For Grief: A photographic social documentary of funeral directors and their experiences

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Abstract

In many developed countries, death and funerals are often considered a taboo subject which people avoid talking about. "Death" and "dead" are often rephrased as "loss", "gone" or "passed away", and "the deceased" or "remains" are used instead of "dead body" and "corpse". The concept of death is carefully sanitised in our society and we often deny death. This denial can lead to stigmatisation of people who work in the funeral industry because they handle dead bodies and appear to profit from death and grief. Utilising digital still-photography and video interviews, a qualitative photographic field study was conducted with three funeral directors in Queensland, Australia in 2013. The project undertook an investigation of their work and private time to determine whether funeral directors are stigmatised in today's sanitised society. The research showed that the funeral directors have experienced stigmatisation directly related to their occupation, however this stigma has waned as their role in the industry becomes established. The project revealed that over time, this stigma becomes less concerning to Funeral Directors who instead focus on the process of burial and funerary arrangements. Interviews with Funeral Directors reveal rarely discussed side-effects of dealing with their own grief affected by depressing facts of death.

Keywords

photography, documentary, death, denial of death, funeral, taboo, stigma

Introduction

My father used to own a house in Odawara, Japan. Odawara is a small fishing village under Odawara Castle. It is only a couple hours away from central Tokyo, with a beautiful tiny beach which only locals visit. The old two storey house my father used to own was originally a traditional restaurant for Japanese soba noodles, and it came with a deep well which produces beautiful spring water. My father lived upstairs in that house and I stayed there several times to spend some time with my family. Downstairs, which used to be a restaurant, was disused for a while after he purchased it. One day I went to the house to stay with my father and sister when my father explained to me that he was now leasing out downstairs—it was now occupied by a funeral home. He said to me, as if it were nothing really important, "It seems that they are quite good tenants with a stable business, if you don't mind the fact that they keep dead bodies there for vigils sometimes." I remember I felt a little awkward about sleeping that night in the house, knowing there might be a dead body downstairs.

I have never been ashamed that one of my father's houses is a funeral home; however, I have never been proud of it, either. I believe I have never mentioned it to my friends. A long time ago when we were dating, I told my future husband about this house, but I was very careful with the manner in which I spoke. I think I tried to talk to him as if this were nothing important and nothing unusual, the same way my father did for me. This was the very beginning of my journey. I started wondering, “Why did I felt awkward about sleeping in the presence of a dead body downstairs?” “What is this, even though we all die one day?”

Research Question and Methodology

I conducted a photographic social documentary research combined with video interviews in 2013. This study reflects on one year of qualitative fieldwork. Three funeral directors from the Gold Coast, Burpengary and Stapylton agreed to participate, and I followed their work and their private lives.

This qualitative field research was aimed at finding out whether funeral directors are stigmatised in our sanitised society. Evidence of the taboos associated with death, along with the notion of denial of death in society is also investigated in order to broadly understand the issue. In construction of the research question for this study, firstly I investigate whether society is in denial regarding the taboo subject of death and funerals. Secondly, I consider how these perceptions influence the public image of funeral directors.

Part 1: Denial of Death in Society

Denial of death and death study

In most societies, as it is in Japan and Australia, death and funerals are often considered a taboo subject which people avoid talking about. "Death" and "dead" are often rephrased as "loss", "gone" or "passed away", and the words "the deceased" or "remains" are used instead of "dead body" and "corpse". However, most people do not even realise how death, as a concept, has been sanitised, and this includes a widespread denial of death. It seems like our society is sanitised quite well, and we don’t have many opportunities to see death. Many of us do not die at home any more, and family members do not have to clean the dead body themselves and dig the grave like people used to in the past. This might lead to stigmatisation of people who work in the funeral industry because they are willing to handle taboos, dead bodies, and appear to profit from death and grief.

