

## Let's Talk About Cremation

by [Thelma Fayle](#)  
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When is a good time to talk about cremation? Before Christmas? No. At the start of the new year? No again. How about during a pandemic? Forget it. And it's hardly an ideal theme at Easter—given the hopeful rising-from-the-dead thread.

It turns out the answer is “never”—unless you're talking to someone with a link to an ancient culture that has an established funeral pyre tradition. You can't have a conversation if people are afraid to own the subject.

When will Canadians be able to open up to discussing the challenging subject of cremation traditions? Maybe even learn to talk about our shivering squeamishness—about what to do with the ashes—other than hide the urn in a closet?

The act of witnessing the burning of the bodies of people we have loved is a tough subject that stirs something deep, shocking, and fragile in many of us. But as with all tough subjects, frank talk helps—especially since there are many lenses through which to view human end-of-life traditions.

“Observing the procedure can be difficult for grieving family members,” the funeral-home receptionist gently offers. “Only 10% of our client families attend, despite data showing that 90% of people who die in British Columbia are cremated.”

Cremation may be more common than burial these days, but Canadians still have few dominant-culture traditions related to cremating the dead.

Not to be deterred, and dressed in the best clothes worn to the last family wedding, my nephew and I headed to the crematorium at the designated time.

Being at my 100-year-old mother's—and his grandmother's—cremation represented an important responsibility to the two of us. It felt like a profound moment of rite and reverence for

a Boomer and a Gen Zedder—who happen to be the two curious, and maybe even pig-headed, members of a large family. No sugar-coating for us.



Thelma Fayle and Keith Hicke attend a cremation

After helping to care for her at home through the pandemic, we felt the need to accompany her to the very end. I knew it was a bit irrational, but I wanted to make sure this particular waif-like, skinny, and wrinkled body of an old woman did not sit in some cold-storage warehouse with a bunch of other bodies for weeks on end—waiting for a time slot to be disposed of at some unknowable point that suited a busy scheduler. The element of uncertainty didn't feel dignified.

For a variety of understandable and common reasons, most of our family did not want to attend or even talk about the cremation, although they all agreed that it should be done. Facing the logistics of the final step alongside the immense grief of losing a woman who meant the world was just too hard.

One family member, who wore a respectful but discernible sneer, suggested they did not see cremation as a “spectator event.”

I silently wondered what part of end-of-life care is a spectator event. The vomit? The shit? The phlegm? The phlegm was rough. But not as difficult as watching my mother when she was scared from the dementia in that final year. Sometimes, no matter how much we cajoled and tried, we just couldn't take the fearful look from her eyes. None of it was a spectator sport.

Should this final cremation component of dealing with death be hidden from griever's sorrowful sensibilities? I wondered about our societal denial.

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Since we had been with her the night she died, Keith and I opted not to "view" her body one last time. We knew she was covered with a favourite multicoloured, cozy blanket and accompanied by one of her big, jolly white teddy bears. The young funeral director had checked on her before we arrived and, with a wide smile, noted: "Wow, fantastic fluffy bear!"

He guided us to a sparsely furnished, 20' x 20' room that resembled the little chapel spaces you might find at the end of a quiet hallway in a palliative or hospice ward. There were a few pews, some vases of fresh-cut flowers, and black drapes that we soon learned covered a "viewing window." When the curtains were drawn back, my nephew and I stood for a moment of silence. We stared at the cremation container—a rectangular, cardboard box with a plywood-reinforced base.

A machine operator standing beside the furnace was patient and at ease, bearing a sentinel-like quality. I wondered at the thousands of bodies he had likely ushered out as part of busy days in an undertaker's establishment and house of the dead. As he was on the other side of the glass, there were no words between us. As instructed, when we were ready, we gave him a nod, and he pushed a large button engaging a belt that reminded me of an airport luggage carousel.

After a slight mechanical jolt, as the conveyor carrier started, Mom's body slowly moved a last, short journey of six feet towards the entrance of a large, shiny, metal, purpose-built cremation chamber. Placing her boxed body in position for the final, incendiary step was a simple procedure that was over seconds after it started.

Funeral home staff may not have discouraged attendance, but I can understand why they don't encourage it. I suspect part of the issue has to do with the added work a high-functioning industrial facility would have to do in scheduling and accommodating family attendance for a brief and clipped reverential moment. I never doubted that the attentive and respectful staff were doing a good job. Every aspect of their business came across as impeccable.

Keith and I stood straight, tall, and motionless by our seat and held hands. There were no rules about sitting, standing, or kneeling on command—like the ones I remembered from childhood days in the Catholic Church. But it seemed only right to stand as my mother physically left our presence.

