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The discomfort of confronting Death: A philosophical autopsy of the cultural outlook regarding death from an Irish perspective.

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Introduction

Death is inevitable. Death, one's own death and the death of others are feared by many. This fear is understandable; humanity's inherent ability to comprehend death and the finality of it has created a hostile space in many people's minds regarding their mentality towards death. It could be suggested that a lack of connection to death influences this. Death was once humanity's close companion, and though we meet death at the end of our journey, we often do not encounter death for much of our lives outside of movies and books. With the advancement of medicine, people are dying older and in hospitals and nursing homes rather than at home. Families and communities are no longer the ones caring for the dying. People are practising religion less, and young people migrate or immigrate away. Many traditional ways of dealing with death are being lost through urbanisation, dwindling social connections, and a lack of community in urban areas. Throughout all of this, a significant discomfort towards death, the terminally ill and the bereaved has been forged.

Death is Inevitable



Figure. 1. Death on a Pale Horse. A painting illustrating some of the fear many feel towards death. (Mortimer, 1775.)

Death is the only thing any living creature can guarantee; death is natural. It is simply a part of living (Lysaght, 1995, p.27). "Death is - and will always be - a part of life" (Slaughter and Taylor, 2018, p9). If there were no death, there would be no life. Despite this, there is an intense fear and discomfort towards death running through society. Fear of one's demise is natural "death anxiety is a feeling that exists since birth, continues throughout life, and lies at the root of all fears" (Özgüç, Kaplan Serin and Tanriverdi, 2021). Wilson (1903) writes that "the strenuous avoidance of injury and death" is fundamental; it is a "basal instinct upon which the reproductive and all other modes of consciousness and activities are built". No matter how advanced we become, humans are, at our core, animals; thus, the "fear of death is in the blood and in the bones" of all of us (1903, p.352). Despite our innate animal nature, animals do not carry out their days feeling an impending, looming fear of death. Although they do all they can to avoid dying, their minds are not, at any point, flooded with dread (Anderson, 2020, Becker 1997). Rezapour (2022) writes that "unlike other species, the central perplexity of human beings is their awareness of the inevitability of death", and this, in many ways, defines how we handle death (fig. 1).

Death is Uncomfortable

Many people feel an inherent discomfort around discussing death. This discomfort can disrupt people's lives by causing death anxiety, stigmatising the expression of grief, discouraging pre-death funeral plans, stigmatising terminally ill or disabled people, and even affecting how terminally ill patients are treated in hospitals (McCarthy et al. 2009).

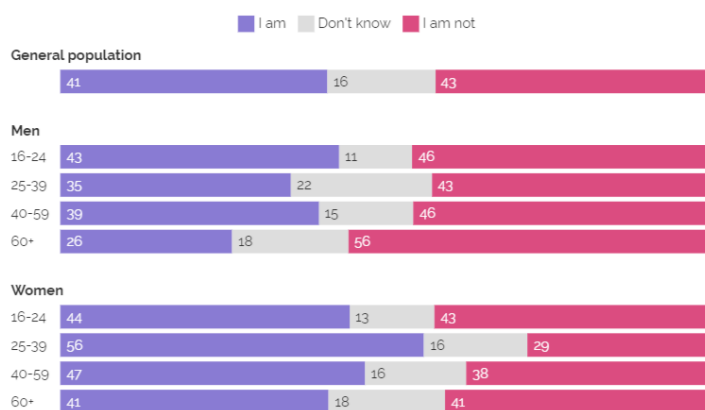
Literature such as Lysaght (1995) suggests this discomfort was not always as pronounced. Lysaght writes that "attitudes to death, and to those affected by it, have changed drastically in the twentieth century, and that the change has not been for the better" (1995, p.27-29). Lysaght writes that "avoidance and denial are the hallmarks of attitudes to death" in modern society. "Death is uniquely badly handled by modern society"; it is ignored for as long as possible. It is not acknowledged or processed; it is neglected and has become taboo (Walter, 1991, p.295). Walter

(1991, p306) writes that this discomfort has caused "the dying and bereaved [to] become uniquely isolated" by society.

It is not their own death that people fear the most; it is the death of others. In a 2021 UK study conducted by the British government (Dinic, 2021) around the public's perceptions of death, a question included was "are you afraid of dying?". 41% of participants claimed they were afraid of dying, and 43% claimed they were not (fig 2). The follow-up question was asked to the 41% that answered "yes", being, "has the fear of death ever affected your enjoyment of life?". 32% answered yes, meaning 13% of all participants feared death to the point of disruption of life (fig 3). However, it was found that people fear the death of a loved one far more than their demise. It was found that 63% of participants fear the death of a loved one more than their own death, with only 6% of people fearing their own death more than the loss of a loved one (fig 4). Given this information, it could be suggested that many people's fear of death is linked to the loss of loved ones rather than their own mortality. It is much easier to conceptualise the impact of the loss of a loved one and the impact that would have on the world over than one's own death (Verywell Health, n.d.).

Britons are split over their fear of death

Are you afraid of dying? %



YouGov

19 - 23 March 2021

Figure. 2. Chart displaying the statistics of fear felt towards death from Dinic's (2021) study of the UK population.

Three in ten of those afraid of death say it has affected their enjoyment of life

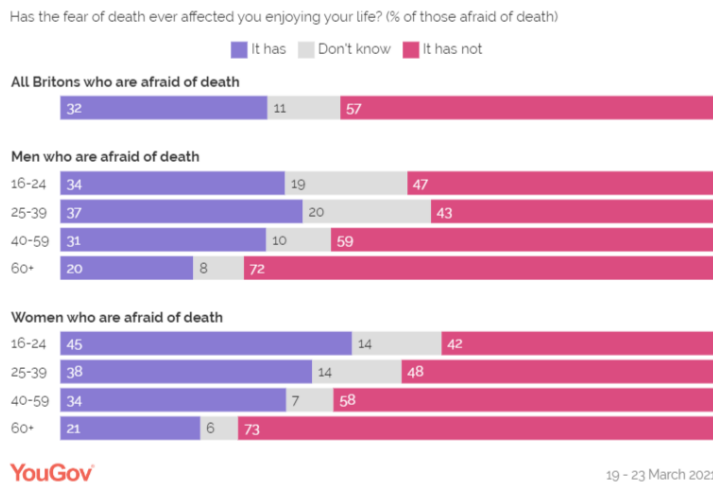


Figure. 3. Chart showing the statistics of how many people feel that their fear of death negatively impacted their lives. (Dinic, 2021)

Britons fear the death of the people they love more than their own

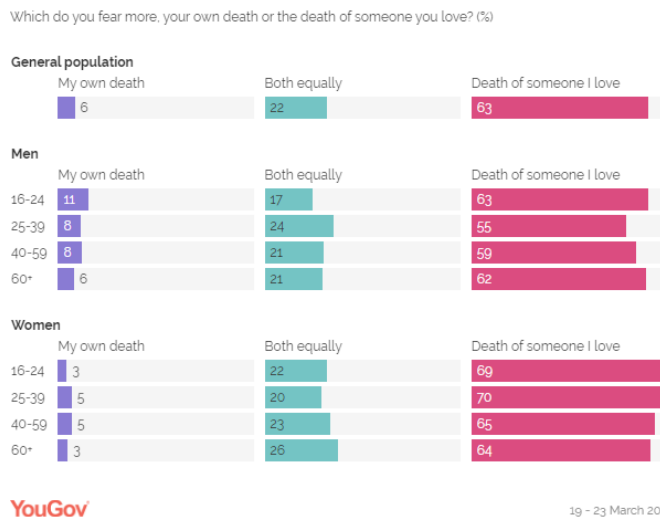


Figure. 4. Chart showing that people fear the loss of a loved one more than their own death. (Dinic, 2021)

