

A deep green burial



David Keith Orton
January 6th, 1934 – May 12th, 2011

(This is an account of David's burial for those who could not attend. It was written by Helga Hoffmann-Orton, with input from Karen Orton, Billy MacDonald and Mark Brennan.)

David was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer on March 3rd, 2011, after going to the doctor because of jaundice. He was told the cancer was at an advanced stage, and that there was no hope of recovery. David chose not to have chemotherapy or other life-prolonging therapies, and only reluctantly accepted palliative measures, like an external drain to help relieve the jaundice and associated symptoms, such as severe itchiness. He worried that he might be compromising his principles by accepting any interventions. David died at home, in his sleep, in the early morning of Thursday, May 12th, 2011. He died as he lived, with great dignity.

During his illness we had some discussions about the funeral arrangements. Billy MacDonald, a close friend, volunteered to help carry out David's wish – to be buried in the forest on our land. David wanted everything to be as simple as possible: a very short obituary notice, only including his e-mail sign-off "For the Earth"; no major memorial event; and he even had to be convinced that a box was needed to take him to the gravesite, which Billy then built from donated red spruce wood.

Together Billy, Mark Brennan (another good friend of ours) and I, went to the area where David wanted to be buried (near a large rock he called "Thinker's Rock" next to a wildlife pond). We chose a spot in a forested area on top of a hill, overlooking the wildlife pond, with the Cobequid Hills in the distance – a beautiful and peaceful resting place. (Ironically, on clear days a number of wind turbines are visible. David thought of them as a light green solution to excessive energy consumption and as a symbol of the increasing industrial contamination of wild places.) Billy and Mark prepared the gravesite, and David was relieved that the arrangements worked out.

What we had not sorted out at that point, was whether the burial on our land was legal. David wanted it to be done either way, even if it meant civil disobedience and trouble with the authorities. We had to make many inquiries, going through the bureaucracy, as the situation was so unusual that nobody seemed to know the answer. Funeral homes did not help, as they would not benefit financially. Through joint efforts of many people, and assistance of a friend and retired lawyer Bernadette Romanowsky, we sorted out the paperwork (the laws, by-laws, the death certificate, the burial permit, etc.) that would be needed and how to get it. David made us promise

that if we encountered obstacles, we should carry out civil disobedience and bury him in the chosen spot, even without official approval. We should be prepared to fight David's fight, even after his death!

After David died on Thursday morning, Billy and Mark came to our house. We wrote up the obituary notice, trying to carry out David's wish of simplicity, but also wanting to relay some of what David had meant for us and the Earth. We decided that, to allow family and friends the time to congregate, the funeral would be held on Sunday, May 15th.

The day of the burial was a misty, cool spring day. Over 30 people – family, friends and neighbours – gathered, all wearing rubber boots, because the path to the gravesite, some 600 metres (approx. 600 yards) from the house, was very wet and muddy.

Billy led the burial ceremony. Before we set off on the procession, he asked people not to speak and to walk in silence. David's body was carried in the box by six people, alternating with others. We walked by the garden, where David enjoyed spending so much time. (He was always proud to be one of the first people in the area to plant his garden in the spring. We usually started eating a salad from the garden in late May.) Then we went past the pond, where we swim in the summer. (David always was the first in the spring and the last in the fall to go for a dip. It was a big relief, to have a swim to cool down on hot summer days.) There were frequent stops for rest, and to absorb the beauty of nature and listen to the bird songs. A Northern Harrier, which returns to nest every year in our marsh, and which David loved to see, soared through the sky overhead as we walked into the forest.

Physically, it was a struggle to carry David's body to the gravesite. It was hard work, like the struggle for the Earth. Also, there was the overwhelming presence of nature, everything from the wind in the trees to the spring bird songs, and this was only apparent because of the silence. It was so much about nature awareness, or the lack of it in society, as we progressed up the hill.



