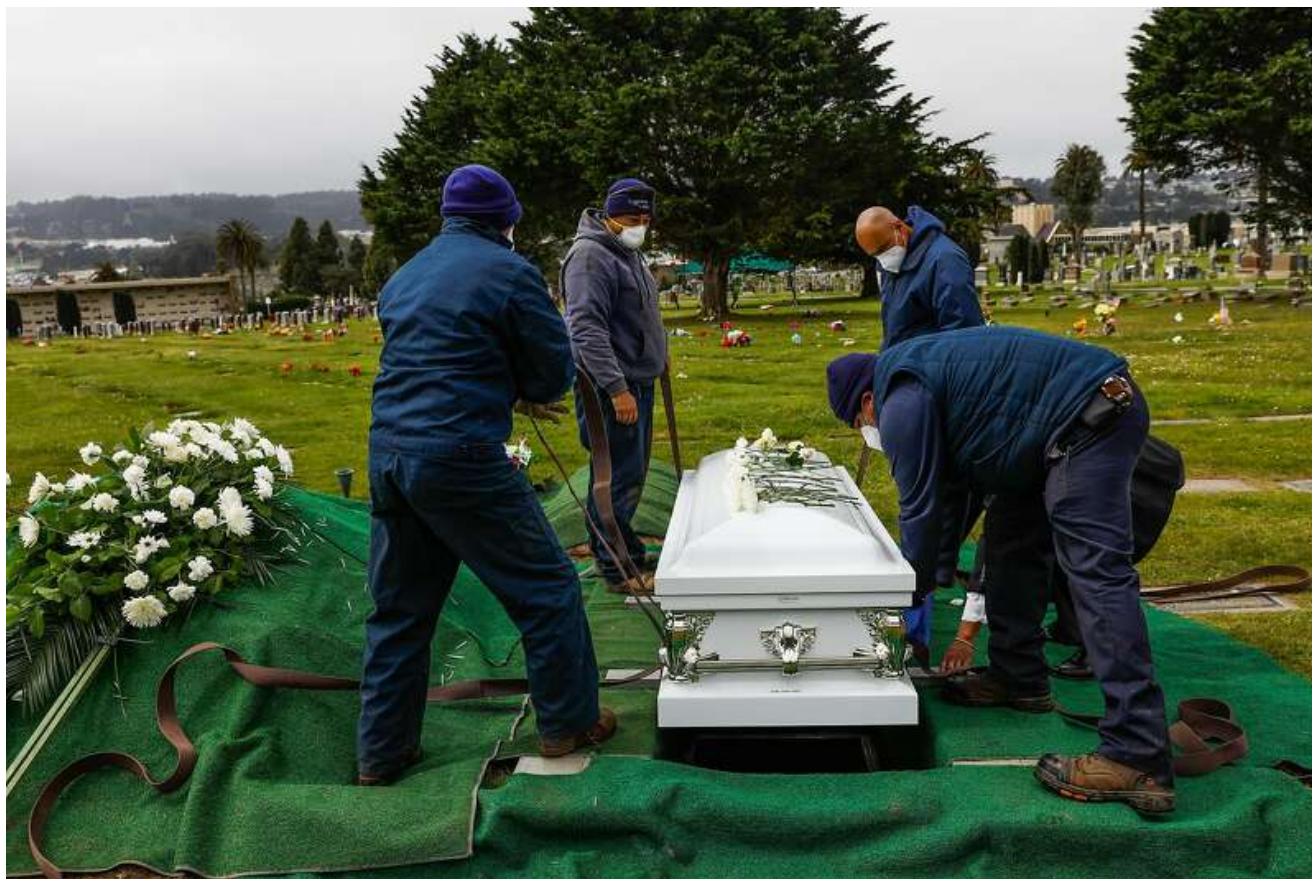


Coronavirus has changed the very act of dying and saying goodbye

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In a grave dug 6,000 years ago on an island off the coast of France, two women were laid to rest together under a “roof” made of antlers. They wore necklaces made of seashells. There is some evidence that Neanderthals buried their dead, too, 100,000 years ago or more. What these burials may have looked like — were there songs? — is an unanswerable question.

The point, though, is this: The act of dying, and the act of saying goodbye, are millennia-old rituals. Some painted the dead with ocher, some placed the dead in pyramids, some set the dead on pyres and set them aflame. These rituals have changed again and again — and now they are changing, suddenly, once more.

Most everything has been halted or, at least, deferred. But not death.

A couple weeks ago, a woman called Marvin K. White, the minister of celebrations at [Glide Memorial Church](#) in San Francisco. She sought “pastoral counseling and some ministerial care.” Her mom had died, she told him, on her couch, with a magazine and her TV remote in

her hand.

“The level of detail was so amazing to me,” White said.

“She still needed somebody to listen to her, somebody to affirm her fears, and someone to relieve her from the daughterly responsibilities of not being able to be there. And not being able to handle the affairs. And not being able to send her off ...”

The grief is the same, even though everything else about death is different. White knows how this feels. He remembers how hard it was to find churches to hold funerals for friends who had died from AIDS. He remembers their services in Golden Gate Park and planting trees in their honor — a life to remember a life.

“This isn’t the first time where we’ve had relationships with the dead where we couldn’t access the bodies.” Rituals change to fit the moment.

