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Crafting death: Grief, stories, and materiality in Katikati Coffin Club

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Abstract

Coffin Clubs are a social phenomenon in Aotearoa New Zealand, where people gather for two main purposes: to talk about death and dying, and to build their own coffins. This latter, practical aspect is what sets Coffin Clubs apart from other death-related support groups. This research explores why people attend Katikati Coffin Club. My field work involved attending Katikati Coffin Club on a weekly basis for more than a year. While I was there, I helped build and decorate many coffins, including my own. Using participant-observation and ethnographic accounts from club members, my findings reveal the nuanced reasons people choose to attend Coffin Club, and why many continue to attend long after they have finished building their coffin. This research explores the practical element of Katikati Coffin Club through the lens of the anthropology of craftwork. I consider how the act of building a coffin facilitates conversations about death, dying and grief. I argue that building a coffin can be seen as a form of storytelling, and an acknowledgement of mortality. Finally, I suggest that Coffin Club provides an alternative to the coffins sold by the funeral industry, and is a way to take control of/personalise 'death work' (actively preparing for death, both practically and in more abstract, emotional ways). My findings assert that Coffin Club helps people talk about death and grief. It creates a space for people to share different practices relating to death work, and provides an opportunity to craft narratives. As club members tell their stories through crafting a coffin, they are also able to narrate their loss and grief. As they craft their coffin, they also craft the relationships and the social space around them. In performing a practical aspect of death work, Coffin Club members are working on grief and loss. Woodwork, death work and the work of grief, occurring simultaneously.

Key words: Coffin Club, crafting, materiality, embodiment, storytelling, grief.

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PART ONE

Construction



FIGURE 1: COFFINS WAITING TO BE FINISHED

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, January 2020

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This thesis is about Coffin Clubs in Aotearoa/New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa). More specifically, it is about the Katikati Coffin Club. It is based on more than a year of ethnographic fieldwork. I began this project with some preconceived notions about what I would find. I expected to find something social, meaningful, and with an unwavering focus on death. I did indeed find something social and meaningful. I found conversations about death and dying. But I found much more than that. I found a group that works together to do both tangible and intangible ‘death work’; actively preparing for and processing death, both practically and in more abstract, emotional ways. I found spoken and unspoken support of grief, loss and death, but also of happiness, joy and life. I found friendship, camaraderie and humour. I also found an inordinate number of biscuits.

The question foremost in my mind when I began attending Katikati Coffin Club was ‘why do people come here?’ As I continued my fieldwork journey and began writing down my thoughts, that question expanded. What needs are being met there? What is it about the club that makes it an effective space for sharing and processing grief? Why does Coffin Club exist now? Why do people choose to make their own coffins? This thesis is my attempt to answer these questions. It seeks to explore Katikati Coffin Club, and discuss what makes it attractive, effective and relevant.

These thoughts raised some anthropological questions. What is the place of material things in grief? What is the significance of the embodied experience of building your own coffin? What role does creativity play in Coffin Club and in dealing with death? These questions led me into scholarship in a search for some answers. The literature (directed by my fieldwork) led me to some key concepts — materiality, tactility, movement, creativity and crafting — themes that helped generate my analysis of what I was experiencing.

This thesis is about crafting. It is about other things too, of course, like death, grief, touch, and movement. I even managed to sneak in a goat. But craftwork is the beating heart of this

thesis. By craftwork I mean the crafting of coffins, but also the crafting of stories, of the social space that is Coffin Club, and of this thesis. Crafting is about doing, making, creating. It is the act building something, not just the finished product. That is why the core of my method — building my own coffin — is so crucial to my research project. It is also the reason why I have written this thesis in a way that shows the crafting of this research project. I aim to reveal to the reader all of these processes, from the planning and designing, through the construction (including mishaps) and decoration, all the way to the final polish.

You will note that this thesis is divided into two parts. Part One (‘Construction’) is about the ‘doing’ of my research project. It is about the things that I did to build this thesis. I have called Part Two of this thesis ‘Conversation’. It is the section where people and ideas meet. The tone shifts from ‘doing’ to ‘thinking’. In this introductory chapter I will provide some background information about myself, about the origins of Coffin Clubs, and about the funeral industry in Aotearoa. Understanding my position will provide insight into why I chose to explore this research topic, what experiences I brought into the research field and how those things shaped my understanding. The story of how Coffin Clubs began introduces the founder, Katie Williams. It explains why she started the first club, and outlines the ethos of Coffin Clubs. Finally, I will include a brief history of the funerary practices and funeral industry in Aotearoa, in order to provide some context of the environment in which Coffin Clubs exist.

My background

Throughout this research project, many people have asked me how I became interested in Coffin Clubs. I think my age throws people off. I am thirty-one years old. I cannot recall the number of times someone has asked me: ‘Why is someone *your* age spending so much time thinking about death?’ To understand how I became interested in such a topic, it is necessary to provide some background information.

There is no taboo on discussions of death in my family. For as long as I can remember, we have talked about death and dying, most often over the dinner table. We do not talk about it all the time, but when we do it is without discomfort or awkwardness. My grandparents, who are in their mid-nineties, often comment that they feel ready to die soon. My mother raised

four children on her own, and openly discussed her plans for us were she to die before we reached adulthood. When I left Aotearoa to go travelling, I realised that with some of my more adventurous interests, dying overseas was a possibility. I told my family that if I were to die in a foreign country, I wanted my remains to be left behind. Corpse repatriation is expensive. My sister disagreed with my solution, and we eventually came to a compromise. If I died somewhere beautiful, such as on a mountaintop, my body would be left there. If I died in the gutter of an anonymous back alley, my sister would retrieve my body. She emphasised that either way, she would be very angry with me.

My practical experience with death has also been largely theoretical. My first real introduction to death was at university when I was eighteen. While studying to become a physiotherapist at Auckland University of Technology, I attended cadaver laboratories. We went into the bowels of a nearby teaching hospital, where pre-dissected cadavers were laid out on metal gurneys. There we spent hours with the bodies, examining how tendons attached to bones, what the nervous system looked like, and how muscles were positioned in relation to one another. The cadavers we worked with were a long time dead, and had been preserved with chemicals. The smell made me sneeze. The bodies were a pale grey-yellow, almost waxy to the touch. They were like incredibly detailed life-sized dolls, disarticulated into parts. I had to remind myself that they had once been alive.

Throughout my career as a physiotherapist, I have worked in many hospitals, healthcare facilities and care homes, in Aotearoa and internationally. In my particular brand of physiotherapy (musculoskeletal), it is rare for a patient to die in front of the physiotherapist. I have been lucky that it has never happened to me. But death and healthcare go hand-in-hand. It is everywhere. It is behind the closed doors of the morgue, in the hushed conversations in the corridors, behind the drawn curtains around a hospital bed, and in the rapid-fire handovers between healthcare professionals. When someone is dying, the physiotherapist rarely takes an active role. Rather, my job is to pull away, to withdraw my input. So although death surrounds me in the workplace and I am near it often, it is usually at a distance.

My personal experiences with death are also limited. I have been to only three funerals, and have had no close family members or loved ones die. I have never been to a wake or helped prepare a body for funerary rites. I have never seen or touched the corpse of anyone that I know. I do not think I had even touched a coffin before undertaking this research.

