

FUNERAL PLANS

I've told my lawyer and I've told my oldest son what I wanted for a funeral service. It's not to be in any holy place, it's not to take place in New York City. I don't want a Viking funeral where they put a guy on a boat with treasure and set it on fire. I want it to be on Cape Cod, where I raised my family, and I want to be cremated and my ashes scattered over Barnstable Harbor – Kurt Vonnegut.¹

INTRODUCTION

The funeral plans of men interviewed for this book are the focus of this chapter. As explained in the previous chapter, this discussion follows consideration of participants' afterlife beliefs because they were prompted to speak about their views on euthanasia and life after death in the penultimate interview question when being asked for their thoughts on their physical end of life. And as I observed there, I felt the need to explain the chapter order because any progress to an afterlife usually occurs after a funeral.

When the data for this chapter were first assembled, a number of sorting possibilities were considered, that is, a number of categories that could be used for examining and arranging the data. There was material, for example, about participants' religious beliefs, formal and informal; whether or not they wanted a funeral service or a memorial service; what they wanted done with their bodily remains: buried, cremated or donated to medical science; and how detailed were the plans that they had made for their funeral.

1 Terkel, S. (2002) *Will the Circle be Unbroken? Reflections on Death and Dignity* (London: Granta Books), p. 226.

As many qualitative researchers know, a simple question can evoke a variety of answers, some expected and some not, and just so here when in answer to the relatively simple question, ‘Is there anything else you would like to say about your will and end of life plans? For example, have you included funeral plans with your will?’, participants provided details about their religious upbringing and beliefs, preference for burial or cremation, thoughts about arranging for their cadavers or organs to be donated for the use of the living, and all without additional prompting during the interview.

FUNERAL PLANS

Funeral is the name given for the burial or cremation of a dead person and the associated religious or secular ceremonies. A funeral traditionally served three functions. The first was to celebrate the life of the dead person; the second for the proper disposal of the corpse, which could take place by burial, cremation or on a pyre;² the third was to mark a period of mourning for the dead person, also serving as an act of social solidarity or continuity.³ It was generally the custom for Christian funeral services to comprise two stages: firstly the body was taken by procession from the place of death – which until the 1950s was often the person’s home, the hospital being much more common nowadays⁴ – to the church and secondly again by procession from the church to the grave.

The two-stage funeral procession became more common from the eighteenth century in Europe with the movement to relocate cemeteries for reasons of public health from the centre of towns and cities to their outskirts.⁵ French historian Philippe Ariès argued that the transferring of cemeteries to the edge of towns and cities coincided with what he called the secularization of the funeral procession and burials when in France (and elsewhere) cemeteries became the responsibility of municipal bodies and the role of the clergy was

2 Laqueur, T.W. (2015) *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 3–9, 527–48.

3 Ariès, P. (1991) *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. H. Weaver (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 145–146; Griffin, G.M. and D. Tobin (1982) *In the Midst of Life: the Australian Response to Death* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press), p. 98.

4 Ariès, P. (1975) *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. P. Ranum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 87–88.

5 Ariès *The Hour*, pp. 491–498.

limited to the funeral service and their presence at the grave was withdrawn, to be filled by that of the undertaker, then the funeral director.⁶

Contemporary funerals can follow the form established after cemeteries were moved out of town in eighteenth-century Europe, namely, where the dead person's body is first transferred from their place of death, although, unless the person is a head of state or government, the transfer is no longer done in procession, and then, after a religious or non-religious service, it is transferred to the grave. In most cases, the dead body is transferred from the place of death to the place of service and then to the grave by firms of funeral directors who prior to 1900 were known as undertakers.⁷

In the towns, there is no way of knowing that something has happened: the old black and silver hearse has become the ordinary gray (sic) limousine, indistinguishable from the flow of traffic. Society no longer observes a pause; the disappearance of the individual no longer affects its continuity. Everything in town goes on as if nobody died anymore.⁸

