Cost, status, service and sustainability, changing expectations around Australian funeral practice

Author: Annie Bolitho

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Abstract: Costco now sells coffins in its Australian stores, along with dry goods, sports products, clothing and dairy. With funeral products on supermarket shelves, the Australian funeral industry is feeling the wind of change. A strong message from Costco’s coffins announcement earlier in 2016 is that a funeral could be less costly. There is also the implication that we could be doing more funerals ourselves. We could be quite hands on, drive to Docklands, and pick up the flat pack. We would be the agents who put it into use. In this article I explore a DIY scenario, and what its potential might mean for consumers and for funeral practice in today’s context. DIY home improvements, certainly. But funerals?

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Costco now sells coffins in its Australian stores, along with dry goods, sports products, clothing and dairy. With funeral products on supermarket shelves, the Australian funeral industry is feeling the wind of change. A strong message from Costco’s coffins announcement earlier in 2016 is that a funeral could be less costly. There is also the implication that we could be doing more funerals ourselves. We could be quite hands on, drive to Docklands, and pick up the flat pack. We would be the agents who put it into use. In this article I explore a DIY scenario, and what its potential might mean for consumers and for funeral practice in today’s context.

DIY home improvements, certainly. But funerals? The notion might sound a little disrespectful, as if we’d be quite satisfied with turning out a less than professional product. Because funerals today are products, and funeral directors make considerable effort for them to be as perfect as possible. Over many centuries changes in funeral practice such as commodification of products have been driven by an increase in economic affluence (Earle cited in Beard & Burger, 4). In the Victorian era, if you wanted to you could visit Harrods funeral furnishing department (Parsons, 128). You could have a certain hearse type, or number of volleys fired at the funeral (Harris cited in Beard & Burger). All this led to ‘the entrenchment of a genteel code of conduct’ (ibid, 128).

Today forces such as environmental sustainability, social media and other technologies influence how people think about funerals. But of all contemporary customer motivations, cost effectiveness is the most significant motivator (Parsons). A funeral can be one of the largest purchases in later life. For this reason, status and prestige may be of less importance to some consumers than options that include an element of DIY as well as increased personal involvement.

Everyone wants a funeral to feel right. To look good and to do good. It should honour the deceased, and help the bereaved feel supported. It is quite possible to have these outcomes with DIY. There is no restriction on those who are resourceful and on moderate incomes calling on friends and relatives to be part of a collective effort and doing a funeral.

The availability of coffins at supermarkets and online invites consumers at least to review their expectations of what a funeral could be. This in turn could propel a different view of the funeral industry as one that can provide specific services as requested, and support families in new ways. For example a funeral director might assist with essential paperwork or negotiate with the coroner if required. A cemetery can provide a shallower gravesite to enable a more natural body decomposition.

Those who go DIY and buy a coffin elsewhere are refusing what has traditionally been the funeral director’s product, but also the way funerals are packaged. Coffins are widely thought of as being over-priced, and they are. Coffins and other ‘tangibles’ like urns, DVDs and mini statues have to be expensive. Funeral directing is a labour intensive business, with pick-ups, body preparation and storage and a very personalised service, from first meeting to the attentive welcomes and goodbyes at the event itself. Ramping up the price of products as part of a package enables funeral directors to cross-subsidise their operational costs.

If a family or community has time and is well organised, there is no reason why they should not largely direct a funeral themselves. Fifty years ago family and friends took a much stronger role. At the time of death, it is still customary in our society that tasks are carried out by family and friends, as well as by professional service providers. Funerals are quietly celebrated as times when family and community links are activated. In fact it is the way that relationships come into their own at this time that helps the bereaved deal with disruption of losing a loved one.
In my experience no country does self-reliant grass roots movements as well as the US. This goes for the 'home funeral' movement. When I attended the National Home Funeral Alliance’s conference a couple of years’ ago, I got a flavour of this in the sign-in line when the woman next to me introduced herself: 'I’m Margaret, and this is my sister Helen ... we did our mother.' Intrepid baby boomers without financial resources, they had been inspired to organise a home vigil or 'lying in state' and funeral, taking care of bathing, dressing, vigil and transportation themselves.

The coast-to-coast movement comprises a mix of educators, death doulas, health care and funeral professionals, green burial specialists, Death Café convenors, artists and craftspeople, and those like Margaret, who read in a newspaper or on the net that the family could do it without calling on funeral directors. Margaret then made connections with educators in her state through a Google search. Those who have had the experience often become educators. They can undertake training with home funeral practitioners http://homefuneralalliance.org/get-assistance/find-training/ in numerous states. They may lead the way in their own communities for a new way of approaching death, dying and funerals.

The conference was an intriguing US-wide get-together. The title ‘Home Funeral in Community, Restoring the Lost Art’, suggests the American folk spirit that marked the action. I got together with men and women ranging from 30 to 70. At every meal people were hard at death conversations over weak coffee, comparing notes on regulatory requirements in their respective states and discussing tools of the trade. Americans are taciturn, never insisting, simply helping others towards their point of view. ‘You might want to think about buying a body board, said one practitioner to another, ‘it makes it so much easier to move the body across – you should think about it.’ Only to be met with protestations that a double sheet is good, a sheet is quite fine.

