's dead body in my arms while we prepared her was so tender. And it was holy. It felt so remarkable on so many levels that I was even saying the words "I was moved" is just not enough to express what happened to me. And I realized in that moment that this is something that everybody, everybody should have the opportunity to do to get closer to death in this way and to do this last final ritual to a loved one, a spouse, a parent, God forbid a child. And it felt very sad to me that this ritual, which was obviously innate in cultures all over the world up until the last 100 years had been taken away by an industry and sterilized and made mysterious so that we, the general public, felt like we didn't know what to do or how to do it. And it wasn't difficult at all and it was life changing for me. So that was really what inspired me to find a way to help other people have the experience. And this was now 18 years ago that I came back to Los Angeles and I found a teacher Jerry Grace Lyons who's wonderful. She lives in Northern California and I took a training and learned everything there was to learn about how to prepare a dead body and how the legalities and the logistics of keeping the body at home for three days for a home funeral. And then I created Sacred Crossings, I hung up my shingle and people started to call. So I've been doing this now as a home funeral guide, supporting families too, to do this really sacred ancient holy ritual of caring for their dad.

Karen Wyatt: Mm hmm. It's really beautiful to hear your story and to think of how many of us, in a way, we're called into this work through the death of a loved one that we cherished. But that was our introduction to this dying process and how sacred it is and how it can be beautiful if we approach it in the right way. And then I love it also that you had Jerry Grace Lyons as a mentor because I think that's the other thing. Each one of us has had somewhere a mentor and now you have been a mentor for so many people that you have trained to do this work as well.

Olivia Bareham: Yes that's right. That's where it feels good to be able to pass it forward and to know that maybe hundreds if not thousands of people are able to have a similar experience which honestly is life changing and I feel like we can all midwife. If we were all able to midwife at least three of our loved ones through their dying and their home funeral then we would be so much better prepared when our time came. It softens everything. It lessens the anxiety around it. It becomes familiar. So you can sort of wear death as the most natural thing that's going to happen rather than hold it at arm's length as this dread. Like it's interesting that dread and dead are such similar words.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, so true. And I love the words you used, "wearing death," because I do think that that is what happens at some point. Like for those of us who have been working in this area for a while or a long time, as you and I have, it becomes just part of your everyday life and your awareness everyday, so that in each moment you can you can feel the preciousness of life because you know that it's fleeting and you know that you won't have this forever.

Olivia Bareham: Yes. In the beginning I called death my guru. I felt like she was ahead of me and I leaned into her and was asking her to show me, teach me. I went into it with such deep curiosity and a real longing to get to know her better. And now as I've absorbed this in these last almost 20 years, I feel like she walks beside me now, she's my friend, she's less of a guru and it feels very safe, my relationship with her now.

Karen Wyatt: I love that and I'm sure both of us feel, but we long to share this with everyone, we long for everyone to have this feeling because it would really change things in our world a lot if everyone could be more comfortable with death and have death as a friend that accompanies them.

Olivia Bareham: Oh yes, and it's not depressing at all. It hasn't brought me down and in fact it's enlivened me. I feel much more present in my daily life, much kinder softer, more open. So it enhances this life, it doesn't depress it thinking about the end of it, it gives it a more intense urgency. So another gift, I mean there's so many gifts from death and when you think about everything we eat is dead, death. Death is the ultimate gift. We're only here because of death and once we can bring the two together the birth and the death, I think we can just relax.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. Which it seems like that's what we're really meant to do here on this earth, to be in that more relaxed state and just being present and participating in and savoring all that life offers us. It's been a while now since you and I had a conversation and during that time I know that you've taken on this new venture of starting the Sacred Crossings funeral home. And so I'm curious about what led you to create the funeral home and then talking a little bit about what you offer through the funeral home.

Olivia Bareham: Well, as I said, I came in as a home funeral guide just supporting families and offering ministerial comfort and education and guidance into how to do this. But it became tricky sometimes to find funeral homes that would support us having the body at home for three days. And I just realized it would be far easier if I was also a fully licensed alternative funeral home because then it would just be seamless to help her family through conscious dying, have the body at home for three days and then bring it to our mortuary for either cremation or take it to the cemetery. So that's why I partnered with one of my students who was just incredibly generous and offering like, what do you need? And I said, I think we need a funeral home. So we've been doing this now for 7 or 8 years, I think. And it's been a real ride. Very interesting because my intention is to hold space really, and to maintain the ministerial educator stance and not be so connected to the legality part and, you know, all of the rules and regulations that go with the funeral home, but we've managed to merge the two and now offer a very sacred hands-on personalized service to our families here in Los Angeles.

