



Funeral Consumers Alliance of Idaho

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF THE FUNERAL BUSINESS

Dana Milbank's article, "Funeral Business Feeling Six Feet Under" ran on April 1 in the *Washington Post*, but in spite of the date and being riddled with bad puns, it did appear to be news and not humorous fiction. It seems that rather than being immune from economic cycles, "funeral homes are discovering that their clients' thrift—sheet-metal urns instead of bronze caskets, cheese-and-cracker nibbles instead of traditional funeral

luncheons—is positively killing profits."

The video included as a sidebar on the *Washington Post* website, "Washington Sketch: Death and Taxes" has a decided April Fool's flavor to it, but again, it appears to be news of an actual event, showing parts of a press conference at the National Funeral Directors Association annual conference. Gaby Bruna made the report of the press conference far more entertaining than being in that room could have been.

We recommend watching the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode "Six People, No Music" either before or after, to keep the funeral business in proper perspective. It's available free of charge on hulu (<http://www.hulu.com/watch/52602/alfred-hitchcock-presents-six-people-no-music>).

FCAI ANNUAL MEETING

The Library! at Collister
(Corner of State St. and Collister in Boise)
Saturday, May 16, 12:30pm

You are invited to our annual meeting. We'll have a brief business meeting, followed by a presentation by Mary Cecilia Smith:

"High Octane"

Many people, including Picasso, Pablo Casals, Arthur Rubenstein, and Linus Pauling, did extraordinary things in their nineties. Come for a chance to be reinvigorated and inspired by what's possible.

There will be a question and answer session, and refreshments will be served. The meeting is open to the public and is free of charge.

"What is there left to confront but the great simplicities? I never tire of bird-song and sky and weather. I dream of an art so transparent that you can look through and see the world."

Stanley J. Kunitz (1905-2006)

SPOKANE MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION MERGES WITH PEOPLE'S MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION

People's Memorial Association (PMA), the oldest and by far the largest of Funeral Consumers Alliance affiliates has announced that the Spokane Memorial Association will become a part of their organization, effective May 1, 2009. SMA was founded ten years before the FCAI (originally known as the Idaho Memorial Association), in 1962 and has 3,000 members in eastern Washington and north Idaho. PMA will now serve the entire state of Washington, having merged with the Memorial Society of Central Washington in 2004. They have contracts with more than 20 funeral homes in Washington, and started the People's Memorial Funeral Cooperative in Seattle two years ago, to provide cremation and burial services in the Seattle/King County for PMA members and for the general public.

LYNCH VS. FEO UPDATE

As we reported last fall, the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Idaho was named as a defendant in a lawsuit brought by Thomas Lynch and Lynch & Co. Funeral Directors PLLC, filed in U.S. District Court in Michigan. Lisa Carlson, the non-profit Funeral Ethics Organization that Carlson founded, and the national Funeral Consumers Alliance were also named as defendants.

Further discussion with the Plaintiffs' counsel satisfied him that we were not properly a party to the suit (having no business in Michigan), and we understand that he has stated on the record with the Court that we are to be dismissed from the suit, although we have not yet seen official paperwork to that effect.

The mills of Justice grind slowly; perhaps this fall we'll be able to report how fine.

Conscious Dying

Kate Riley

Death, in all its mystery, is still a stage of growth—the final stage. As human beings, we can embrace this mystery. In doing so, it is possible to light the way, not only for those who are passing but for those who remain. Each of us has the capacity to enrich our life through our unique experiences, individually and collectively. Death's doorway can be an open invitation for encountering unexpected gifts of grace, deepening our life beyond any rational explanation.

Let's face it. We live in a death-denying society, even though in many ways that is slowly changing. One change is commonly referred to as "conscious dying." By exercising free will, we have the ability to choose the way we *view*, *approach* and *deal* with this final stage of development. This is not a new trend. In fact, if anything it is a trend that is resurfacing. Members of the Baby Boom generation are not only dealing with their parent's deaths but are facing the prospect of their own.

Where do we begin? One way is to ask yourself how you *view* death and dying. Most people can't even talk about it, let alone think about it. What are your personal views? Are you willing to change your relationship with death? What if this could alleviate some of the fear surrounding death and dying? People who exhibit fear of dying often increase the fear in the person who is dying. How do we deal with this common reaction? How do we face the fear?

Next, look closely at the way you *approach* death and dying. Many families are turning away from institutional (hospital) settings and returning to more traditional ways. Until the mid-1800s, people died at home. Fortunately, many physicians are now supporting families who choose to bring their loved ones home to die. This also saves families from exorbitant costs that escalate in the final months, weeks, even days while being cared for in hospitals and care facilities. Hospice is a wonderful organization that can help support families through this transition. Would you consider alternatives, knowing you had support and resources to pull from?

