

If we don't want a run of the mill, standardised funeral, this primer is for us.

## A Direct-It-Yourself (DIY)



# Earth & family-friendly funeral primer

## First of all

**What to do with the body of the deceased**  
—removed to a mortuary or kept at home?

**What kind of body disposal for the deceased**  
— Aquamation, Burial, Compost, Cremation, Science?

**What are our preferences, or were the preferences of the deceased, in terms of funeral style**  
— plain and simple or something else?

### Having sorted that out ...

Decide if there is to be a funeral with people turning up. If NOT, this is described as No Service, No Attendance (NSNA), where in most cases the body is cremated privately and the 'ashes' (cremains) are returned to the family.<sup>1</sup> No further arrangements required.

**If there IS to be a funeral**, the information contained here is intended to help people understand that they are **capable of doing all the things necessary to pull off a funeral that is dignified and respectful**, without all the expense involved in employing an external professional provider — otherwise known as a funeral director or undertaker located at a funeral premises, which is often a shop front for a large corporate business enterprise.

Knowing that family and friends are capable of making all the necessary arrangements and conducting the funeral service, what help would be appreciated to carry out these tasks?

Speak with the executor/s of the will to see if they would like to co-ordinate the funeral or have someone else help with what needs to be done, such as the following ...

- ♦ Selection of a coffin or casket or choice of a shroud - buy in or make or have made.
- ♦ Nominate a trusted person to be the funeral go-to-person i.e. Arranger / Event Organiser.
- ♦ Prepare a eulogy.
- ♦ Organise for a floral arrangement.
- ♦ Select a means of transport for the coffin from the mortuary to the site where the body will be disposed of.
- ♦ Book a venue for a memorial service or celebration and / or wake with refreshments.

NOTE: <sup>1</sup> In these cases where there is no funeral —known as No Service No Attendance (NSNA) as noted above— family and friends may choose to arrange a memorial event to be held at a later date at a venue of the families choosing.

## It runs in the family ... our ancestors did all this

IT WAS NOT ALL THAT LONG AGO that the body of the deceased person was laid out in the front room of the family home – the parlour – in some cases where they had died. This would be done by a death midwife who was one of the family or a close friend.

Family and friends came to visit, to pay respects, to say their last goodbyes, to show support.

The family would arrange for a service to be held at the local church.

The body would be wrapped in a blanket or sheet, placed in the parish coffin, held in common by the church community (stored in the porch at the front of the church in full view of parishioners).



A parish pall would be draped across the coffin, pall bearers would carry the coffin into the church.

After the service the coffin would be carried to the grave site, which was at the back of the church, to an area commonly known as God's Acre.

The grave hole was hand dug by the locals and after the wrapped body was lowered inside, filled in by these same people.

The same gravesites would be re-used on a rotating basis over the centuries. Headstones were not installed in those days.

No professional funeral industry in sight, because they didn't exist, because everything was done 'in-house' by people within the local community. Not complicated then, nor now, except we make it so.



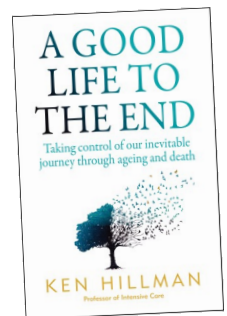
Hand made quilt draped over a coffin serves the same purpose as the parish pall.

## The point of the exercise

THE PURPOSE of a 'rite of passage' or funeral event is to get us through the immediate aftermath of a death.

It is to provide comfort and a sense of closure for the survivors of the deceased person, to help the living mourn and grieve; providing a space to say goodbye, celebrate the life of the deceased, and support one another; to acknowledge the death, express feelings in a healthy way; strengthen bonds with family, friends.

Whatever it happens to be: music, poems, songs, hymns, dancing, painting, long walks, long conversations in person or on the phone, it is 'whatever gets you there' that matters.



## Principles of a good death

TO SEE DEATH acknowledged as part of life.

TO BE TREATED with dignity, respect and privacy according to our wishes.

TO HAVE CLEAR honest and tailored information and good communication throughout illness and frailty.

*Family and community arranged funerals can tread lightly on the earth and not cost a packet of money.*

## Direct It Yourself after-death-care

>> See examples right >>

A DECEASED PERSON can be kept at home for up to 5 days, or held in a mortuary for up to 21 days until it's time for the funeral to be held and/or transport to a gravesite or furnace cremator or for liquid aquamation.

Moving / transfer of the deceased can be carried out by family and friends using a suitable private mode of carriage.

You can be buried in a shroud without a coffin. [Reference link.](#)



Burial or cremation can be in caskets made of willow, wool; cardboard coffins; biodegradable scattering tubes; biodegradable burial suits made from mushrooms; or burial shrouds made from biodegradable material, like 100% cotton, bamboo, linen, wool.