This dichotomy of experience is interesting. On one hand, mortality is a concept I have long been aware of and comfortable with, in part thanks to my family's frank conversations, and in part because death is a very real part of my work life. This has taught me to be pragmatic about dying and death. On the other hand, there has always been a distance between me and death, particularly in my personal life. It is as if I have had a lot of experience of death, but through two-inch-thick glass.

The one area of death in which I have had considerable experience is talking about it. Comforting people in their grief after the loss of a loved one; listening as patients mentally, emotionally and materially prepare for their own death from a terminal illness; watching and listening to people as they, with a fierce resolve that never fails, will themselves to die; trying to dissuade people from their planned suicides. My upbringing involving open discussion of death is an asset in these scenarios. I find a frank approach towards these conversations tends to work best. I do not have the luxury of awkwardness or discomfort.

Physiotherapy has taught me, though, that grief encompasses more than just death. My job is largely about people and conversations. I meet many people with whom I talk about a plethora of topics. Patients usually want to talk about what is weighing most heavily on their minds. As a result we often discuss loss: of a limb, a way of life, of identity, a job, a relationship, of a pain-free existence, of confidence. People deal with loss constantly, in myriad ways. A role of physiotherapists (and many other healthcare workers) which is almost completely overlooked is how we help people cope with their loss. The support physiotherapists provide includes hands-on techniques, education and self-management advice. Mostly, though, we offer a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, an endless supply of tissues, and a complete lack of judgement. Soon after becoming a physiotherapist I became interested, out of curiosity and necessity, in how people cope with loss, grief and transition; the coping strategies, rituals and support networks they rely on.

My job and experiences help explain my attitude towards discussions of death and dying, and my interest in loss and grief, but not how I came to choose this particular topic for my research project. That decision was the result of two things; a book and a conversation.

'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes and Other Lessons from the Crematory' (Doughty, 2014) is a book I picked up on a whim. The title caught my eye, and the cover was appealing. It is written by Caitlin Doughty, a mortician from the United States, and is a combination of an autobiographical account of her early experiences in the funeral industry, a description of funerary practices from different cultures, and a call to arms to make changes in Western death practices. Doughty argues strongly that Western funeral practices have become too sterile, with minimal family involvement in the process of funerary rites. She writes that this has a negative impact on grieving, and can result in death anxiety or phobias. Because of these beliefs, Doughty is a vocal advocate for death acceptance and the reform of Western funeral industry practices. I found this book compelling. It spoke to my aim to better understand how people deal with loss and transition, my curiosity about expressions of grief, and my frank approach towards talking about death.

The final catalyst was a conversation I had two and a half years ago with a friend. We share interests and reading material. I mentioned *'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes'* (Doughty, 2014). Eleanor had already read it. We talked about death practices, and she mentioned Coffin Clubs. I was fascinated. A social group specific to Aotearoa where discussions of death and dying were combined with the practicality of building a personalised coffin? What a fabulous idea. Eleanor suggested it as a potential research topic proposal for a paper I was taking as an undergraduate. I did some research into the group, and from there I was hooked. I wrote the proposal for the undergraduate paper. Eighteen months later, when I decided to go on to do postgraduate study, I realised I was just as fascinated by the topic as when I was first introduced to it. And now, here we are. Thank you, Eleanor.

The story of Coffin Club

Coffin Clubs began ten years ago in Rotorua. Katie Williams, the founder, attended a general meeting for U3A New Zealand. U3A New Zealand is an organisation designed to provide a space for people over fifty-five years old to share knowledge and skills, and to meet new people (What is U3A?, 2015). In the meeting, they asked for ideas for new groups for members to attend. Katie describes the idea for Coffin Club as striking her 'like a bolt out of the blue'. She stood up and said 'I would like to build my own coffin'. The idea was approved, and from there, it was Katie's job to get the ball rolling. She got in touch with

some ‘old blokes’ she knew who liked woodwork, and from there, the first Coffin Club was born (Death Hangout, 2019).

Katie is often asked how she came up with the idea. She replies that ‘it was in her being’ (Death Hangout, 2019). She worked as a midwife and nurse for a long time, and then became a palliative care nurse. She says that it seemed like a natural progression, and that death is a natural part of life. Katie talks about how when ‘oldies’ talk about death and dying, often they are met with resistance from their families, with statements like ‘but you aren’t allowed to die!’ and ‘we won’t be able to manage without you.’ Katie says ‘that’s a lot of crap, and it doesn’t help.’ She states that old people know they are going to die, and they want to personalise their funeral as much as possible, and have their family involved (Death Hangout, 2019). When those well-meant statements are made, families can unwittingly deny their older members the right to discuss and plan for their death.

The values that are core to the formation of Coffin Club are a need to create a space in which people can talk freely about death, and to provide a way for people to put their personal stamp on their coffins. Katie Williams talks about how throughout life, people express their individual personalities through style, interests and hobbies. She asks ‘why should it be any different in death?’ (Death Hangout, 2019). The building of a personalised coffin is one way of expressing individuality in death.

Katie also advocates what she calls ‘the loving touch’ (Death Hangout, 2019). She states that as people get older, they are often deprived of interaction, particularly touch. Coffin Club is designed to provide an environment in which people can feel safe expressing themselves creatively and emotionally, particularly with regards to death. The social element of this is incredibly important; it serves as a place to meet new people, build social ties and communicate freely. Touch is a significant part of this, as I discuss in Chapter Two.

Over the past decade, Coffin Clubs have been popping up all over Aotearoa. There has also been significant interest globally. Katie Williams states that people from more than fifty countries have been in touch to find out how to start clubs in their own communities (TedEx Talks, 2019). Katie and other Coffin Club members have been interviewed by a number of different groups. A short musical was filmed, in which the ethos of Coffin Club was explained through the medium of song (<https://vimeo.com/229063637> (March, 2017)).

Documentary makers (both film and radio) have come to explore Coffin Clubs and talk to those who attend them. The Coffin Club idea is gathering steam. Katie states: ‘In our own little way, we are making quite a difference to the concept of death and dying.’ (Freethink, 2018).

Katikati Coffin Club was formed six years ago. Dennis Beach placed an advertisement in the local paper, organising a meeting for interested people to consider the idea. Forty people attended. Jack, the club treasurer, was one of them. Since then, the Katikati Coffin Club has never looked back. Dennis died a few years ago, but his legacy continues. There are now more than 250 members and numbers grow steadily every month. The majority of members are aged 65 years or older, and come from varied backgrounds. There is roughly an equal number of men and women (although slightly more men make up the regular attendees). Around a dozen people attend regularly, but numbers fluctuate from week to week (depending on weather, time of year, and prior commitments).

A brief history of the funeral industry in Aotearoa

Death is not a new phenomenon. A blindingly obvious statement, I know. Death rites and rituals have been part of human tradition for aeons. It is only relatively recently, however, that death work has gone from being a series of rituals performed by family, close community or religious leaders, to being undertaken by a commercialised funeral industry.

The funeral industry has a complicated history. Ancient Egyptians are commonly considered to be the pioneers of professional death care, with evidence of full-time positions for morticians and intentional mummification dating back to 2600 BC (Teeter, 2011, pp. 132-135). Professional mourners were common in Ancient Rome; actors hired to wail and cry during funeral processions, in a public display of grief. The number of mourners and the volume of the wailing was considered a direct representation of the wealth and power of the deceased and their family (Hope, 2009, p. 126).