With the general decline in religious affiliation in the second half of the twentieth century,⁹ non-religious funerals became increasingly popular. These could be conducted by secular funeral celebrants, friends of the deceased or the representatives of organizations to which the dead person belonged, such as, for example, Rotary International, sporting clubs or in Australia the Returned Servicemen's League or Legacy. Funeral directors have increasingly taken on the role of conducting non-religious funeral services. One problem with non-religious services was 'to frame rites which say something worth saying and which are not just imitations of church liturgies':

Secular liturgies have little to fall back upon for that depth when the transcendental is excluded by definition. Unfortunately it is just as easy in a non-religious funeral as in a religious one to substitute sentimentality for meaning and triteness for truth.¹⁰

Gay men had a unique experience of funerals when between 1980 and 1996 at least two generations were directly affected by the AIDS epidemic. During

6 Ariès *The Hour*, pp. 492, 598–601.

7 Mitford, J. (1998) *The American Way of Death Revisited* (London: Virago Press), p. 148; Ariès *The Hour*, p. 598.

8 Ariès *The Hour*, p. 560.

9 The latest Australian census showed a continued increase in the proportion of people stating that they have no religion, rising from 6.7% of the population in 1971 to 38.9% in 2021; see <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia#change-in-no-religion-over-time> accessed 21 January 2023.

10 Griffin and Tobin *In the Midst of Life*, p. 87.

this time, they had a disproportionately high experience of death, mourning, grief and funeral-going as thousands of friends, former partners, and acquaintances died of AIDS and AIDS-related illnesses.¹¹ In response to the social death which often affected gay men's experience of death and dying during almost two decades, the funerals of men who died of AIDS could take on the form of a 'grand performance', a quiet gathering of close friends and family, or, if unaccepting families organized them, sometimes omitted any reference to the deceased's sexuality or his partner.¹²

In his study of the disposal of the dead, French historian Thomas Laqueur argued that the dead had a power, 'to make communities, to do the work of culture, to announce their presence and meaning by occupying space',¹³ illustrating his point with reference to Karl Marx's grave in Highgate cemetery, London and the graves of other socialists and Jews that are situated nearby in the same cemetery. If it is true that the dead 'make communities', how do we make sense of the decisions taken by the men interviewed for this book who decided not to have a grave in a cemetery or special place for the burial of their corpse or cremated ashes and instead, to have their corpse or organs donated for the use of living humans and their ashes scattered 'anywhere'? Do decisions such as these suggest that people who have no wish for their corpse or the ashes of their remains to be buried *are not* or *were not* part of a community or that they have no wish to be part of a group of people like them in announcing their 'presence and meaning by occupying space'?

Although 25 participants or almost 60% of the sample said that they had not yet made funeral plans, they were able when asked to provide some idea about whether they wanted a funeral or details of the sort of funeral that they wanted. Their answers were examined together with those of the minority who had made funeral plans and, in the sections that follow, all are examined under topics which follow the traditional logic for the stages of the funeral, that is, the service – religious or non-religious – and then the disposal of the body, by burial, cremation, or the bone crusher.

11 Robinson, P. and Geldens, P. (2014) 'Stories of Two Generations of Australian Gay Men Living in the Presence of HIV-AIDS' in *Journal of Australian Studies*, 38(2): 233–245.

12 For autobiographical account of one family's refusal to acknowledge their dead son's sexuality or cause of death, see Conigrave, T. (1995) *Holding the Man* (Melbourne: Penguin Books).

13 Laqueur *Work of the Dead*, pp. 21–22.

Religious Services

Only slightly more than one-fifth of the sample wanted a religious funeral.¹⁴ When speaking about their decision for a religious funeral, these participants referred either to family precedence or ‘tradition’, that is, to what their parents had done before then or to what they and their partner wished for each other and had decided together.

Parents, Family Tradition

Five participants referred to their parents’ funerals when explaining their preference for a religious funeral. Their accounts are represented here by two men: one in his late-60s and one in his mid-50s. Seth (aged 68) who was from California wanted half of his ashes spread at the AIDS memorial in San Francisco and half of them to be interred in his parents’ plot.