Many in society are so rattled by the idea of death and dying that they are made uncomfortable by people who are terminally ill and those deep in grief (Lysaght, 1995, Walter, 1991). McCarthy et al. (2009, p.460) reported that some people feel "awkward in the presence of friends who [have] been diagnosed with a serious or terminal illness". Lysaght (1995, p.30) states that "alienation" of the terminally ill is common in the modern world. The dead, the dying and the grief-stricken are often neglected or disregarded due to the discomfort those around them feel. Walter

(1991, p301) writes about how bereaved are often isolated. Grief and other large displays of deep emotion following a death can make those that witness them profoundly uncomfortable. Lysaght (1995, p.27) suggests that society is built on striving for success and achievement, and the dying, the dead and the bereaved are often spurned as they are seen as "a failure, a loser in life's race" as they are, either temporarily through grief or permanently through death "unable to actively contribute to society."

Why is Death Uncomfortable?

Many factors are causing this awkwardness around conceptualising or facing death, though it could be argued that the main factor is disconnection from the realities of death and disconnection from community, thus, disconnection from tradition.

Before the advancements in medicine and nutrition, death was once an everyday experience, "adults and children died young", the average person's life expectancy was short, and news of death was always in the air (Slaughter and Taylor, 2018, p9). Death was expected and accepted. Because death was such an accepted inevitability, people had constant exposure through nursing loved ones into death, attending neighbours' funerals, and mourning their losses. This is no longer the case in many parts of the world. Many in "our society knows little about the subject of death because most of us have never been exposed to it" (Slaughter and Taylor, 2018, 60 p9). We shirk away from it.

Dealing with death was once a profoundly intimate process for the bereaved. "Caring for and preparing a deceased loved one prior to burial was once a familial responsibility", writes Slaughter and Taylor (2018, p.8) that comforted both the dying and bereaved. Sadly, this is often no longer the case (Walter, 1991, p.300). Though families are often the ones to organise funeral proceedings, they are no longer part of many other aspects of the dying and death process of their loved one. In the not-so-distant past, adults and children would participate in the death rituals for their loved ones, "from washing a corpse with water from the kitchen sink to sitting up next to the body when it was laid out in the parlour" (Slaughter and Taylor, 2018, p.9).

Such a close connection and interaction with the dead outside the medical field is uncommon today. For the vast majority of people in the Western world, the only interaction they have with a dead body is under the "sterile conditions of a hospital" or after a corpse is embalmed and painted to chase away any semblance of their death. Slaughter and Taylor (2018, p.8) In modern days, we pass the responsibility of dealing with our dead to strangers because any reminder of the realities and inevitability of death is seen as "macabre", scary or even "repugnant"; it makes people uncomfortable.

Many traditions that once connected people to the realities of death have been abandoned for the most part. As people drift apart, "traditions that once held emotional significance for the bereaved are now seen as macabre reminders of the reality of death", as their value is forgotten in many ways (Slaughter and Taylor (2018, p.8).



Figure. 5. An image of a common site during Irish funerals and churches, the lighting of candles for those who have passed, a tradition carried on by the community. (McGarry 2023)

This value is being forgotten partially due to a loss of community. Community in many parts of the world is dwindling as urbanisation continues. Community builds tradition and ritual; many rituals were a means of processing and facing hardships such as death. In urban areas, it has become difficult for communities of all sorts to grow and thrive as they once did. With the expansion of cities, young people moving from rural areas (Ritchie and Roser, 2018), the rampant disconnection and loneliness felt by people in urban areas (Fardghassemi and Joffe, 2021), and community-building influences such as organised religion (CSO.ie, 2019, Sherwood,

2019) in decline, people's ability to build community and pass on traditions have been damaged. It could be argued that this contributes to the world's strained relationship with death. This affects funeral traditions in particular, as many of the rules and traditions of funeral practices are "unspoken", only carried on when the time is right by those who have witnessed these rites (McGarry 2023). This comes with a flaw; if there is no community to carry on these traditions, they risk being lost (fig 5).

Funeral traditions are of great importance to people and society. Death has always been an almost unfathomable concept for humans, and like all things unfathomable, humans attempted to process and understand it (Ariès, 2008, Ariès,1976). Societies traditionally process what they don't understand or fear through "religion and through ritual"; through tradition. Many funeral rites are designed to comfort the dying and bereaved. Belief in an "afterlife could bring considerable comfort, [and] deathbed, funeral and mourning rituals [help] survivors come to terms with their loss" (Walter, 1991, p.300). Kübler-Ross (1969, p6-10) claims that when stressful or traumatic "experiences such as bereavement are not handled ritually, psychological problems will emerge for the individual". Thus, as religious and secular communities dwindle and the wayside leaves funerary traditions no longer being passed down wordlessly. It could be suggested that society is feeling a marked negative effect of this loss. This is visible in the discomfort many feel towards death.

Malignant Discomfort

This discomfort towards death is not benign; it hurts people in many ways. One of many is depriving people of a "good death" (McCarthy et al., 2009, p.446-447). McCarthy et al. (2009, p.446-447) suggest that a good death is dying in a "private space, free from pain; comfortable; to die with dignity; and to be surrounded by family members". A study by The Irish Hospice Foundation (2014) found that "most Irish people say they want to die at home, in their own bed, surrounded by the people they love"; a peaceful death, a good death. In many cases, "the dying are often removed from the familiar surroundings of their homes and institutionalised in hospitals and nursing homes" (Lysaght, 1995, p.27). The Irish Hospice Foundation

(2014) found that in 1885, roughly 85% of Irish people died at home; by 1985, it reduced to approximately 40%, and by 2005 it reduced to approximately one-third of people (fig 8). Similarly, a study done at Trinity University Dublin (2021) found that in 2018 in Ireland, only 23% of people died at home, with 44% dying in hospitals, 23% in long-stay residential care, 8% in hospice care and the remainder elsewhere. Most of these people who died in long-stay residential care facilities were aged 85 and older. It is evident from the data above (fig 6, fig 7) that although there was a time when most people in Ireland died at home, that is no longer the case. (Dublin, TC 2021, Irish Hospice Foundation 2014). This has a two-fold negative effect.