Karen Wyatt: That's really wonderful. It does sound like a big undertaking to go from just being a solo practitioner helping people with home funerals now to running a funeral home. But I know that you offer full body burials at sea, which is possible because you're on the West Coast. So you're by the sea, so that's possible. But I'm so curious about that because I haven't really known anything about that. And I wondered if you'd talked to us

about how long have you been doing those full body sea burials and what do they consist of?

Olivia Bareham: Well, we've actually been doing them from the start, as soon as the first person asked for one and I researched it and I realized it was legal, it was possible and relatively easy here in Southern California. I know most people are not aware that this exists for the general public. They feel that it's just for military personnel. And once somebody has come on a full body sea burial, it's like, oh my gosh, I want this for myself. I didn't realize it was so beautiful. And if we've already done the home funeral, it's just such a beautiful seamless transition to have the body at home for the three-day home funeral and then shrouded in the custom sailcloth shroud, which it needs to be shrouded in for a sea burial, which is weighted with up to 140 lbs of ballast or pebbles. And then taken out to sea. And they're actually, there are two different ways that we can do it. We can have the body taken onboard a very small vessel and then a witness boat follows it and the witness boat can have up to 200 people on board, depending on the size of the vessel and then we follow it and then we come very close to the deployment boat, like, you know, probably 20 ft away. It's quite close, so we're right there while the body is deployed. We can have a funeral service on the deck and then when the body's deployed, that boat goes away and the witness boats circles the graveyard three times where people throw flowers on the water and it's stunning here in California. The weather is usually gorgeous. It's dolphins, it's so still and so peaceful and symbolic of a return to the ocean of life. That's why a lot of people choose it because of its naturalness. And the other way we do it more often now is that we take the body right on the boat with the people. So the body is on a shroud on the deck And the family is standing around. Usually our average number of guests is about 10-20. And then we have to go six miles, three miles minimum, but we go six miles out and that's like an hour's journey out to sea when the family are just telling stories and sort of just enjoying the ride and then when we get to the sea cemetery, then we'll hold the funeral service. Maybe there'll be music, somebody will sing. People can actually write on the shroud, that's an option. And then the family actually helped to tip the tray up and the shroud slides just directly into the ocean. Then the guests put their flowers on the top and I toll the bell eight times, which is traditional for maritime burials before we go back to shore. And then it's a natural for the family to have a celebration in a local restaurant right back there at the port. We leave from Long Beach and Newport Beach and San Pedro right down to San Diego and up to Santa Barbara. So there's a number of different ports we can leave from.

Karen Wyatt: Because you mentioned the sea cemetery, is it is it always the same place that you take the bodies to depending on the ports that you leave from? Do you always go to the same place or does that matter?

Olivia Bareham: It's similar to the federal waters out there on a sea map, I've seen it. It's a very large area. It doesn't have to be exactly the same spot. But we give the families the certificate and it has the exact coordinates where the body was buried. So another family member can go to the exact same spot which makes it for a nice tradition, like every year the family can rent a boat, hire a boat and then go to that exact same spot. So it's like

visiting the grave even though there's no headstone obviously but it's a nice way to remember every year. I just can't express how beautiful it is.

Karen Wyatt: It sounds like it. And so you mentioned the body shrouded in the sailcloth. Is the body dressed or any other shrouding underneath or possessions or flowers or anything underneath the sailcloth?

Olivia Bareham: It can be, it can be dressed as long as it's green because this is a certified green burial. No plastic goes down into the ocean. We're sure about that. But as long as the body is dressed in cotton or linen, ours are usually already in a shroud or a sheet, just a simple white sheet naked. Or if they've been laying in honor for three days at home, they usually be in some kind of a shroud, either a purchased one or one made out of just regular cotton or linen and then the body is placed in that inside the sailcloth shroud. They can be buried in metal caskets too, we never do the metal caskets. All of our families just want the shroud, but it is legal to go into the metal casket because that becomes a natural habitat for marine life at the bottom of the ocean.