The national AIDS Memorial Grove is in San Francisco at Golden Gate Park ... [and] has a plaza area [where] they have people’s names engraved in it. It is called ‘Circle of Friends’. It is both living and dead people and I had my name engraved there. It is the only place in the city where you can also spread ashes. I let them [siblings] all know that I want to be cremated and half go to Memorial Grove and half go to my parents’ plot. They are going to take a screw and take out part of the dirt for me [*Laughs*].

Seth was one of the six participants who said that they were HIV positive. And for him, and I suspect many thousands of other gay men in the USA, the National AIDS memorial Grove represents a permanent memorial for the hundreds of thousands of people who died during the HIV-AIDS epidemic in the USA. Within the Grove is the Circle of Friends where the names of those affected by AIDS, living and dead, are engraved in stone.¹⁵

Ellis (aged 56) from England provided a detailed account of his parents’ funerals when outlining his own wishes for a religious funeral and why he believed it was important for people to make funeral plans, ‘because it reduces the amount of head scratching’ for family and relatives after their death. His father remarried after his parents divorced and according to Ellis, ‘made very firm plans with my stepmother’, which meant that making arrangements was quite straightforward for him and his siblings:

14 Nine participants said that they wanted a religious funeral service.

15 See: <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/circle-of-friends> accessed 29 October 2022.

The only stuff we had to work out was the stuff you don't usually have the presence of mind to sort out, which is what is going to be read at his funeral, what is going to be said, what are we going to listen to, that kind of thing, and what goes on his headstone. And those are the things that, while painful, are lovely to do. Dad organised together with [stepmother] pretty much everything else: the funeral plan in terms of payment; burial rather than cremation.

His mother, on the other hand, 'didn't really do anything':

She didn't even express an opinion about where she wanted her remains to be. She didn't want to be buried. It wasn't careless, she genuinely didn't care. She said, "It's not me. I'll have gone and I am not fussed. You can chuck me in the bin, if you like, just do not worry about it". But it did mean that in the end we had to go through that thought process because we weren't sure and we wanted to do the right thing. In one way, it was lovely. It was a creative moment and brought . . . us close together . . . the six of us, including my brother-in-law and my sister-in-law.

Together, Ellis and his four siblings and their partners arranged a remarkable funeral for their mother, which began when they met in London and drove some way along the Thames to a point where in his words, 'We ended up throwing Mum in the river' because it is now possible to get a soluble, environmentally clean container made out of compressed sand and salt. In the following account, Ellis explained why the funeral that he and his siblings and their partners devised so nicely suited them and their idea of what their mother would have wanted herself:

It was like an urn but it was a globe shape with a lid and Mum's ashes were placed in that . . . The way it worked out was lovely. Mum would have been tickled and it worked. We are not good at ceremonial, we are always poking fun at each other and it meant that there was a ceremony of sorts, something to remember. It was not mawkish and it was in keeping with Mum's sense of who she was and her sense of humour, but also, it was delicate.

While Ellis's story is a striking example of how children can agree and resolve to honour a mother who left no instructions for her own funeral, it suggests also how the wishes of the deceased can be countermanded by the living, emphasizing as well the common-sense understanding that 'funerals are for the living'.

Partner

Five mentioned funeral arrangements that they had made together or in consultation with their partner and they are represented here by accounts from

two men, one in his 70s, the other in his 60s. The first, Joel (aged 74) from California explained that he planned to let his ex-partner arrange his service in accord with the latter's religious affiliation:

As far the service itself . . . my ex-partner will probably take control of it. He is a devout Episcopalian. In fact, I converted from Catholicism to Episcopalian when I was with him. Of any church or religion, that is the one I can embrace the easiest.

The second account was provided by Kieran (aged 67) from England and was included in this section because, even though he and his partner had 'enormous difficulties with the faith', they both wanted their remains committed to a churchyard or a cemetery. Each had slightly different plans: Kieran wanted his remains spread in a churchyard and his partner to be buried in a family plot with his deceased parents and sibling:

The idea is to sprinkle the ashes or bury them, whatever the authorities allow, within the churchyard of this church . . . which is a Welsh church, this wonderful, wonderful romantic setting by a river. [Partner] is also doing . . . [something] in a church which has got strong family connections up in [name of county] which is right in the middle of where he was born and lived for the first two decades. We both want to have a conventional, in the best sense, a traditional send-off.