Place of death trends in Ireland, 2013–2018

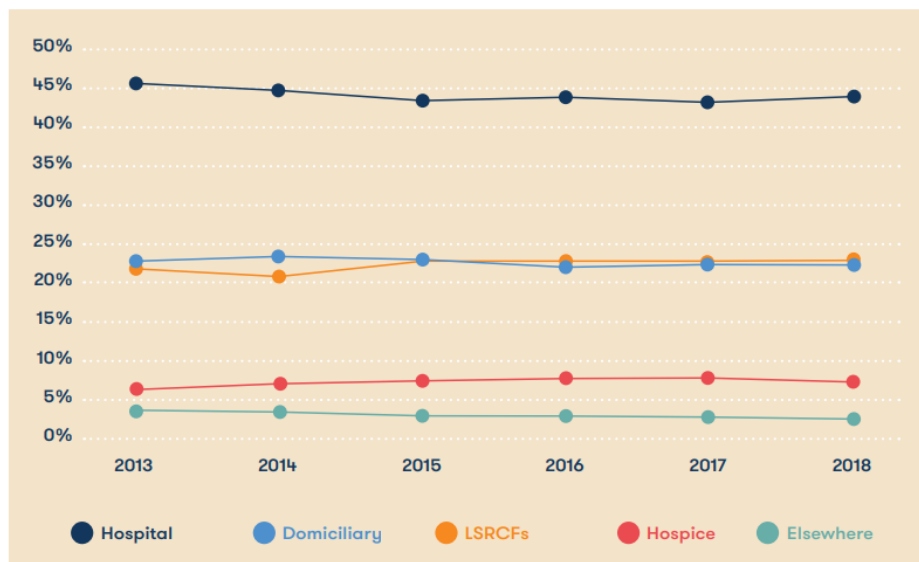
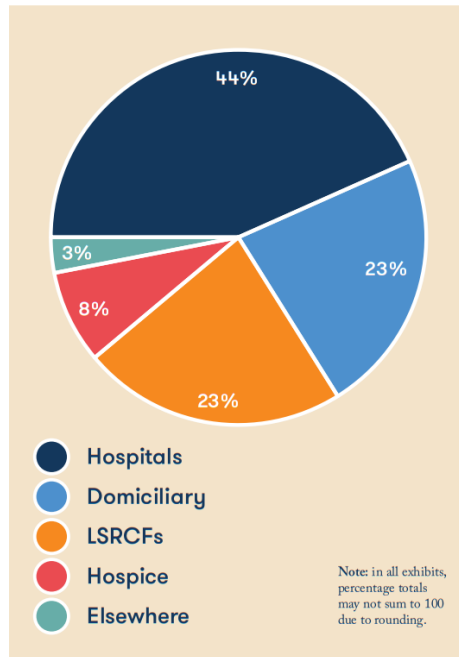


Figure. 6. Graph showing the places of death of Irish people between 2013 and 2018. (Dublin, TC 2021)

All deaths in Ireland by place of death, 2018 (%)

Figure. places 2021)



7. Pie chart breaking down the Irish people died in 2018. (Dublin, TC

Firstly, people wish to die at home, and this need is not being fulfilled, thus adding undue distress and discomfort to the dying person (Elias, 2001, Lysaght, 1995). Secondly, this contributes to the stigmatisation and disconnection people feel towards death, as people begin to associate death not with a peaceful passing in one's own bed, surrounded by friends and family, but with a painful demise in a loud hospital, surrounded by strangers (Walter, 1991).

Why is a peaceful death in one's home becoming less common? It could be argued that it is due to the intense life extension many experience before death. Brown (2015) writes that "the current focus of medical research [is on] increasing the quantity, rather than the quality" of a person's life; medicine often focuses more on keeping someone alive than making them comfortable. Life expectancy has rapidly increased along with scientific improvements; life expectancy is increasing by approximately 2.2 years per decade (Brown, 2015, Oeppen, 2002). San (2006) notes that "modern medicine also has attempted to tame death by prolonging life". However, death cannot be tamed. Medical professionals see death as a failure (Walter, 1991). Thus, as mentioned above, this increase in life expectancy does not correlate to increased quality of life for the elderly and dying. This increased life expectancy comes with age-related illnesses such as dementia and Parkinson's, as

well as an increased risk of general illness, disease and rapid ageing, all of which increase suffering prior to one's death ((Brown, 2015, Mapes, 2014, Brayne, 2007) (fig 9).

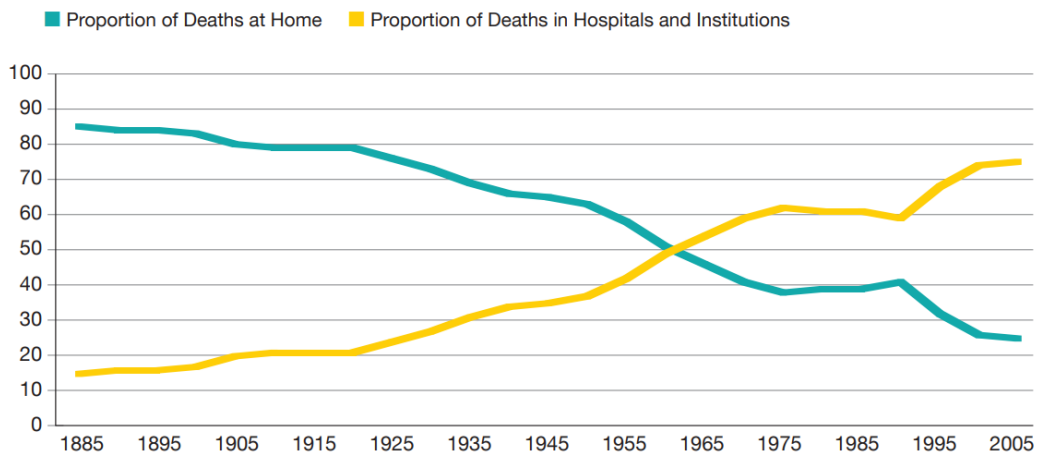


Figure. 8. Graph showing the decrease in deaths at home and the increase in hospital deaths between 1885 and 2005. (Irish Hospice Foundation 2014)

