Let's talk about death and dying

It's time for an open and frank conversation about:

- how death has become a lucrative industry in Australia, and
- how we, as citizens, can be active players on the field, rather than passive spectators from the sidelines.

Most people would like to die at home, but more than 70% die in an institutional setting like a hospital.

In the past, when life expectancy meant death by 40 or 50, death was a more familiar and visible event. Our beginnings and our endings weren't separated by as many years and our extended families were close by. We had a good idea of how we lived and we were there for each other when we died.

Before hospitals and nursing homes, dying and death happened in the home and the community of close knit family and friends rallied around to deal with the deceased and attend to the needs of the grieving family.

Medical intervention can now put off dying and delay a natural death such that we risk becoming a death denying society. Some would argue we are already that way inclined; placing unrealistic expectations on Intensive Care specialists to work miracles.

Although dying and death is all around us – with regular reports in newspapers and on the nightly news bulletins – we have become desensitized to its meaning for us as individuals. It's something that happens to someone else. We don't internalize it in any meaningful way. We don't plan or make arrangements for what is inevitable. We tell ourselves that time is on our side. Why load ourselves up with thinking about death when chances are we're nowhere near knocking on deaths door.

Many of the reports we read, see and hear about, are of people dying in tragic and unforeseen circumstances. For these people, if plans had been put in place, at least some of the anguish would be mitigated, in that a conversation would have been had and the wishes of the deceased would have been recorded.

In those cases where people have had a conversation and Advance Care Directives and Wills recorded, then families have been better placed to deal with the situation, come to terms with the consequences and make the necessary decisions according to the wishes of the person who has died.

Even if a death is not the outcome, but rather a debilitating injury, having had a conversation and preparing a plan, leaves everyone better able to deal with the immediate situation and whatever needs to take place next.

To not plan is to leave each of us vulnerable to those who do plan.

As the population ages, a whole range of industries are planning for how they can corner a piece of the death pie. The pharmaceutical industry, the legal profession, privately operated cemeteries and crematoriums; they most certainly all have plans for us. Beyond that, whether it be floral tributes, catering supplies, coffins, funeral services or memorial plaques, the people behind each of these industries have plans for getting us to buy their products – mostly at the last minute, when we are in no fit state to haggle over price and probably before we have had the opportunity to discuss matters with close relatives. In many cases decisions are made before the will of the deceased has been fully comprehended. After the event it may well be clear that Uncle Johnny or Aunty Mavis would have preferred a non-religious service or no flowers with the money going to charity or a simple cloth shroud rather than an expensive coffin.

But with no plans and no prior discussion, it's no wonder we make hasty decisions, and it's no wonder that in addition to our grieving we also have to live with regrets that include not honoring the final wishes of our dearly departed loved ones.

It has been said that if **we** don't have goals for us, we can be sure **other people** most certainly do (have goals for us). Worse still, we are targets, ripe for the picking. Those other goals are most likely to put business interests ahead of yours or my family's interests. And those targets are aimed at signing up people without goals and plans for their future wellbeing. We become prey for the carefully crafted sales pitch that makes it sound otherwise. But rest assured, the costings and subsequent invoices for services provided, will most likely indicate a very different story.

Much of what is provided by third party outsiders is well within the capacity of ordinary people to deal with and perhaps even provide for themselves - or at least do the behind the scenes arranging themselves.

Let's face it. The ordinary people to whom this paper refers are in many respects very capable and skilled in their chosen field of expertise, who, come these trying times deem themselves to be unable to perform what in many cases are uncomplicated organisational tasks. In other circumstances they would deal with such situations as a matter of day-to-day 'housekeeping'. They would be competent practitioners. They would relish the challenges and carry out the duties required with distinction.

It's a strange twist of events, that while we might be distraught, professional service providers are relishing the challenge and carrying out their death business duties with distinction.

For centuries families took care of their own. We need to remind ourselves, that prior to the funeral industry as we know it today, the undertaker was a local bloke, known to all and sundry who kept a horse and cart or a ute out the back, for the purpose of moving the coffin from home to church and church to cemetery. He was little different to a furniture removalist, except he moved deceased members of his local community to the grave site of their family's choosing at the local village or town burial site.

But for reasons outside the brief of this article, we have been told – and we believe it - that we are out of our depth, helpless, disabled almost, when someone is dying or has died. That we should put our affairs in the hands of professionals who know better than us what is good for us. After all, they've been in the business for 30 odd years and they know all the right people – the tricks of the trade, so to speak. They might even offer a one stop shop. No need to think about it. All we need to do is turn up – very neat and clean and technical.

