

“My Future Funeral”—an Example of Being Healthy but Planning Ahead **Ms Iris Hoiting, Project Officer**

In life, we plan and prepare for many things. Our education, career, and summer holidays are sources of continual preoccupation. When it comes to our wishes for what will happen at the end of our lives, however, many of us are woefully unprepared, even in spite of opinions about the importance of such planning.¹

When I found out that a healthy person I know was actively preparing for his own funeral, discussing his wishes with his family and making objects for his own ceremony, I took the opportunity to learn a bit more about his thoughts and motivations. Frans, a healthy 67 year-old Dutch man, who recently retired as a carpenter, spends his time designing and creating art, houses, and boats, and, in the past few weeks, he has begun to envision and produce objects for his own funeral. Living his life according to his own philosophy—simply and in touch with nature—he realized that his death, if circumstances permit, should be along those same lines. Over a cup of Dutch coffee, we sat down in his backyard, in front of the yurt he had made (yurts are Mongolian nomadic circular tents). I asked him about his process of preparing for his own funeral, even though he was still a healthy and vibrant man.

“A ceremony that represents me”

I started off our conversation by asking what exactly triggered his desire to prepare for his future death.

Frans: “After losing a couple of friends, and realizing that you can be too late to express your last wishes, and leave your loved ones with financial burden, as well as the burden of having to make certain decisions for you, I started to seriously think about my wishes when it comes to my own death. Most importantly, I wondered about how I could prepare for a ceremony that would still represent me, be very personal, and would include my own family as much as possible in the funeral process.”

After deliberating over a variety of options, Frans began the process by arranging a meeting with his children and partner to discuss his future funeral wishes with them, over a glass of wine, in a cozy, informal atmosphere.

Frans explained to me how this meeting went: “After making sure that my family understood that I do not want to be kept alive through mechanical ventilation, or resuscitated if my quality of life is tremendously affected, and after explaining that I am registered as an organ donor, I described to them what type of funeral ceremony I envision for myself. Before and during the ceremony, I

¹ See for example the study by [Steinhauser et al.](#), which demonstrates that a large majority of healthcare providers, physicians, patients and family members considered making funeral arrangements ahead of death important.

want my body to stay in my own home, in the yurt that I built. Instead of lying in a coffin, I am designing a bag in the same colors as the yurt, in which I want to be laid for the viewing.”

This bag is in line with his fondness for a simple lifestyle—no expensive coffin, but rather a self-made cloth ‘envelope’ for his body. He also created a brancard out of wood and branches, on which he wants his body to rest, again, in line with his fondness of simplicity and nature. Frans continued: “since I am very intrigued by death rituals that involve fire, I wanted my loved ones to gather around a bonfire next to the yurt where my body will be laying, where they can share their memories of me. I want my daughters to make arrangements for drinks and food during the ceremony, and my son and sons-in-law to transport my body, in my own camper, to the crematorium where the workers will cremate my body.”

Emotional impact



The brancard made by Frans, on which his body will be laid to rest

As Frans explains his explicit wishes to me, and shows me the brancard that he made and the exact place where the ceremony should take place, I ask him how he experienced informing his children, and whether it made him and his family very sad to talk about his death.

Frans: “The idea of dying doesn’t make me sad, but the additional thoughts of friends and family that I

have lost throughout my life does. My family and I had a very good gathering, and although it made them sad to think about my future death, they also appreciate it that I won’t leave them behind with unexpected costs and the daunting task of planning my funeral, without knowing what I really would have wanted.”

Knowing what Frans wants gives peace to his family, Frans reasons, since everyone will know exactly what to do when he dies. But, as Frans maintains: “these are my wishes, but if in the end my children decide to do things differently, because it would make them happier, I am alright with that as well.” He continues, “I also wanted to make clear to them that what I leave behind is merely my body, it won’t be me anymore. I want to leave the memories they have of me, but nothing else. Cremation is therefore very important to me, and what my children/partner would like to do with my ashes, they can decide for themselves.”

Suggestions for planning a future funeral

Impressed by the clear expression of his wishes and the down-to-earth approach Frans was taking towards death, I asked him if he has any suggestions or advice for others, who may be considering planning for their own future deaths. Frans replied, “Try to make this final life event as personal as possible, and, if possible, let the event unfold in a way that is compatible with the way you’ve lived. When you express your last wishes, you can truly be in peace, as will be your loved ones, who can let you go in peace, knowing that they have done what would make you happy in this last stage of life.”

Before we finished our conversation, I asked his partner Ympie what she thought and felt when Frans expressed his own funeral wishes: “At first I was surprised when he brought up this topic, but, after talking about it in a relaxed manner over a glass of wine, I became more comfortable with it. I have experienced what it is like to lose a loved one, and having to arrange a funeral without knowing what that person actually wanted. I am happy to know what Frans’ wishes are now, but, of course, I hope that I don’t have to think about it for at least another 30 years!” When I asked her if this inspired her to think about her own funeral she shakes her head and laughs, and suggest that we first need to eat some soup...



Frans and his partner, Ympie, in front of the yurt that Frans made, where he wants his wake to take place

Death over dinner

Ympie’s reaction to my question is not an uncommon one. A study in 2010², conducted by the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), suggests that 66% of adults would like to arrange their own funeral services, but in reality, only 25% have actually made preparations for it.

Even here in Hong Kong, where dying and death is often regarded as a taboo, over half of the participants in a survey conducted by [Chan et al.](#) have in some way thought about their death (60% had bought a life insurance), but fewer have actually made arrangements (for example, 13.3% signed a will, and 7% arranged their resting place).

Frans’ suggestions of making a funeral personal, keeping it natural and simple, and start planning ahead before it is too late, coincide with what [others](#) have been writing about funeral planning. His case also shows how the planning process can be an important way to alleviate the burdens on family, and, with that, yourself. Others around the globe have agreed with this assessment, and a

² <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2013/05/29/funeral-pre-planning/2370935/>

great initiative that encourages starting conversations about death can be found in the interactive [death over dinner](#) website. Ympie's desire to retreat from the topic to 'eat soup' should be respected. Perhaps, however, the comfort of a meal, shared with loved ones, can also provide a nice atmosphere for taking a few moments to think about what wishes we may have for the end of our lives.³



image: deathoverdinner.org

³ For those in Hong Kong who, like Frans, are 'conversation ready,' and ready to make arrangements for their funerals, the website [white lilly](#) (a local funeral planner) has very useful suggestions for preparing a personalized funeral.