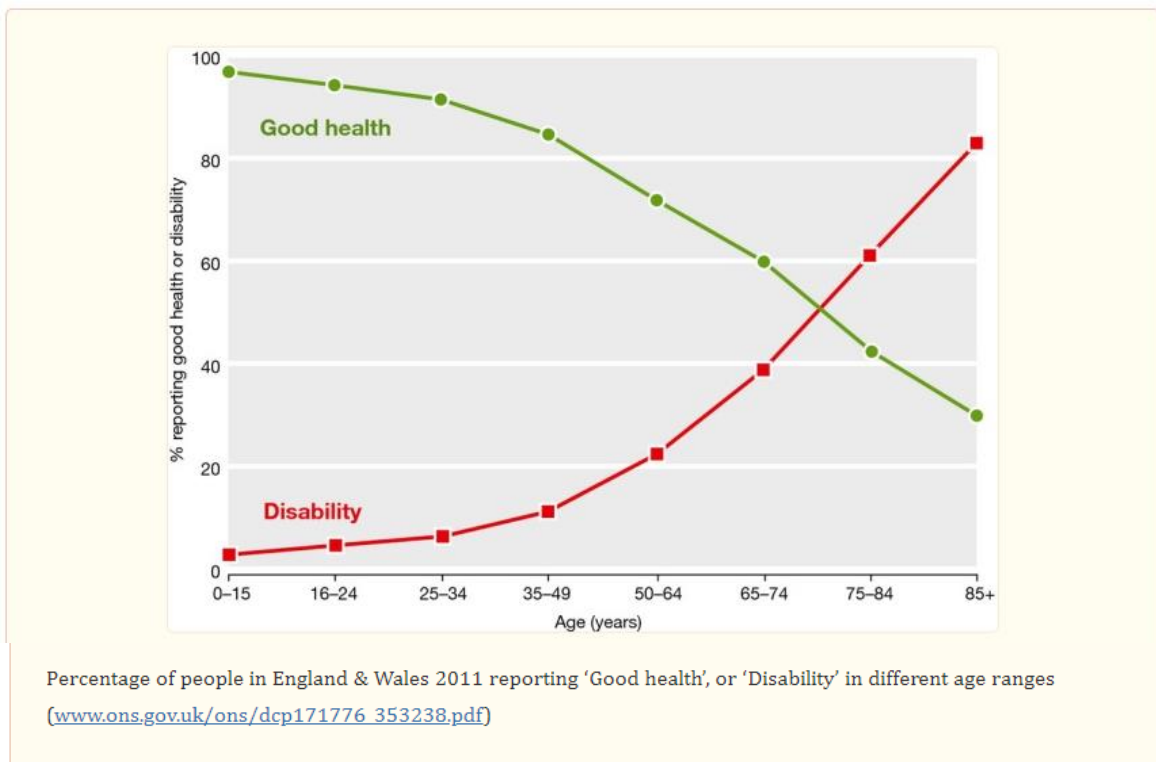


Figure. 9. Illustrating the direct correlation between age and the deterioration of health. (Brown, 2015)

This approach in medicine exists in a counterintuitive space (Brown, 2015). Studies have shown that medical professionals handle their journey with death in a different way than they treat their patient's journey with death (Brown, 2015, Periyakoil et al. 2014). Brown (2015) found that when investigated, "most physicians surveyed would choose a do-not-resuscitate or "no code" status for themselves if they were terminally ill". Despite this, most doctors "pursue aggressive, life-prolonging treatment, [even] for patients facing the same prognosis". Those familiar with the realities of death often choose death over the suffering that comes with many of the invasive procedures that people experience before they die to extend their lives (Mapes, 2014, Walter, 1991).

Additionally, it has been recorded by both patients and doctors that there is an intense reluctance to discuss death and the process of dying both in medical settings (Brown, 2019, Walter, 1991). This is dangerous, as the dying person may not even be educated on their options past life-extending treatments, such as hospice care (Craven and Wald, 1975) or medical aid in dying (Pagano, 2022). This constant push towards life extension over comfort in the final part of a patient's life occurs despite "more than 80 per cent of patients say that they wish to avoid hospitalisations and high-intensity care at the end of life". There is such a stigma against the discussion of death that the dying person's "wishes are often overridden" (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p.6-9).

Media Influence

People are aware that it is highly likely that they will die in a hospital. Those who do not work within the medical field or are not chronically ill and, as such, do not frequent hospitals are likely unaware of the realities of the medical field. The average person's knowledge of hospital procedures comes from medical dramas. It is commonly known that the media influences people's perception (83, 84) (Arias, 2019, Hoffman et al., 2017, Walter, 1991). The purpose of the media is to entertain. Thus many media depictions of death in medical settings opt for more dramatic

depictions (fig 10). This affects people's perception of death, potentially leading to a more negative relationship towards death and dying.



Figure. 10. Dramatic scene from a hospital drama Grey's Anatomy. (2012).

In the same way, pornography is not a healthy or accurate depiction of sex and sexuality (www.psychologytoday.com, n.d.), death in the media is not a healthy or accurate depiction of death (Walter, 1991). Both are exaggerated, dramatised and curated. However, the primary way people discover how skewed pornography is through experiencing sex themselves. That technique does not work with one's own death. One cannot return from dying; death is a one-time occurrence and cannot be conceptualised through repeated exposure. However, in the past, people conceptualised their death and the deaths of others through ritual, tradition and exposure. Nowadays, people are attending funerals less and experiencing the realities of death less often, thus hampering people's ability to explore their emotions surrounding death. Something is perplexing about the prevalence of the media obsession with death, dying and violence in a world that often cannot confront death in the real world (Walter, 1991).

Interview with Jonathan Stafford: How have things changed?

In an interview with Jonathan Stafford (2022), the current Managing Director of Stafford Funeral Homes, Stafford discussed his observations on people's behaviour around death in a number of places. Stafford has worked in both urban and rural Ireland, as well as the UK, the US and Australia for 30 years. Stafford discussed many of his observations on how people treat death and the visible difference between urban and rural areas in Ireland. He discussed how the "Irish people treat death better" than many countries he has worked in and how he believes this is primarily due to "our rural background" and our culture of community (fig 11). When asked about the contrast Stafford witnessed between rural and urban areas, he talked about the changes he has seen over the past 30 years; how there is almost a lack of empathy around the death of others. Stafford recounted multiple instances of "selfish" behaviour in urban areas. This included cars blowing their horn at hearses, drivers speeding past funeral processions, and even one circumstance where one of his staff was accosted by a driver when they were slowing down traffic for a horse-drawn hearse. He stated that nowadays, "there's always somebody late for something, and they get caught in the middle of a funeral and start having a meltdown", whereas this did not happen when he began practising 30 years ago. It does not happen in rural areas. Stafford expressed that thirty years ago, "even in urban areas, people used to stop for the hearses". Whereas "now people just do not care", this extreme disregard for the dead and the grieving by the urban public "doesn't happen every day", but Stafford has noticed a substantial increase during his time in the funeral industry.



Figure. 11. A funeral procession on the island of Inis Oírr in Galway, 1968. On a small Island such as Inis Oírr, the community tends to be very close, it would not be surprising if the entire population of the Island attended a funeral. (Sugar and Images, n.d.)

Stafford discussed how suburban areas are very different. When asked about suburban Dublin, areas with more community presence, Stafford stated that in suburban areas, death is handled similarly to rural areas of Ireland, with care and empathy. Many community members would come to pay respects if the deceased were part of a neighbourhood or parish. However, this does not stop someone driving through the community, especially in commuter areas, from continuing the disrespectful behaviour he and his staff have witnessed. Dunbar's Number could influence this behaviour. Dunbar (2010, p.775-778) suggested that humans can only form approximately "150 individual relationships". Thus, people living in densely populated areas may find it challenging to empathise with those they do not know. However, when these same people are engaged and connected to others, they would likely feel more empathy for them. It could be suggested that the simple addition of community and connection dramatically increases people's care towards death and the grieving, likely through increased empathy for our fellow person.

Death in Rural Ireland

A place where death is often faced head-on is rural Ireland. The Irish have a long history with death, with one of the most famous times in Irish history being the Famine, where approximately 1 million people died (fig 11) (Dorney, 2016), as well as Ireland's long-standing, bloody invasions by England (Paxton, 2020). Long before the Famine or even the first invasion of Ireland, there was a strong relationship, mythology and ritual around death and dying. This is evident when looking at Irish folklore stories such as the tale of the banshee (O'Connor and Lysaght, 1986), as well as Irish funeral practices, including dwindling practices such as keening and the near everyday staple to Irish death rites to this day, the wake. This close connection has caused death to be less taboo in most rural areas of Ireland than in many urban areas. It is an accepted norm.