Like pioneers in unknown territory, the Boomer woman and the Gen Z man remained standing as protector-defenders—not knowing what else to do. The coming together of an atheist Boomer and a Christian Gen Zedder can be a subtle business.

We were invited to start the furnace but declined, and the worker pushed another button to activate the 1,800-degree Celsius fire. Carbon would soon be released into the atmosphere. In two or three hours, there would only be ashes and bone fragments remaining in the modern funeral pyre. We trusted the dutiful attendant would carefully bundle them for us.

Body disposal in 21st century cremation practices in North America are a long way from the ancient, communal, open-air alternatives to burial still used in many countries today.

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After my mother's cremation, I felt the need to talk and begin to fathom this new experience.

We ended up chatting for an hour with Mr. Benesch, the knowledgeable and sensitively articulate professional – who went through funeral school five years earlier, when he was 20.

He listened well and stood ready to respond fully to our probing questions. He was prepared and easily able to speak with clients who wanted or needed to talk. With his warm and friendly smile, this man, forty years younger than me, had the comforting presence and bearing of a wise elder.

After we got through the dozen questions I imagine he routinely hears; we seemed to open a door that invited him to be frank with us. We were in listen-mode and our rich chat evolved into a conversation we might have shared with a good friend.

With prompting, he told us about his frustration at trying to raise important climate-impact issues related to his trade. From his professional perspective, the eager, young, subject-matter expert was full of ideas that he felt would benefit the environment.

He said he had tried his best to engage in productive and progressive discussions with government officials about the need for new policies related to cremation. He met with courteous, civil, door slams. The politicians he had contacted were not eager to engage in dialogue about controversies that visibly rattled constituents with an EWW-ish quality linked to their emotional experiences of loss and mourning. He realized cremation-chat discourse could offer politicians few potential votes.

I kept thinking Canadians might benefit from hearing more from this bright, professional funeral director who is at early days on his career path and has a strong belief that providing education is part of his job. He seemed a natural teacher.

I casually asked him if he planned on being cremated. His immediate, “definitely not” response surprised me and begged more conversation.

He told us about Alkaline Hydrolysis, also referred to as aquamation, water cremation, hydro cremation, or bio cremation – a sustainable, environmentally friendly and less expensive option available to those who want to limit their carbon footprint through death. For his preference, it was the more natural and ethical alternative to flame cremation or burial.

The greener method, not authorized in all parts of Canada yet, uses water to dispose of a body in place of fire – eliminating the use of gas and emissions produced by the traditional cremation process.

The practice can be completely carbon neutral as it uses water, heat and an alkaline solution to return a body to its basic elements – still leaving families with the ritual remains to spread.

His eager and rare candour was striking but I was beginning to appreciate the dread he had encountered with his attempts to educate.

I imagine it will take time for North Americans to warm to a concept that involves dissolving human tissue in water – climate-friendly or not. The process will require a skillful and sensitive advertising campaign.

But then, flame-cremation also faced a slow history of acceptance before being seen as a civilized and hygienic practice.

With the scarcity of available land for cemeteries, the question might become: water or fire? Water seems gentler as well as being easier on the environment.

While my questions to him were about logistics, my nephew had a different inquiry.

“What is the toughest part of your job?” one 20ish Gen Z man asked another.

“When the caskets are much smaller,” Mr. Benesch replied. Those words silenced my nephew, a new dad.

As we left the building, my always-observant nephew noticed the shimmering heat waves rising from the chimney flue next to a hillside full of rocks and trees.

Just for a fleeting moment, I felt an exhilarating sense of freedom and joy for my mother. That my nephew and I were with her, seemed to make the event a little less lonesome – in our minds.

Cremation had assisted in the magic trick of death. One minute the centenarian who had mentored us both was here – and the next, she was physically gone.

Being next to her as she was cremated, offered a moment filled with the kind of gravitas we rarely get in a social-media-ized world.

As he drove me home, my nephew put on a CD that I had given him when he was a teenager. We quietly listened to the music and then he said he always found Jesse Cook's *Freefall* album to be soothing. I had hoped he would, when I gave it to him long ago. I found it comforting too.

Unlike the prediction offered by the funeral-home receptionist, observing was not difficult for this grieving Boomer and Gen Zedder. We were both happy – yes, happy – that we attended the cremation. The experience helped us accept large loss.

Postscript:

Comments from Mr. Benesch, owner of Earth's Option Cremation and Burial Services, were based on my recollection from a conversation with him in November 2020. To ensure accuracy and currency, I checked in with the funeral director and received this comment in 2024: "My work with the BC Aquamation Coalition is still ongoing and we are making great progress in getting letters of approval from 17 local municipalities. We have yet to get a timeframe on the legalization of Alkaline Hydrolysis but we know for sure it's on the government's radar and as the voices get louder, we can expect change to follow."