Traditionally, death was not suppressed or denied in our history. Philippe Aries wrote his book The Hour of our death in 1977. He explains that death used to be a more frequent event in history. People died with diseases more often and violence was less controlled. People were familiar with the face of death, and less sensitive about it (1977:28). Death was once tame, and also a social event for the whole community (1977: 559).

However, Ernest Becker (1973) states in his book Denial of Death that "Here we introduce directly one of the great rediscoveries of modern thought: that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death (1973: 11)". This fear of death leads to denial of death in many developed countries and exists in following contexts.

1) Decline of religious influence and rise of individualism

Geoffrey Gorer (1955:51) and Ernest Becker (1973:07) state that influence of religious belief is less prominent in contemporary society, and the belief in life after death does not relieve the fear of death enough in these times. The rise of individualism in the twentieth century also contributed to isolate death from the community.

2) Institutional death

In traditional society, people died at home and family members cleaned the body and dug a hole. Norbert Elias (2001:45-47) points out that a healthier environment and medical improvement contributed to people living longer, therefore the idea of death became distant. Aries (1977:570) also explains that death is now managed by medical institutions and funeral homes, and the duty of family members has become less of a burden. These shifts of society have made death a relatively uncommon event.

Denying Denial of Death

However, some sociologists argue whether denial of death exists in society or not.

Allan Kellhear begins chapter 3 of his book, Social History of Dying as: “What produces more activity from a person: anticipation or ignorance? What produces greater anxiety in a person: anticipation or denial and ignorance? (2007:47)”.

He also states “death motivates and activates people like little else because historically biological death has been viewed as no death at all, but rather; the most complicated and challenging part of living (2007: 47)”.

He claims that when we acknowledge that death is unavoidable, we might also have "the desire to learn more about it; the desire to prepare for it; and the desire to plan around it".

Kellhear also explains there is no denial of death in society, using these popular materials often used as indications of humanisation of dead corpses and denying death.

Coffin: It may look like furniture rather than a disposal box, however, Kellehear states that this is for a practical reason, the same as ‘ornamentalising’ or ‘beautifying’ the dusty playgrounds, old cars or buildings more palatable or acceptable (1984:718).

Embalming: “This ‘restorative art’ has been cited as being responsible for the practice of creating life-like corpses, another example of death denial. However, this is structurally a carry over, a logical continuation, of the cosmetic industry for the living. The difference does not even lie any more in the surgical intervention of the cosmetic industry for the living(1984:718).” It is just the fashion option, and an affirmation of economic life.

Funeral flowers and wreaths: “The giving of flowers at funerals was a Middle-Age custom revived in the Victorian Period and has persisted until today as a tribute (1984:719).” Kellhear insists that it is just a custom of gift giving, replacing words of comfort, friendship, or alliance.

Unseen Images

During the field research on funeral directors in 2013, I witnessed the behind the scenes activities of funeral homes. Some of them shocked me, and some also made me wonder why we are not familiar with these images, if there is no denial of death in society. I took a picture of garbage bin at crematorium (Figure 1). I was shocked to see some material which used to be a part of someone’s body displaced in the garbage bin. Logically, those metal parts cannot be a part of our ashes and it makes sense that these wastes are disposed of in the bin. However, I felt very uncomfortable seeing this. It reminded me of the remains of Auschwitz victims during Nazi era. Everyone of us, whoever it is, ends up in a same way when it comes to death. This idea made me feel uneasy.

Another day, I attended the funeral and burial ceremony one day with the permission of all the funeral attendants. I captured a few shots and started to wonder around to take more images of the cemetery when it finished. After all the attendants left, a few men and a bobcat approached the burial site, and started working there (Figure 2). There was no sad dramatised music or the solemn rituals. This was the ‘real burial’ after all the ceremonies were conducted in a calm beautiful manner.

Again, it is logical to think about using heavy machinery to bury the body. However, I was shocked to witness this as I had never seen this before, and realised how much of the ‘real’ facts of burial are carefully sanitised.

