



Mortal Coil

Magazine

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La Catrina
Dead Person
of the Year 2019

Do
Death
Differently.

How Did I Get Here?



I like cemeteries*.
I'm a writer, so at
first, I came for the
stories.

But eventually,
I stayed for the
statuary, the
cool names,
the history.

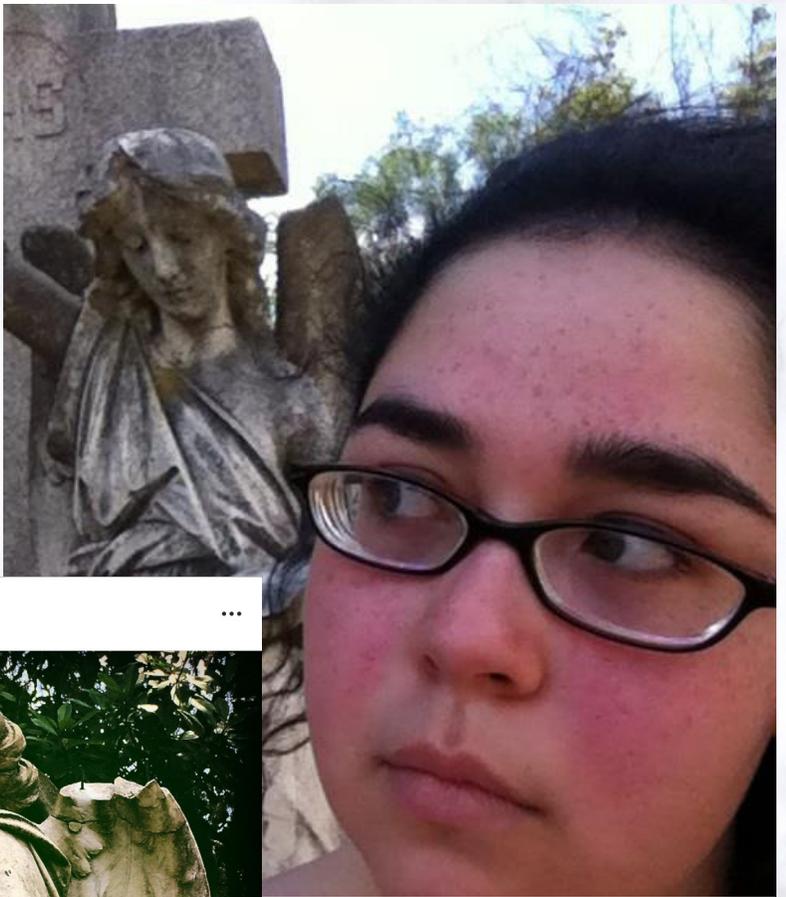


Soon, I realized that I loved cemeteries a lot.

Like, a lot, a lot.



 isobelallegra
Bonaventure Cemetery



 isobelallegra

 isobelallegra
Green Mount Cemetery



Of course, I had to share my adventures.



