

Putting the Fun in Funeral



Attendees of a “fun-eral” aren’t afraid to talk about death with positivity and openness. Credit Credit Devin Yalkin for The New York Times

By John Leland

- June 24, 2018

[Times Insider](#) delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how news, features and opinion come together at The New York Times.

When Times reporters take on social phenomena, it’s often instructive to imagine what headline The Onion would put on the story. For an [article](#) I wrote this weekend about the positive death movement, a loose effort to bring more open discussion about death, I did not have to imagine. The Onion had already written it: “[World Death Rate Holding Steady At 100 Percent.](#)”

As they say in law, caveat reporter.

But the truth is, I welcomed the chance to meet people who were interested in death and dying. I’ve spent much of the last three years

writing about [people near the end of life](#), and about how learning from them to [embrace my mortality](#) had made my life better.

Also, I had lots to learn. For instance, did you know that cremated remains contain no ashes, only pulverized bones, and that plants cannot grow in them because they are too alkaline? I didn't either, until I attended a class taught by a funeral director named [Amy Cunningham](#), who directed her students to a product called [Let Your Love Grow](#) that makes remains suitable for plants.

The challenge for the article was getting readers to engage with a story about how Americans refuse to engage with the topic. On the plus side, it was a rare chance to interview someone at her own funeral — or, as Shatzi Weisberger pronounced it, her FUN-eral.

Ms. Weisberger, I should add, is quite healthy and in no hurry to shuffle off, though she did worry that she might die before the FUN-eral, which would have ruined everything.

There was no goth music or heavy black makeup among the people I met, no moping. More often than not, there was joy.

“The closer I get to death, the more alive I feel,” said Shana Deane, a certified death doula, who sits with dying people in hospice.

“What a gift to have all your attention on something,” she said. “That’s like, people try to find transcendence in sex or orgasm. This was all my attention. And it was heaven. That’s an antidote to the fear.”

Not everyone embraced the term “positive death.” Matilda Garrido, who quit her job as a law school administrator to pursue a degree in thanatology (the study of death) online, felt the term might offend people who are in grief. “How can it be positive to lose your husband, your child, your parent?” she said. “It’s not positive, but it is inevitable. So I’m a member of the death acceptance movement, rather than the death positive movement.”

Still, she said, since she started studying death, rather than creeping people out, the subject drew people to her. “It’s like going to a party and saying you’re a car mechanic: Everybody comes out of the woodwork and

they want to talk about this or that, or they want your advice,” she said. “It just opens up a conversation immediately.”

At the end of my reporting for the article, there remained one unanswered question — besides the [big one](#), that is. For Ms. Weisberger’s FUN-eral, guests decorated a cardboard coffin with drawings or messages in colored marker.

But after the event, what to do with the coffin? Ms. Cunningham, who supplied it, had originally thought she might donate it for some needy person’s cremation, but the jaunty messages — “Let the fun (eral) begin!” — ruled that out.

What’s more forlorn than a coffin with no body?

Two weeks after the FUN-eral, the coffin remains in Ms. Weisberger’s studio apartment, folded flat to take up less space. She did not find its presence gloomy, she said, and she liked showing it to people who missed the FUN-eral.

“It’s nice,” she said. “It’s very comforting. But I won’t mind when it’s gone, because it takes up too much room.”

When her day does come, Ms. Weisberger plans to be buried in a shroud and no coffin — she ruled out cremation because it is too polluting. The coffin at the FUN-eral, Ms. Cunningham wrote in an email message, was “more like a card that everyone could sign.”

In the meantime, even after attending numerous classes about death and singing at her own funeral, Ms. Weisberger said she still had not come to terms with the end. Dying, yes; nonexistence, not so much.

“Even though I’m well aware of my mortality, I can’t imagine not being here,” she said. “It seems absurd.”

And with that, she turned the conversation to a chorus she belongs to. They’re singing Stephen Sondheim’s “Company” next.

So [here’s to the ladies who lunch](#). If Ms. Weisberger gets her way, maybe they’ll do so at the [death cafe](#).