What we consider as the ‘modern funeral industry’ began in the 17th Century. Undertaking businesses were usually family-owned and secondary, run concurrently with other, often related industries, such as upholstery or carpentry (Parsons, 1999; Schäfer, 2007b). The main

role of these businesses was to provide a coffin and transportation. This was the state of the ‘Western’ funeral industry during the time when Britain colonised Aotearoa in 1840, the influences of which remain manifest today.

The Māori funeral industry does not exist in the same way as the ‘Western’ funeral industry, because death care, both historically and contemporarily, is performed by friends and family. The body is taken home or to the marae (Māori meeting place), to be looked after and prepared for burial by loved ones. Waiata tangi (dirges), reciting of whakapapa (genealogy), karakia (prayer) and lamentation are performed, and thus tangihanga begins. Tangihanga can last up to a week, and is, for Māori, a customary way to respond to death (Ngata, 2005; Paterson, 2015).

Some elements of tangihanga remain unaltered over time, but colonisation by the British brought about some changes. Historically, the duration of tangihanga reflected the mana (spiritual power or status) of the deceased person. They could last weeks or months. In the early 20th Century, however, public health legislation was passed to limit the duration of tangihanga (Paterson, 2015, p. 38). Some mourning practices have changed as well. In the past, chief mourners would cut their upper bodies and face in an embodied expression of grief. This was forbidden by Christian missionaries, and nowadays the practice has almost completely ceased (Paterson, 2015, p. 37).

Across the Pacific, embalming became common during the American Civil War. With so many soldiers dying far from home, it became necessary to preserve bodies so they could be sent to families by train. Embalming practices flourished as many entrepreneurs developed new ways of preserving the dead, with varying degrees of success (Copeland, 2005; Schäfer, 2007b). These embalming techniques were the precursors for what we use today. After the Civil War ended, the practice of embalming remained and became a signifier of wealth and circumstance. Over time it became popular in other countries across the globe, including Aotearoa (Schäfer, 2007b; Trapeznik & Gee, 2016).

This is where the history of the funeral industry in Aotearoa becomes complicated, by the amalgamation of these different cultural values and practices. British, American, Māori and other cultural death practices have combined over the decades to result in funeral traditions that are distinct to Aotearoa. Perhaps ‘complicated’ is not the correct word, but it is definitely

nuanced. It is inaccurate to say ‘Western death practices’, ‘Pākehā¹ death practices’ or ‘Māori death practices’ definitively, because they are not so easily disentangled. There is some crossover. The Māori tangihanga tends to be practiced only by Māori, but there are elements of it — namely, the wake — that have become common in Pākehā funerals (although this could also be attributed to the Irish influence). Conversely, cremations and embalming have become more common in some Māori death care practices (Paterson, 2015, p. 43).

In the 20th Century, funeral directors’ roles expanded to include the organisation of funerals and body disposition, overseeing of the funeral, dressing the body and desairology (funeral cosmetology). It was also in the 20th Century that the New Zealand Federation of Funeral Directors was formed. This move acknowledged the augmentation of the traditional undertaker role and points to the professionalisation of the industry and its development into an efficient, scientific, and hygienic system for dealing with death and the dead (Schäfer, 2007b, pp. 5-6). In keeping with this new, modern image, industry education was established so that funeral workers had professional training, and regulation of death care practices was put into place. There was also a shift into recognising and attempting to address the psychological effects of grief and to meet the therapeutic needs of the bereaved.

The professionalisation and expansion of the funeral directors’ role brought the financial component of the industry to the public’s attention. The funeral industry has long been criticised for its financial exploitation (Banks, 1998; Parsons, 2018; Sanders, 2009; Vélez-Zapata, 2012). A famous example of this critique is found in Jessica Mitford’s controversial book, *The American Way of Death* (1963). She depicts the funeral industry as taking advantage of unsuspecting buyers to make money. Mitford states that the buyer is vulnerable and so is more likely to be manipulated. She attributes this to the emotional upheaval following the death of a loved one, the ignorance of most people on what to expect in a funeral parlour, and the oft-rushed nature of decision-making in funeral planning (Mitford, 1963, p. 81).

¹ The term ‘Pākehā’ refers to a New Zealander of European descent.

Anthropological literature both expands on and counters this view. Scholarship states that when viewed purely through an economic lens, it is easy to see the funeral industry as an example of 'ruthless capitalism'. It goes on to argue, however, that the reality is more nuanced. Literature states that the funeral industry (in Aotearoa and globally) supplies something that a purely economic analysis falls short of explaining; ritual, and with it, psychosocial and emotional support (McManus & Schäfer, 2014; Metcalf & Huntington, 1991).

In the last few decades funeral practices have continued to transform. Personalisation of funerary rites has become increasingly popular, with a move away from religious ceremonies to more secular ones (Schäfer, 2007b, p. 7). Funerals are also becoming less of a mourning of a person's passing, and more of a celebration of their life. The funeral industry in Aotearoa has adapted to meet these more individual needs. These adaptations include personalisation of the ceremony, more casket options and live streaming of funeral services for friends and family who unable to attend.

Even more recently people have been taking economic and ecological considerations into account when planning their funerals. There is a move away from expensive funerals and memorials, with more focus on saving money and reducing the financial burden for the surviving family. Other values are having a significant impact as well, such as environmental concerns (Schäfer, 2007b; Schäfer, 2016). One example of this is the move away from embalming, due to concerns with pollution of soil. Another is that more people are choosing to be cremated, in a bid to save land space (although cremation presents its own set of environmental concerns) (Clayden et al., 2018). There are a number of environmentally friendly alternatives available or currently being developed. Examples include suits and shrouds made with material woven from mushroom-spore-infused thread, liquid cremation, biodegradable burial pods, and sea burials. Formaldehyde-free, biodegradable embalming fluid options have also been developed, to help reduce the chemical impact on the soil in which the corpse is buried (Copeland, 2015; Sperber, 2003).

This is the environment in which Coffin Clubs were born: one in which individuality is celebrated, life is honoured, and the wishes and values of the dead are taken into account. These include the desire to reduce the financial burden of funerals and to have families and

loved ones to become more involved in death care. Coffin Club is a way people can fulfil these desires and take death work into their own hands (quite literally).

In the coming chapters, I explore different facets of Coffin Club to understand why people attend. In Chapter Three I describe how I went about this research project, which included building my own coffin. In Chapter Four, I tell three stories which show how grief (and particularly rage in grief) is discussed and expressed at Coffin Club. Through ideas of embodiment, creativity, and materiality, I suggest that Coffin Club provides an environment which facilitates the sharing of ideas and stories, helping people deal with grief. In Chapter Five, I consider coffin-building as a form of storytelling, and as signalling an acceptance of death. I show how by crafting their own coffin, club members craft a 'good death' by taking control of funerary rites. In Chapter Six, I draw these ideas together to show how Coffin Club is personalising death work. I argue building a personalised coffin to save money can be seen as an implicit criticism of the lack of personalisation and overpricing of some services provided by the funeral industry. I suggest that build crafting their own coffins, Club members are simultaneously crafting a do-it-yourself movement for change. But first, in Chapter Two, I outline the literature that helped inform my ideas, and discuss themes of craftwork, storytelling, materiality and embodiment (amongst other things).

CHAPTER TWO

The literature: Making sense of Katikati Coffin Club

I began research for this project when I wrote a proposal for my undergraduate degree, more than two years ago. I focused on death, dying, death rituals, funerary rites and the funeral industry. It was a lot of fun; learning about death rituals from different cultures is fascinating. I quickly fell down rabbit holes furnished with death chairs from the Order of Saint Clare and fantasy coffins from Ghana. Friends began calling me the ‘death woman’ and sending me links to every article about death they came across. I had mixed feelings about both.