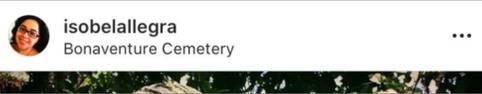
 isobelallegra
Bonaventure Cemetery

 isobelallegra
Westview Cemetery



 isobelallegra
Historic Oakland Cemetery





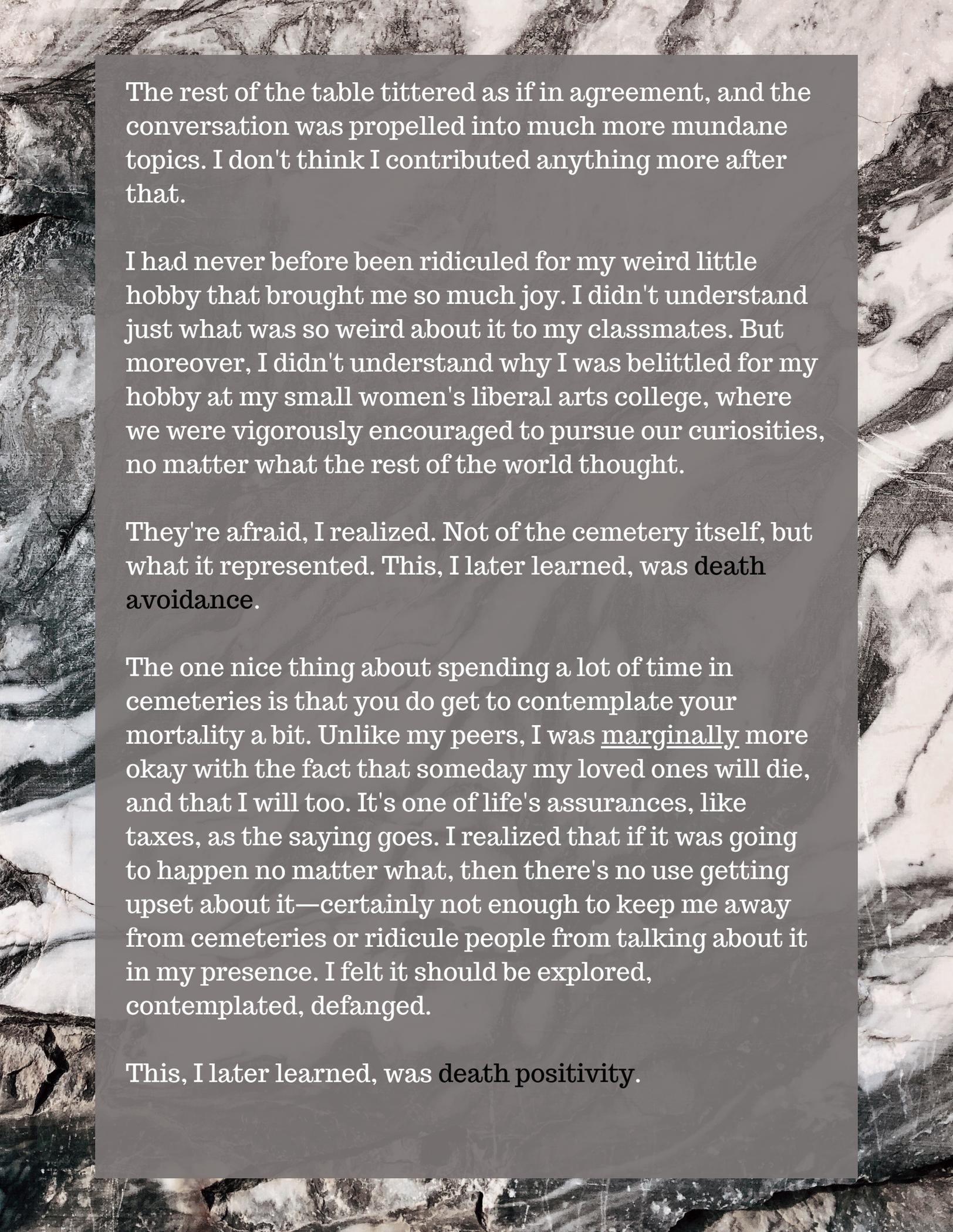
But no one really seemed to understand why I wanted to spend all my time in graveyards. And sometimes, I had a hard time explaining myself, especially in front of somewhat hostile audiences.

I remember sitting in the dining hall just after winter break one year in undergrad, talking with friends and acquaintances about what we'd done over the break. When it was my turn, I excitedly told everyone we'd had snow in Atlanta over the break. The morning after the snowfall, my parents (who thankfully indulge my pastime) and I had bundled up and braved the icy but brief drive over to Oakland, the city's grandest rural Victorian-style cemetery. I gushed about how beautiful it was, to see everything covered in a layer of snow and ice; how we looked for footprints in the snow, and—

"So wait," another student interrupted me. "You went to a graveyard?"

"Well, yeah," I said, unsure of where this was going.

"Oh. That's *weird*." Her tone was curt and amused, like she was embarrassed for me, or suppressing a laugh.