You can choose what coffin you would like or make one. You can buy a coffin or shroud directly from a supplier.

### Div.4—97: No refusal to cremate

A cremation authority must not, without reasonable excuse, refuse to accept a body for cremation. Ref: *NSW Public Health Regulation 2022 and Cemeteries and Crematoria NSW. 2022*

*Trees have been around for 60 million years. Conservation burial conserves native bushland and provides an area for human remains to be returned to the Earth—Bury Me at Taylor Hollow*

## Funeral choices

### ^ Community organised

LIGHTNING RIDGE Funeral Advisory Service, NSW—Community volunteer operated. Featured on [Back Roads, Series 4](#), ABC TV.

ISLAND WAYS: Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands—The body of the deceased is collected by members of the local funeral committee, who also organise and conduct the funeral in association with the family of the deceased.

*Colleen McCullough: Thorn Birds author farewelled in funeral on Norfolk Island.* by Adrian Raschella. 4 Feb 2015

TENDER FUNERALS, Port Kembla. Reference: *A community undertaking*, by Susan Chenery and Olivia Rousset. [Australian Story](#), 20.6.22

### ^ Family arranged

DAVID COOTE, Bungendore, NSW –



regenerating the land. Family arranged and conducted. Ref: [Australian Story: Hope Springs](#). ABC TV 2018

JOHN REID, Trentham, Victoria –



bakery owner and a lover of trees and bushland.

[Family arranged and conducted.](#)

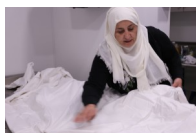
### ^ Cultural diversity

INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS—In some regions,



Indigenous traditions included the deceased being wrapped in a possum skin cloak, all handled by mob on country.

HINDU, JEWISH & MUSLIM TRADITIONS –



Faith community arranged, deceased wrapped in shroud at local temple, synagogue or mosque.

## Voice of experience Zenith Virago



I'VE SPENT 25 YEARS living in the Northern Rivers of NSW, working with people when they are dying, with their bodies when they are dead, and with their families. We really need to reclaim the death process.

Before there was a funeral industry there were always families taking care of their own – washing them, caring for them. Most people don't know that they can do it themselves.

You can go from the bed to the cremator, the bed to the grave, *without a professional person being involved*. There'll be a medical person, but that's it. None of it is rocket science. It's just not what the funeral industry is doing. Their agenda is how to make a profit. The funeral industry is a corporate business and they are only links in the chain which people don't understand. Like the coffin manufacturer, the funeral director, the cemetery, the crematorium. That's a monopoly. And it's a huge industry turning over \$1.6 billion per year. “

Reference: *Australian Story*, ABC TV, 20 June 2022

Founder: [Natural Death Care Centre, Byron Bay, NSW](#)



“The service was simple and nice. She [Colleen McCullough] was a very unpretentious person, and she made it known she didn't want any pomp or ceremony,” Norfolk Island chief minister Lisle Snell said. *Daily Telegraph, February 4, 2015*

## FUNERAL INFORMATION PRIMER

This primer aims to help families make funeral arrangements in line with their beliefs free of undue influence by large commercial providers. Information has been sourced from government agencies, advocacy groups and community not-for-profit organisations. Co-authors: Ruth Boydell & Stuart Carter / July 2022, Feb. 2024, Oct. 2025

*Have a bias towards action. You can break that big plan into small steps and take the first step right away – Indira Gandhi*



## Be consumer savvy

**F**uneral consumer advocacy groups will tell us, saving money on funerals boils down to a few very basic principles, the same ones that apply to any significant purchase:

**Shop around.** Compare prices from at least 3 or 4 funeral providers. More if they put up barriers to your needs. Make sure they aren't all part of the same retail brand. Make sure coffin prices are included in this process.

**Get a written price list.** And make sure it is itemised so it is easy to compare one with another.

**Avoid 'emotional overspending.'**

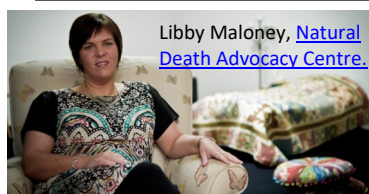
Funeral providers often play on the heart-strings of vulnerable family members in an effort to get them to spend up. *Price has nothing to do with respect and dignity.*

**Know your rights.** Laws regarding funerals and burial vary from state to state.

**Simplify, simplify.** By following Henry David Thoreau's famous saying, we can cut costs and still obtain a wonderful outcome. For example purchase a plain simple coffin and cover it with a drape such as a family patch-work quilt or other significant cloth, hold an intimate personal memorial in some place that was meaningful to the deceased and forgo an elaborate service in a hired chapel or catering venue. Only buy the bits we think we can't manage ourselves, rather than a package deal.

