

DOCTOR'S ORDERS FOR A GOOD DEATH

Caitlin Doughty and
Lindsey Fitzharris

Thursday, April 6, 2017, at 4:30 p.m.
Mayer Auditorium, Health Sciences Campus
University of Southern California

ABOUT THE PANELISTS

- **CAITLIN DOUGHTY** is a mortician who has become a spokesperson for death acceptance and reform of western funeral-industry practices.
- **LINDSEY FITZHARRIS** is a death-positive medical historian who created the popular website *The Chirurgeon's Apprentice* and the YouTube series *Under the Knife*.
- **MEGAN ROSENBLOOM** is a USC medical librarian and the director of Death Salon, an event series that explores mortality by sharing knowledge and art.

THE ORDER OF THE GOOD DEATH

The Order of the Good Death is a group of funeral-industry professionals, academics, and artists who believe that we live in a death-phobic culture and want to help people prepare for their inevitable mortality. The Order was founded in L.A. in January 2011 by mortician Caitlin Doughty.

The Order was inspired by several historical concepts of “the good death,” including the medieval *Ars Moriendi* (*Art of Dying*), two related fifteenth-century Latin texts that explain the procedures for “dying well” according to the precepts of medieval Christianity, and the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol* (*Book of the Dead*), a Buddhist funerary text. The Order’s name is taken from the nineteenth-century Afro-Catholic Brazilian sisterhood Irmandade da Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte, or Sisterhood of Our Lady of the Good Death.

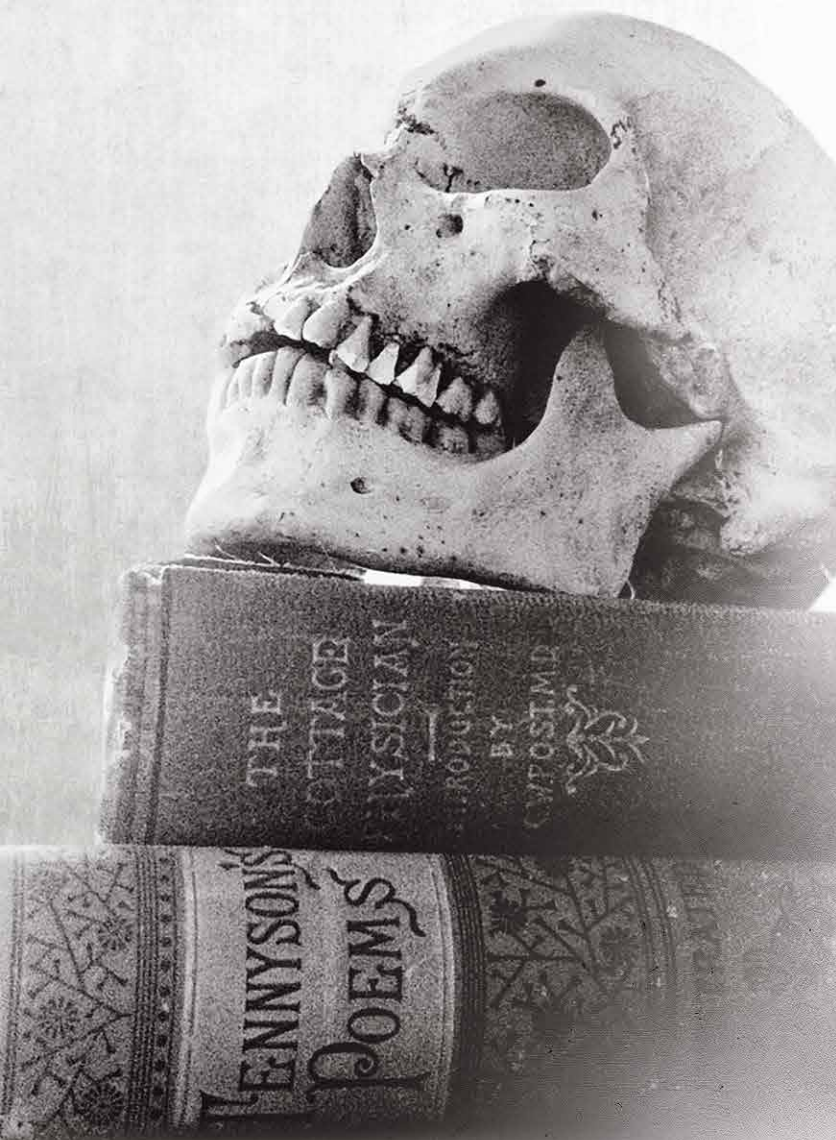
The members of the Order believe the way our society handles death is changing. The Order aims to showcase the people at the forefront of this change, from a designer who creates clothing and shrouds that decompose at the same rate as a corpse, to a professor who studies how to capture energy and heat from crematoriums to heat pools and homes, to a funeral director opening a funeral home that is a space for art and culture as well as a place for the dead.