At the gravesite, we formed a circle. Billy asked people if they wanted to say something about David. Many came forward and three poems were read. (See below for the text of the poems) I read "For the Warrior", a poem which David had on the door to his 'office', and which he felt reflected his own sentiment about why he kept struggling. Britt Roscoe read "The Cathedral", written by forestry activist Jeremy Frith from Cape Breton, who had died a few years ago. Mark read a poem recently written by Jim Drescher for David, which David had enjoyed reading when he still felt fairly well. David Blackwell also read a beautiful Gaelic nature prayer near the end of the ceremony. David really liked this type of poetry and would have been moved by the poems and by the comments people made.

People spoke about how David had helped them in their environmental struggles and in their personal evolution to deepen their relationship with nature. They said that David had always raised the bar through his own dedication. He tended to avoid small talk and had the ability to go straight to the heart of any matter in his interactions with others. A woodlot owner said that David had been far ahead of others in his thinking on forestry issues, and that, despite the fact that they initially saw his views as very radical, they now think, "Yes, he was right back then!" Hearing this would have made David very happy. People also spoke of how David had made them think uncomfortably hard and how he criticized shallow practices; and that throughout David's life, he was not afraid to present unpopular views, even when mainstream environmentalists ostracized him. David's close friends and family spoke of how many people did not see his vulnerable side – his humour, his laughter and the kindness, generosity and huge amount of love that he shared with family and friends – this was another side of David which he often did not show to the outside world.

After all who wanted to had spoken, and after a few minutes of silence, the box was lowered into the ground and people were asked to symbolically put a stone or some dirt on the box. While this was being done, Billy played his flute, while sitting on "Thinker's Rock" next to the wildlife pond. David had always loved to hear Billy play the flute, and had asked that Billy play at his burial. Then, with the assistance of the mourners, the grave was filled in and we quietly walked back to the house.

At the house, Billy's partner, Nova Poirier, had very generously set up lunch for the guests. Everyone spent time talking to each other about David and looking at pictures of him with his family and friends, carrying out his favourite activities – walking in the woods, kayaking, working in the garden, camping, as well as attending protests and speaking at meetings. People could also see many of the supportive e-mail messages David had received since falling ill, in a collection entitled "*Dear David... Messages to David upon learning of the cancer*". In the background, we played a compilation of music David enjoyed, including old favourites like Woody Guthrie, Phil Ochs, Paul Robeson, Bob Dylan, Buffy Saint Marie, Johnny Cash and June Carter, as well as Bruce Springsteen, the McGarrigle Sisters and Patsy Cline, and more recent additions to his music library, like Serena Ryder, Tom Morello and Eliza Gilkyson.

The burial ceremony and afternoon gathering was a heart-wrenching, sorrowful event, but I feel that David would have been very moved by it. As we could see from the many, many messages which David received by e-mail during his illness, or which we received after his death, David's influence was truly worldwide, as well as in his local community. His deep green burial ceremony was a reflection of his deep green beliefs. It was a moving tribute to a man who devoted his life to fighting for the Earth and all living beings.

May 19th, 2011

Poems read at David's funeral

For the Warriors

You've got to want to fight,
the odds are so overwhelming:
they always have more money, more force,
(Remember, it's force and not power they have more of)
more weapons and the means to use them,

more offices, typewriters, telephones, xerox machines,
secretaries to diligently type and mail memos,
men to deliver the charges,
all the many ways of keeping us busy,
distracting us from the work.

The work, the work...

You've got to want to fight,
want to do it from some place deep, deep, within,
deeper than the need to take vacations,
grow gardens, play with the children,
deeper than anything else,
from someplace deep enough
where truth is what matters,
where the truth of justice and freedom
is the only, natural truth,
as essential and unquestionable
as breath, or seasons,
or the rock at the center of Earth.
And this truth, and its sister the love of it,
makes you want to fight.

You've got to want to fight,
facing the terrible truths of oppression,
the deadly and violent acts
can grind you down, bleed you slowly.
If you're not careful.
The knowing can be a butcher knife in the guts
that slashes and twists,
or it can be a bitter poison dripping in the blood
like rust,
or, of you're lucky,
maybe it will only be
tired lines around the eyes and an occasional
tightening in the chest - maybe only that.