Figure. 12. Illustration of a mother and two children during the famine. (Dorney, 2016)

McGarry (2020) argued that there is almost a "captivation with funerals" in Ireland. Rural areas have a higher proportion of older residents who are often far more comfortable discussing death and funerals. Some older folks even have the clothes they wish to be buried in already picked out (McCarthy et al., 2009). Rural areas also have more people practising religion (Central Statistics Office, 2019) and, often, a

stronger sense of community because of that. In rural Ireland, the only traffic congestion is generated by a funeral party, a car crash, or cows. In two of the three situations, somebody has probably died. Whether through their farming backgrounds, where death is simply part of raising animals or due to the higher proportion of older people who maintain their strong ties to Irish tradition and continue practising. This positively affects many people's relationship with death as it erodes the boundary. If someone is more familiar with something, it is less frightening. Nothing is more uncomfortable to the human mind than the unknown.

The Death Notice

One example of familiarity with death in Irish culture is how death notices are handled. Death notices are an essential part of Irish culture; there is even an entire supernatural creature, the banshee (O'Connor and Lysaght, 1986), whose entire myth revolves around giving notice of oncoming death. McGarry (2020) writes how "death notices, originally published in newspapers, became required listening for many on local radio, and now appear on dedicated websites" (fig 12). As Paddy Duffy (2015, p.24), author of *Do You Know Who's Dead? A hilarious celebration of what makes us Irish* writes, "breaking death news is so important in Ireland that local radio stations have to announce it twice a day". People also spread death news by word of mouth, like gossip. A familiar experience of many Irish people returning home is hearing a question such as "did you hear who's dead?" from a parent in a jovial tone. Duffy (2015 p.24) writes, "if aliens were to descend on Ireland... they'd be forgiven for thinking that a regular form of greeting is: Do you know who's dead?".

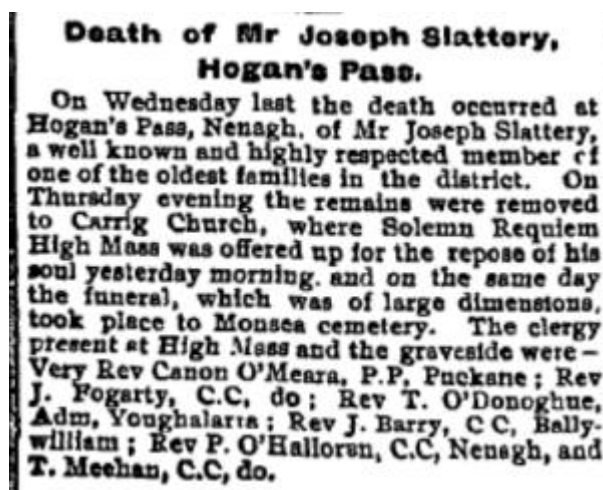


Figure. 13. Example of an old Irish death notice from a newspaper.

(www.irishnewsarchive.com, n.d.)

The lost tradition of keening

Keening is an Irish tradition rarely, if ever, practised in Ireland in modern times but was once, like the death notice, nearly mandatory (fig 13). Keening consisted of women gathering and wailing and crying at a wake or funeral, "lamenting over the dead" (Fitzpatrick, 2016). The cries and screams and wails were often unpleasant to listen to, with professional musician Marie-Louise Muir in Fitzpatrick's (2016) article claiming they sounded "off-note" and unsettling", claiming that while listening ", you're recoiling from the horror of loss", the feelings of pain and loss is expressed through these wails. Keening was done as a sort of release, "they express the praise of the deceased, and the loss the clan would sustain" due to the death.

Figure. 14. Illustration of a woman keening.
(www.libraryireland.com, n.d.)



The keening did not always occur after the death. It was even once believed that keening could delay death for several hours (Lysaght, 1995). In a powerful account from author Kevin Toolis' (www.youtube.com, 2018) made for BBC Ideas, he describes his Father's death and wake, which included keening as the man died. In both an article written by Toolis (2017) and a youtube video (www.youtube.com, 2018), he recounted his Father's deathbed and wake. Toolis discussed how, as his Father was dying, those around him began to keen through a Catholic prayer known as the Five Sorrowful Mysteries. Those keening repeated the prayer, louder and louder. These people were, as Toolis (2017) recounts, "cradling this man into death". Toolis compared it to a lullaby. Dying alone is a fear many feel (Dignity in Dying, 2008), and the Irish people remedied this when they could, in part through keening.

This treatment of death was once seen as "a right within an Irish Clan" (Toolis, 2017). The burden of grief, death and dying was alleviated through sharing it amongst the community while the death occurred and mourning publicly, loudly, and thoroughly (Lysaght, 1995).

Though keening, covering mirrors, and other older practices have almost completely died out, the one consistent and well-known Irish funeral tradition is the Irish wake. The wake is a rich, ancient funeral rite that was once practised by a litany of cultures in ancient times; and has slowly died out as science has improved and the strength of religious beliefs has waned (Stafford). The original purpose of the wake amongst ancient peoples was multi-purpose. For many cultures, the wake originally occurred to protect the body from evil spirits, ease the pain felt by the grieving, and celebrate the life of the person who has passed. It is also believed that wakes were held to ensure the person who had passed was truly dead, as before medical practices advanced, the occasional corpse was misidentified as dead when the person was, in fact, alive. (Witoszek, 1987, Mooney, 1888) Many cultures, such as the Welsh (Stevens, 1976), Jewish (Fishbane, 1989) and Māori (Beaglehole and Beaglehole, 1945), have similar funeral practices involving sitting by the corpse before the funeral. However, the wake is most commonly associated with Ireland.

The Irish Wake

The wake is a "hallmark" of Irish culture (Witoszek, 1987, p.207). To the Irish, it is "older than history" (Mooney, 1888 p.269) and is an essential part of the grieving process in Ireland. RIP.ie (n.d.), Ireland's current foremost death notice website, writes an account of what is involved in the typical Irish wake. A wake typically takes place in the deceased person's home, but many funeral homes provide a space for repose. The deceased is well dressed, for some older people, in clothes that have been set aside for some time now, often since they became ill, and placed in a coffin, with the body wrapped in a shroud from the chest down, keeping "the head and hands visible" (rip.ie, n.d.) . The casket is placed in a communal space in the home, often a living room, where it is "waked" for typically one night, though some choose to wake the body for shorter periods. In the not-so-distant past, mirrors were

covered, the blinds drawn, bar one in the room where the deceased is residing, where a window would be left open. There was once a belief that, when someone died, a window should be left open so the soul could easily pass on, though this practice is less common nowadays.



Figure. 15. An image from an old Irish wake titled "Mickie O'Hoolihan's Wake". (Stromeyer and Wyman, 1894)

Wakes are a very community-based affair. People are not invited to wakes. They arrive at the location stated on the death notice if they deem it appropriate. This can lead to upwards of a hundred people passing through the home of a deceased during any given wake (fig 16). Some treat wakes as a sombre affair, others a party. Despite the event's mood, wakes usually play out similarly. The first thing any non-family member must do when attending a wake is shaking the bereaved's hand and give their condolences after signing the guest book. An expectation during wakes is for attendees to gaze upon the deceased for a time. People often say prayers, touch the hands and head of the dead, or sprinkle holy water on the corpse. Then, they join the rest of the mourning party, "drinking tea, eating sandwiches, biscuits and cakes [while] chatting". This occurs in the "room where the body is laid out". There is no room for fear or discomfort towards death at a wake, as death has already arrived, and the funeral party is simply processing that. A wake is not a scary place. It is a place safe enough for a grieving spouse to cry and joyous enough for a gaggle of

kids to play at the foot of a coffin (rip.ie, n.d.). During a wake, death is linked to life and celebration. It is acknowledged and not shunned. It could be argued that this is one of the most vital elements to mourning and processing death as an Irish person.