DEATH, CULTURE, RELIGION, AND HISTORY

Death is one of the core issues, realities, and concerns of human beings. The spiritual meanings of death are debated in almost every human culture. Most people dispose of their dead in rituals that are rooted in cultural, spiritual, religious, and regional traditions.

The ancient Egyptians embalmed and mummified, the Romans cremated, the Wari’ of Brazil consumed. Jews sit shiva, a period of structured mourning, for days after a burial. Most religious groups practice some form of last rites or offices, and relatives or friends usually arrange for disposal of the body. Cremation and burial are both very old and common practices across regions and cultures.

For much of human history, people died at home and families handled arrangements for the deceased, from the moment of death through disposal of the body and any attending rituals. But with the advent of modern hospitals and health care, it became much more common for people to die in hospitals instead of at



home, and a certain distance or disconnect happened between the living and death. Today, when a loved one dies, hospital and funerary professionals usually have more contact with the deceased than family or friends do. There has been a shift from simple family handling of death to an increasingly status-oriented, profit-driven funeral industry.

At the same time, family, community, and religious structures have changed dramatically in recent generations. Many people do not live and die in the towns where they were born, and for many, practices and belief systems change over the course of a lifetime. This means an unprecedented era of choice about the rituals we perform with our dead and how we dispose of dead bodies.

THE ALTERNATIVE DEATH-CARE MOVEMENT

A new movement is growing to make practices around death and dying more sustainable, less profit-focused, and more “death-positive.” The Seattle-based People’s Memorial Association is a nonprofit that advocates for consumer freedom in end-of-life arrangements. Groups like the Green Burial Council help people find more environmentally friendly methods of disposing of a dead body than embalming or metal caskets. And there is a burgeoning field of death doulas and death midwives who aim to bring support as well as greater meaning and comfort to the process of dying.

ON LANGUAGE

Given all of the religious, cultural, community, and personal variation in conceptions of death and dying, the meanings and implications of the terms “death-positive” and “death-phobic” are hard to pin down and will likely warrant discussion for generations to come.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- ◉ Do you agree that mainstream U.S. culture today is death-phobic? Why?
- ◉ How is death perceived in your family or community or by your culture?
- ◉ The Order of the Good Death believes that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- ◉ Have you thought about your own death? Have you shared your hopes, fears, and preferences with anyone?

TO LEARN MORE, EXPLORE THESE RESOURCES:

- ◉ The “Ask a Mortician” web series
<https://www.youtube.com/user/OrderoftheGoodDeath>
- ◉ *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes and Other Lessons of the Crematory* by Caitlin Doughty
- ◉ Lindsey Fitzharris and Chris Skaife’s website *Grave Matters*
- ◉ Death Salon, which organizes events to discuss mortality through the sharing of art and ideas
www.deathsalon.org
- ◉ Death Over Dinner, which helps people talk about death and dying with their loved ones
<http://deathoverdinner.org>
- ◉ Jessica Mitford’s *The American Way of Death*, a 1963 exposé of the U.S. funeral-industrial complex



Caitlin Doughty



Lindsey Fitzharris



Megan Rosenbloom (Photo by Polly Antonia)

DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

ZOE PETTWAY UNNO of the USC Libraries has selected the following resources to help you learn more about this afternoon's conversation. Except where noted, you can access electronic resources, which include the e-books, journals, and databases listed below, through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu.

Books

- ⦿ Cacciatore, Joanne, editor, and John D. DeFrain editor. *The World of Bereavement: Cultural Perspectives on Death in Families*. Cham: Springer, 2015. (eBook)
- ⦿ Kelly, Suzanne. *Greening Death: Reclaiming Burial Practices and Restoring Our Tie to the Earth*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. Doheny Memorial Library: GT3203 .K45 2015
- ⦿ Noys, Benjamin. *The Culture of Death*. Oxford, UK; New York: Berg, 2005. (eBook)
- ⦿ Stillion, Judith M., editor, and Thomas Attig editor. *Death, Dying, and Bereavement: Contemporary Perspectives, Institutions, and Practices*. New York, New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2015. (eBook)

Databases and websites

- ⦿ **PsycINFO**. Abstracting and indexing database with more than 3 million records devoted to peer-reviewed literature of journal articles, chapters, books, dissertations, and reports in psychology, the behavioral sciences, and mental health.
- ⦿ **Social Sciences Citation Index**. The Social Sciences Citation Index is a multidisciplinary database, with searchable author abstracts, covering the journal literature of the social sciences. Part of USC's subscription to the Web of Science, it indexes 1,700 journals spanning 50 disciplines, as well as covering individually selected, relevant items.
- ⦿ **"MedlinePlus – End of Life Issues."** From the National Library of Medicine. medlineplus.gov/endoflifeissues.html

Journals

- ⦿ *Death Studies* (formerly *Death Education*)
- ⦿ *Journal of Social Work in End-of-Life & Palliative Care* (formerly *Life, Grief & Care*)
- ⦿ *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*