Karen Wyatt: Interesting. And then I assume these are unembalmed bodies because you don't want to place the embalming chemicals into the ocean either.

Olivia Bareham: Right. They have to be unembalmed. They do follow the strict green burial guidelines. The nice thing is, you don't have to buy a plot of land. There's no maintenance. There's no burial vault or headstone or any of those resources you're saving by going out to the ocean. In fact, the only thing is there is the gas on the boat to get there. If you think about it, it is really the ultimate in green.

Karen Wyatt: Do some families choose to scatter ashes in the same way like from the boat in that same area or do you offer that?

Olivia Bareham: We have the captain of a vessel who just specifically does ash scattering. You don't have to go so far out to sea for ash scattering and that depends on where the family wants to go. We don't get involved in that because it's quite timely, you know, to have to send one of our Sacred Crossing guides out to sea to get down to the port to get on the boat. We do offer celebrant services for that. So the celebrant will go and help the family create a beautiful service for the ashes. We don't scatter on the ocean. Most of our families purchase urns either made of paper so that they actually start to sink with the ashes in there and then the ashes are dispersed in the water, not on top of the water. Or there's a beautiful rock salt urn too, which just sinks directly to the bottom and then just gradually dissolves into the water. I like those better than ash floating on the top somehow.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Oh, that's very interesting. I've never seen a full body sea burial. I can only imagine how beautiful it must be. And it just made me think when I've been on the beach a few times, I've seen flowers wash up, you know, I mean not in a full bouquet, but individual flowers, a number of them washing up at the same time. And I've always wondered if it was from something like that. Some kind of a ceremony out at sea where

people were tossing flowers and I don't know, it was touching to me just to see the flowers come ashore again.

Olivia Bareham: Yeah, it is, it's just so beautiful. We have some lovely images on the Sacred Crossings funeral home website of different funerals and you can just see how graceful it is and natural.

Karen Wyatt: It sounds so lovely. And I'm curious what kind of feedback you've gotten from families who have chosen that.

Olivia Bareham: Mostly they're just blown away that they didn't know it was an option. And um, I think it's the support the family feel and their loved ones are right there, in such a small space on a vessel. You know, and you're going out there together and you're watching, look the dolphins have come. And the last time we went there was hundreds of baby dolphins and apparently it was dolphin nursery. So we decided to stop right there because she loved dolphins, the lady who was being buried. So it was fabulous to be able to bury her in the dolphin nursery. Just stunning. I think people are, they're so surprised because it's just not what you're used to when it comes to a burial or cremation or funeral service at all. It's not used to be able to offer that to people.

Karen Wyatt: It sounds very intimate for one thing, although I guess it could be a large group of people if you can hold as many as 200, but it sounds like it just lends itself to being in that sacred space of being out on the water and as you said, with dolphins and birds and the sun and blue skies, I can just imagine how mystical it is almost to be out there.

Olivia Bareham: Yeah. And I think the idea, a lot of people feel that it takes a long time because the shroud rests on the seabed and contrary to popular belief, it's not like attacked by fishes or anything. It just takes an awful long time sitting right there and it's covered very gently with a very thin layer of sand apparently when it hits the bottom and apparently in about 100 years it actually becomes the water. So it's a lovely notion that you can actually become rain at some point, millions of years in the future, that the body has been dispersed over the entire planet and like this, I love that notion. And even though I always wanted a green burial because I'm very earthy and I like the idea of being in the earth directly after the sea burials. I've decided that I'm going to go for the ocean.

Karen Wyatt: Do you have people who choose it for themselves in advance who come in to make all the arrangements for themselves because they know that's what they would like?

Olivia Bareham: Yes. Yes, because mostly these are people who have been avid swimmers or fishermen or the ocean has meant everything to them. So it's just a no brainer that they go back there. I had a family had a little boy who died, he was eight and the beach was his most favorite place to be. And she couldn't think of anything better to know that every time she went to the beach, she could look at the mother, that every time

she looked at the ocean after that she would know her son was there. So that's another reason people like that.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. I wanted to ask that if it's limited to people who feel that affinity for the ocean and connected to it. The people who have chosen it. But I mean, and also people who have proximity to the ocean because I don't know if you ever get someone who the body is flown in or brought in from farther away for this type of burial.