For Kieran, a strong emotional connection with the historical and natural environment was all important when explaining his choice of the location for his remains:

The crows are squawking, it has an incredible sense of wildlife as well . . . and then you go into the church and it has been there for 1000 years and still representing the faith. It has been through the Armada, it has been through the Second World War, it has been through the Norman invasion, it has been through everything and survived.

As was a shared understanding that he and his partner had of church buildings and what they represented in the spiritual, perhaps also mythical landscape of Britain:

We do feel a strong sense that churches represent continuity in the best sense and a sort of faith. We do not want to be associated with the faith, but we respect it, and I think we would like to be allies of it by association, rather than by deep internal belief, which neither of us have.

Non-Religious Services

Almost twice as many participants said that they preferred a non-religious funeral to a religious one.¹⁶ These comprised a small group of three who had well-developed plans and the remainder who had only sketchy plans or ideas about the sort of service that they wanted including a group of nine who wholly rejected the idea of a religious service, five of whom referred to their Catholic upbringing when explaining their decision.

Well-Developed Plans

There were three participants with well-developed plans and they were from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and England. Their plans included details of the music that they wanted played and the style and nature of the service. The first of three was a man in his early 80s (Clive, aged 81, ACT) who provided a list of the music that he was compiling for his funeral:

I have chosen about an hour, an hour and a half's worth of music, it's all ludicrous anyway. *What music have you chosen?* I can give you the full details if you really want them. I can even play it, to you [*Laughs, walks off, returns with a list*]. There are seven items and they include a passage from Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* ... and two items with me playing the violin on them ... in a band called 'Mulga Bill's Bicycle Band' ... and the last three are 'Hotel California' by the Eagles, which is a key work as far as I am concerned and then, 'I am a Man of Constant Sorrow' ... from the film, 'Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?' And then there is a big finish ... a passage from Bach's B Minor Mass, which ends with trumpets, played very loud to get the best of the spluttery trumpets at the end is my instruction. I don't know but I have probably put a burden on somebody or other to do [it all]. Maybe I will just go out with 'Hotel California' [*Laughs*].

While Clive was clear about the 90 minutes' of music he would like played at his funeral, he was less sure about its format and said elsewhere in his interview that he was content to leave that and other details of his memorial service to his family and friends.

Donovan (aged 55) from England wanted music also at his funeral service, although his repertoire was less extensive than Clive's:

I have set the sound track for my funeral: Philip Glass piano solo, played by the artist. I want tears! None of this soft-rock rubbish [*Laughs*] ... Being a bit of a control-freak, I did want to choose the sound-track. *Are there hymns?* No! It

¹⁶ Sixteen participants said that they preferred a non-religious memorial or service.

won't be religious at all. We are not religious in the slightest. I think we struck a good note with my dear old Mum's funeral. That was a non-religious funeral and it was fantastic. People still talk about it. It was pitch-perfect.

By contrast to Clive and Donovan, Damien (aged 52) from England wanted his friends to meet in a place which meant a lot to him and had made provision in his will for funds to be made available for them to do so:

I set aside . . . [money] for people to gather in a very beautiful place they will never get to in their lives, a place in Italy and if they were to scatter some of my ashes there [it would be] great. It is general but it is to pay for ten friends to have a week in this place that they just would not get to but it is for them to experience this place that has touched me and make it a funeral. That is the focus; it is a party basically.

Although relatively few in number, those with well-developed funeral plans seemed mainly focused on minimizing the maudlin nature of their memorial service and ensuring that it would be a memorable or uplifting experience for their family and friends.

Sketchy Plans

Explanations that were given for having only sketchy plans or no plan at all tended to centre on the common-sense understanding that 'funerals were for the living', as Eric (aged 57) from Hong Kong explained: 'Frankly I don't care [*Laughs*] I am not around. They can do what they want [*Laughs*]. I did not put anything in . . . my current will'. Others with sketchy plans either reiterated this understanding or provided outlines of how they expected their friends or family to mark their passing informally.