Source: *The Whole Death Catalog*, Professor Harold Schechter. [Here is an excerpt.](#)

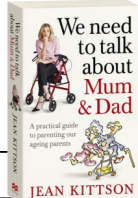
NOTE: There are many more options than we are provided with by the established funeral industry. As Zenith Virago says: It's not rocket science. For centuries families took care of their own. The business of death was all done in-house ... no outsourcing was ever considered.



Libby Maloney, [Natural Death Advocacy Centre](#).

#nocoffin:  
natural death  
movement

"Families have use of a community coffin for the funeral ceremony," Libby says. Then the coffin cover or lid, is lifted off the shroud bearer, before going off for cremation. [9News](#), 13 May, 2023  
Burial and cremation [shrouds and bearers](#).



**We need to talk about Mum & Dad**, Jean Kittson

## Talking a good way of thought sorting

TALKING ABOUT DEATH provides opportunities for deep and meaningful discussions that often don't see the light of day. It is at these times that we discover others are often thinking very much the same thoughts; thoughts that are as unthinkable as our own.

What a relief and what a blessing. What moments to cherish, what gifts to honour. And all because we dared to speak the unspeakable. And all because a death was imminent or had occurred.



## Biggest provider

CURRENTLY 34 per cent of the Australian death care market is serviced by TPG Global trading as InvoCare, the company behind names such as White Lady, Simplicity, Guardian, Value Cremations and 50 other shop front brands. A glance at InvoCare's annual report provides an idea of their scale: 1,566 equivalent employees, 225 funeral outlets and 16 cemeteries and crematoria in 2016. Next biggest is Propel Funeral Providers with about half the market share of InvoCare.

There is an illusion of local ownership. See [Sensible Funerals, S.A.](#);

Understand that:  
*Basically running a funeral is like planning a wedding; difference being you only have three or so days to do it. So we need to be prepared.*

Ref: A funeral director explains how Australia's death industry works, Tiger Webb & Richard Aedy, [The Money, ABC RN](#), 9.8.17.  
*How to avoid vultures in the funeral industry.* [Life Matters ABC RN](#), 20.7.17

*One cannot be prepared for something while secretly believing it will not happen*  
—Nelson Mandela

## Beware the pitfalls

WE TEND TO BE creatures of habit and irrespective of past experiences, keep doing the same old same old, even when there's ample evidence to suggest that the status quo is not working to our advantage.

And so it is not surprising that when it comes to making funeral arrangements, the go to information source, is more often than not the established funeral industry.

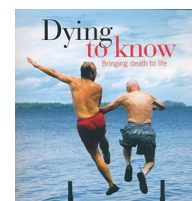
They have, however, a vested interest in promoting a packaged product ostensibly putting the customers needs ahead of their own, suggesting that the arrangements can be tailored to family requirements, but invariably downplaying any involvement that might impact their capacity to sell expensive products and essentially control who does what.

They play on a lack of preparedness, knowing that having not sought out external independent advice, we are in no position to question the validity of what we're being told - and sold. The grieving family, placing blind faith in this sales pitch, are led to believe that the funeral can't be done any other way—when they know full well that it can. There is next to no transparency.

With a narrative that says it is inappropriate to shop around as we would for an electrical appliance or car, we are prone to think that the more we pay the better the product—assuming the more expensive coffin and total price has something to do with dignity and respect—in reality, a false belief.

NOTE: As with other product providers, there is a reluctance to change brands, preferring to stick with the same provider regardless. It seems familiarity breeds repeat business.

What is a natural biological part of life has been turned into an industrial commercial process with layers of bureaucracy that remove us from the realities that we all die—without exception.



**Dying to Know**, The Groundswell Project

*One person's lack of planning, always becomes someone else's opportunity—Murphy's law*

## We are capable of planning and staging a funeral

SOMEWHERE in our ancestry there will be a death midwife. Therefore, we are 100 per cent confident that most Australians are perfectly capable of putting together a funeral event. Here's why:

*We can stage a wedding,  
stage a 70th birthday celebration,  
stage a family or work reunion,  
it follows, we can stage a funeral.*

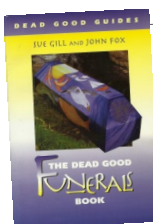
We don't eat a plateful of food in one gulp / one mouthful, we divide up what's on the plate into manageable portions, so we can eat it in bite sized chunks or spoonfuls. We can do the same when faced with arranging something like a funeral – divide up what needs to be done, into manageable portions – into bite sized chunks.