Olivia Bareham: Actually, all of us have been local and we did get a call recently from somebody from Oregon. They were not on the coast and they wanted the coast and I think the Oregon coast is more difficult and we're just so fortunate here in Southern California. The weather is always nice and so she wants to come from Oregon. But then it's a little bit more complicated. Then it's not so green because you're dealing with transporting the body and the length of time that that takes. And then just two different funeral homes. You have to pay for one in Oregon and us here. So it can be quite a lot more expensive that way.

Karen Wyatt: How did you first learn about doing the sea burials and decided to start offering it?

Olivia Bareham: I think I just started researching when somebody asked for it. I just went hunting for a captain who had a boat that could take us out there and it wasn't very difficult to find one. We don't use him anymore because it's become more popular here in Southern California. So it's easier to find boats that they have the hardware, if you will, equipment to get the body from the dock onto the boat and then for it to be stable on the journey out to sea, and then for it to be able to be deployed into the ocean. There's a little, there's, you know, some steps in that. But I think more captains are getting their vessels ready for this when they know it's going to be more popular.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah, I can imagine that it will only grow in popularity. How does it compare cost wise to green burial in the ground? Like in a forest or a green cemetery?

Olivia Bareham: Well, it's a lot less expensive here in California because our green burial plots are quite expensive because it's real estate. And at least in Los Angeles you can't get a plot for less than \$15,000 in the city here. You can go out to Joshua Tree or up to Northern California. So obviously you're avoiding that cost right off the bat, there's no opening or closing of the grave. So we, once we've paid for the captain and the boat and the shroud, I mean there is, there are costs involved, but it's usually around \$6,000 rather than up to \$20,000, if you've done the opening when you bought the plot, opening and closing of the grave, the shroud, the personnel, the cemetery personnel to be there. It can be very expensive.

Karen Wyatt: And then it also occurred to me, are there any laws against people who have artificial joints or any type of metal in the body? Is that an issue or a problem?

Olivia Bareham: It's not, interestingly, because metal becomes, like I said, the metal casket, you're allowed to have metal caskets because it becomes part of the habitat for creatures. Monocle stick on it and metal is considered okay, but wood is not. They come back up to the surface eventually, whereas metal stays down there. So metal body parts would be included in there.

Karen Wyatt: No problem with that. It's very, very interesting. Well, I'm so glad to learn about it. Well, first of all, it's nice to inform people about other options available and then it gives me something to think about for myself because I've always grown up in the mountains. But now in my adulthood I have found this love for the ocean and I'm obsessed with it. And I can't get enough time on the beach and near the ocean. And it feels like what I need, what my soul needs in a way is to be near the ocean. So it's like, oh, this is an interesting idea. Maybe something I should consider for myself in the future.

Olivia Bareham: Yes, absolutely. Oh, yes. And I think mostly for the family, for the loved ones, everybody is so touched by the elements. I mean, you feel the wind, you feel the water, you've got the rocks in the shroud. There's something so earthy and comforting about the whole experience. It's a visceral experience unlike, you know, wearing a nice outfit and going to church or chapel. There's a stiffness about that. I mean, even if the service is in the home or in a beautiful place, it's still inside and limited. There's something about being on the ocean and feeling the expansiveness of the world and our place in it. And people have said after the burial, there's a feeling of elation like, wow, that's where they're going to be. That's, that's their forever place. And then it takes another hour to go back to shore. So people, they find a spot on the boat and you can feel that they go inside. There's a deep reflective process that happens when people are just taking in what they just witnessed, who that person was, where they are now in terms of their life, their connection to life. You can't really put it into words because it's so individual in their quiet introspection. But I notice it every time, they're different when they get off the boat than when they got on.

Karen Wyatt: It's so nice to have that extended ritual time together in that beautiful space that I think, oftentimes with traditional funerals, you just don't get that, you go in, you go through this little ceremony, then you go somewhere to eat something, you know, and it's so, it's just so nice to have that time for reflection. But that does make me wonder about food. Do people ever bring food on the boat and have food as part of their ceremony?