I also captured the storage room at one of the funeral homes (Figure 3). Among all the regular paper work, containers of ashes were also stored very neatly. I felt awkward to see those ordinary objects which we see used in everyday businesses, sitting together with containers of ashes. Those containers were labelled with the names and addresses of

Figure 1: After the cremation

Figure 2: Real Burial

the deceased. There was one container with the hand written note that said 'not paid'.

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The process of cremation is not widely known, either. This is

Figure 3: Ashes on Shelves

the cremator with the front door opened for me in order to observe inside (Figure 4). This is normally shut completely during the process. The cremators are all controlled by computers these days. Temperature, oxygen levels, and length of cremation are all well managed (Figure 5). After the cremation process is complete, all the remains are swept into a metal container. When we think about 'ashes', we often imagine just a powdery substance, however, the remains of the human body normally contain many chunks of bones (Figure 6).

When the temperature of the remains are cooled down, they have to be taken away with metal objects, and then the bones are ground down (Figure7). The tools and the actual

Figure 4: The Cremator

procedure vary depending on the crematorium. This man here wears a mask to avoid inhaling the powdery substance. Behind him is one of the cremators they use in this facility.

This is a grinder they use in this facility (Figure 10). Three metal balls are inside, and the drum of this machine turns like a washing machine. These images do not often appear in our society. Information and reality of death are often sanitised carefully.

Death as Information and Death as Pornography

If these images above I captured during the field study in 2013 can be the evidence of denial death in society, how can we explain that we also see images of dead in mass media, such as movies and TV news?

Some like Tony Walter's Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo? (1991), or Atushi Sawai's Tabood Death Revisited argue that death is both denied and accepted. We see death in the mass media frequently, such as news of natural disasters, death of celebrities, dead people in crimes, or hospital dramas. Sawai explains two different types of death appearing in mass media. One is 'Death as information' and another is 'Death as pornography'.

The first one is Death as information. Death described in fictional productions, such as novels, movies, or TV dramas is often consumed as guideline information of life and death. For example, hospital dramas like 'ER' inform audiences how death appears in medical institutions. Non-fictional entertainment such as news and documentaries also provide information of death. News of death tolls of natural disasters, wars, and victims of crimes are reported in newspaper every day, and deaths of celebrities are often displayed on the front page of some gossip magazines. Many documentaries following cancer patients and capture the vulnerabilities of human beings and how we seek some hope in these tragic situations. These are the guideline of death and often advise us how we should face death and accept it.

Geoffrey Gorer introduced the argument of death as pornography for the first time in his article The Pornography of Death in 1955. In the Victorian era, death was a subject that people talked openly about, and the topic of birth and sex were considered taboo. Now death is suppressed as taboo in many developed countries, and birth and sex are the subjects we talk about in public. Sex is still considered as taboo

Figure 5: Control panel of the cremator

Figure 6: Ashes

Figure 7: Masked man

Figure 8: Magnetic Stick

Figure 9: Sieve

Figure 10: Grinder

subject sometimes, however, it is a part of child education at school now. We can see this 'death as pornography', the pleasure of consuming suppressed taboos, especially in video games in modern society. According to research conducted by Tyson Foster, over 30% of the games released on the first day of the Xbox release and also the launch window in 2001 were related to killing or attacking zombies or human figures. Similarly in 2013, over 30% of the Play Station 4 games released on the day 1 and launch window were in this genre.[1]

[1] Foster's original research statistics were focused on the presence of monsters or grotesque in gaming. This means some games that involve killing or attacking human figures such as Battlefield 4 were not counted as it's a modern military shooter that doesn't feature any monsters. Therefore, there could be higher number of games released related to killing or attacking. No games in presence of monsters or grotesque figures were free from violence.

