

What Remains By Caitlin Doughty End Well Symposium, December 6, 2018

Start of Transcript

[Crowd Applauding]

Hello! We're here today learning about technology and design and end-of-life innovations. I'm not gonna talk about that. I'm gonna talk about my great life's passion which is convincing you to hang out with more corpses.

[Crowd Laughing]

Now this is probably where I should say, "Of course, it is much more nuance and complicated than that." But it's not really. It's just yeah, get you to hang out with more corpses. I will say though, okay one caveat, I am talking about the dead bodies of your family and your loved ones, not just random dead bodies. So that's fair, that's the caveat.

So why am I so passionate about this? Ten years ago, I entered a job in the funeral industry, and that's the industry I've been in **[00:01:00]** ever since then. And almost immediately after I've started in this job, I noticed a somewhat sinister pattern emerging. So let's talk about someone dying. Let's say mom. [Chuckles] A voice from beyond, perfect!

[Everybody Laughing]

Okay, let's say someone die, let's say mom. Mom died at a hospice, she died at home, she died in a nursing home, she died at a hospital. In the hours following her death, there's an absolutely incredible opportunity that you have for ritual in and around her dead body. And by ritual, all I mean is some physical action, either with your own body or with the body mixed with a thought or an idea or a belief. And rituals can run the gamut if you're a deeply spiritual or religious person **[00:02:00]**. Ritual can mean singing or chanting or praying. If you're a more secular A religious person, ritual can mean holding her hand, washing her feet, brushing her hair, telling stories. But what we do know, is that something sort of sacred happens during that time and listen, I am a pretty secular person myself but I have to borrow words from religion to describe the awe that can take place in those few hours. However long you're comfortable being with the body.

Why is it so powerful? I think there are a few reasons. The first reason is that you're looking down at a body that is starting to physically change after the moment of death. Their skin is growing stiff, it's going down to room temperature. Their features are sinking, and with that physical proof, you have to start realising this person is dead. They are no longer part **[00:03:00]** of my community. They're no longer part of my life. Any relationship that I continue to have with them will not be the same as it was before. The second reason is a little more selfish but I think equally important which is looking down at a dead body, you realise as they are, so you too will be one day. And how are you living your life that reflects that? How aware are you of your own mortality? And the fact that you're gonna die. Can you leave the room at the end of this experience with a different way of thinking about the world you're inhabiting?

And the last thing I never really could put words to this until I had a conversation with a rabbi, and he said, "It sounds like what you're saying is an important reason to stay with a dead body because it gives you time and space to mourn for all the people you'd never got a chance to mourn for." That can **[00:04:00]** be people in your family that you didn't get to be there for the death, or it could be people you've never even met, but still feel a connection to. So we know

that being with a dead body is just a simple act of being with the dead body can have these profound implications.

But here's the somewhat sinister narrative that I was talking about: that almost never happened. What does happen is mom dies, it was an expected death and I'm not talking about traumatic deaths or unexpected death, it's an expected death which most deaths are, but it is treated as an emergency. It is treated as "Pick up the phone. Call the funeral home. Call the funeral director. Get them here right now." And I'm gonna be brutally honest with you, in the 21st century, the second you pick up the phone and call a funeral home to take over, all of that opportunity [00:05:00] for ritual is essentially lost to you.

When the funeral home comes, then picks up mom, one of the first two things is likely to happen. First thing is that she is cremated or buried and you do not see her again. And that's okay, that's your choice. Second thing, is that they are going to chemically preserve her, embalm her, put her in makeup, put her in a suit or a dress, put her in a casket and present her to you in a wake. And I've spent most of my career thinking about these two different ways of hanging out with a corpse, essentially. The first option being seeing mom as she actually is immediately after death, spending time with her, sitting her having that kind of space and time around it, versus what happens at a modern American funeral home, with the embalming, with the makeup, with all that [00:06:00] and the very different "user experiences" to borrow a Silicon Valley term. User experiences that people have with these two different ways of being with a dead body. The first way that I was talking about, just sitting with a dead body, honestly I wouldn't keep advocating for this if it didn't have the response rate or approval rating of like, puppies and chocolates.

[Crowd Laughing]

People who have done this with their loved ones come and say it was life-changing. "I would absolutely do this again. I had no idea I could do this!" It's an introvert's dream. You have the space and the time to really feel your feelings and start going on your grief journey, whatever it looks like for you. Whereas the modern American wake, a lot of millennials, a lot of gen-exrs, especially tell me that it makes them pretty uncomfortable. They show up and all these people are there so they're essentially on display [00:07:00] as a close family member, they feel they have to perform. There's a time limit because the funeral director only have so much time allotted for you to be with the body, and they walk up to the casket and they see mom in there and they tap her hand and then just kind of back away and sit down. There's not really an opportunity built in there for ritual.

Most of you in this room probably have some sense that it didn't always used to be this way. Until the 20th century, there wasn't a funeral industry. Especially not a 20 billion dollar funeral industry... and to maintain a 20 billion dollar funeral industry, the industry can't really let people know that the first option is available to them. They cannot really let people know that there's this option with an approval rating of puppies and chocolate. They cannot really let people know that there is a frankly free option [00:08:00] available to them to sit and have ritual and be with the dead body.

So a lot of what I do is just reinforcing people again and again, it is safe and legal to be with your own dead. It is safe and legal, safe and legal. And it's difficult when a family doesn't know that but it's even more difficult when the medical professionals we work with don't know that. I've said this again and again: hospice nurses, trauma nurses, nursing home workers, these are some of our greatest allies in this fight to have this continuum of care for people, through dying and death. But they can also be our greatest enemies if someone in higher up has told them that information or another funeral director has told them that information.

Let me give you a story of a time that this really did work, this continuum of care. There was a young girl who died [00:09:00] who's only 13 years old. Her death was expected but obviously still tragic for her family. Because the hospital and our funeral home were in communication, what we're able to do for the family is when she died at the hospital they allowed her to stay in their morgue under refrigeration for a few days while everything got ready and we came and picked her up and brought her home to her family. Over that next night, her family stayed up with her, they dressed her, they washed her, they put her in the casket. They didn't want anybody else to do this. This was their little girl. They wanted to be the ones who did it. The next morning, they put her in a minivan and off they drove up to Central California where they had a family plot for her to be buried. And that worked only because the medical establishment and the funeral establishment were on the same page, with the family taking that kind of control.

So [00:10:00] I'm really excited about the future. I am excited about technology. I am excited about the way we're moving forward. I'm excited about this continuum of care but I think especially for people in this room, let — yes! Let's think about dying well but let's also think about being dead well which is not as catchy.

[Crowd Laughing]

I see that. It's maybe not the you know, branding I would choose but [Chuckles] thinking about it, you can have this empowered, informed, best medical care has to offer death but if it just drops off from there, there's this whole family left behind that is not getting the well part of dying well and being dead well. So I'm excited about the technology that presents in the dying process but I wanna encourage you to think that the best answer for after the death occurs might be this very ancient idea [00:11:00] that humans have been doing for tens of thousands of years which is just simply being present with the dead body. Thank you.

[Crowd Applauding]

End of Transcript