Olivia Bareham: Yes. On the bigger vessels, they can have food. We do an early morning one. We leave at eight. So people are usually eating something little. So we have tea, coffee, oatmeal snacks on board because they celebrate with the food afterwards. It's only a two-hour journey, 2.5 hours sometimes. So we don't really have the time to do all of that. Well, I did go to one when they laid out a spread. I just noticed that people aren't so hungry on a boat there, that you want to look out at the ocean and some even feel a bit queasy, but I've never, it's not usually a problem, but something about going inside and eating food feels like contrary to what's happening here. This isn't true outside.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, that's true. And the food may not be as much of an asset on the boat as it might be later as part of like, the coming together afterwards in a restaurant or something. Do you ever have to postpone or delay because of weather or are you able to go out in various types of weather?

Olivia Bareham: Well, we've never had to postpone. Sometimes it's difficult to make sure the different elements fall in place. So sometimes I can give them two options. But we've never had to turn around for weather and it's rare here in California. I mean you get a storm what twice a year that's really bad?

Karen Wyatt: Is this something that can be planned in the moment? Like, like right after someone dies, if the family didn't have a plan in advance that they could call you and just make these arrangements or is it better if it's already been decided upon before the person even dies?

Olivia Bareham: No, it's actually the same and many people do call, you know, "My loved one's just died in the hospital. Can you help us? I know he'd like a sea burial," and we go from there, we'll pick them up from the hospital. Bring them back to our mortuary where we can shroud them in the sailcloth. Shroud there. If the family wants to witness, they can come to our chapel to have that ahead of time. Because once the body's on the boat, it's sealed in the shroud, so there's no witnessing on the boat and it just, it might take a while. So once the body is in a care facility, we're making all the arrangements, finding the vessel, finding the captain and the crew. That might take, you could take up to a week, sometimes a little more even, but the family doesn't mind.

Karen Wyatt: So then you store the body during that time. Well, okay, very interesting. And do you happen to have, sorry, I have all these questions. Do you happen to know? I don't know as far as certain religious traditions, like Jewish funeral customs or Islamic customs. Is that possible for those religions that have fairly strict rituals about how quickly the body has to be buried after death, does sea burial qualify? I don't, I don't know any of that.

Olivia Bareham: Well, that's a very good question. We've never been approached by. Um Well, that's not true. We did bury at sea, um she was actually a rabbi, but very alternative and she knew ahead of time. So she arranged it herself ahead of time. She wasn't so concerned with it being in the earth or that it goes into the earth within 24 hours. So if you hold steady to those parameters, then obviously a sea burial wouldn't work for you because it's not in the earth. But it is green and we don't usually get approached by families who have those religious ideals because they have their own community and their own very specific ways of doing that. The Taharah ritual for the Jewish people. But there's so many blended families now and they're not so strict anymore. We do Taharah rituals in the home with a, with a rabbi there. And they don't mind if the body doesn't go into the ground in 24 hours. So I guess it's just a very individual thing now.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And it's probably something that will continue to evolve and change perhaps in the future too, as the possibility of sea burial becomes more common and more

available to people. Well, I noticed on your website also that you offer some other services that seemed very unique to me. One being, ICU rituals. And so I was wondering what that's like.

Olivia Bareham: That is one of my offerings as a death midwife and a celebrant. So when a family knows ahead of time that this life support is going to be withdrawn and they know that it's going to happen at 11:00 tomorrow say, and what they're looking for is some way to mark this event, somebody to help hold that space for them while they witness their loved one dying. And it's a very special, intense, poignant, powerful moment there. So I will go and help support the family. I call it, I hold the rim around the death bed. I'll take either music or I take my singing bowl. I have little rituals that I can bring out to help the family be present to what's happening. I might, if the family wish it, close the chakras ahead of the time, explain to the one who's on life support what's happening so that nothing is sudden, and then we may sing together, do a little chant while the equipment is removed and then wait together while the person dies. It's beautiful, it's tender. And then once they have died then I usually ask if we can prepare the body there. So the family members will just wash the body, maybe if they brought clothing we can actually put clothing on the beloved right there on the hospital bed and then shroud very simply with the sheet that they're on. So it gives the family the opportunity to really tenderly say goodbye because once all of the equipment is removed and as long as the doctor in the ICU is willing to sign off on the death certificate, then it's not going to be a coroner case, of course. Then the family can do this lovely tender ritual. I usually take rosemary or some flowers to put it on top of the shroud once they've shrouded the body, anointed it, just a light bathing. But it's a way for the family to sort of put their fingerprints over it, to bless it, to say thank you, to close it up, to lay a beautiful flower on it, and then we wait for the transport to come to pick up to bring it to our care facility where it might be just a direct cremation after that. Or it could go for sea burial after that. But you know, very often families don't want a funeral service. They can't afford a funeral service. They would just like a cremation. So having the opportunity to do this beautiful tender ritual right there when the person dies is, it is a loving gesture and it's very healing for the family. Otherwise they have to leave the room and they see their loved ones and their mouth open and tubes down their throat. And there's this wrenching of this traumatic thing that just occurred. And by doing these closing rituals were putting their psyche back together in a way like yes, he died and we're going to stay here for another half an hour and honor his body.