Edward (aged 77) from the ACT drew on the common-sense understanding: 'I could not care less for me because I am not going to be there . . . so I will leave whether to have one to my partner'. When asked about the sort of memorial that he envisaged might take place, he said: 'The normal thing these days . . . is somebody says something and then everybody chips in, sits around, says something'. Others who shared the same common-sense understanding were Aiden (aged 42) from England, who was very clear about his wish for next to nothing to mark his passing: 'I would not want anyone to think I want the Mozart Requiem being played with weeping mourners. I would instruct: simple, quick, send off'; and Harrison (aged 56) from Victoria, who, like many others, was more concerned about his surviving partner:

I have left a clear instruction with my husband to say that . . . [my] funeral is really for the living and not for me. I have no religious concerns. I am not a

believer in any supernatural being . . . The funeral . . . should be set up in such a way that benefits the people who are left behind and . . . whatever it is that they need is what they should get. I don't care at all what happens just to say that whatever they want is what my husband should work with them to achieve.

One of a few from this group who reluctantly agreed to the need for some post-mortem service or celebration was Nicholas (aged 72) from New South Wales. In the following extract, he seemed to suggest that a life well lived with friends and family was preferable to a funeral service or memorial and that he honestly expected nothing more:

I hope that everybody gets to say to me what they want to say to me before I am dead. I don't need people to say things about me, except to celebrate their lives and their lives with me in the way that they want to.

A participant who had sketchy plans only, which when written would probably include a fulsome celebration of his life – along the lines of the services being planned by those already discussed in well-developed plans (above) – was Johann (aged 52) from England. In the following extract, Johann explained that he wanted an ‘after party’ where ‘Cosmopolitans would have to be served [as] that is my signature cocktail’:

“After parties” can be lovely. That aspect of them I really like. It brings this group of people together and hopefully if it is a nice person, it's a nice funeral and those group of people are lovely and often haven't met each other but know of each other because they have been in this person's life. And I get the importance of the after-party and it's a nice, social celebration of that person's life. That bit I fully understand is a good thing.

Emphasizing the importance of a social gathering to celebrate a person's life was Johann's way of distinguishing between what he hoped for himself and what transpired at this father's funeral:

My father's funeral was the most awkward funeral I have ever been to and I could not wait to get out of there. It was horrible. We would have been better not having it. He was not well-liked by anyone and everyone felt this fake sense of needing to console me and things. I did not like him and . . . I really wish it had not happened. The only positive [partner] said . . . was that at least it . . . did a good job of representing what he had been like in life: this . . . weird, fake, non-personal funeral. It was just strange.

In a previous chapter,¹⁷ Johann was quoted as explaining that, because his family had moved around a lot when he was young, blood relatives were not

17 Chapter 1: Affective Lives.

an important part of his life. Elsewhere in his interview, he confessed that his most problematic relationship was with his father – who was possibly responsible for the family having to move around a lot – and in this extract, he seemed to suggest that his family had made a mistake in arranging the ‘weird, fake, non-personal funeral’ for his father, which might have been his way of signifying the level of unresolved feelings that he and others had for his father.

As mentioned, a small group of five referred to their Catholic upbringing when explaining why they did not want a religious funeral service. Four of these rejected any thought of a religious funeral service because of memories of the bad experiences they had had as children in Catholic education systems in Australia, England or the USA.

In New York State, Dorian (aged 70) said that he wanted no religious service ‘whatsoever’: ‘I am a lapsed Catholic and don’t want anything to do with religion when I pass’. Quinn (aged 60) from Victoria was more forthright, drawing an unambiguous connection between his schooling and wish for a non-religious funeral service:

I don’t want a religious service. Unfortunately, that was beaten out of me in school. *Catholic?* The Brothers of St Gerard Majella: a very small group that have since been disbanded by the Vatican.