For decades now, people haven't wanted to *deal* with death and dying. Has this led to more institutional deaths? At the same time, the funeral industry expanded; perhaps taking the burden and/or responsibility away from the family members. The cost of dying keeps rising, often leaving substantial debt to the surviving family members.

I spent most of my life struggling, even agonizing, over death. I couldn't be with the mystery no matter how hard I tried. But then all that changed. It was during a time when I made the choice to approach my father's death consciously, independent of whether he chose to do the same, finding comfort in being supported by my sisters as they

too made the same choice. Someone asked me, *how did you arrive at that place?* It was nothing any of us planned ahead of time, it just happened. It was as natural as the sun rises each and every day. My father's passing taught me that by being totally present—heart and soul, often in complete silence—I could invariably and simultaneously reach acceptance and experience very little, if any, resistance. Effort? Yes, some. That is what it takes to be conscious.

We don't know how or when we will die. But we *will* die each and every one of us. So take the time—closely examine your thoughts, your choices, and the many resources available. Most people aren't even aware that you *are* allowed to die at home and you *are* allowed to plan and arrange for home funerals. Don't wait for a crisis. Your action will make a difference.

Kate Riley is an author in Boise, Idaho.

THE BUSINESS OF THE FCAI

Your alliance has a tiny core of volunteers who do its work. (Hint: all their names can be found in this copy of the newsletter.) Over the years, a few dedicated souls have taken on "everything" for a while, and others have done "most everything." It's not a lot of work, but it's regular: responding to telephone inquiries, publicizing the information and service we offer, checking the post office box, balancing the checkbook, sending out new member packets, surveying funeral homes once a year, keeping track of the Board of Morticians, the Legislature, industry groups, publishing a newsletter twice a year.

Did you ever wonder how it all happens? Did it seem like magic? Did it seem like a near-impossibly good deal for that once-in-a-lifetime membership fee? If something seems too good to be true, it probably is. We can't keep doing what we do without your help once in a while.

WHAT CAN ONE PERSON DO?

We're glad you asked. You could volunteer to help us maintain our mailing lists, or research a topic of interest for a newsletter article. You could help spread the word by asking for a handful of our brochures and giving them to family members, or neighbors, or friends.

If you're willing and able, and have the interest, you could volunteer to serve on the Nominating Committee, or on the Board of Directors. Have you taken your turn? Maybe this the time. Give us a call, write us an email, come to the annual meeting, lend us a hand.

THE BUS AND ITS FINAL STOP

Kate Riley

Pulling the black suitcase from my storage room in the garage, I wipe sweat from my brow. I'm doing my best to remain in the moment. For a week now, I've placed three different outfits across my bed; all black, along with a few colorful accessories, black heels, a dress hat, my pearl necklace. Every night I remove the outfits from my bed only to replace them in the morning. I study them throughout the day.

It was so sudden. Two weeks ago, my father had taken a fall. He and his wife were preparing for a long weekend at their summer home in the mountains, not a ride in an ambulance to Baptist Hospital in Jacksonville, Florida. I received the call while on assignment in central Idaho. After the two hour drive home I called his hospital room directly.

"Dad?"

"Hey!"

"Are you okay?"

"Well, no, actually I'm not. I blew it!"

"What happened?"

"Oh, I had a little too much to drink. We had planned a trip for Memorial Day weekend and I was packing. I walked into the bathroom and everything started spinning. I fell. My neck hurts so badly!"

"What do they say..."

"Well, I'm having a CAT scan tomorrow. Something about... I might have broken my neck." After a long pause, his voice weary, he says, "Kate, I just can't do this anymore. I can't stay here."

The conversation continues for a bit longer and I reassure him I'll call him in the morning. I pick up on what his words might really have meant—something in the tone.

The next morning I call again. His voice isn't as weary. He's excited and seems eager to tell me something. Slurring somewhat, he sounds as though he's had a stroke although seems very clear in articulating his thoughts. I listen carefully, more carefully than I've ever listened to anyone.

"We're supposed to go fishing later..."

"Really?" He throws me for a loop with this one.

"Yeah," he replies with renewed vigor.

I ask where his wife is and he tells me she's fine and staying in a hotel.

"Where are you, Dad?"

"Oh, I'm on a bus." I know he's in room #3208 because I've just dialed the hospital and asked to be connected to that room number.