If a DIY funeral is deemed appropriate, it works well if a planning process has been put in place, roles and tasks considered and conversations had. The activity of doing after death care and a funeral ourselves contributes to sense making, a key aspect of successful grieving and integration of loss. Death is a mystery. It is something humans with few exceptions are at pains to banish from front of mind. Yet it happens to all. In contemporary society our exposure to the reality of death is often very limited. The body is whisked away soon after death, and there may be little further contact with it again. No wonder it is difficult to make sense of. Integrating the experience of loss has to take place via the mind, without the concrete support of the senses. Seeing. Touching a cold body. Listening, and not hearing breath.

The body present at home before the funeral? It’s morbid. Confronting. It’s unnecessary. It will be frightening. These are commonly held views and tend to make the funeral domain strictly one for funeral directors. This makes it the norm to hand over authority to them. They are experienced and resourced to provide a seamless experience. Their work is not easy yet they often describe it as rewarding.

This is equally true of those who are part of the movement for ‘death literacy’ and new funeral norms such as Groundswell http://www.thegroundswellproject.com, which runs an annual Dying to Know Day http://www.dyingtoknowday.org/. On 8th August each year, hosted conversations are held with the intent of countering fear, isolation and taboos around end of life discussions.

‘Have you thought about what you want when you die? Have you discussed it?’

‘Oh yeah, don’t worry about it, I just want to be buried in the backyard.’

Hitting on a solution like this seems trouble-free. Yet Imagine flying over the suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne, and instead of noticing swimming pools out of the window, picking up the imprint of a massive DIY graveyard, not of pets, but family members.
‘Oh I just want something sustainable. There’s this fantastic new biodegradable pod coffin. You can be buried in it in foetal position and a tree grows out of it.’

The beauty of this individual solution to body disposal has seen it liked on Facebook more than 12,000 times. The pod is still in the design phase but many people think it is an immediate option. On a moment’s reflection the bio aspect of the pod is way more complex than an enviro-friendly Christmas card studded with callistemon seed that is supposed to result in a gorgeous shrub in the garden. It may take some years to perfect. Nonetheless sustainability is a value both innovators and their audience aspire to.

Holding a conversation can be light and enjoyable. It can acknowledge the optimistic, sometimes unrealistic thinking that comes from thinking alone. It is not morbid to talk about practical aspects of caring for a dead body that we usually outsource to funeral companies. With ease around what many see as a difficult subject, we are more likely to hold in mind values such as sustainability, beauty or cost-effectiveness, that in ordinary circumstances inform our decision-making. We can stop to calculate the human and environmental costs of producing a cheap cardboard coffin in China and shipping it to Costco.

A dead body is okay in the abstract, as a something to pop into a pod. What is handy about abstraction is that particulars of context do not have to be taken into account. The successful disposal of human bodies is a public concern. In Australia state government departments set regulations. In Victoria, burial on private land is not permitted. In NSW you may put a cemetery in your back paddock, but the planning application to your local council will be onerous.


Overseas, restricted land areas have generated innovations such as ‘term limits’, for example in Singapore https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-burial-idUSBRE8AQ07M20121127 and Hong Kong. This has been a result of public policy, new rules and planning decisions. In the US advocacy has also played a role in ensuring integrity in one popular innovation. There the concept and practice of ‘green burial’ was until fairly recently an area where customers were easy targets within no regulation or standards in place. The US industry has been nudged towards conforming to standards by a non-government organisation, The Green Burial Council. https://greenburialcouncil.org/ Their definition highlights parameters such as ‘legitimate environmental and societal aims such as protecting worker health, reducing carbon emissions, conserving natural resources, and preserving habitat’.

In Australia, advocacy for change includes a strong interest in green burial. The option is scarcely available in Australia. Where it is, it tends to be equated with ‘natural’, ‘informal’ and ‘serene’ rather than with environmental sustainability benefits. In Victoria, the statutory authorities in charge of cemeteries have only recently begun to recognise consumers’ appetite for more aesthetically considered, non-traditional alternatives. Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust is fast-tracking a green burial development in Melbourne’s south-east. Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust has small green burial pockets in existing cemeteries. They have to operate at a profit and also to retain funds to take care of their cemeteries in perpetuity. This mandate implies a commercial imperative. Evidence of a large number of consumers willing to put money down for this choice would legitimate change. Yet consumers cannot invest when their preferred option is not available.
Inevitably, in the absence of energetic advocacy, cemeteries have most influenced by their key stakeholders, funeral directors. Through advocacy and media, people are becoming more familiar with what is possible at end of life, and this will gradually change expectations of the funeral industry. Now, its norms are standardised, giving practices the appearance of being generic no matter how much packages are tailored to accommodate contemporary tastes. The genteel approach of the squadron of company staff ranked in the lobby of a funeral venue is not what everyone is looking for. The warm and assured but organic practices of the home funeral movement will attract people who do not want a perfect finish.

Vigils, home funerals and green burials are increasingly sought after. They involve conversations such as those encouraged by Dying to Know Day. Thinking DIY for funeral arrangements implies being willing to put a particular stamp on things. This means having a vision and being organised. Individual choices need to interface with public realities. There is more to making the resolution to do things differently than simply heading down to Docklands for a cardboard coffin.

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