This relaxed attitude towards death continues after the death news. Many Irish people will remember attending many wakes as a child (Lysaght, 1995). Sometimes the deceased was a grandparent, a family friend, or even someone they did not know. They may remember shaking hands with people, all clad in black, being led over to a coffin to mutter a prayer before being handed a mug of tea and a ham sandwich to eat while sitting opposite the coffin in a room full of people. Though this experience may seem morbid, it has been a formative part of many Irish persons' lives.

Stafford mentions that, in his experience, far fewer children who are not direct relatives to the deceased attend urban repose and funerals. It is possible that people from urbanised areas, where it is less common to bring children to wakes and funerals, may not see a dead body or attend a funeral or wake until it is their grandparents or parents' funeral. According to Stafford, far more people generally attend rural wakes and funerals than urban ones. There could be upwards of 100 people attending a wake or funeral in rural areas (McGarry, 2023, Stafford, 2022). McGarry (2023) writes, "in Ireland, you don't just attend funerals of people you know - there is an unspoken rule that you attend funerals of those closely related to people you know too". This is an act of community and support for those who have lost someone. Irish funeral traditions, like many cultures, are "unspoken" and done when the time is right. People know to do them because they have witnessed it done by others. This suffers to a certain extent in many urban areas, as the culture around death and wakes are changing. Stafford recounts a trend he has noticed of more people opting not to repose, instead proceeding straight to a funeral or cremation.



Figure. 16. The funeral of Mrs Pearse, 1932. Image illustrating a large turnout at an Irish funeral, a sight not uncommon to this day. (National Library of Ireland, 1932).

Once a wake attendant has paid their respects, they sit, eat, drink and talk until late into the night, or they leave quickly, as wakes can draw in dozens and dozens of visitors and, as Duffy (2015) writes, guests, want to ensure "some other eejit attendee doesn't completely box in your car". Those who stay tell stories about the person who has passed, sharing the pain of loss as a group. Eventually, those not directly related to the deceased all depart, leaving those most affected to sit by the body for the night, metaphorically cradling the deceased into whatever comes after life while leaving room for themselves to grieve.

The Pub and the Funeral

There are ideas, even amongst Irish people, that the "Irish wake is a mere drinking orgy on the occasion of a funeral"; a wake is so much more than a hard night in a pub with a corpse present (Mooney, 1888 p.269). This idea may come from pub owners' history in Irish funerals. For decades, many pubs doubled as undertakers. Irish pubs were once very multifaceted establishments (Gingrich, 2019). They would be a pub, a haberdashery, a hardware store, butchers and undertakers, and any

other establishments crammed into one building. Gingrich (2019) quotes a Dublin pub owner, John O'Dwyer who stated that for many people in the past, "the publican was the man who christened them, married them, and buried them" (fig 17). This possibly influences the idea that Irish funerals are very rowdy, drunken affairs. However, just as the wake is a place of both mourning and celebration, as is the common funeral tradition of the afterparty. It is common for most of a funeral party, including the bereaved, to journey to a pub directly after a funeral. This provides a much-needed release of tension after the sombre affair that is an Irish funeral.

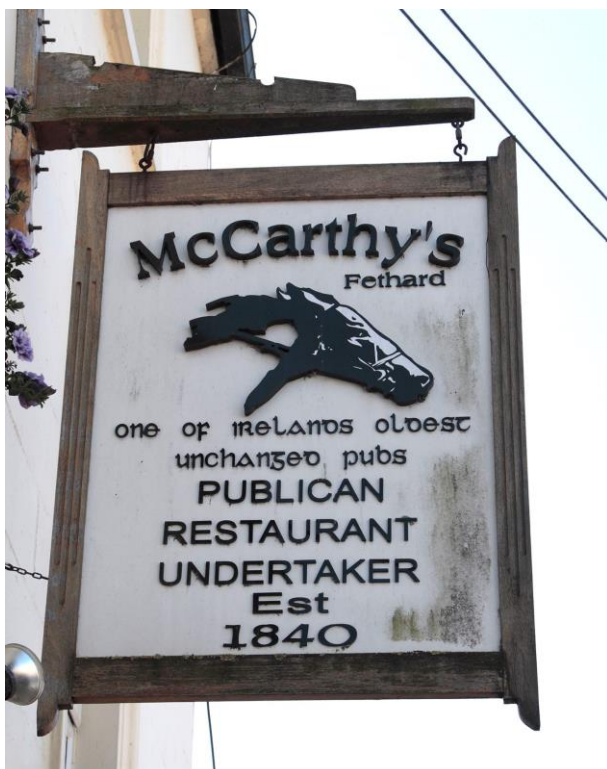


Figure. 17. Sign from McCarthy's Pub, an establishment that has been practising as a "Publican, Restaurant [and] Undertaker" since 1840. (Gingrich, 2019)

The Handshake

An act that runs throughout Irish funeral traditions is quite understated but could be argued to be a vital part of counteracting the disconnection with death within Irish funeral practices. That is the handshake (www.youtube.com, 2018, Toolis, 2017). Someone has just died, and the first thing an Irish person does is shake the hand of

the bereaved. There is an obsessive nature to it. When entering a wake, you shake the bereaved hand and give condolences, same with the funeral and the month's mind.

In journalist Toolis' (www.youtube.com, 2018) video account of his Father's funeral, he describes how his hand was shaken hundreds of times and how it impacted him. He wrote that "they all came up and shook your hands and as they shook your hands they say it like a cliché"; they repeated, "I'm sorry for your troubles". These actions and words are repeated during the wake and funeral until "the bones in your hands begin to ache". The handshake, the firm, physical contact that does not require the bereaved to be vulnerable like an embrace may, acts for many as a grounding moment. It brings them back to reality. Toolis states that this tradition of the handshake is a long-standing way of "countering death denial". With each handshake and each "I'm sorry for your loss", the bereaved are reminded that "they're dead, they're dead, they're dead". Similarly, in Seamus Heaney's (1966) poem *Mid-Term Break*, he writes:

*"When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand
And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'."*

When someone dies, the bereaved are often in shock, and the belief that the dead might walk through the door if they wish hard enough is understandable. The handshake and the condolences are a healthy reminder that death is permanent and that the best thing to do is accept it, grieve, and move on. It "helps us acknowledge the reality of the death" (Wolfelt 2016). It shows that others see the bereaved grief and loss as acknowledged, and, like with the wake and keening, it reminds them that they are not alone (Toolis, 2017)

The Irish Funeral

It is commonly known that "the Irish are famously good at throwing a funeral". However, it is not the funeral that brings this reputation. An Irish funeral is often a

"cookie cutter" affair if the funeral follows the traditional Catholic ceremony (Duffy, 2015). They are mournful affairs, often saturated with religion and impersonal tradition. It is not the Irish funeral that helps the Irish process grief in ways other countries do not; it is the wake and the afterparty, with a funeral sandwiched in between. The pain of grief is not erased by the celebration of life and community in the wake and afterparty, but it supports the bereaved and comforts them through great pain (Freyne 2013). The healing of an Irish funeral does not take place in the cemetery (fig 18).