Mind you, the next generation might take this a step further. As Charles Cowling, author of *The Good Funeral Guide* (book and UK website) points out, "The disempowered mourner poses a great threat to funerals. Why have em? What good do they do, really? Would it make any difference if I didn't have one?"

But there is another side to the story. Time and again, people who take an active role in end-of-life planning and decision-making, say it is one of the most uplifting and worthwhile things they have ever done.

It can be cathartic, an integral part of emotional healing. To be an active player, rather than a passive spectator, with few exceptions leaves us all the richer for the experience - better able to face the next trial or tribulation with greater understanding and resolve. Not only that, we become pillars of strength for others who are yet to walk the valleys and shadows of death.

As the lyrics to the song sung by Bill Withers go:

Lean on me when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on
For it won't be long
'Til I'm gonna need somebody to lean on.

This article is not in any way intended to cast aspersions on those good and honourable people within all the professions who put their customers first and do their utmost to meet the needs of those who seek out their services. But we should be in no doubt that there are too many people only too happy to take advantage of their fellow men and women who are ill prepared, unduly trusting and unaware of their rights. Folks who are in no fit state to ask the right questions let alone make decisions on the spur of the moment. At a time when a modicum of assertiveness would go a long way, the situation renders them / us, unable to call on our normal sense of healthy questioning or skepticism.

Is there something that might spur us into action? Could we indulge in a little self flattery perhaps, such as calling on those good Aussie traditions of mateship, resourcefulness and self-reliance? Tom Lynch – author of *The Good Funeral* - likes to talk of the importance of shoulder and shovel work. While this could imply grave digging, it's more a case of shouldering some of the responsibilities, offering practical help. Parents implore the youth of the day to get their hands dirty. Maybe it's time to practice what we preach.

So let's talk about death and dying, while we still have all our faculties about us and before we become sitting ducks – targets no less - for those who have plans for us, when we have failed to put in place plans for ourselves.

To do otherwise is to leave ourselves vulnerable at a most vulnerable time in our lives.

Stuart Carter
30th September 2013

Further reading
Sue **Brayne**: *The D-Word, Talking About Dying. A guide for relatives, friends and carers.* Continuum Books. 2010
Charles **Cowling**: *The Good Funeral Guide*. Continuum Books. 2010

Michael **Dunn**: *The Good Death Guide, Everything you wanted to know but were afraid to ask.* Pathways Books. 2000
Sue **Gill** & John **Fox**: *The Dead Good Funerals Book.* (Dead Good Guides) Engineers of the Imagination. 1997
Robert **Larkin**: *Funeral Rights: What the death-care industry doesn't want you to know*
PilotLight: *Dying to Know, Bringing death to life*. 2010 (for the Dying Matters Coalition)
Gail **Rubin**: *A Good Goodbye, Funeral planning for those who don't plan to die.* Light Tree Press. 2010
Harold **Schechter**: *The Whole Death Catalog, A lively guide to the bitter end.* Ballantine Books. 2009

Shovel-and-shoulder work

Thursday, 21 October 2010

By Charles Cowling
The Good Funeral Guide.
http://www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk/2010/10/shovel-and-shoulder-work/

The words that follow are by Thomas Lynch, a hero to so many of us in the UK. (In the US there are those who reckon him paternalistic, but we don't need to go into that. It's complicated.)

> Funerals are about the living and the dead — the talk and the traffic between them … in the face of mortality we need to stand and look, watch and wonder, listen and remember … This is what we do funerals for — not only to dispose of our dead, but to bear witness to their lives and times among us, to affirm the difference their living and dying makes among kin and community, and to provide a vehicle for the healthy expression of grief and faith, hope and wonder. The value of a funeral proceeds neither from how much we spend nor from how little. A death in the family is an existential event, not only or entirely a medical, emotional, religious or retail one.
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> "An act of sacred community theater," Thomas Long calls the funeral — this "transporting" of the dead from this life to the next. "We move them to a further shore. Everyone has a part in this drama." Long — theologian, writer, thinker and minister — speaks about the need for "a sacred text, sacred community and sacred space," to process the deaths of "sacred persons." The dead get to the grave or fire or tomb while the living get to the edge of a life they must learn to live without those loved ones. The transport is ritual, ceremonial, an amalgam of metaphor and reality, image and imagination, process and procession, text and scene set, script and silence, witness and participation — theater, "sacred theater," indeed.
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> "Once you put a dead body in the room, you can talk about anything," Alan Ball [creator of the HBO show Six Feet Under] wrote to me once in a note.