Two participants who likewise had no wish for a religious funeral were nevertheless aware of possible difficulties that could arise in their families because of their preference. Mason (aged 60) from California said: ‘I don’t want to be buried out of the Catholic church which will be difficult because in my family I have two aunts who are nuns’. Meanwhile, 42-year-old Declan from Victoria anticipated a ‘shit-fight’ if he predeceased his parents and they were unwilling to acknowledge his partner’s role in organizing his funeral, and was the principal reason that he intended to clearly state his wishes when his will was written:

I think we presume a lot of things and I think I have to make those things quite clear [in my will] so that that is easier for everyone in the end. But also, by the same token, I want my parents to go, “Well, as [partner] has been with him for the last four years, [partner] should be making those sort of decisions” . . . But that’s just too much to risk and that is why it is something that I have to do.

A fifth participant who was brought up a Catholic did not however relate memories of bad experiences in the Catholic school system but explained that, despite being ‘quite religious’, he had no wish for prayers or religious celebrants at his funeral:

I was raised by Catholic brothers and nuns until the age of about fifteen and then my parents ran out of money, so I went over to public school which

shocked me terribly [*Laughs*] but nevertheless helped me a lot because it meant I did not end up [becoming] a cleric because I am quite religious . . . I have some anathema about churches, particularly Roman Catholic churches. I don't want strangers talking about me and saying arcane prayers . . . and I certainly don't want clerics incensing over me [*Laughs*]. I don't feel hostile about that, I don't have animosity but I certainly rigorously do not want anything to do with those people, particularly because I think that they have abrogated their moral and spiritual authority totally and completely. (Nicholas, aged 72, New South Wales)

What the sketchy plans suggest is that a significant minority of the sample either accepted the common-place understanding that funerals were for the living and were unconcerned by what took place after their death to celebrate their life or were opposed to any sort of memorial because of their dislike of religion and/or religiosity.

Disposing of the Body: Burial, Cremation or the Bone Crusher

The phrase 'bone crusher' which is used in the subheading was not meant to offend readers, referring as it does to the views of a number of participants, one of whom raised the question of how to dispose of the body: 'Do you want to be thrown into a pauper's grave or do you want to be ground up or burnt?' (Edward, aged 77, ACT). In this section, the focus is on participants' thoughts about and advice that they had included in their wills for the disposal of their body.

About half as many said that they preferred a traditional funeral to those who wanted a cremation.¹⁸ And a small group of six said either that they wanted their corpse or organs donated for research or to aid the living or that they really did not care and that their ashes could be thrown 'under a bush somewhere'.

Burial

Slightly less than a quarter of the sample said that they would prefer or had stated a wish for a burial. Of these, a majority said that they would prefer an alternative burial.¹⁹ The three who wanted a conventional burial referred to some form of family tradition, as shown in the following extracts. 'I want to be buried in the grave-yard where all my family is buried' (Emmett, aged 70, England). 'I've already got a plot for my ashes in a cemetery . . . in the same

18 Eleven participants said that they wanted a burial; 21 said that they wanted a cremation.

19 Of the 11 who stated a preference for burial, eight participants said that they wanted an alternative burial.

church that my family has used for a few generations' (Carl, aged 58, New Zealand). 'When my father died, we decided we would get a "fits-three" grave ... He's on the bottom, Mum's in the middle, and there is room for me' (Donovan, aged 55, England).

Interest in and demand for woodland burials,²⁰ which can also be known as green burials, seemed to be growing in countries like Australia, England and the USA. When asked about the growth in the green burial movement in the UK, one participant whose partner was a secular funeral celebrant had the following to say:

It is quite niche. It is expensive ... White, middle-class, slightly alternative-minded people would go for that as an option. It is happening. I am not quite sure how prevalent it is in terms of percentages but I would say that it is steadily growing. But growing more rapidly are secular funerals and DIY funerals where you manage the whole thing yourself because getting a funeral director is very expensive. (Wade, aged 66, England)

While a participant from North America spoke of the personal appeal of so-called 'body farms':

If I could go to a body farm, I would sure do that because I am a big environmentalist. I like the idea of those body farms, just nourishing the earth and letting things take their course. It's not that I am anti-religious or anything; it's just that I am religious in a different way. *Tell me a little more about the body farm.* Your remains are buried and become the roots of a tree. They plant a tree on top of you. I saw an article in one of the papers last week about these 'pods' that they have. I like that idea, it's a poetic idea.

