

# 'Corporatization' of funeral industry drives quest for alternatives

## People are beginning to question North America's 'outsourcing' of funerals and burials

By Mary O'Connell, [CBC News](#) Posted: May 07, 2014 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: May 07, 2014 7:47 AM ET

Twenty strangers sit at tables scattered throughout the first floor of a Victorian house. They drink tea and eat cake. Some are laughing, a few wipe away tears. All are intensely engaged in conversation.

Welcome to the Death Café.

The concept originated with Swiss sociologist Bernard Krettaz several years ago. He wanted to liberate death from what he called, “its tyrannical secrecy.”

- [Listen: Death Becomes Us, part 1](#)

Now the Death Café has swept through Europe and North America. It is a way for people to talk about their fear of death, about the will they can't make, about the grandmother they miss, about the child they had to bury.

## Death Becomes Us

People are changing the way we deal with death: they're taking charge of the rites and rituals, and not leaving it to multinational funeral home corporations. They're also saving themselves lots of money in the process. Listen to part two of Mary O'Connell's audio documentary series, Death Becomes Us, on CBC radio's Ideas at 9 p.m. Eastern on May 7, or on the [Ideas](#) website.

Like the sun, we can't bear to look at death but it seems we are finally dying to talk about it – and it's just one of the changes affecting modern traditions around funerals and mourning in western society.

Mortuary customs are among the most entrenched in our culture, and they tell us a lot about ourselves. A century ago death was viewed as inevitable – and was much more personal. Families washed and dressed the bodies of their loved ones, the local carpenter often built the simple pine box, and burial took place at the church cemetery.

By the 1920s, mortuary customs had begun to shift dramatically. Across Canada and the U.S., death became outsourced.

Now people are beginning to question that shift.

## Corporatization

One of the reasons for the public pushback is that the growth of the funeral industry has driven up the costs of dying.

Today, unlike many parts of the world, Canadians and Americans have fuelled a multibillion-dollar funeral industry where high-priced goods and services range from chemical embalming and fancy caskets, to burial vaults and expensive cremation urns.

And as death has become corporatized, it has opened the door to questionable practises, as cases in [Beausejour](#), [Lethbridge](#), and [Vancouver](#) indicate. Some of the cases involve fraud charges related to misusing money from prepaid funerals and substituting cheaper caskets for more expensive ones. Consumer advocates advise pre-plan, don't pre-pay.

And read the fine print. When Jennie Morrow of Cape St. Mary's, N.S., wanted to bury her 89 year old mother, the funeral home (part of a major chain) told her, "we don't sell funerals, we sell packages." She was told the package would cost \$10,000 but Morrow didn't get a rundown of all the items she was paying for.

When the bill arrived in the mail a few days later, she says it included \$375 for a black box that contained a few items including thank you cards and a coffee mug with her mother's photo glued to it. There was also a \$499 charge for an on-line obituary, \$1,800 for professional services that were not itemized, and \$199 for a compassion help-line she says she was never given the number for.

Morrow eventually negotiated a lower sum, but she advises caution when buying a funeral package. "They talk to you in their soft, compassionate voices but they are dealing with grieving, vulnerable people."

## Environment

The environmental costs of the modern funeral industry are alarming too.

In North America, embalming has been sold by an industry that declares it preserves the body and protects public health. Yet the threat to public health idea was dismissed by scientists and health agencies decades ago.

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Consumer advocate Josh Slocum says, "you're more likely to pick up something from the guy coughing beside you on the bus than holding the

hand of your dead Uncle Jack.”

Even so, this declaration remains on funeral company websites.

And while more of us recycle, drive a hybrid and become vegetarian, how we pass on - and what we pass on in - is often not carefully considered. For example, a typical 10-acre cemetery today contains enough formaldehyde and other solvents to fill a swimming pool. These chemicals can leach into soil and groundwater.