"On a bus? Where are you headed?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Jim's here though, and so is Herman. In fact, Herman's waiting for me. Well, they're all waiting for me. When I'm ready, they tell me I can drive! You should see the fish! The fish here are beautiful, all different colors! You just wouldn't believe it! Oh, I have to go now!" He means it and I try not to panic. Jim and Herman were dear friends of his who have both passed on.

"Well, do you want me to call you back later?"

"Yeah... that will be fine."

"How about if I call you at five this evening?" I suddenly need to set a definitive time.

"Well, let me see now. Five o'clock... no don't call me at five. The bus still has one more stop to make and that final stop is scheduled right at five o'clock."

Standing with the phone pressed against my head, I go numb. My father is telling me he's on a bus, the bus has one more stop to make, and then what? He seems so clear about everything. I've heard of people who are close to dying talk about "leaving" on a bus. He fell just two days ago. He was healthy, vibrant, a man on the move.

We are both left in silence, holding our phones, and I wonder if this is the last time I will be speaking to my father. He tells me he loves me. I tell him I love him. Everything seems perfect with him. I'm two thousand miles away and somehow I can't hang up.

"Shall I call you back before or after five, dad?"

"You can call me anytime; just don't call me *at* five."

"Okay. Are you sure?" I feel like I'm hanging on for dear life. *His* life.

I can tell he's smiling with confidence when he responds, "Of course, I'm sure!"

"Love you," suddenly I feel like I can't say this enough.

"Love you, kiddo," his voice clear, the moment surreal, perfect, sanctioned.

Keeping a vigilant eye on the clock for the remainder of the day, I become increasingly impatient and pick up the receiver dialing his room number. His wife answers. She's been crying. My mind races to a bus stop. *The* bus stop. Did he get off? Did he board? Where is he? Something about... "Oh, they took him to do a CAT scan and something happened during the..." She can't finish the sentence but later I find out that a "Code Blue" was called an hour earlier and they revived him. *He was boarding the bus at five o'clock.* She tells me they are now in the process of moving him to a different unit.

Two weeks later, I'm flying to Florida to visit my father who has undergone neck surgery for a broken neck. He's paralyzed from the waist down, hooked up to all kinds of equipment, tubes, and a ventilator—something he never wanted. I'm not sure if he will try to board the bus again before I get there. I pack for a funeral just in case.

Days later, I sit on the edge of his bed; the room is dark but I can still see him. I study his face as he sleeps peacefully to the steady rhythm of the ventilator. I have never been so present with anything except maybe giving birth as those four days spent bedside. My hand reaches up and finds its place over his heart where it remains there for quite some time. And, in this space of holy silence, in deepest communion and appreciation, I release him. Tears surface from a deep place where sadness and joy seem to reside together. He stirs, as if in recognition of the moment. His eyes smile with that familiar twinkle he has been known for and I realize that dying is really an intimate encounter with life.

Over the course of seven grueling weeks, my father made several attempts to board that bus. Each and every time, a Code Blue was called; the crash cart and professional team faithfully carried out their duties. And then finally, the day arrives. I can see him, and his buddies Jim and Herman, with absolute clarity. My father happily boards the bus, takes the helm, and goes fishing.

**F u n e r a l C o n s u m e r s
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OREGON CONSIDERS REGULATING “DEATH CARE CONSULTANTS”

Oregon Senator Vicki Walker has introduced Senate Bill 796 in our neighboring state, seeking to expand the purview of its State Mortuary and Cemetery Board to include anyone who “assists another person with death care arrangements for payment, but does not practice as a funeral service practitioner,” including offering “consultations or workshops to individuals or groups regarding funeral or final disposition services” for payment. Licensing from the Board would require passing an examination conducted by it, and meeting “other requirements” set by the Board. The legislation specifies none of the specifics, leaving those up to the Board.

The national Funeral Consumers Alliance has responded to the proposed infringement on the right of free speech:

“No lawmaking body has the authority to demand that citizens pass a test and register with the state before offering informational workshops. Neither does charging a

fee to attendees strip a citizen of his right to offer them. Read plainly, this provision would make it illegal for ordinary citizens, consumer advocates such as those of us in FCA, or business owners in Oregon, to address a group of people on topics relating to funeral planning, cost-saving alternatives, building one’s own casket, or any similar topic. To be candid, we are astonished that any lawmaker would contemplate such unconstitutional restrictions.”

The target of the Oregon legislation is presumably not consumer non-profits such as the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Oregon, but rather the increasing number of those who offer guidance or consultation as “home funeral guides” or “death midwives.” Many of the advocacy and educational functions the FCA and its affiliates perform would fall under the description of Oregon SB 796 however.

As we go to press, public hearings and work sessions on the bill are being held.