When I started this project in earnest, I quickly realised that although the reading I had done was interesting, what I was observing at Coffin Club was pointing me in a different direction. Coffin Club is less about the rituals of death, and more about the practicalities of it. It is about action. And so I changed tack. I became more discerning in my engagement with literatures. I had to set parameters, to avoid those pesky rabbit holes (they have a tendency to break ankles). I tried to avoid literature that was about abstract death rituals or the process of dying, and focused more on the material. I drew on literature from a variety of disciplines. I used the questions and knowledge generated by my fieldwork to inform my reading. As a result, both my fieldwork, and the process of writing this thesis influenced my research pathway.

As I reflected on the stories the club members told me, I considered the different roles Coffin Club was fulfilling in different members’ narratives. A few key themes emerged, which would become the basis of the three analysis chapters of this thesis. I discuss how the creativity and sociality of Coffin Club can facilitate expressions and discussions of emotion in grief, particularly rage. I consider how Coffin Club can provide a ‘good death’ and can be understood as an acknowledgement of mortality. Finally, I argue that through personalising death work, Coffin Club is a gentle criticism of the funeral industry. It meets needs not met elsewhere, and allows people to do the work of death their own way.

Exploring these ideas brought to my attention theoretical frameworks which I weave throughout this thesis; materiality, creativity, embodiment, craftwork, storytelling, touch, and movement. I draw on and engage with these theoretical ideas to make sense of my ethnographic fieldwork. Having undertaken fieldwork and engaged with literatures, I came to the idea that within Coffin Club people are simultaneously crafting their coffins, their stories, and the club environment. This chapter is an account of my journey through the academic literatures. Mind your ankles.

Material culture, embodiment and movement

As I read literature, attended Coffin Club, and reflected upon both, I thought about themes that arose from my participation in Coffin Club. In doing so, I kept returning to the factor of Coffin Club which drew my attention in the first place: coffin construction. This material and practical facet sets Coffin Club apart from other death-specific support groups, and combines the dynamic and tactile elements which speak to my physiotherapy background. Thus, I arrived at material culture and embodiment.

The study of material culture looks at ‘objects, their properties, and the materials that they are made of, and the ways in which these material facets are central to an understanding of culture and social relations’ (Woodward, 2013). Material culture attracts much scholarship which examines materiality from myriad angles, with particular emphasis on the symbolism of objects, and their potential cultural, social, emotional and economic meanings (Boivin, 2008; Knappett, 2005; Lemonnier, 2012; Miller, 2008). The plethora of scholarship on material culture is due in no small part to the omnipresence of the material. Hollenback and Schiffer write:

...the concept of *material life* is redundant since it is impossible to imagine a human life that is immaterial. Human interactions, human belief systems, and human cultures require intimate ties to things. Culture is not something that is possessed; rather it is participated in and continuously created...Artefacts are not just tools for survival; rather, artefact manufacture, use, discard, and reuse are ‘constitutive processes’ that make culture.

(Hollenback & Schiffer, 2010, p. 314)

The concept of material life being inseparable from human life led me to the question of embodiment. Theories of embodiment link bodily, lived experience, and perception and thought processes (Csordas, 1990; Davies, 2002; Strathern & Stewart, 2011). Scholarship covers a broad range of topics, from the relationship between the body and memory (Kidron, 2011), to the mind-body experience of pain (Jackson, 2011) and impairment (Howe, 2011). Literature postulates ‘that the body is not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the *subject* of culture’ (Csordas, 1990, p. 5). In short, embodiment focuses on ‘doing’, and what that means for the body and the mind.

To consider the bodily experience, one must consider movement. Luckily, movement is something I am familiar with. It is a crucial part of physiotherapy. I consciously and subconsciously watch the way people move all the time. In physiotherapy, it helps me locate and diagnose injuries, ascertain levels of pain, and tells me something of the person I am observing. I watch big movements, such as the way someone walks. I notice little movements, like the way a person holds their head as they talk to me. I cannot turn the habit off. Fortunately, this served me well in this research.

While observing and participating in Coffin Club I noticed movement. More specifically, I noticed repetitive movement, and what effect it had on club members. Tasks such as sanding and painting are repetitive. The arms and body move in unison, drawing the paintbrush or sandpaper to and fro over the surface of the coffin. Concentration is required to ensure the strokes are even, smooth, parallel, and that no areas are missed. I noticed that the longer people were engaged in such a task, the more they relaxed. Tension drained from their bodies; their shoulders dropped, their grip loosened and their posture softened. But it was more than simply a physical response. These repetitive tasks also fostered conversation. I noticed that people were far more likely to talk about difficult subjects, such as loss and grief, while performing these tasks. There is something meditative in the repetitive movement, concentration and muted sounds of the tasks that calm the mind and encourage discussion.

This observation was validated by Gloria, the club secretary. I asked her how she found Coffin Club as a space in which to express her thoughts, grief, concerns and ideas. She replied that the tasks, particularly sanding, were soothing, and that they stimulated

conversation. She also commented that having something to do with her hands and somewhere to look made talking about difficult topics easier.

When contemplating the convergence of movement and thought, I turned to the work of Tim Ingold. He writes of the biographical elements of walking. Ingold posits that in undertaking a task as repetitive and familiar as walking, the walker is transformed, not simply geographically but biographically as well. In the planning stages of taking a walk, it is task which the walker intends on undertaking. But once the walker is walking, they *become* their walking. They are their steps, their breath, the blisters on their feet. They are perpetually modified by it, vivified by its movement and with completely new experiences gained by the time the walk is completed (Ingold, 2018, p. 23). The walker, in the act of walking, becomes a different person.

Ingold also states that walking ‘offers a space between the fixed points of origin and destination, a space for both mental and physical exertion’ (Ingold, 2018, p. 23). Walkers look without seeing, the environment around them only coming into focus when it requires interpretation. He observes that the rhythmic, meditative nature of walking allows for ‘a bodily automatism that frees the mind to do its own thing’ (Ingold, 2018, pp. 23-25). Ingold’s thoughts on the meditative effects of repetitive movement spoke to both the anthropologist and the physiotherapist in me. His work on walking does not have the material element that is so pivotal to my research, but there are parallels between it and the repetitive tasks I observed at Coffin Club, such as sanding. Sanding is similar to walking in that there is progression. There is an origin (a rough coffin), a destination (a smooth coffin), rhythmic movement and the space for thoughts to flow. Perhaps, as Ingold posits, the sander becomes their sanding. They are their wide-legged stance, their swaying torso, their sensitive fingertips and the metrical motion of their arms. The sander watches without seeing, and even then, mostly sees with their hands. The space for thought is immense.

Sensory anthropology: touch

When considering embodiment, it is short step to sensory anthropology. Sensory studies involve ‘a cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture’ (Howes, 2018, p. 226). Sensory studies cover all the senses, which literature states

are usually interconnected (Howes, 2018, p. 226). For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will focus only on touch, because it was by far the most significant to Coffin Club.

Physiotherapy requires a huge reliance on touch: as a tool for diagnosis, in treatment techniques, as reassurance, support and sometimes even as a deterrent. My hands are the tools of my trade and I would be lost without them. They see better than my eyes, have a longer and more accurate memory than my mind, and are more eloquent than my words. Perhaps it is because of the value I place in touch that I quickly recognised how important it is at the club. Coffin Club is an incredibly tactile place. Every aspect of building, decorating and lining a coffin involves the hands. Touch is also used to communicate, to teach, and to comfort.