Part 2: Funeral directors and their stigma

Seven funeral directors in different funeral homes on the Gold Coast, Tweed Shire, Redland Bay, Burpengary and Stapylton in Queensland Australia were approached for this project. Three from the Gold Coast, Burpengary and Stapylton agreed to participate. I followed those three funeral directors to investigate their work and their private lives, shooting using still photography and interviewing them using HD-SLR video recordings. I also investigated several cemeteries to broaden the visual scope of the industry and its practices. Considering other research such as Handling the stigma of handling the dead: Morticians and funeral directors (1991) by William Thompson and Occupationism: Occupational discrimination in relation to funeral directors (1994) by F. Ozge Akçali, I too investigated whether funeral directors are stigmatised in our sanitised society.

Kim Rodda

The first case study is Kim Rodda. Kim has been in the industry for over 15 years already, and he works at Traditional Funerals in Burpengary, north of Brisbane.

Figure 11a: Kim Rodda

Kim Rodda spoke of some past experiences and mentioned that he recognised this stigma often when he started working

Figure 11b: Kim Rodda working in his office

in the industry. He felt he was alienated in the church that attends. The possible reason for this was also that he kept

Figure 11c: Kim Rodda transferring a coffin

reminding them of the loved ones that they had lost, and he was also invited to share a lot of personal, and sometimes, embarrassing information.

He used to joke about his job when he was asked what he does for living. He often said “I’m actually a male stripper.” He often gets two reactions when he reveals his occupation: people asking him many questions, or remaining in complete silence. When he started in industry fifteen years ago, the reaction was complete silence (Figure 11a-11d).

Donna Rostron

The second case is Donna Rostron. Donna found a new office of White Lady Funerals had opened in Ashmore on the Gold Coast, and started working there five years ago. White Lady Funerals is a unique business operated by woman wearing white suits, offering a women's understanding to people who have lost loved ones, while many traditional societies in the world do not accept a female as a conductor of funerals.

Figure 11d: Kim Rodda preparing for a funeral

Donna mentioned that her aunty was not happy when she started the job, because she thought a White Lady Funeral was sexist and racist, servicing only white women.

Figure 12a: Donna Rostron, White Lady Funerals

Figure 12b: Donna Rostron preparing for a funeral

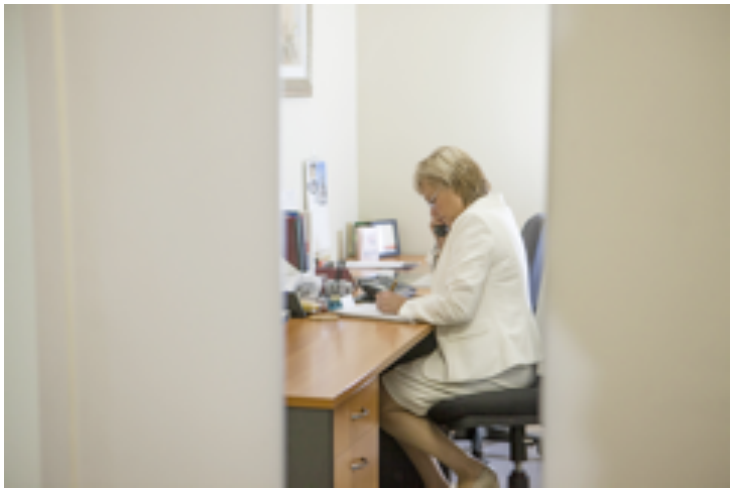

Figure 12c: Donna Rostron working in her office

Donna also said that many people do not respond well when she reveals her occupation to people who do not know her career. Many stop the conversation, or in some cases, some start asking many questions (Figure 12a-12d).

Figure 12d: Donna Rostron, reaching to a coffin

Tim Connolly

The third case study is Tim Connolly. Tim's parents started a funeral business, and he grew up in the industry. He eventually inherited and manages the business, Newhaven Funerals in Stapylton. Tim told me that he did not recognise any stigma from friends and teachers when he was young.