Others elsewhere emphasized geographical location and a form of relatively modest environmental sustainability, which did not include having their bodily remains converted into effluent,²¹ as the main reasons for the appeal of woodland or green burials. 'I have changed that [his instructions] to have a woodland burial ... in a delightful woodland setting in a large area set aside for woodland burials' (Rowan, aged 71, England). 'A couple of friends have had woodland burials [in] coffins that would very easily decompose and become part of the soil' (Ellis, aged 56, England). 'One of those environmental

20 See, for example, this account from *The Guardian* of an alternative funeral in Devon, England: Wollaston, S. (2022) 'Ditch the hearse, bring the kids, have a picnic: an alternative undertaker's tips for a better funeral', <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/oct/19/shallow-grave-kids-picnic-alternative-undertaker-funeral> accessed 20 October 2022.

21 For details of processes for converting dead bodies into effluent, see: Kalia, A. (2019) 'A Greener Way to Go: What's the Most Eco-Friendly Way to Dispose of a Body?' in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jul/09/greener-way-to-go-eco-friendly-way-dispose-of-body-burial-cremation> accessed 20 October 2022.

burials where you're put into the ground and have to rot [*Laughs*] would be the most appealing thing for me' (Roland, aged 50, Victoria).

Cremation

Just under half of the participants said that they wanted to be cremated after death. When explaining their choice for cremation, most spoke of where they wanted their ashes left, namely buried or scattered. One or two said that they might reconsider the decision as more information came to light about the environmental impact of cremation – mostly in connection with what they understood to be the large amount of energy required to reduce a corpse to ashes.²²

Preferred locations for the scattering of ashes varied. Joel (aged 74) from California said that he wanted his remains returned to the east coast USA:

And the ashes scattered in the garden by the church that my main partner and I attended. We are both going to be scattered there. At first, I was going to scatter to the wind but my daughter was very insistent that she needed to have a place. I am not having a gravestone or anything but there is a place that she can go to.

Meanwhile, Dorian (aged 70) said that he wanted his ashes simply, 'scattered in New York'; and Davis (aged 65) from California that, 'I would be cremated and scattered at sea like my Mom. I do not want anyone spending any money'; while unclear where he wanted his ashes to go, Jonathon (aged 53) from England said that he wanted his scattered 'somewhere important to me'. Another participant did not specify a location for them but instead explained who would receive his ashes:

I intend to be taken away immediately – I have spoken to my partner – and cremated ... My ashes will be given to my partner and half will go to the family and half will remain with him. And that's the arrangement. (Nicholas, aged 72, New South Wales)

Two were not particularly concerned about what happened to their ashes. 'I want to be cremated and I want my ashes tossed' (Randolph, aged 57, Germany). 'Throw my ashes under a bush somewhere would be fine' (Johann, aged 52, Sheffield). And dark humour coloured the thoughts of one of the men in their 40s who related a story that he had heard about, 'the vengeful old queen who said in his will that he wanted his ashes to be flung in the faces of his enemies'!

22 Wollaston 'Ditch the hearse'; Kalia 'A greener way to go'.

Medical Science, the Tip or the Bone Crusher

A small group of six participants said that they wanted their body or organs either donated to medical science or in extreme cases simply ‘thrown on the tip’. The latter preference, while to contemporary readers might suggest a serious case of low self-esteem, has a long tradition, as French historian Phillippe Ariès explained in his study of changing attitudes to death:

Anonymity [in death] persisted until the eighteenth century . . . The bodies of the poor and of the young children of the rich, who were treated like the poor, were sewn into shrouds . . . and thrown into big, common graves . . . [while] those who drowned in the rivers or were the anonymous victims of disasters . . . [were] left to rot on the dump like animals, executed criminals, or the excommunicate.²³

The six from the sample canvassed thoughts about the disposal of their body that ranged from having it sent to the blood and bone factory, the fairly standard intention to have it sent to a medical faculty, to throwing it under a bush or into a rubbish bin.