In Coffin Club, touch is integral to communication and takes on different forms. The firm handshakes in greeting, the hugs offered in times of support. When I started woodworking, I received tactile signals of approval: a slap on the back, a squeeze on the shoulder. These were sometimes accompanied by a 'she'll do, this one,' but more often were simply silent signs of encouragement and approval.

As a novice woodworker, I need a lot of instruction, and in the shed, there are times when it is too loud for conversation. A power saw generates a considerable amount of noise. Combine that with the use of earmuffs, and you have an almost impenetrable communication barrier. This is when tactile communication comes in handy. The blokes use touch to guide and instruct me. A gentle touch to the shoulder, a repositioning of my elbow, a tap on the forearm as a stop signal. Sometimes they place their hand over mine, so I can feel the correct alignment. Even if talking is possible, sometimes learning through touch is simply faster and easier.

Touch attracts a lot of scholarship across a variety of disciplines. Perhaps this is because there are so many ways in which to administer touch. Loving, gentle, comforting, erotic, guiding, parenting, as punishment and to torment. Touch has long been recognised as a way to establish and build relationships, whether it be between close family members or people with more distant connections (Blake, 2011; Field, 2001). Literature explores the difference in tactile experiences between the genders (Carsten, 2004; Ibanez-Tirado, 2018), different age groups (Field, 2001; Montagu, 1986), and different cultures (Ibanez-Tirado, 2018; Geissler &

Prince, 2010; Williams, 1966). For example, in tribal groups of Australia and South Africa, touch is felt across distance. People can foretell when loved ones are approaching from ‘tappings’ on the skin in distinct places (Howes, 2018, p. 229). Cross-cultural studies show that despite differences in practice and belief surrounding touch, one thing holds true; touch is social, not simply individual (Howes, 2018, p. 230). Touch is about sharing.

Touch has also been shown to help with a range of different conditions and ailments, including helping to reduce chronic pain and manage symptoms of various immune and autoimmune disorders. Pertinent to this research topic are the positive effects that touch and touch therapies have on stress, depression and anxiety (Field, 2001, pp. 136-138), which scholarship links to grief (Aiken, 2001; Becker, 1973; Davies, 2015). As a physiotherapist, I often see the positive effects of touch. It is a powerful thing.

As people age, their tactile needs increase (Montagu, 1986, p. 395). Ironically, this increase in need corresponds with a stage in life when people are often touched less. Literature posits that the reason for this is that there are taboos surrounding adults and touch, and that people do not like touching older people (Field, 2001, p. 29). Scholarship claims that fear of aging causes a failure to understand and meet the needs of older people. This is exacerbated by increased distance between family members, both geographically and emotionally (Montagu, 1986, p. 395). And just as touch can have a positive effect on depression and anxiety, the lack of touch can exacerbate those problems.

This touch deprivation is what Katie Williams was referring to when she spoke of aging adults missing out on ‘loving touch’ (Death Hangout, 2019). It is one of the reasons she began the first Coffin Club, and is why touch continues to be part of the non-verbal communication that happens in the group. To my knowledge touch is never talked about in the club (which is not surprising), but from my observations is an important part of why people come to Coffin Club, contributing to the creation of friendships, fellowship and comfort.

Touch and tools

In making a coffin, touch often happens through tools. A tool is ‘a device that is activated by human agency’ (Ingold, 2000, p. 300), one that lends itself to manipulation rather than

automated use. During the construction of a coffin, hands and tools seem almost synonymous. Hands are used to brace wood while sawing, so that it does not bow and snap back into the operator's face. Hands are used to brush accumulated wood dust out of the way, so visibility is maintained and saw blades do not jam. Fingers hold screws in place before drilling, so correct alignment is achieved. Sometimes the absence of hands is more important than the presence. Keeping hands and fingers away from blades is crucial, for obvious reasons.

During sanding, touch is vital. Hands are used to search for rough areas in the wood. Fingertips are run over the whole surface of the coffin, imperfections located and then sanded out. The wood initially feels gritty, every rough patch an affront. After sanding, it feels as smooth as the skin on the inside of a person's wrist. It is incredibly satisfying.

When considering touch and tools, I found myself drawn to Ingold's work once more. Ingold explores the hand as a tool in itself. He considers the movements it can do: grip, flex, pinch, squeeze, dig, knead. He writes how every movement is subject to tiny variations, and therefore has infinite possibilities, making each individual's movements unique. Ingold posits that over time and with repetitive movement, hands become more skilled, protected from injury (by callouses), and marked by mistakes (scars). This results in a tool which is perfectly adapted for the task it is undertaking. It also means that hands can reveal the story of a person's life (Ingold, 2013, pp. 116-117). Thus, hands are not only the medium for communication, but part of the story themselves.

As I considered all these elements — materiality, embodiment, movement and touch — I reflected on what brought them together. Once again, I was back at what had initially piqued my interest; crafting a coffin. Thus, I arrived at the anthropology of craftwork, and with it, storytelling.

The anthropology of craftwork, and storytelling

The anthropology of craftwork aims to better understand the relationship between crafters and their materials, their communities, and the environment around them. The term 'crafting' combines materiality and tactility with the reflective and transformative characteristics

inherent in creativity (Harper, 2014; Ingold, 2018). It encompasses material culture, embodiment, identity, and touch (among other things) (DeNicola & Wilkinson-Weber, 2016; Gowlland, 2016; McGuire, 2014). Literature exploring the relationship between movement, tools, and making things acknowledges the dynamism of crafting (Ingold, 2000; Ingold, 2018; Liardet, 2014). It also opens up the connection between crafting, knowing, and learning, highlighting communication in crafting (Liardet, 2014; Marchand, 2007; Marchand, 2014; Turney, 2014), and is relevant to my research project, as it speaks to the ‘making’ element of Coffin Club.

Hedtke and Winslade explore crafting in bereavement, and explain why:

It is more ordinary than some artistic endeavors for which one has to go through extensive training before one is allowed to participate. Crafts are accessible to everyone. It involves deliberate action, rather than passive acceptance of suffering. It has an aesthetic quality too, living halfway between an art and a science.

(Hedtke & Winslade, 2017, p. 18)

The term ‘crafting’, in this context, refers to the making of something, but also to the crafting of a narrative in grief. Hedtke and Winslade posit that crafting an aesthetic, tangible object is a ‘creative process that is shaped by stories, meaning, actions, and rituals’ (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017, p. 18). The ‘doing’ of crafting allows for room for rituals and storytelling, which can help people deal with grief. And as the definition above states, crafting is ‘ordinary’. It is quotidian, accessible to many.

I turned once more to Ingold’s work, this time on crafting. As outlined above, Ingold explores the relationship between people, tools, and the objects they are crafting. He writes of the storytelling of crafting; both in the object crafted, and of the hands that made it (Ingold, 2011; Ingold & Hallam, 2014; Ingold 2018). The object (in my case, a coffin), and the act of making it, are forms of storytelling. Ingold states that this story is without beginning or end, and is constantly evolving as the crafter repeatedly returns to crafting, and moves from one project to the next (Ingold, 2014, p. 1). By crafting an object, the crafter is simultaneously presenting an expression of themselves to others, and to themselves (Harper, 2014; Turney, 2014). Thus, the act of crafting requires reflection and introspection, and the resultant

craftwork can result in further reflection (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017; Letherby & Davidson, 2015), acting as both a self-portrait and a mirror.