However, Tim says his in-laws showed some hesitation to his occupation when they got married. It was hard to talk with his father-in-law who is an old fashioned Italian and did not like talking about death. Even though many people do not show any negative perspective towards funeral directors, when it comes to their close family members, they reconsider it and change their attitude sometimes. (Figure13a-13d).

Figure 13a: Tim Connolly, Newhaven Funerals

Findings from interviews

Although they all agreed that they have experienced some level of stigma in the past, it was not a big issue to any of funeral directors I interviewed. They all said their stigma has eased over the years. Donna Rostron mentioned the influence of TV dramas such as NCIS or Bones that introduce the interesting characters who deal with dead corpses.

All participants expressed that the hardest thing about being in the industry was not dealing with the stigma, but dealing with their own grief. Working for people at the most difficult time or facing the horrific way that some individuals die is not

Figure 13b: Tim Connolly preparing for a funeral

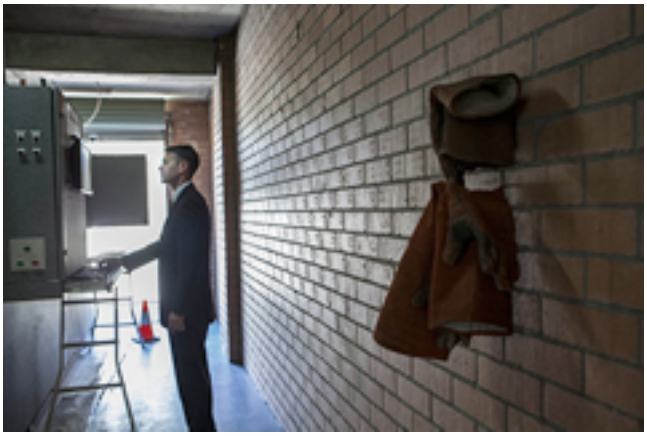

Figure 13c: Tim Connolly operating a cremator

Figure 13d: Tim Connolly looking at the coffin storage

an easy job, and often they are affected emotionally, with or without being conscious of this knowledge and experience.

Kim Rodda did not take a holiday for a while even though his boss recommended doing so, and he did not realise how much his emotions had been affected until he went to see a movie with his sons. He sobbed and cried watching 'Armageddon'. He says when he watches the movie again, he cannot see any part that makes him cry, and he was definitely affected by his work at the time.

Donna Rostron spoke of an instance where she held a service for a young boy who was the same age as her son who had killed himself.

Tim Connolly does a lot of work for the government which requires him to go to crime scenes or fatal accident scenes and transport the diseased to the morgue. He often has to witness brutal deaths that are sometimes unbearable. He also mentioned it is very hard to face the tragic deaths of some young children.

All of the participants have great support from family and colleagues, although Tim Connolly does not talk about his work to his wife who is a school teacher.

They also admitted that they often find difficulties to talk openly in public about details of their line of the work or their own grief. Denial of death in society suppresses them, and those funeral directors do not want to upset other people who would not wish to discuss death and mortality openly.

Conclusion

Our society in the modern developed countries has both acceptance and denial of death. This causes some stigmatisation of funeral directors; however, it has eased over years. The acceptance of death has increased in this last decade especially, although funeral directors are still stigmatised sometimes and they do not have many opportunities to express their secondary traumatic stress. Even though, all the funeral directors I interviewed seemed to be extremely proud of their job and happy to pursue their career. They feel that they are supporting people and the community during the most difficult times.

This research reveals behind the scene activities of funeral homes, and shows some confronting facts related to death and funerals visually, however, it was carefully yielded in a respectful manner. Feeding pleasure for pornography of death was not an intention, and the visual materials were made to increase public awareness, questioning why we have not seen these images before and why we tend to avoid talking about this topic.

When I show my work, I often witness that people start opening their dialogue about their own death and grief. I witnessed those suppressed stories and emotions needed a place to be expressed.

Should we, or should not we talk about death?

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