



The day-to-day business of death

A look at the lively way of life behind the scenes at a funeral home

BY ANTONY ANDERSON

A strange thing happened to me after attending an inordinate number of funerals lately: I stopped thinking about the meaning of life and became intensely curious about our rituals around death.

I contacted the Funeral Director's program at Humber College, and subsequently met up with Fern John, who is currently apprenticing to be a funeral director. When we talk on the phone, John sounds very down to earth. There are no grand visions or ghastly experiences in her past that led her to this point. A single conversation with a friend triggered her interest and she acted on it. I want to make it more complicated, but John won't let me. She does agree, however, to let me join her for a day in the life of an apprentice funeral director.

When I arrive at the Jerrett Funeral Home in downtown Toronto, just after 9 a.m., John is briskly loading flowers into the back of a limo. She has already swept the front entrance and parking lot, greeted mourners and parked their cars. Today she will work on three funerals.

She's amiable and straightforward, full of life. After completing four months as an apprentice funeral director, she says without hesitation: "I love coming to work every day."

Finished with the flowers, John takes me inside. The staff hovers about, dressed in subdued shades. The lighting is low-key. The general ambience and decor resemble a hotel lobby. At first, I then I hear the sound of intense crying



Fern John acknowledges she can get caught up in the daily grief, but knows that if she crosses that line, she's not going to be of help to the families.

from a distant room. And I notice the tissue boxes stationed everywhere.

John introduces me to the staff. You couldn't ask for a more cheery group of people — cheery in-between official duties, of course. All day long, I see them shift from discreet attentiveness in public to high-spirited banter behind closed doors.

Somewhere down the hall, two visitations are in progress. The sound of crying continues to drift in. The sound is heartbreaking but must be routine in this location, which handles about 250 funerals every year.

At 9:30 a.m., John gathers six pall-

bearers in the foyer and tells them how to carry the coffin across the street to the church where Mass is scheduled for 10 a.m. Meanwhile, another staff member takes the name plate off the visitation room to prepare it for the next funeral.

Once Mass has started, John and her colleagues hurry back to take down the floral arrangements for the burial. By 10:45, John is back guiding the pallbearers as they struggle with the coffin down the steep church steps. It has started raining. John tells me I'll be riding with her in the hearse. I flinch when I get seated and see the coffin just inches behind me. We make small talk but I cannot



take my mind off the former person sealed up behind me.

It's 11:01 when we arrive at the cemetery. The downpour is Biblical. John hurries to get the flowers in place before the mourners arrive. By 11:08, she is once again guiding the pallbearers as they pull the coffin out of the hearse and carry it to the burial site. The mourners gather in the rain and watch as the coffin is lowered into the soaking earth. I feel slightly unethical sitting in the hearse, witnessing all this grief without feeling any connection to the event.

At 11:17, John escorts the priest to a car and drives him back to his church in Little Italy. On the way, they talk about how impatient and rude Toronto drivers are when caught behind funeral processions. We are back at the funeral home by 11:50, and instead of having lunch or continuing her duties, John gives me a quick tour of the place. The only disturbing sight are the small, beautifully made coffins for children.

This leads me to ask about dealing with the daily grief. John acknowledges that she and the other staff can get very caught up. She especially remembers one woman in her mid-30s, who was married in the hospital just before she died of cancer. "There are times when you get emotional and you just let the tears come down. Then you stop and go back to your work."

And they know they have to. The funeral home's co-general manager, David Garvie, puts it very concisely: "If you cross over the line that you're so emotionally involved, you're not of any help to the families."

The next service begins at 1 p.m. A new round of mourners shuffle in. It is strange to witness the pattern of human

grief unfold again, as if the first two funerals this morning aren't enough to satisfy the flow of death. Forty-five minutes later, they emerge sounding like a movie audience: "That was really good. Really good. What do you think, 60?" "No more like 70." They're pleased with the turnout.

John is ready to drive to the burial site and says I can come along. But I beg off. I've had enough death for one day. When she returns, she will have an early dinner and then pick up a deceased 90-year-old woman from a hospital morgue — a piece of cake compared to making housecalls, where the bodies have been there for weeks. I try not to dwell on that image.

After dinner, John will embalm the woman, a process that takes anywhere from two to four hours; she'll also arrange the facial features, dress the person, "cosmetize" and actually get them into a casket.

During the process, she will sometimes talk to the corpse as in: "Oh, Mrs. Smith, we're having a hard time getting on your socks today, aren't we?" I ask about embalming so soon after eating. John laughs. The timing never even occurred to her. She's already embalmed about 20 people. The most difficult was working on a three-year-old girl killed by a bullet intended for someone else.

I suspect most of us would need an alcohol binge or vacation to recover from any one of John's experiences. But there is not a trace of what she has been through in her manner. She could be working at a day-care centre or training to be a ballerina. Again I keep marveling at her composure and good cheer. When we say goodbye, I leave thinking, "I want you directing my funeral."