And from a skills perspective, if we are or have been in any form of employment requiring us to be organised and performing jobs of all descriptions, we can stage a funeral.

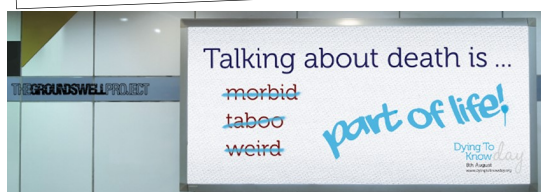
Anyone in any of the professions, in the trades, in health, hospitality, retail, construction, government agencies, farmers, graziers, household managers – we can all arrange a funeral.

There's no doubt about it. It is a matter of following in the footsteps of those who have gone before. There is a rich history of this being done thousands of times by ordinary folks doing extraordinary events for centuries. No university degrees or Certificate IVs in sight.

**Death happens. It's 100% guaranteed. Best not to be in denial. Be prepared. Talking about sex doesn't make a woman pregnant. Talking about death, doesn't bring on death.**



Funeral directors have created the mystique that funerals are an unfathomable and difficult thing that only they, as experts, know about (p.28). To help understand what it is to be a funeral arranger, Sue Gill and John Fox suggest there are similarities with a travel agent (p.29). We pick and choose, we specify when, where, how much. What we are doing, in practical terms, is arranging for a coffin or casket to be moved from one resting place to another. From home, hospital or nursing home, to their final resting place, be this a burial in the ground or the atmosphere via a cremator. This is not something new or strange. It happens thousands of times every week all around the world.



## Death is coming, ready or not. What to do when planning for a Direct-It-Yourself funeral

### Whatever gets us there

FOR those of us who have abandoned believing in an after-life (which is the case in many faith traditions or social customs of our ancestors, or extended family), dealing with the sense of loss when someone of significance dies, can sometimes become complicated. In 'mixed' belief families it can be a tense time.

Then there is the 'just bury me in the backyard' throwaway line. It denies the reality that there are rules and guidelines around disposing of bodies. And for those charged with the responsibility of dealing with the deceased, being dismissive of these is very unhelpful.

Reflecting on what we believe can help get us there. Especially if we can find a person with whom we can chew over the reasons why we do or don't believe what others believe, or, what they think we should believe, about how to do a funeral.

We are complex creatures, making decisions informed by ideas, opinions, culture, traditions, philosophies, and beliefs.

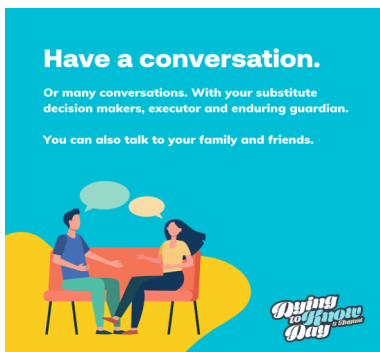
*Though the word derives from the ancient Greek Koimeterion (meaning "sleeping place"), the cemetery as we know it today—a parklike tract of land with neatly marked individual plots—is a modern invention.*

- Whole Death Catalog, Harold Schechter.

### Have a conversation.

Or many conversations. With your substitute decision makers, executor and enduring guardian.

You can also talk to your family and friends.



TO GET OUR DEATH LITERACY skills up to speed so we can make wise decisions, start here: **THE GROUNDSWELL PROJECT** [Death Literacy Library — The Groundswell Project](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/patients/acp/Pages/acd-form-info-book.aspx)

FOR INFORMATION ABOUT:

> end-of-life planning such as wills, and advance health care directives, visit: <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/patients/acp/Pages/acd-form-info-book.aspx>

FOR ASSISTANCE WITH:

> making end-of-life plans, and caring for the body at home, including a cold plate, contact a death midwife or death doula.

> preparing an after-death-care plan and preplanning (not prepaying) a funeral, contact a death midwife or independent funeral celebrant.

> purchasing or making a coffin, a casket or a shroud—check the websites below.

FOR KNOWING OUR RIGHTS:

> when we are planning in advance or even at the last minute, check the following website [Funerals | State Library of NSW](https://www.lifetimes.net.au/funerals)

BE AWARE that this and other documents may not be totally up to date. There will always be some information that appears to be at odds with another source—it doesn't seem to add up—so if in doubt, make contact with an independent funeral advisor or celebrant.

> to book a cremation timeslot, see previous notation.

CONTACT:

E: – [ruth@lifetimes.net.au](mailto:ruth@lifetimes.net.au)

W: <https://lifetimes.net.au/>

W: – <https://thedialoguecafe.com/>



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Feb 2024  
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