Karen Wyatt: Have you found the hospital staff to be supportive of that kind of ritual?

Olivia Bareham: Yes, we've never had a problem. You know, they're a little surprised I have to say. They don't often see it but I think it touches them very often. You know they're curious about it, and I know that they like it because death is not really marked there in the ICU. They're used to you know, the guy coming up from down at the morgue with his gurney and it's bagged and taken away and they don't get to see the honoring of it like this. And I always say you know, we won't be long. And what's another 20 minutes. You know this family has just lost their beloved.

Karen Wyatt: I was thinking it might be rather healing for the ICU staff who, they just have to feel something when they're taking a person off life support and they themselves don't have the means of creating any sort of ritual around that. And the fact that you're there to hold space and creating a sacred space around that event. It just seems to me that that would really help them with their own distress about the death that's happening.

Olivia Bareham: Yes, I've heard that many times and you often see there's a tear in their eye as they're doing their paperwork or they're turning away but when we've completed it and then the gurney does arrive with the transport. I encouraged the family to follow the gurney to the elevator and it might be 10, 20 steps away. But even that is a way of saying goodbye, and I might ring my little bell as we're walking solemnly behind the gurney with the shroud and the flowers on the top right there in a hospital. It's unusual. Usually it's covered with a big heavy blanket and it's, it's tried to be the most insignificant thing that's happening right now. And we make it the most significant thing and it's what, another four minutes of the day. But as the gurneys now going and three or four family members are following and you hear the sound of the bell, all the nurses and doctors stop and they just take a moment and you can, you can feel how just marking the event like this is like, yes, somebody died. There's somebody's beloved just died and will stand at the elevator till it comes. The man goes inside with the body and then the family leave. It's like they've taken them all, every step of the way. They haven't just scattered and been dispersed out into the parking lot.

Karen Wyatt: They've accompanied their loved one on a part of the journey and it's in an area of the hospital that is so sterile and so mechanical and oftentimes cold, so to be able to transform it so simply into this sacred space, I don't know. I just think of working there and recognizing, oh, this room is also a sacred space where someone just died. And so to be able to, every time they walk in there to remember that, that this is a space where I'm, I'm caring for this life that may be slipping away right now and for the hospital staff to have that in mind.

Olivia Bareham: And you know, in hospitals, every time a baby is born in many hospitals, they play this chime through the intercom. I don't know if you've heard it, but everybody stops and another baby is born and everybody's like really like happy. And I was thinking, wouldn't it be lovely that every time somebody died in a hospital there was a different kind of chime or maybe something very similar. Um, that would cause people to stop and put their hand on their heart and go, oh, he's gone. It's like, it's just this revolving door. You know, we come in, we go out and I think the more we can acknowledge and just embrace the going out just as much as they're coming in, the healthier will be as a society.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, definitely. Well, oh, that's just so beautiful that you offer that. And, I'm happy that we're letting people know that you offer that as well in Los Angeles of course, but maybe there are other funeral homes or other death midwives and death doulas who would like to also offer that service wherever they live. And one more thing I wanted to ask you about that I saw on your website is that you also offer stillbirth

services and that's again, that's something I haven't seen very often. And so I wanted to ask you about that.