The background of the page is a piece of marbled paper with a complex, organic pattern of dark grey, black, and light grey/white swirls and veins. The pattern is dense and textured, resembling natural stone or biological growth. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent dark grey rectangular area.

The rest of the table tittered as if in agreement, and the conversation was propelled into much more mundane topics. I don't think I contributed anything more after that.

I had never before been ridiculed for my weird little hobby that brought me so much joy. I didn't understand just what was so weird about it to my classmates. But moreover, I didn't understand why I was belittled for my hobby at my small women's liberal arts college, where we were vigorously encouraged to pursue our curiosities, no matter what the rest of the world thought.

They're afraid, I realized. Not of the cemetery itself, but what it represented. This, I later learned, was **death avoidance**.

The one nice thing about spending a lot of time in cemeteries is that you do get to contemplate your mortality a bit. Unlike my peers, I was marginally more okay with the fact that someday my loved ones will die, and that I will too. It's one of life's assurances, like taxes, as the saying goes. I realized that if it was going to happen no matter what, then there's no use getting upset about it—certainly not enough to keep me away from cemeteries or ridicule people from talking about it in my presence. I felt it should be explored, contemplated, defanged.

This, I later learned, was **death positivity**.

So what exactly is Death Positivity?

The Order of the Good Death states that being death positive is "about making death a part of your life. That means committing to staring down your death fears [...]. Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety and terror of modern culture are not."

("Death Positive Movement—The Order of the Good Death," n.d.)."

Who needs to hear this?

Do you have a pulse? If so, you need to hear this.

Unfortunately, the coveted 'mortal' demographic comprises literally all of us, so for the purposes of narrowing my demographic identification, this campaign is most targeted to millennials encountering death avoidance—hence the sleek graphics, personal narrative storytelling, and relaxed or humorous language (where possible) of this booklet. It is also targeted towards the 56% of Americans who have yet to write a will (Jones, 2016), who may respond better to a physical booklet rather than website or social media.

Of those who have actually written their wills or planned their estates, only 14% are under 30, 28% are nonwhite, 32% are non-college-educated, and 31% make less than \$30,000 a year. In other words, if you are young, poor, less educated than average, or a person of color, you are more likely to die intestate. As these populations already struggle with the transmission of generational wealth, it is especially important to prevent that loss of wealth through early estate planning, consumer education, and general death awareness.

Death Avoidance/Anxiety Hurts:

You...

Your Wallet...

And the Planet.

And unlike some
issues, ignoring
the problem
REALLY doesn't
help.



Emotional Harm

Who likes thinking and talking about death besides death-positive weirdos like me? It's usually seen as strange and repugnant, but evidence suggests that that should change. Because we do not enjoy contemplating our mortality and have shaped our lives to keep us from thinking about it, we deny ourselves an avenue to come to terms with others' deaths and our own. In reality, dealing with this anxiety is beneficial to our emotional health (Cozzolino, 2006) and will help you grieve more productively. Avoidance can be equally deleterious: according to research, people tend to be less charitable and more aggressive toward others when reminded of their mortality (Shen, 2003). So rather than punching the next Salvation Army worker you see after you drive past a cemetery, start contemplating your mortality instead!

Cozzolino, P. J. (2006). *Death contemplation, growth, and defense: Converging evidence of dual-existential systems?* *Psychological Inquiry*, 17(4), 278–287.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400701366944>

Shen, P. (2003). *Flight From Death: The Quest for Immortality* [Documentary]. *Transcendental Media*.

Financial Harm

Although the majority of funeral homes in America are privately held, the threat of monopolization looms. Over 1500 funeral homes and 400 cemeteries are now owned by Service Corporation International (SCI), a conglomerate that controls multiple brands and services in the death industry. SCI can (and does) charge up to 42% higher than indie businesses (Barret, n.d.)

But just because you pick an independent funeral home doesn't mean you'll get a fair deal. Funeral home salespeople use aggressive, emotionally manipulative tactics to upsell consumers at their most vulnerable. Sometimes getting caught doesn't help: one Canadian funeral home was caught on hidden camera using shady practices one year after they had been caught marking up prices and deliberately confusing customers in an effort to increase prices and services sold... using hidden camera footage (Common & Denne, 2018). Since regular, repeat business is fortunately uncommon in the funeral industry, salespeople may feel emboldened to 'get as much as they can' out of their customers, viewing them purely as consumers rather than grieving individuals.