HOROSCOPE BY GEORGIA NICOLS

All Signs: A little advance warning to everyone: Mercury will be retrograde from Feb. 21 until March 15th. This early warning is to tell you if there's anything you want to start — do it before Feb 21. After that, it's a poor time for beginnings until after March 15th. It is also a poor time to buy a car or truck. So if you're thinking about buying ground transportation — you auto do it now.

Aries (March 21 - April 19)

You have to be careful not to let a friend rain on your parade. They may be giving you the been-there, done-that routine. So what? Nothing new exists under the sun. Ancient Greek writing is full of complaints about the good ol' days and how the youth "of today" is going to pot.

Taurus (April 20 - May 20)

Life has its discouraging aspects, and you may even feel physically tired as well. That's because this is a testing time for you. Things that you began around 1991, '92 or '93 are now being challenged to see if they are worthwhile. It's okay. This is your chance to see what is working and what is not working in your life. Which means: get rid of what is not working. Simple. You can do it.

Gemini (May 21 - June 20)

Whereas before you thought you had cooperation — now you meet with resistance. Oy, oy, oy. Actually, there is a message here somewhere. You are advised to cut your losses. And remember — your first loss is your cheapest loss. Things are being demonstrated to you as being invalid in your life right now. Don't deny this. Accept and work within these limitations. Let go and move on. (Pack trail mix.)

Cancer (June 21 - July 22)

You may be stalled in the water due to debt, or a disagreement about how to spend a limited amount of money. (Shared property or belongings could be an issue.) Remember that your sign is favoured by the Taurus lineup this year. Learn to work with others' values, even if you don't agree with them. There's more than one way to make chicken soup. Not everyone uses a bay leaf. (Ever noticed how close that is to bailiff?) Relax.

Leo (July 23 - Aug. 22)

Bosses and authority figures (possibly parents or teachers) are tough to deal with right now. Partners feel this, too. Actually, this is the perfect time to learn how to communicate in an effective way so that you can achieve your objectives. You have to

determine what is worth saving in the bigger scheme of things and what is not. You are strong in your career. Only push for what makes sense. Don't go for broke.

Virgo (Aug. 23 - Sept. 22)

With respect to publishing, the media and higher education, even the law — you are blocked right now. It's important for you to ascertain what works for you and what doesn't. Transfer your energy to areas that are more productive. You are concerned with efficiency and effectiveness now. You also are concerned with good health. (You know that a balanced diet is more than a cookie in each hand.)

Libra (Sept. 23 - Oct. 22)

You are keen to enjoy yourself and have a good time, plus you're interested in romance. Go with the flow. Fulfill your obligations to others and their property and belongings, and at the same time try to enjoy yourself as much as possible. (Always yield to temptation because it may never come your way again.)

Scorpio (Oct. 23 - Nov. 21)

You are eager to pursue your goals about home and family; anything that stands in your way is viewed by you as an obstruction. Fortunately, at the moment, you have the patience and charm to deal with

these delays gracefully. You feel playful and full of good humour. Rely on this lighter side of yourself to get you through the tension now. Or be silent. After all, a closed mouth gathers no feet.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22 - Dec. 21)

Contracts, deals, conversations and practical day-to-day matters are blocked by obligations connected with your work. Perhaps your job responsibilities prohibit you from taking off on a short trip, or chatting to relatives and neighbours as much as you would like. For some of you, it could be a health issue. Be encouraged by the knowledge that this is a brief halt to things.

Capricorn (Dec. 22 - Jan. 19)

You have the opportunity to learn if something is adequate or not. Is it reliable or not? No one likes to be driving along and run out of gas, but it's always nice if it happens a block away from a gas station. In a way, what you learn now will save you from a greater disappointment in the future. (At least one thing about being in hot water — with a little soap, you're really clean.)

Aquarius (Jan. 20 - Feb. 18)

You feel that it's difficult to maintain your freedom in the face of the duties or restric-

tions placed upon you now. Others stand in your way. Don't fight them. This does not help. This is a temporary setback. From here on, you are rising to your success. Just dig in and face this like a kitchen-sink reality. Do the dishes — one at a time.

Pisces (Feb. 19 - March 20)

If you lighten up on your expectations, and go more with what's happening, you will see that this is just something to get through — or work through. Until then, be reminded of the observation of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "When it's dark enough, you can see the stars." (And you can smooch a little while no one is looking.)

If Your Birthday Is Today

Oprah Winfrey shares your birthday. You are fun-loving and socially minded. You also have a strong desire to make the world a better place. You fight for what you believe in.

If Your Birthday Is Tomorrow

Actors Gene Hackman and Vanessa Redgrave share your birthday. Those with tomorrow's birth date are astute and observant. You have a talent for teaching, guiding and training. You have a social conscience, and use your communications skills to inspire others.