Figure. 18. A photograph of Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, Ireland's largest cemetery. (O'Donoghue, 2022)

English Funerals

Funerals in Ireland and Britain are places of mourning, but there is levity on either side for the Irish. This is not the case for the British. British funerary practices differ significantly from Ireland in many ways, the starkest being the timeline and the focus. An Irish burial usually takes place 2-4 days post-mortem, with the wake occurring on

the day after the body has been removed and treated (Kiltiernan Cemetery, 2017). In contrast, in Britain, the time between death and burial is upwards of a week, though often two weeks or more (farewill.com, n.d.). According to Gov.UK (n.d), in the UK, people are only entitled to paid bereavement leave in the case of the death of a child (GOV.UK, n.d.). Meaning many must return to work mere days after a death, wait up to two weeks, then attend their spouse's, parents, cousins, etc. funeral, opening up the wound of grief once more. Moreover, the only real levity felt in a typical British funeral is during the British wake, which, unlike in Ireland, occurs after the funeral (farewill.com, n.d.). Though this wake may act as a much-needed release and relief, it could be suggested that the quick-paced, often party-like atmosphere of Irish wakes and funeral afterparties are more conducive to mourning with reduced pain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many in our society have a disconnected, dysfunctional and uncomfortable relationship with death and dying. People are often viscerally uncomfortable with death, grief and the dying. They do not know how to handle death-related situations; thus, they avoid them. This has been a slow deterioration fuelled by many factors, including community degradation through urbanisation and migration, the medical priority of life extension, and a reduction in people practising religion and carrying on death traditions. When examining standard Irish funeral practices, both current and no longer practised, there is a throughline of acceptance of death and support of the bereaved. When looking at the Irish attitude towards death, there is an argument that the Irish people do not appear to fear death, or at least discussions surrounding death, as much as many others; that is to say, at least when a death has occurred. Death news is an Irish person's favourite gossip. Wakes are, for some people, the party of the year, and for some, they have been planning what they will be wearing into the grave for the last ten years. Community and love for the deceased and bereaved are reinforced during Irish funeral practices. Through the handshakes and condolences, both during the wake and the funeral, the physical contact is grounding, the condolences, both a reminder that yes, they are dead, but you are not; you are loved and supported. Everyone feels discomfort towards death,

but Ireland is one example of a culture that may sometimes look death in the eye with acceptance.

Appendices

*Interview with Jonathan Stafford - Managing Director of Stafford Funeral Home.
Conducted by Ella Quinn. 8/11/2022*

Researcher: Thank you for accepting my request for an interview. Before we start, would it be alright if I were to make a recording of the interview for me to reference back on later?

Stafford: Yes, I just don't want to hear it on the internet or anything.

Researcher: Oh you're not, don't worry. Thank you very much.

Stafford: No problem.

Researcher: I'd just like to ask you a couple of questions - it's a bit of an odd dissertation topic and I thought I might as well go to some of the sources. So how long have you been working as a funeral director yourself?

Stafford: I have been working here for 30 years.

Researcher: Does your funeral home provide space for viewings or does it just provide embalming and that sort of thing?

Stafford: We would provide a full service.

Researcher: Have you ever worked in a funeral home that is outside of the city?

Stafford: I have worked in funeral homes around the world. When I came out of college I started here, then I went to the UK, Australia and America. I've worked all over the world.

Researcher: Have you found any real major differences between working in this sort of industry in Ireland versus, let's say England. I know that England has a very different funeral culture.

Stafford: Yeah. Now look times have changed. That was 35 years ago but it was very different then. We're actually becoming a bit like the way they were. So in the UK the funeral might not be for 2 weeks - 3 weeks. The deceased may not be in repose and may not be on view, it's not as big a thing in the UK. An awful lot of it back then, 35 years ago, they were at 70% cremation rate, whereas back then it was less than 10% here, and now we're closer to 50%, so you can see in the trends the way we're going. And then obviously the States is very like Ireland in terms of the repose, the laying out of the remains, they would be very popular, which it still is in Ireland. I know in the States now that it is very much focused - not focused, but has turned around as well, there is now a huge amount of cremation. I don't have the proper statistics for the UK, but yes I'd say it's very different over there, I'd reckon it's very similar here for ourselves at around 45%.

Researcher: Do you reckon there's a lot more cremation in urban areas in Ireland than rural areas?

Stafford: There is, purely from the point of view that in urban areas graves are much more expensive than in rural areas. You would probably buy a grave in a rural area for €250 to €500, whereas if you're to buy a grave in Dublin at the very least you're probably talking two-and-a-half-thousand.

Researcher: So it's a lot more expensive, a lot more difficult in the urban areas of Ireland.

Stafford: Yeah.

Researcher: When it comes to the wake/viewings...

Stafford: Reposes yeah.

Researcher: Reposes, yes. Do you find that in the ones that take place in urban areas, do you think there are as many people as there, is the community as big, do as many people attend as in rural areas? Or do you find that they are a lot smaller simply because it is not held in the home?

Stafford: Yeah I suppose - that's a good question. From our point of view, it really depends on the person's connection to the community, depends on the age, depends on whether they have a rural background. Definitely people in rural areas attend the funeral, or the repose, or the wake for the sake of it sometimes. You could definitely find an awful lot of these areas where people turn up at the repose or at the wake for the sake of being there when maybe they shouldn't be there. Are they just here for an ol' shindig or what are they doing? So yeah, urban areas are a bit more... not distant, that's not the right word, but they seem to have it on the nose, they seem to have it done right, you know?

Researcher: Is it a bit more balanced in your opinion?

Stafford: Yeah, it's more balanced. I suppose, now it's very difficult for me to say, I don't want to be judging, I'm not judging anybody. People could come around all the time, and that's lovely, they're paying their respects, but you'll find in urban areas sometimes that people will think "well I didn't know him that well" so they'll send a letter or a card. You definitely don't have as much, and you can word this better than how I'm saying, but you definitely don't have as many. I don't know what the proper terminology is, but you wouldn't have as many "hanger oners" in urban areas versus rural areas. There are almost professional funeral goers in rural areas. I don't know why that is, but they'll go to every funeral. Another thing, you wouldn't have as many funerals in rural areas because, sure, why would they there's less people? In Dublin there's a high population so there's more funerals.

Researcher: Do you find that there's less children in urban funerals than there would be in rural ones? I remember being dragged along to so many funerals when I was a kid. I'm from the middle of nowhere in Wicklow, and it always seemed kind of odd to have so many kids that are not related to the person who has passed-away present.

Stafford: Yeah, I would agree with you, there's a bit of that, definitely in rural areas more than urban areas. You wouldn't have as many kids at our funerals, obviously relations, grandchildren, fine, but you don't get as many people bringing kids along. Maybe in tragic circumstances.

Researcher: Such as the deaths of younger people?

Stafford: Yes, if you were to give a sort of anecdotal view yeah. Most of what I can give you is anecdotal I will say.

Researcher: Oh no worries, this dissertation is more based on an idea I have that Ireland does death quite well in a lot of ways, I have attended various English funerals and it has been very different.

Stafford: I've been quoted saying that Ireland and Irish people do death better than most. That does come from our rural background, where we do have the reposal and the wake, and from a grief point of view you do have something there.

Researcher: I have another question. Do you notice any odd or old fashioned traditions that still happen. Things like keening or covering mirrors.