Olivia Bareham: Yes, stillbirth is much more common than I think many people realize and I can't imagine anything worse than a mother leaving the hospital knowing that her baby is still there in the refrigerator. Um, and as agonizing as that is. So what we do, if somebody knows that they're going to deliver still or we get the call that somebody's baby has died, then we'll offer them the opportunity to bring baby home where they can, in the privacy of their own home, bathe and dress him or her and lay them in a little Moses basket. Usually we put ice packs underneath and the family can just have this child at home with them because that's what they were expecting to do, was to bring the baby home. The mother especially, I think she needs this opportunity to integrate what just happened. And everybody who has experienced it, as you can imagine, having gone on with their life without these two or three days with their infant to maybe show the baby to siblings too. You think about it, a mother's milk takes three days to come down and when her arms are empty, there's a whole syndrome there with the empty arms, it's incredibly difficult for her to move forward. For all of the mothers who have had the opportunity to hold their babies, dress them, just look at them, keep picking them up, putting them back down. They all say by the second day, usually by the third day, absolutely. Their brain has organized the fact that their, all of their dreams and hopes are still. He or she is not going to breathe and cry and be the baby that they had hoped for. But having it there is so much more helpful than moms at home and her mind is imagining, my babies are laying still somewhere, it needs me, my arms need to hold it. We're sort of piecing that back together. And I've heard from people that they say, well that sounds horrible. Why would you want to hold your dead baby? However, the opposite is true. When the mother holds her baby, she can acknowledge that this actually happened. I gave birth and he died and after two or three days it's like, it's okay. I need to do the next step now which is to put this body either in the ground or in the crematory, and they willingly do it. It's astounding. And then you talk to a mother who didn't have that opportunity and you can tell years later there are still, you know tendrils of this pain that felt incomplete and the grief is still as raw as it was on the day. And yet these mothers who have had 1, 2 or 3 days at home with their babies don't report that. So I know there's a very important ritual that needs to occur for mothers and fathers who had just lost a child.

Karen Wyatt: As you mentioned, stillbirth is more common than any of us realize, because people don't talk about it very much or acknowledge it very often. And I think that's another thing for a mother who has experienced it, trying to return to her usual life and no one within her life knows how to address it. So everyone just ignores that, that the death happened. And there isn't this opportunity to have a resolution of some sort by holding the baby and by coming to terms with it.

Olivia Bareham: And especially when you go to a community of people who come to the home to support mom and dad, have just lost their child and they get to see baby laying there in the basket. And yes, it's devastating. And it's enormously tragic, but it's life. It's what happened. It's real. And ultimately everybody who comes is so touched, their hearts crack open, they don't break, they just crack open and more love flows through them. So

this baby's life actually means something because it transformed people. They were, they could feel the depth of the human love in a way that they might not have been able to do had they not been invited to a home where the infant laid. It is devastating. And yet there's a collision of this. It's beauty. It's tender. It's raw, it's real, it's precious life.

Karen Wyatt: Wow. I admire you so much for being able to be there and hold space in these really challenging situations. Death itself is always challenging. But these are special circumstances and people are so lucky to have someone like you there to help them, just to help them create rituals that will help them move into their grieving process. And it's just very beautiful. But I admire you so much that you're able to offer that.

Olivia Bareham: Thank you, and I love to teach it now. And of course the art of death midwifery includes sharing these rituals and practices that I've been doing for years so that hopefully and now we can do it on zoom, that people all over the world will be able to open to offer their community these new rituals and they're not new. And you don't have to be a funeral home to do a farewell ritual in the ICU or to help mom bathe, anoint, and dress her infant. Even if she wants to just do it in the hospital and not bring it all the way home. You know, she can be in such a state of shock. She doesn't really know what to do. But with a guide, a death midwife standing there with her holding that space. You could just ask for three or four extra hours in the hospital and a lot can be done. So I love teaching it now because I feel like it's rippling out there into the world.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. So and let's talk about the classes that you offer because I know that you mentioned the art of death midwifery and what other trainings do you offer?

Olivia Bareham: So the other death midwifery is a four level training. Each level is a three-day weekend and I keep it live in person or live on zoom. And the first level is "Enter the Grave," which is a deep personal dive into what it means to die. Why are we here? Why am I so afraid of it? How can I ease into my dying and start to wear it like I do? That's Enter the Grave. So we go into that, into our fears and our beliefs. Level two is "Conscious Dying" and that is more the work of the death doula, how to support another through a conscious dying journey. How to put your things in order to create a legacy project, heal relationships. There's physician aid in dying, how to support a family with somebody who's just died by suicide. That's level two. Level three is "After the Last Breath," and that's everything I've been doing. I'm talking about here from, after the last breath until burial or cremation including sea burials, green burials, home funerals. Everything there is to know about a dead body is level three. And then level four is the funeral celebrant training. I call it the "Life Celebration." And that's how to pull the thread of somebody's unique life and create a beautiful service ceremony around that so that everybody who comes to celebrate the person who just died leaves feeling like they inherited a little bit of the decedent into their life. So, there's a real, it's a skill to it. And now a lot of funerals happen on zoom because of Covid. So the zoom funerals, home funerals, funeral services that you might do at the crematory for a witness cremation burial service. That's a different ceremony. A sea burial service, a different ceremony. So that's level four and the other course is the death doula training, which is just level one and two of the Art of Death Midwifery. I tend to keep the doula and the midwife

