

Facing Death in Changing Times

Although there has been increased media attention on end-of-life issues in the last few years, death remains one of the most avoided topics of conversation within our families and social circles. Whenever it does surface, it is usually dismissed as morbid, and the subject is quickly changed. It comes as no surprise that we have been labelled a 'death-denying' or 'death-avoiding' culture. Our avoidance of death has led to significant changes in the way we face, respond to and grieve the death of a loved one. As we look ahead to November, the month during which we prayerfully remember our beloved dead, we begin a 5-part series of articles focused on death - from the reality of secular practices to the hope-filled rituals celebrated within our Christian Catholic faith.

"In keeping with Walter's wishes, there will be no service, and his remains will be scattered in all of his favourite places."

Practices that were once unheard of are quickly becoming the standard for the manner in which Canadians, including Catholics, respond to the death of a loved one. The increasingly secular nature of our society is shaping where and how we respond to death. Community centres, country clubs, restaurants and even hockey rinks are chosen as venues to celebrate and memorialize the beloved dead. Many of these gatherings are 'private' - intended for immediate family only, and often taking place weeks or months after the individual's death. Some have interred the remains prior to the celebration, or perhaps scattered, divided or put away their loved one's cremated remains. Others are simply opting out of funeral rituals altogether.



What are the contributing factors to the shift in how we deal with death? Some would say that our 'mobile' lifestyles create geographical distances between family members that make it challenging to find both the time and a place for all to gather. Others would argue that the cost of funeral celebrations and interments influence a family's response to death. And in some situations, the bereaved are simply honouring the wishes of the deceased to either 'have

something simple' or nothing at all.

The more we avoid death, the more uncomfortable we become with it as a society. We live in a culture that values youth and vitality, and we struggle when those attributes begin to change.

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Although death is a natural part of the human condition, we fight and resist it, holding tightly to all that is familiar, longing for what once was. We even distance ourselves from death through the very language that we use to describe it, using ambiguous terms such as ‘passed away’ and ‘left’ in an attempt to soften the harsh reality we have encountered.

These ‘death denying’ perspectives also shape the way we grieve. When faced with the death of loved one, many of us hurry through the experience. We dismiss our grief and convince ourselves that it is best to simply forget what has occurred. We strive to ‘get over it’ and ‘get back to normal’ by quickly resuming the rhythm of life as we knew it prior to our

loved one’s death. We carefully hide our grief, so as not to make those around us uncomfortable, and we take pride in our ability to carry on as though nothing had ever happened...But it has happened, and eventually the residual effects of unresolved grief can manifest themselves in the fabric of our emotional, spiritual and physical well-being.

No matter how much we try to avoid it, death will eventually visit each of us, as well as those we love, for death is a natural part of our human condition. In contrast to the finality of many current secular practices, our Christian Catholic faith offers a hope-filled promise in the face of death. Rather than view death as our enemy, we are called to embrace it as the gateway to something

greater for which we are made. We respond to death, we ritualize it and we honour the mortal remains of our loved ones with interment in a consecrated cemetery or columbarium. We grieve deeply, and we remember; however our remembering is not of the past, but rather of our future - in the promise of the resurrection of Jesus in which we will all partake, and in the hope that we will one day be reunited with those we love. It is through our paschal faith that we proclaim that life, not death, has the final word.

As we remember and celebrate our beloved dead during the month of November, let us take the time to contemplate, and perhaps even befriend the mystery of death.



In our next publication...Part II: *The Value of Celebrating Funeral Rituals*

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