Storytelling is universal. People everywhere tell stories, whether they be formalised oral histories by professional storytellers, or informal anecdotes during conversation by everyday folk (Maggio, 2014; Mandelbaum, 2013; Ryan, 2008). Stories enable people to relay meaning, to build trust (and therefore relationships), and to shift understanding of a situation (Kaulingfreks & Van den Akker, 2018; Mandelbaum, 2013). Storytelling is also an embodied experience. Body language is an important part of storytelling, on the part of both the storyteller and the audience. Gestures, stance, facial expression, eye contact and body orientation can emphasise a point, deter or encourage interruption, deliver a punchline or suggest nuance. On the part of the audience, these bodily cues can demonstrate interest, engagement and comprehension (or lack thereof) (Mandelbaum, 2013, pp. 501-502). Thus, storytelling and craftwork are both bodily experiences.

The anthropology of storytelling acknowledges how difficult storytelling is to define. Stories can be about almost anything, told almost anywhere and at any time, and be told by and to almost anyone. And because anthropology is a form of storytelling itself, the line between the ‘anthropology of storytelling’ and the ‘storytelling of anthropology’ is blurred (Maggio, 2014, p. 92). Storytelling also encompasses different mediums, including oral, written, digital and visual formats, and varies cross-culturally (Goldman & Zieleszinski, 2017; Maggio, 2014; Nuñez-Janes, Thornburg & Booker, 2017). As they build their coffins, Coffin Club members are engaging in both oral and visual storytelling; visual in the way they choose to decorate their coffins, and oral in the stories they tell as they do it.

A crucial idea I take from the anthropology of storytelling is the concept of ‘subjective composure’. This phrase has dual meanings. One is that when a person is telling a story, they are tailoring it (‘composing’ it) for their audience. They highlight some aspects and hide others, to tell a story they think will appeal and make sense to their listeners (Maggio, 2014; Summerfield, 1998; Summerfield, 2004). The other meaning is that the storyteller tells the story in order to achieve ‘psychic and emotional equilibrium’ (‘composure’) (Summerfield, 2019, p. 109). Thus, a story is told and re-told. The search for meaning is endless, as each telling and re-telling of a story can generate new and different interpretations.

There is an interesting parallel between the endlessness of the search for meaning in storytelling (Summerfield, 2019, p. 91), and the endlessness Ingold identifies in crafting (Ingold, 2014, p. 1). If we view crafting as a form of storytelling, crafting and re-crafting (or designing and re-designing) a coffin is a story being told and re-told, in a bid to create meaning and to achieve subjective composure.

Thus, crafting, movement, touch, embodiment, and storytelling are intertwined. These themes helped me consider the different roles Coffin Club fulfils; as a space to express grief, as an acceptance of death, and as way to personalise death work.

Grief

Grief is ‘a mental state of sorrow or distress...a natural reaction to bereavement, but not experienced by every bereaved person’ (Aiken, 2001, p. 302). There is much scholarship on grief, spanning many disciplines. Literature underscores that grief is a complex, dynamic mix of emotional states, cultural conditioning and personal experiences (Aiken, 2001; Davies, 2002; Davies, 2005; Small, 2001; Strange, 2002; Walter, 1993). This is also true for the way people respond to grief. From Greek funeral laments (Danforth, 2004), to the ceremonial weeping of the Andaman Islanders (Radcliffe-Brown, 2004), and the festive wakes for deceased children in Brazil (Scheper-Hughes, 2004), grief response is dependent on cultural tradition and personal experience.

Thus, strategies to help people deal with grief — such as through grief support groups or counselling — ought to account for these differences, with flexibility and individualisation (Árnason, 2001; Canine, 1996; McManus, 2013; Neimeyer, 2013). Death Café is an example of one such support group. It is a discussion group where the objective is to ‘to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives’ (What is death café?, 2014). Coffin Club is another example. The practical element of coffin construction emphasises an active approach towards grief support. It also sets it apart from other death-related support groups (such as Death Café), which focus on talking.

Coffin Club is not explicitly a grief support group, but as a social group which aims to open up conversations about death and dying, discussions of grief and bereavement are inevitable. People talk about their current and past losses. They offer advice and support, and draw

comfort from one another. As I listened to members' stories of loss, many different emotions were expressed; pain, nostalgia, love, anxiety, regret, peace, compassion (to name just a few). One emotion drew my attention in particular was rage. Rage was by no means the most common emotion expressed at Coffin Club, but the way some members spoke of their rage was visceral. The sheer force of it was breath taking. And so I decided to focus on rage in bereavement. Not because it was the most prevalent emotion (it was not), nor because it is somehow more important than the other emotions expressed (it is not). My focus on rage is because it highlights how Coffin Club provides a safe space to express often painful emotions and stories. Rage in relation to grief is often ignored or denied (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 10), but at Coffin Club, it is neither. The creativity of craftwork allows opportunities for achieving composure through narrating grief, while the action of building a coffin draws out thoughts while relaxing the body.

When considering the scholarship on grief and rage in anthropology, Renato Rosaldo's work was the launching point. Rosaldo and his wife, Michelle, spent almost three years living with and researching the Ilongot people of the Philippines. The Rosaldos' focus was on the Ilongot practice of headhunting after the loss of a loved one (Rosaldo, 1980). When they asked older Ilongot men why they felt driven to cut off human heads, the men described the following:

...rage, born of grief, impels him to kill his fellow human beings. He claims that he needs a space to "to carry his anger." The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him, he says, to vent and, he hopes, throw away the anger of his bereavement.

(Rosaldo, 1993, p. 1).

Rosaldo, by his own admission, struggled to comprehend this emotion. He wanted to find a deeper meaning, a ritual of exchange or transformation (Rosaldo, 1980; Rosaldo, 1993). It was not until personal tragedy struck that he began to understand what the Ilongot men were trying to tell him. In 1981, Michelle Rosaldo slipped and fell to her death. Rosaldo describes the rage he felt after finding her body: 'I felt like in a nightmare, the whole world around me expanding and contracting, visually and viscerally heaving' (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 9). Rosaldo's personal journey of rage and grief following his wife's death brought him to two conclusions. First, he moved away from viewing headhunting as a ritual of bereavement, instead seeing it

as an expression of deep grief, rage and loss. Second, he felt it was an emotion that could only be understood through experience (Rosaldo, 1993, pp. 10-11).

Rosaldo also writes that Western cultures tend to ignore the rage that bereavement can bring, both in scholarship and in everyday life (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 10). Since Rosaldo's research with the Ilongot people, there have been a few other studies looking at grief and rage. These look at non-Western cultures which acknowledge and express rage in grief more readily (George, 1995; Mongelluzzo, 2013). For example, the Waorani people of Amazonian Ecuador are known for their lethal vendettas on surrounding groups, motivated by revenge, envy and power (Robarchek & Robarchek, 2005). People of the Kwanga tribe of Papua New Guinea express their rage and resentment in bereavement through narratives of sorcery (Brisson, 1995). Mongolian sheep herders respond to rage in bereavement with complete silence, when their extreme grief cannot be assuaged by typical bereavement practices (Delaplace, 2009).