separate. Just because from my own personal journey, the death midwife feels a little more involved because it goes all the way to the burial or cremation and I think death doula tradition is more of supporting the loved ones through their dying journey.

Karen Wyatt: And your training for death doulas is a certified training. They can get a certificate for completing the training?

Olivia Bareham: Both of them, they get a certificate of completion for death midwifery or death doula training. I'm actually doing one in person soon. We'll come back in person now that I do it here in Los Angeles and it's very intimate and we have just such an incredible connection with one another. I've missed that. But they did transfer seamlessly onto the zoom format.

Karen Wyatt: It's amazing all of us learned how to use zoom over the last two years. It turns out to be a helpful tool in lots of situations. So it's nice to have it. But I'm sure the in person meetings will be beautiful to be back to those again. So how can listeners find out more about all of your services? The trainings, the burials of any sort?

Olivia Bareham: Sacredcrossings.com has both the institute and you can go directly to the funeral home from there. Sacred Crossings funeral home is its own website and its own entity. So there's the institute and the funeral home, but you can find them both under sacredcrossings.com. The sea burials and the green burials. That's all part of the funeral home. Whereas the teachings, the death doula and the death midwife is part of the institute.

Karen Wyatt: So you're very busy maintaining both of those, which I'm sure are full time jobs.

Olivia Bareham: Yes, I bit off sometimes I think more than I could chew, but I've got some wonderful help now. So I think it's all going to be fine.

Karen Wyatt: Well, it's really exciting. I'm just glad to hear how you have grown and expanded these services that you're offering and you offer it with such grace and beauty and just in your presence, even talking with you and interviewing you, I know that everything you offer has to have that same feeling of your presence and your intention and it's, it's very lovely. So I want to thank you so much.

Olivia Bareham: Oh, thank you, Karen. Yeah, it's really, I want to maintain the sacred. That's why it's Sacred Crossings. This is sacred work. The deathbed is sacred. This liminal space is, is an opportunity for profound connectivity both to ourselves and to others and I'm the one who gets the benefit of, every time I'm present to a family who's open in their grief and looking for conscious alternative ways to do this, which are usually the families that reach out to us. So I just, I am fulfilled and filled up every time. So it's really an honor and thank you Karen for your continuing, reaching out and finding us and talking to us and letting us share what we do and increasing awareness. It's, it's truly lovely. Thank you.

Karen Wyatt: Well, thank you, I'm glad that you're here doing what you do so that I have someone to talk to and have these conversations with. So, we support one another in that way and I'm happy to be part of this community along with you. Well, it's been lovely to talk with you and thank you again.

Olivia Bareham: Thank you and I look forward to listening to more of your guests on your beautiful podcast and hopefully we'll get to see one another in person sometime once again.

Karen Wyatt: I hope so. That would be fun.

Karen Wyatt: I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Olivia Bareham. I was really interested to learn more about full body burial at sea and very touched to learn about the rituals Olivia does with families in the ICU and also parents who have lost a child at birth. Those really got to me and touched me in my heart. But I feel like these are such important services to offer. I'm so grateful that Olivia is there, and comfortable and happy and willing to be there for these families. I hope more of you are interested in serving in that way as well. So I'm glad now you know about the kind of training that Olivia offers in case you would like to study her death midwifery course and take on some of these challenging but profound acts of service for people who are experiencing the death of a loved one. So if you enjoy this content that I create here, be sure to share it with other people, let them know about the podcast, show them how to subscribe or follow and make sure you've subscribed on whatever platform you happen to listen to podcasts. Also, it's really helpful if you're so inclined if you leave a rating and review for the podcast. I'll be back next week with another interview for you. And until then remember that we're here for love. So face your fear, be ready for whatever life brings you next and love each and every moment of your precious life. Bye bye.