

These People Are Transforming What Happens After You Die

Meet the morticians offering compassionate practices for dealing with death.



A green (or “natural”) burial eschews caskets, vaults, and toxic embalming fluids for biodegradable materials: a muslin shroud, a cardboard casket, a quilt. Weeks later, all but shroud and skeleton will have decomposed.

Photo by Mathew MacQuarrie on Unsplash.



Sammi-Jo Lee posted Nov 28, 2017

Not everyone likes talking about the death of a loved one. A few people in the funeral industry have taken it upon themselves to make those uncomfortable conversations easier and to offer more options for making those difficult decisions at the end of life.

Caitlin Doughty

Let's talk openly about death

Americans have been cut off from powerful rituals because they don't interact with death. Caitlin Doughty seeks to change that. "Sitting with the body and digging the grave by hand, and standing there pushing the button for the cremation to start," she says. These, and other alternatives, are options at her nonprofit funeral home, Undertaking LA, in Los Angeles.

Doughty's own path to death acceptance took her from macabre child to medieval history student to hauling bodies as a crematory operator. She answers awkward death questions in her funny and honest "Ask a Mortician" web series, and she founded The Order of the Good Death collective and the Death Salon conferences to spread the word on alternatives to the mainstream funeral industry.

It's all about creating a "death positive" culture, she says.

"What it means is that it's okay to have this real interest in your mortality, and it's not morbid or weird to feel that way," she says.

It also means becoming educated about death care options, deciding for yourself what "dignified" means, and having knowledgeable people in our communities to take care of bodies.

Brian Flowers

Where cemeterians and conservationists align

In 2009, when Brian Flowers founded The Meadow Natural Burial Ground in Ferndale, Washington, it was one of only a dozen green burial grounds in the country. Undaunted by the lack of how-to resources, he approached Moles Farewell Tributes, a family-owned funeral home, about dedicating part of its cemetery grounds for green burials.

Moles later hired him as their green-burial coordinator. As former president of the Green Burial Council, Flowers educated other funeral professionals and land trust organizations on how to offer certified green burials, which increase native plant diversity in the burial ground.

"Green burial has an appeal to something pretty essential in our humanity," Flowers says.



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Flowers wants his body naturally buried when he dies. And he’s including a ritual for his living self: “I want to make my own casket, and keep it in my environment as a meditation of my own mortality,” he says.

Nora Menkin

Giving death care back to the people

What if the high cost of dying could be taken down with an alternative business model?

The Co-op Funeral Home of People’s Memorial in Seattle is one of the only nonprofit, member-owned cooperative funeral homes in the U.S., and anyone can join. Members of the People’s Memorial Association own the co-op, paying a \$50 joining fee to access discounted, transparent pricing for traditional and green burials, carbon-offset cremations, and other services.



“We don’t tell people what they need,” says Nora Menkin, the co-op’s managing funeral director. “We provide them with their options so that they can come at making these decisions from an educated place.”

She is a founding member of the watchdog Funeral Consumers Alliance, an association that has been working to ban predatory practices and update outdated and culturally discriminatory laws. It also offers popular end-of-life planning workshops to help members write wills and designate powers of attorney.

For Menkin, the daughter of a hospice physician whose house calls were sometimes her playdates, death was never an uncomfortable subject. At the co-op, she sees how much it means to families to be able to afford and choose their own approach to funerals. “That’s what keeps me going,” she says.

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