Barret, P. (n.d.). Is Funeral Home Chain SCI's Growth Coming at the Expense of Mourners? - Bloomberg. Retrieved November 25, 2019, from Bloomberg News website: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-10-24/is-funeral-home-chain-scis-growth-coming-at-the-expense-of-mourners>

Common, D., & Denne, L. (2018, November 23). "They should know better": Funeral home chain skirting new rule with misleading sales tactics [News & Commentary]. Retrieved December 15, 2019, from CBC website: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/funeral-home-upselling-marketplace-update-1.4913281>

Environmental Harm

The traditional way of burial is hostile to conservation efforts, especially as overcrowding becomes a more pressing concern. Burying an embalmed body essentially means that that patch of land is forever off-limits, unable to be used for growing food or building housing (see S. Spielberg's groundbreaking* 1982 thesis on this topic, Poltergeist). Furthermore, the carcinogens in embalming fluids may potentially pollute the groundwater that may come into contact with (hence why embalmed bodies are buried in vaults), and harm the death workers that are exposed to them in the course of their jobs.

Even if you choose to forgo the traditional western burial for cremation, that doesn't mean you're in the clear. Traditional cremation methods rely on fossil fuels to power the retort. So unless your estate bequest includes money for purchasing carbon offset credits, your ecofriendly burial is all show with no substance to back it up.

Jaafari, J. D. (2018, February 20). Saving the Earth By Dying. Retrieved October 6, 2019, from NationSwell website: <http://nationswell.com/green-burials-save-earth-dying/>

*I'm not sorry

So what can you do? You can make your Death Plan!

First, research your options! There's much more to death than the old embalming-and-burial-six-feet-under song and dance:

- Do you want a green burial?
- Or perhaps you'd like to be cremated by fire?
 - Or with water?
- Donated to science?
- Composted? (Doughty, 2017)
- Buried in an underwater cemetery? (Rhoads, 2017)
- Frozen and literally vibrated into smithereens? (Shorman, 2019)

Whatever you decide, be sure what your options are where you live. The legality of some methods vary from state to state, and if your state doesn't have laws on the books permitting your preferred method, don't be afraid to contact your lawmakers.

Doughty, C. (2017). *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death (First)*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Rhoads, L. (2017). *199 Cemeteries to See Before You Die*. New York, NY: Black Dog & Leventhal.

Shorman, J. (2019, November 30). Frozen, vibrated, buried? It's not cremation, says Kansas AG | The Wichita Eagle. Kansas.Com. Retrieved from <https://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article237888864.html>

Put Your Plan Into Action!

Once you'd decided on your method of disposition, you can make your pre-need plan! This also includes details like directions for specific funeral homes to use or even which songs you'd like played at your service (if you choose to have a service).

- **Write your wills!**
 - **Living:** this will be used in the event that you are incapacitated or otherwise unable to make your wishes known about your care.
 - **Last Will & Testament:** your actual when-you're-dead will, which includes your pre-need and disburses your estate. Must be witnessed before it can be recognized in a court of law; requirements vary from state to state.
 - **Digital:** hide your, erm, explicit virtual assets! Services like The Digital Beyond can help you get your online affairs in order.
- **Of course, your will won't do any good if it's just gathering dust in a safe somewhere without anyone knowing. The best way to ensure your wishes are honored are to share knowledge of their existence with trusted friends and family members beyond those who have witnessed it.**

Come to terms with Death

We can't talk about death positivity without practicing it a little. Here, I'll start:

These are my parents.

Arturo,



and
Barbara.