Stafford: Now I haven't heard of keening now for a long time. Now I have only been in the business for just over 30 years, and you didn't see it that often anyhow, but I haven't heard of it in a long time. Covering the mirrors, I actually have mirrors in one of my funeral chapels and no one has ever told me to cover them up. I know that was a bit of an older tradition where you cover up the windows, and even to be fair, in most places even lighting candles is a fire hazard because you have to be careful of people whacking them over, so we don't even light candles anymore, we have battery candles. You could even do your dissertation on how society has become more selfish, even in urban areas they used to stop for the hearse and make sure the hearse was allowed to come through. People would pull over, they wouldn't jump in between a cortege, whereas nowadays people just don't care, they don't stop, they'll pull in on top of you, they don't break, I've even had people blow at us.

Researcher: Really?

Stafford: Yeah, society has completely changed. And again, depending on the circumstances, everybody is busy and all, I am not judging anybody, but it has definitely changed. What's happening more and more is that people are not reposing as much as they used to, they'll go directly to the crematorium, but this is still at a very low level in comparison to the UK.

Researcher: Do you reckon people have - respect is the wrong word - but less respect for the death process than they used to? Specifically in urban areas.

Stafford: definitely, definitely in the urban areas. People, I don't know, are just busy, they have their own rushing, there's always somebody who is late for something, and they get caught in the middle of a funeral and end up having a meltdown.

Researcher: Even though they know that there's a family who has just lost someone?

Stafford: Yes exactly.

Researcher: Almost as if there's a lack of empathy going on?

Stafford: Yes, exactly. Whereas that just didn't happen 30 years ago. Maybe Irish people were a bit more relaxed, I have no idea.

Researcher: When it comes to my hypothesis on that within my essay I am suggesting that it has to do with a lack of connection between people in cities. There are so many people, and the more people there are, the less you know about them and the less empathy you have for them.

Stafford: If you go locally, let's say somewhere in Dublin like Malahide, that's different. The people in Malahide will come out from the parish. Though you might still get someone from outside who's travelling through Malahide to get to somewhere else. They're the ones who cause difficulty, someone's in a hurry or

someone from Malahide that doesn't know that other person in Malahide. Let's say if the village stops for a funeral, let's say it's a tragic funeral of a young person, you won't be able to get in or out of the place, it'll be so full, so you would want to know locally whether such and such are there and make sure you don't go near the place during the funeral. That's something that's missing in urban areas.

Researcher: So, you reckon that this sort of selfishness is mainly in very central city environments rather than the suburbs?

Stafford: Yes, I agree. If you go to certain areas, I can't think of the proper terminology, but when areas become gated or renewed, when it's all rentals. When it goes from an older area to a newer area, in those areas you'd definitely have it because - and it's sad to see - because the community has been pushed out with age and obviously with the price of housing, and a lot of the families couldn't stay or chose not to stay because they wanted to move out to the suburbs.

Researcher: Do you think that behaviour goes on in places that are almost entirely holiday homes? Like certain places in West Cork and coastal areas that are mostly holiday homes with only a few locals?

Stafford: No I don't think so, the people who have the holiday homes try to integrate into the society or into the area on a more personal level than those just renting for a while because for those who own the holiday homes you want to be a part of the community for however many months you are there, whereas when you're renting a house and you know you're only going to be there for a few months, why would you care about old biddy that lives down the road. Now there are long term renters, that's a different story, but an awful lot of people, inner city, south east inner city, north east inner city, there's a huge amount of rental areas.

Researcher: Yes, I myself am renting in one of these areas, I am in an estate full of families, and the students I share with would be the odd ones out, but I know there's huge areas where it's almost all students, so I can imagine it could be slightly strange holding a funeral in places like that.

Stafford: I am giving you a lot of the worst case scenarios, it doesn't happen every day but it is happening more than it used to. I am seeing impatience, and desensitisation maybe, they're not as sensitive to each other or other people than in rural areas. When I say it happens, it happens more than it used to. It's definitely happening much more than it used to.

Researcher: I have definitely seen behaviour like that when passing funerals in town, about a year back during covid on Thomas street I saw someone getting very angry at the hearse going by.

Stafford: I'll give you my true story. We have a funeral home by the north strand and my grandfather had opened the place back in 1953, and I would know an awful lot of the locals, and admittedly, an awful lot of traffic passing through is going out of the city or into the city. We have a horse drawn hearse, and one of the team members here went into the middle of the road to try and stop the traffic coming down the road, and as he went out into the middle of the road some guy was tearing down the road and he went insane. One, at our guy that went out into the road and two, that we delayed him. So he got out of the car and grabbed our team member by the tie. So that set me thinking about people's sensitivity around others, it is certainly happening much more than 30 years ago. I couldn't get over it! There was no point in calling the guards, this guy had a mouth on him and came into the office roaring and shouting, asking what we were doing. We were trying to get a funeral through, that's what we do, don't come through this way if you're ever worried about getting caught behind a funeral, particularly the horse hearse. But there you go, there's one of my true stories for you of some of the crazy things people do. Is this typical? Probably not, no.

Researcher: It's good to hear the extremes too, that's unbelievable behaviour. I have one last question which is a little different than the others. Do you see many secular or atypical ceremonies, for instance I have many friends who identify as pagan, and I am wondering if you have witnessed funerals for very different sorts of beliefs?

Stafford: From my point of view we would have started seeing that about 10 years ago. We're currently in the process of turning the old Tayto factory up in Coolock into

a place where people can specifically carry out funeral services on different levels. They can have what we would call a Dual funeral, where you can blend in a little bit of religion if you so wish, you don't have to have any religion, just the service, similar to a wedding that you'd see that's non-religious where everybody can get up and say a few words. The funeral can be designed as you so wish, everybody is different but they usually find a celebrant, or civil celebrant to come and put the whole thing together, have a few people in the congregation would say a few words, maybe read a poem, there will definitely be music at it, and it can be absolutely beautiful. Admittedly, it's a bit like anything, most of the time I find them to be so personal and different, whereas if you go to a funeral mass you'll have the liturgical side which often has the same prayers, and then it is a little more personal at the end. But these services, the humanism in them, is what makes them different. I've found that humanism has become very popular, as have humanist funerals. Our facilities have definitely seen them from a long time ago. It's not that they are not pagan, they're secular I suppose. Non-Christian non-religious, they're no problem, we facilitate those types of funerals on a regular basis now. At the moment what happens here is that most of them occur over at the crematorium, but if you want to do that in the graveyard, it's kind of difficult, it can be cold, and there can't be any tents put up, you just can't do it, it's just freezing. So it can be done in our facility, and then you can go on out. There's nowhere really to do that now at the moment, so we built a place in Ballyfermot where we have regular secular funerals, non-religious, pagan funerals, but with this new facility of ours is built, that will be huge.

Researcher: That's very interesting. I know a lot of people looking for secular burial go to the green burial facilities in Wexford, but that still has the issues of potentially being very very cold and very very wet.

Stafford: Yes, that's still the problem.

Researcher: I think that is all the questions I have, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview.

Stafford: When you are finished with this dissertation could you email it onto us?

Researcher: Of course, again thank you so much for this interview. I really appreciate it.

Stafford: Nice talking to you. Bye

Researcher: Goodbye.

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