The concrete used to construct burial vaults in North America in one year is enough to [build an 850 kilometre highway](#) equivalent to driving from Toronto to Quebec City.

Casket manufacturers in the U.S. are on the Environmental Protection Agency's list of the top 50 hazardous material waste producers.

What may be surprising to some is that cremation is not much more environmentally friendly. It takes a lot of energy to reach the required 1,000 degrees Celsius to cremate a body. Never mind the toxins that are released from vaporized mercury fillings and hip implants.

In the U.K. crematoria must abide by new regulations that force cremators to outfit their facilities with mercury filters that reduce emissions. No such regulations exist in Canada.

## Seeking alternatives

Small wonder, then, that some argue the way we die should be changing – in ways that incorporate the environmental, the economical, the psychological and the spiritual.

Death Cafes are just part of a new societal shift that is opening a window into death, by removing the stigma and taboo of our mortal destiny. And nowhere is this more obvious than inside the new and burgeoning “home funeral movement,” or as some call it, DIY funerals.

Led by “death midwives” and “home funeral guides,” it's a big move away from the corporatization of death. Some say it's a natural extension of the home birth movement that began 50 years ago. Those involved will ask you:

- Did you know that embalming is not necessary?
- Did you know that you can hire a service to transport the body of a loved one back to the house for a home funeral?
- Did you know you can wash and dress the body?

A death midwife can help create an intimate family-based funeral, whether it's at a residence or in a funeral home.

Rebecca Daum, a death midwife in Hamilton, helped a family with their dying 12-year-old son. He wanted to experience smoking a cigar, taking a shot of brandy and a trip in an RV before he died. His final wish was to have his entire school, outside, holding signs and waving as the hearse drove by.

“It was a beautiful close to a very short life”, Daum says.

Death doulas are trying to make death a more “real experience,” but many are not aware of the services they offer. California-based Jerrigrace Lyons has helped hundreds of families conduct funerals at home, but she admits, “When I tell people I’m a death doula, people will often respond, ‘Oh, that’s sweet, a doula for the deaf.’”

Meanwhile, in the U.S., death midwives and home funeral guides are facing increasing opposition from the funeral industry. In Oregon, for instance, there have been attempts to outlaw them. In Canada, they are generally working quietly - under the radar.

Another aspect of the new death movement is “green burials,” also called “natural burials.” The idea is we become compost and nourish the planet. Psychologist Robert Jay Lifton calls it “symbolic immortality.”

This idea has taken off in Europe, specifically the U.K. There are more than 240 sites in England - woodlands and meadows - where people can be buried in a shroud or cardboard box. Formaldehyde is banned. There are no markers or flowers.

This new form of burial is also an option for a growing number of people who cannot afford to die and have a modern burial. Hannah Rumble, Anthropology professor at the University of Aberdeen, has researched “funeral poverty” and calls it “a “significant problem that is not being talked about.”

When you look at the increasing number of boomers facing death, the continuing decline in family income, and then add climate change to the mix, “green burial” is likely a growth industry, proponents say.

The number of green burial sites in the U.S. is increasing. However, in Canada there is not one green burial site. There are two hybrids, one in Ontario and the other in B.C. - traditional cemeteries that have set aside a little land for green burials.

Still, while Canada has been generally slower to accept change than some western countries, modern customs around death are indeed beginning to change. Death is being de-corporatized. Everywhere you look, there are new practices and expressions of death, whether it’s using a death midwife or having a green burial, creating a death mask, writing a journal to be left for the grandchildren.

All are ways to lift the veil of secrecy around our mortality.

No matter how people choose to deal with death, on a spiritual level, Toronto funeral director and student midwife Kory McGrath believes we must

change the way we care for the dead.

“Historically we all cared for our own – how have we lost our way?” McGrath says. “When our loved ones go from the hospital to the morgue to the funeral home, they disappear – and it’s important for our humanity to rediscover this sacred rite of passage in ways that each person is comfortable with and is comforted by.”