



## In Praise of Slow Funerals

**H**ave you noticed that we are speed obsessed these days, even though faster is often not better?

A century ago, the Industrial Revolution brought about mass production and with it an emphasis on speed, efficiency and productivity. Then came the technological revolution, heightening our ability to work faster, travel faster, communicate faster. We have come not just to want but to expect instant gratification: same-day delivery, always-on cellphones, email in a second, fast-casual food prepared before our very eyes, instant credit.

There is much to celebrate in our progress, of course. Technology has improved our length and quality of life in many ways. But along the way, we forgot to hold on to much of our hard-won, ancient wisdom about loss, grief and healing.

Death and grief rituals used to be given the time and attention they needed and deserved. Multi-day wakes followed by full funerals complete with processions, committals and extended family gatherings were once typical. Mourning rituals, too, were extended and socially recognized. In short, the death of someone loved was treated as the devastating, life-altering and time-consuming transition it naturally is.

In recent years, I've been noticing that in other life arenas, movements are underway to restore many of the good things that were waylaid during our dizzying decades of progress. The slow food movement, for example, seeks to expose the hazards of globally sourced foods, restore our connection to how and where our food is grown and resurrect the sustainable, healthy and community-enhancing farm-to-table practices of days gone by.

In urban design, we are looking to the past at community-building principles like walkability, human scale, front porches and public gathering spaces. The goal now is to create new cities that blend modern technology with the livability of old cities.

In retail, big-box stores may be going the way of the dodo. We are reconsidering our habits of shopping at discount stores and online for cheap, generic goods. Instead, we are increasingly spending money on local, artisanal products that are not only more beautiful and interesting but also better support the communities in which we live.

Similarly, the time is right, I believe, to get behind what I've coined the Slow Grief Movement. It acknowledges that loss is as much a part of the human experience as love. It recognizes that loss changes us forever and that grief is a normal, necessary and, yes, *sloooooo* process. It also proclaims the need for people to express their grief and be supported by their communi-

ties. And it asks us to look to the past to recapture the healing wisdom and customs we have almost lost, including the multi-day funeral.

As gatekeepers of the funeral, funeral directors are essential to the Slow Grief Movement. In fact, you are its vanguard, standing, as you do, at the entrance gates of grief and the journey to healing.

I hope you will join me in educating families about the importance of the full funeral complete with all of its elements. A full, personalized funeral is a meaningful funeral that helps families mourn well. It creates a tapestry of authentic experience. It sets mourners on a good path toward healing.

I hope you will help create a funeral home culture that appreciates that slower is better. Grieving families need time for education and discussion during the arrangement conference. Grieving families need time to be listened to, without an agenda of completing paperwork or ticking off items on a checklist. Grieving families need ample time and opportunities to be with the body, including before and during cremation. Grieving families need encouragement and the grace of never feeling rushed during the funeral process so they can experience their natural grief and mourn openly whenever the need arises. Grieving families need to be wrapped in ritual and care so they feel supported and guided during those difficult first days when everyday words are inadequate and they're unsure how to proceed. Grieving families also need reliable and ongoing after-care that affirms their need to continue to mourn in the months and years ahead.

As you can see, the Slow Funeral is a key component of the Slow Grief Movement. Unless you help the families you serve slow down, they will be at risk for mistaking efficiency for effectiveness. They will proceed as if faster is better at a time when what they really need is to slow down and suspend. In part, your role is to be a yield sign when they are hurrying to green-light the funeral. Step into your gatekeeper role and help families slow down. They will benefit and so will our society as a whole.

I hope you and your funeral home will join me in the Slow Grief Movement. If you'd like to share your ideas or practices for fostering Slow Funerals, I invite you to email me at [drwolfelt@centerforloss.com](mailto:drwolfelt@centerforloss.com).

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