These studies support Rosaldo's claim that some non-Western cultures tend to more openly acknowledge rage in grief, and demonstrate cultural differences in grief in bereavement. I was unable to find any anthropological research that explicitly investigates expressions of rage in bereavement in Western cultures. My research, and the conversations I had with club members led me to the question; what is it about Coffin Club that makes it a safe space to express such an emotion?

Scholarship on grief highlights the importance of community in processing loss. A group can provide a place to express thoughts and feelings, and validation for emotions. A larger group will have a broader pool of psychological and emotional experiences to draw from, and therefore is more likely to provide the support required (Canine, 1996; Irish, 1993). Literature indicates that those who seek support and assistance from others often deal with loss faster than those who are more isolated (Rogers, 2007; Stillion, 2013). A way in which a group can help is by providing reminders of loss and grief. This affords an increased opportunity to process through it (McCroby, 2018; Rosenblatt, 1988). Psychology literature identifies pain in this approach, but states that although this can cause painful 'surges in grief', people who experience these surges process them and come to terms with the loss more quickly (Rosenblatt, 1988, pp. 72-73).

There are elements of both familiarity and unfamiliarity at play within the support group setting. Literature highlights the importance of interacting with people who have gone through similar experiences. The shared experience gives insight, and provides a sense of solidarity and of being truly understood (Aiken, 2001; Holmes, 2017; McCroby, 2018). People who have had similar experiences are often viewed as being tangible proof of a successful negotiation of bereavement (Pietilä, 2002, pp. 403-404), providing a beacon of hope that things will get better.

Conversely (or perhaps, complementarily), interacting with people who have different or opposing viewpoints is equally useful for those dealing with grief, by providing otherwise unconsidered perspectives (Hass & Walter, 2006, p. 184). Those conversations can be confronting, unpredictable and painful, however, and therefore are often avoided, particularly when they concern bereavement (Hass & Walter, 2006, p. 194-195).

Some scholarship identifies the capacity of grief to turn ‘family into strangers.’ This refers to a feeling of ‘strangeness’ in response to a loss; a feeling of being out of place around family or acquaintances, particularly if strong emotions such as anger or blame are involved (Bálint, 2017, pp. 70-71). Thus, people often search for a place to express grief outside their close social network (Gibson, 2016, p. 643). This desire to express grief to unfamiliar people is facilitated by the tacit understanding that by entering a clearly defined shared space (such as Coffin Club), people already have common ground (Morgan, 2009, pp. 78-79). I see this often in my work as a physiotherapist. People say things to me that they would likely never say to close friends or family, because I am unfamiliar enough to be impartial, while my role as a healthcare professional is familiar enough to be comforting. There is a safety in a lack of familiarity, when combined with shared values or clearly delineated roles.

Scholarship on grief demonstrates the varied benefits of support groups and networks in dealing with grief (Corr & Corr, 2013; Rogers, 2007; Stillion, 2013). It also highlights that although socialisation after bereavement can magnify pain in the short term, in the long term it can have a positive effect on dealing with grief (Hass & Walter, 2006; McCroby, 2018; Rosenblatt, 1988). Anthropological literature on grief support groups tends, however, to focus on talk, rather than action. As with grief and rage, there seemed to be less focus on embodiment and materiality.

Another component of Coffin Club that facilitates dealing with grief is creativity. When considered anthropologically, creativity is performed by every person. It is part of the human condition. Creativity is the act of adding something to the world, whether that be a tradition, an idea, or an object (Kronfeldner, 2009; Wilf, 2014). As I researched creativity and grief, I initially turned to other disciplines. Psychology, social work, sociology and counselling literature provided some important insights into how creativity can be used to help navigate grief.

Creative pursuits are often considered to have the capacity to help heal. Literature highlights the transformative and liberative power of creativity (Bertman, 2017; Havelka, 2017; Holmes, 2017; Near, 2012; Rogers, 2007). Creative activities provide an environment for dealing with emotional turmoil. Creative activities performed in a group provide a shared social experience, which in turn, provides space for the construction of meaning (Rogers, 2007, p. 8). Near writes:

The arts allow us to enter our grief, building a bridge between our emotions and intellect. Through the arts, our emotions and thoughts play together to discover the mutual comprehension of one another's nature. Transformation cannot happen, personal or communal, unless we are in contact with "what is."

(Near, 2012, p. 204)

I take this to mean that humans use creativity to navigate complex situations and emotions. Part of that navigation is the idea that creativity can help build relationships between people. Havelka develops this idea, positing that creativity is at play in the formation and restructuring of relationships between people. He writes that creative involvement of one person with another allows for a deeper understanding of each individual, provides an environment rich with potential for change in each individual, and allows for a maturation of the relationship (Havelka, 2017, p. 219). Or, in short, creativity can 'tell us stories about ourselves and our relationships with others' (Letherby & Davidson, 2015, p. 346). It was creativity that led me, in a roundabout way, to the concept of the 'good death'.

Coffin Club and ‘the good death’

At Coffin Club, one of the questions I asked people was how they planned to decorate their coffin. It was a great icebreaker. I found that almost everyone had put some thought into it; after all, it was a large part of why they were there. As I listened to descriptions of lilac coffins with butterflies painted on them, or buttercup-yellow coffins with orange accents, I considered what personalising a coffin meant. People took something which might be considered sombre, and cheered it up. They painted their personality all over it, quite literally. It occurred to me that this act of creativity could be seen as an acknowledgement of mortality, and an attempt to exert some modicum of control over the Great Uncontrollable Event. Or at least, control over the funerary rites which succeed it.

When considering the concept of Coffin Club as a space in which mortality is accepted, I considered what hurdles may need overcoming in order to achieve such acceptance. I consulted my own thoughts and feelings on the subject (as a human who will die at some point), and felt that the unknowability and uncontrollability of death was where fear and anxiety might creep in. Research into literature about the subject confirmed this (Bauman, 1992; Davies, 2005; Kopp & Kemp, 2019; Solomon & Lawlor, 2011). Scholarship explores the idea that fear of death (combined with a search for pleasure) is the motivator for all human activity (Davies, 2005; Green, 2008; Kellehear, 2007). Becker (1973) develops this concept, particularly with regards to ‘heroism’; heroic acts in an attempt to leave a legacy that will outlast death (Becker, 1973; Becker, 2004). Research into the fear of death and actions taken to assuage that fear introduced me to the idea of the ‘good death.’

The concept of the good death has been around for a long time. Ariès describes the ‘tamed death’ of the medieval period (Ariès, 1974; Ariès, 2004). He explains that in medieval times, people were more aware of and comfortable with the knowledge that they were going to die (this could be because prior to medical advancements, lifespans were shorter). They were often aware of their impending death, and prepared for it mentally, spiritually and emotionally. Rituals and ceremonies were performed, which included church leaders, parents, family and friends. These rituals were public but not theatrical, devoid of great displays of mourning. Death was viewed as if the dying person was simply moving to a new house (Ariès, 1974, pp. 11-13). This view is similar to how coffins are viewed at Coffin Club. A

coffin is seen as a vessel to hold a corpse. Nothing more, nothing less. To build one is as practical and necessary as building somewhere to live.

Literature on the contemporary good death acknowledges how varied the concept can be; that it means different things to different people, and is shaped by culture (Bradbury, 1996; Green, 2008; Murray, 2011). Scholarship makes many attempts to define the contemporary good death cross-culturally. Definitions include the good death as an indication of having lived a good life (Kellehear, 2007, p. 85). In Vaqueiros culture, a good death is rapid, pain-free and without awareness (such as dying in one's sleep) (Cátedra, 2004, p. 77). Literature also explores the concept of the good death within suicide, particularly in some cultural traditions where suicide can be viewed as noble and heroic (Kastenbaum, 2004, pp. 128-131). These different definitions highlight the variability of the concept of the good death, although there is some overlap.