Edward (aged 77) from the ACT planned to include in his will instructions to have his cadaver sent to a university medical school, for reasons of economy:

The main thing is to send the body to the medical school for the dissecting table, partly to avoid something I know [which is that] weddings are one of the great expenses and funerals are a completely unnecessary expense at the other end. I have no idea why people spend money on funerals and gravestones and all of that stuff . . . It is a complete waste of money to start having coffins and all of that.

Aware that not all of the cadaver can be put to use, he noted, ‘that they will want to do something with the left-overs’. And his answer was that many people would want a service of some sort: ‘the relatives are very uneasy about it, so they have these ‘thank-you’ ceremonies’. While arranging to have his cadaver donated to the medical school was his intention at the time of interview, he mentioned also that this was his second option: ‘My view is to send it to the blood and bone factory but I don’t know that they are up to that’.

Other participants who like Edward regarded any fuss about how their body should be disposed as unnecessary included Johann (aged 52) from England whose view included an environmental consideration: ‘I would actually prefer my body to be dumped on a compost heap where it could do some good rather than taking up urban space in a cemetery’; and Warren

23 Ariès *The Hour*, p. 207.

(aged 50) from Western Australia who reported his partner's view: 'If he could be put in a rubbish bin, he would be happy with that'.

Finally, there was Damon who referred to an episode of the Oprah Winfrey television programme that he had seen when he was 15 and realized that his remains could be converted into an object of material value:

They were talking about death and one of the things they could do and can still do was like when you cremated, they take your ashes and make them into a diamond. And I am like, "That's fabulous", because I immediately thought of like Victorian mourning jewellery. And there is a little part of me that just goes, "I can't think of anything better than being turned into some horrible jewellery that then has to be passed on because this is great-uncle" ... [I know that] you can make conditional gifts, so, part of them getting my estate is conditional on that they accept this tiara, which is written into there. The wording is something like, "As far as is practically possible, I must be made into a diamond and placed into a tiara. And this money is set aside for that". I know it is a semi-terrible thing, but there is a little part of me that is like what a fabulous story for future generations to tell. You have got to set up your pranks in advance [*Laughs*].

As comical or improbable as Damon's thoughts about his remains might seem, a similar proposal was considered immediately after the French Revolution when in 1801 the public servant Pierre Giraud suggested that the ashes of cremated people could be turned into glass and then made into 'commemorative medals'.²⁴

CONCLUSION

The fact that religious or non-religious funeral services were relatively unimportant to those interviewed for this book suggested that they did not consider any form of public ceremony necessary to celebrate or mark their life's end. Many explained their decision in light of the common-place understanding that funeral were 'for the living' or that, as they were not going to be present, they were not particularly concerned about how or whether their life was celebrated or marked. It was not clear, however, if behind this sentiment lay a belief that they did not have a claim, as the French historian Lacquer argued in the case of socialists and Jews in London's Highgate cemetery, 'to announce their presence and meaning by occupying space'.

While there was no evidence to suggest that the men regarded their lives as less worthy or less valuable than those of others, such as heads of state or

²⁴ Laqueur *Work of the Dead*, p. 527.

government, senior members of academia, business, finance, media or religion who seemed to require, like the paterfamilias of Victorian novels, to have their lives monumentally celebrated in obituaries in traditional print newspapers like *The New York Times* or *The Times*, could it be that the stigma of sexual outsiders can persist into death and that gay men continue to see themselves as unworthy? Another explanation is that, as that at the time of interview all but three of the sample were likely to die without immediate descendants,²⁵ did the fact of not belonging to the 'tree of man' mean that there was less need for commemoration? A third explanation as to the relative unassuming end that many of the participants envisaged for themselves is that their views represented a type of gay man who was content with his life's achievements and who had no need for fanfare or pomp to mark its end, and that his achievements in the spheres of the domestic and the intimate were sufficient and would stand alone.

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25 Two of the three were in their 80s, the third was in his 50s and all had children from previous relationships with women. There were no gay fathers in the sample who had with their male partner or husband arranged for children through surrogacy or adoption. See Biodata in Appendix 2.

[lifeandstyle/2019/jul/09/greener-way-to-go-eco-friendly-way-dispose-of-body-burial-cremation](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jul/09/greener-way-to-go-eco-friendly-way-dispose-of-body-burial-cremation)

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