“I don’t know if it’s about finding closure in this moment,” White said. “Extend your grief and live in the question and don’t worry if it’s right or wrong. There’s something that you can learn about who you are in moments like this.”

The priest drove a Porsche to the graveyard. Susan Toler Carr noticed; somehow it didn’t seem to fit the occasion. She and her husband, Darrell Carr, were in a blue Kia — “cerulean blue,” the closest they could find to the color turquoise, which was their son’s favorite color. When he passed away years ago, they held a funeral for anybody who wanted to come and there were hugs and flowers and hot dishes.

Now they watched from behind the windshield as Peaches — that’s what everybody called Darrell’s sister — was lowered into the earth. A “drive-in funeral,” Susan called it. Only 10 people could be at the grave, under California’s physical-distancing rules. Susan asked them to call her as she sat in the car and she put the service on speaker. She could only make out every other word.

The cemetery, in Monrovia (Los Angeles County), was empty except for the eight cars that had come. Nothing felt right. “It was surreal,” Susan said. “It was like you’re walking in a daze. Like you’re not even there. ... And so there was no emotion because we’re like — we’re not even there.”

No goosebumps, she said. No shivers. “I just watched, and it made me nauseous.”

Afterward, Susan and Darrell drove straight home. There was no wake. “That’s what this virus is doing to our human traditions.”

Susan wrote a long poem about the funeral when she got home. This was her way of making sense of how everything has changed. “We can’t even hug,” she said. “We can’t even hug anymore.”

So she wrote about her husband and his suit, about how she wore black and some turquoise. “We got dressed up for no one to see.” She wrote about the golden casket. And she wrote about Peaches’ “famous potato salad.”

Then she sent the poem to her family. Most said it held more meaning than the funeral itself.

It was 3 a.m. when her mother’s funeral began. Satu Sharmon had emptied her living room and filled it with flowers and candles and pictures of her mom. There were lots of red roses; red was her favorite color. She’d also placed three chairs in front of the television.

Sharmon had always planned to attend her mother’s funeral. In normal times it wouldn’t be a problem. She’d get on a plane and make her way to the Finnish town where her mother lived, just two hours away from the Arctic Circle. But as the days passed, she came to realize these weren’t normal times. Finland closed its borders, and though the consulate would authorize her travel, they could not promise she’d be able to return to San Jose.

It all began to feel too risky.

“‘I’m going through several airports. What if I’m a carrier and I take it to them?’ These kinds of thoughts started to go through my mind,” she said. “And then I thought ‘What if something happens to me?’ I have a family, my husband and boys here in America.

“I got very upset. This was never my plan to miss my mom’s funeral.”

And so she made her living room into a memorial and made plans with her nephew to stream the funeral live. “You have to do something. You have to feel like you did some effort.”

The service began at 1 p.m. Finland time — it was still dark in San Jose. “There was already an atmosphere ...” Her husband got up, her two sons, too. They wore ties. “We were dressed up for a funeral.”

The grave had been dug. The priest said a few words, then they all sang a couple hymns. She watched from thousands of miles away as her family lowered the casket into the earth.

Afterward, she, her husband and her two boys took a family photograph in the living room.

The news out of Washington state was grim. Death had found its way into an assisted nursing facility in the Seattle suburb of Kirkland, and it was spreading quickly. Katie Jacobs Stanton was following the story. “I remember thinking this is my worst-case scenario for my

dad,” she said. Her father, Herb Jacobs, lived in a similar facility in Aurora, Colo. He was physically fit but had struggled with Alzheimer’s for many years. “My biggest fear was that he would suffer, and he would die alone.”

She called the facility often to check in, to ask about her father’s health and their plans for how to deal with an outbreak. “They were pretty on top of things,” she said. In the meantime, Stanton, a tech executive, was working with colleagues in Texas and New York and the Bay Area to get tablets to people in hospitals. At the very least they might help the dying say goodbye.

Then, three weeks ago the call came. Her father had a fever. His temperature would rise and fall, but he wasn’t in distress, they told her. “I thought ‘OK, well, you know, maybe he’ll get through this.’”

He got worse. Soon he was having trouble swallowing. A dose of hydroxychloroquine did nothing to help. He was put on oxygen.

One of the caregivers had brought in his iPad, and a Catholic priest delivered his last rites from miles away. That meant a lot to her dad; he was very religious. Later that day, her father’s friend sat outside her dad’s window so Stanton could talk to him over FaceTime from her home in Los Altos.

These were his last hours. Stanton told her father stories, and she told him she loved him. “I know he heard us. I think a lot of people hold on to things they want to believe, but I really do believe it.”

Two weekends back, there was a virtual wake for Herb Jacobs. One friend offered an Irish blessing from New York City. Her friend sang “Rainbow Connection” from Sonoma; songs came from Kenya, too. Stanton’s children read poems and there was a slideshow. “It ended up being really beautiful,” she said. But it was still not the ending she imagined. “The grim details of death, they get on this weird fast track, but your heart can’t possibly keep up.

“Death is disorienting, and death during the time of coronavirus is just another level of disorientation. How do you process grief when you’re quarantined at home, and you can’t be with your loved ones?” Stanton said. “There’s a reason we have these rituals after death.”

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