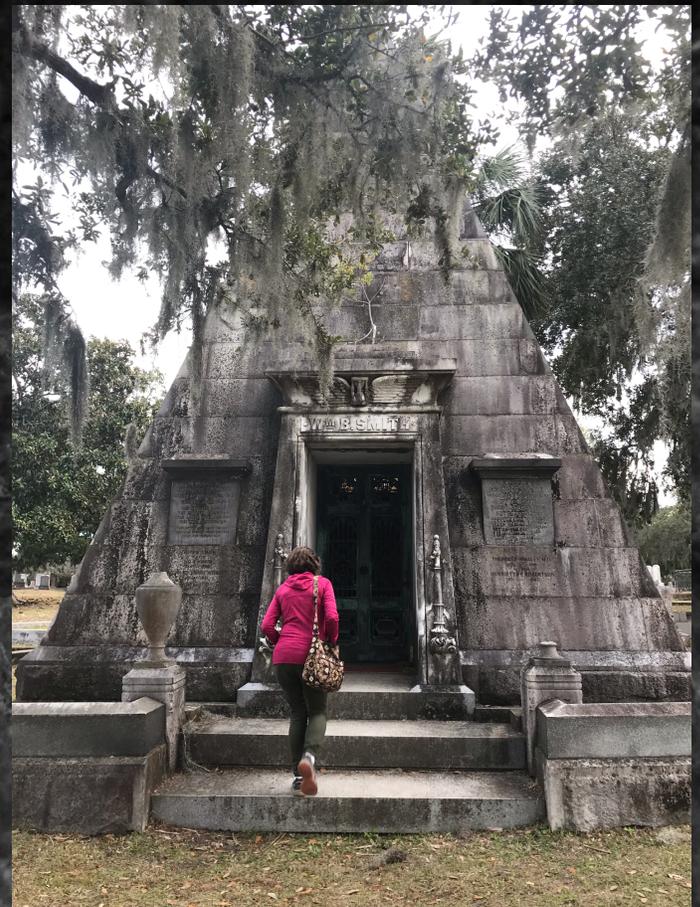
I'm an only child, so we're pretty close. Because they indulge my hobby, they often accompany me on my cemetery visits.

Someday, I will be the one
visiting them alone.



I don't like to think about it.

I don't want to think about it.



But no matter how much or
little I think about it, that
day will still come.



But even that's not set in stone. Although it's less likely, it's still possible that they might be the ones visiting me. But that is easier to wrap my head around than it is to contemplate my parents' deaths. My mom even jokes about it. One of her favorite lines, said with a wink and a smile, is "My daughter still needs help from her mama now and then. Someday she'll need an Ouija Board to get it, but that's how it is."

Contemplating the mortality of yourself or your loved ones isn't fun. It's tough. It can be depressing, and should definitely not be dwelt upon. But it's better to be prepared for the eventuality than to be blindsided. As the Order said at the beginning of this booklet, the anxiety that surrounds death is not natural. Fight it, and perhaps it will make your time with others a little more meaningful, more cherished.

With the knowledge I've shared here, I hope that I save at least one person from more heartache than they need. I sincerely hope you'll join me in doing death differently.

Recommended Death- Positive Media

- **The American Way of Death**, by Jessica Mitford: the first book to take a critical look at the modern death industry.
- **The Harlem Book of the Dead**, by James Van Der Zee: a Harlem Renaissance photographer who specialized in funeral photography, Van Der Zee compiled the book toward the end of his life paying tribute to the lavish, uniquely black funeral traditions of yesteryear.
- **Caitlin Doughty**, the founder of the Order of the Good Death, the modern death positivity movement, and her own funeral home, Undertaking LA, has multiple recommended works:
 - **Youtube Channel: Ask A Mortician**
 - **Books: Smoke Gets In Your Eyes: Lessons from the Crematorium, From Here To Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death, and Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? Big Questions from Tiny Mortals About Death**
 - **Podcast: Death in the Afternoon**
- **Nine Feet Under: Sheri Booker's** debut memoir, about working in a Baltimore funeral home starting at age 15, received an NAACP Image Award for her book.
- **The Casketeers: A New Zealand** reality show about a Maori funeral home owned by an indigenous family; educates about life as a death industry worker, the different rituals that Polynesian cultures use to honor their loved ones, and the ways that modern technology is used to enable the continuation of indigenous funerary traditions.

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