But whatever else, the knowing has got to make
you want to fight,
it's got to make
you want to fight enough
to know more:
to know that what is worth fighting for is
what lasts - grass, wind, flowing water, mountains;
to know that it will endure longer than
our own lives, to know that it is for what is
all around and through us, through our hands
and the work of our hands,
through our bodies, greater than any one of us.

Knowing that,
knowing that makes you not fear
their threats, their violence, their fear,
it makes you want to fight,
truthfully, honestly,
as hard as you've ever done anything,
because you want to,

you need to.
Like wanting to sink into the sweet earth
after a long day,
like wanting to linger in the blessedness of dreams,
like wanting to wake to clear dawn,
like wanting to rise and work through the sun until the evening star
and maybe past,
first you've got to want to,
you've got to want to fight.

Ellen Klaver
Boulder
Earth First! Journal, February 2nd, 1986

My Cathedral

My cathedral is the forest,
The pews are mossy banks;
There a scarlet crested parson,
Drums insistently his thanks.
I have no need of temples
Carved in stone by hands of man,
My cathedral is the forest,
My heaven is the land.

My altar is a meadow
Thick carpeted with grass;
Its roof the vault of heaven,
Each day a sacred mass.
And I hear the feathered choir,
Bees and crickets thrum the time,
There's no hymn can take me higher
And no ritual more sublime.

I care nothing for religion,
Nor require a builded hall
To sing paens to creation
And give praises to the ALL.
When I die I'll make no journey
To another place above,
But my bones will rot in glory,
And my cells return to Love.

In my temple there's no worship
To a goddess or a god;
Trees are one, both male and female,
There's no gender in the sod;
While the symphony of seedling
Brings about all living things,
And the music of creation
In every atom sings.

I look about in wonder
As I walk those pillared aisles,

At the dapple-down of sunbeams
That light leaflitter tiles.
I'm in awe of the mosaics,
Of the plush and verdant green,
And the thought of its destruction
Strikes as nothing but profane.

But we're ruining the temple,
Carving up its living flesh;
Its walls are torn asunder
In the name of corporate cash.
I beg you please rebuild it,
Let the forest stand up tall;
It was put on earth for living,
For the good of one and ALL.

Jeremy Frith

Jim Drescher's poem for David

Firey wrath in the face of ecological injustice,
inseparable from penetrating insight.
Nothing obscures a beating warm heart.
Gentleness has been your most powerful weapon.

Your wrathful compassion,
your tender sensitivity to friends,
your vulnerable longing for a just world,
all these have magnetized beneficial activity.

Your life has been worthwhile,
rich and generous.
Your legacy holds surprises
not yet seen.

Your work is almost finished.
It has been good work.
You can rest now.
Your comrades will carry on.

With love from Windhorse Jim

Gaelic Prayer

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.

Adapted from Gaelic Runes

Some links

One of David's friends, Mark Brennan, made a recording of the morning sounds at our place. I think it is a moving tribute to David and to our place, which David called a paradise. See "For the Earth, Morning Chorus at David's" at: <http://soundcloud.com/wildearthvoices/morning-chorus-at-davids>.

There is an article on David "Noted environmental activist, David Orton, dies at 77: Orton espoused deep ecology and left biocentrism" at <http://www.thecoast.ca/RealityBites/archives/2011/05/14/noted-environmental-activist-david-orton-dies-at-77>

We started a photo album of David at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/greenweb/> It is a work in progress.

Sharon Labchuk took some photos at the burial, which show the lovely spot the gravesite is at. See <http://www.flickr.com/photos/camillelabchuk/sets/72157626615300481/with/5729429552/>

There is a tribute to David on the Friends of Redtail site at <http://www.friendsofredtail.ca/>

There is a Wikipedia entry on David at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Orton_%28deep_ecology%29

The obituary is now posted on the blog at <http://deepgreenweb.blogspot.com/2011/05/for-earth-david-orton-1934-2011.html> and on our web site at http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/David_Keith_Orton.pdf

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http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/A_deep_green_burial.pdf