There are three consistent elements between all descriptions of the good death. The first is control. Each definition represents different approaches towards attempting to control death in some way, whether that be spiritually, emotionally, or medically (Ariès, 2004; Cátedra, 2004; Kastenbaum, 2004; Murray, 2011). The second is community. All descriptions of the good death involve many people; often family, but also people outside the family circle (Bradbury, 1996; Firth, 1996; Green, 2008; Kellehear, 2007). The third element is acknowledgement of mortality. In order to control death in any way, a person must first acknowledge and accept the fact that one day they will die (Bradbury, 1996; Green, 2008). This is certainly the case at Coffin Club. In order to attend Coffin Club and discuss death and dying, members have already necessarily come to terms with their own mortality (to at least some degree). This acceptance may be through the diagnosis of an illness, the loss of a loved one, or some other catalyst. It is not often discussed explicitly at Coffin Club, perhaps because acceptance has already been achieved, so therefore requires no further discussion, or perhaps because the catalyst can be painful. Still, the result is evident; a group of people who are preparing for, and accepting of, their own demise.

The different descriptions of the ways people try to exert control over death encompass ritual, emotions and health, but just as with grief, lack the focus on materiality, embodiment and creativity that is so integral to my research project. So what is a 'good death' to Coffin Club? The club cannot influence dying, after all, by easing pain or prolonging life. It is not a

religious group concerned with spirituality, or a medical facility with biomedical resources. Quite simply, the club acknowledges that part of having a good death is having a good funeral. Literature states that ‘a good funeral (not necessarily a highly emotional one) is an inalienable part of good death’ (Van der Geest, 2004, p. 906). One can have a ‘bad’ death, and still have a good funeral. And a good funeral is ‘a life-enhancing experience’ (Smith, 2000, p. 130). A good funeral celebrates the life of the person who has died, and what better way to do that than with a personalised coffin.

Personalisation of death work

A question I asked every club member was ‘why did you start coming here?’ Almost everyone replied with ‘to save money on a coffin.’ This answer highlights the importance of actually building a coffin. It is what sets Coffin Club apart from other death-related support groups (such as Death Café). The frequency with which I heard this answer made me consider the role of Coffin Club as an implicit criticism of the funeral industry (at least of the coffin-purveying facet of the industry). It provides a way of reducing funeral costs, implying that coffins sourced elsewhere are too expensive. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) state that average cost of a funeral in Aotearoa is between \$8,000 and \$10,000 (CAB, 2018). A significant portion of this cost can be attributed to the coffin. Wooden coffins start at around \$2,000, but can cost a lot more.

There are cheaper alternatives, however, which are becoming more popular. Cardboard coffins are one option, which cost between \$350-\$500. Some other ways of reducing the cost of a funeral include donations, do-it-yourself funerals, applying for a government grant, and pre-payment options (Bern-Klug, 2004; McManus & Schäfer, 2014). Coffin Club falls into the category of do-it-yourself funeral preparations. Their plywood coffins are priced at around \$300, depending on what decorations and embellishments one chooses. This covers the cost of materials. Labour is free, with the proviso that if the member is able to assist in making their coffin, they will do so.

Aside from saving money, there is another outcome of building one’s own coffin: personalisation. Designing and building a coffin means that it can be tailored to the wants of the person for whom it is intended. Earlier in this chapter I considered this personalisation in terms of creativity and storytelling. Another way to view personalisation of coffins is to

consider it as an alternative to the more impersonal coffins supplied by the funeral industry, and therefore, as an implicit criticism.

In Chapter One I outlined the evolution of the Western funeral industry, from rituals performed by family and the wider social network to a professionalised business model (Heessels, 2012; Parsons, 1999; Schäfer, 2007a; Schäfer, 2007b; Walter, 1993). This resulted in practices that people came to find depressing or hollow (Ramshaw, 2010; Schäfer, 2016). As a result, the industry has changed again, to reflect the contemporary values of personalisation and celebration of life. The result is funeral services which acknowledge and reflect the biography of the deceased, and are creative responses to death (Schäfer, 2016, p. 760).

The funeral industry has adapted (and continues to adapt) to meet these changing values (Schäfer, 2007a; Schäfer, 2007b). There is a considerable amount of cross-cultural literature concerned with the change to increasingly personalised and celebratory funerals (Engelke, 2015; Heessels, 2012; Kearl & Jacobsen, 2013; Quartier, 2010; Sanders; 2009). Some of the services provided include a wider array of eco-friendly options (Clayden et al., 2018; Warpole, 2009), curated videos and photographic slideshows celebrating the deceased's life (Hoy, 2013), and personalised coffins (Mano, 2008). There a dearth of literature, however, that actively explores the rising phenomenon of personalised coffins in Western societies.

It is important to note that the funeral industry *does* offer a wider range of coffins than it once did, which vary in price and design. Due to the necessity of them being premade, however, there is not the same level of flexibility of personalisation as is available at Coffin Club. Because members attend Coffin Club while they are still alive, they are able to create something which is unique, and reflects any part of their story they choose. It is (in part) these values of personalisation and celebration of life that drove Katie Williams to start the first Coffin Club, and continues to motivate people to join.

The more I thought about what it means to build one's own coffin, the more I considered Coffin Club as an attempt to approach death work with a more personal touch. This 'personal touch' can be seen in coffin construction, but also in the conversations between club members about death, dying and loss. This led me to consider Coffin Club as providing an alternative to the funeral industry, and thus, an implicit criticism, this time of the level of

control the industry exerts. By providing an alternative to some of the services that the funeral industry offers, the club members are attempting to wrest back some of that control. Or at the very least, provide options. With this in mind, I researched the professionalisation of the funeral industry.

Scholarship identifies a dearth of anthropological literature exploring the commercialisation of the funeral industry, especially cross-culturally (Kaufman & Morgan, 2005, p. 326). I certainly found this to be the case. The literature I found focused on the tension between the common public perception of the industry, and its role in providing useful, knowledgeable care for the bereaved. Scholarship acknowledges the public perception I have outlined in Chapter One; that the funeral industry takes advantage of the vulnerable bereaved (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; McManus & Schäfer, 2014). The literature argues, however, that the industry has changed over time to acknowledge and cater to the various emotional and social needs of the bereaved, and that the professionalisation of the industry provided the flexibility and broad knowledge base to meet those needs (Schäfer, 2007a; Schäfer, 2007b; Tanaka, 2013).

In researching this aspect of my thesis, I found that literature on the professionalisation of the funeral industry was scarce. The majority of the anthropological literature I found was concerned (perhaps unsurprisingly) with money, although it did underscore the emotional and social benefits provided by the funeral industry (McManus & Schäfer, 2014; Schäfer, 2007a; Schäfer, 2007b; Tanaka, 2013). There was, however, limited information on the commercialisation of funerals from the other perspective; from that of the bereaved.

Throughout the following chapters, I weave ideas of crafting, materiality, movement, touch, embodiment, and storytelling. My research project sits where these different elements dovetail together. As Coffin Club members tell their stories through crafting, they also narrate their thoughts on death, dying, grief and loss. They achieve subjective composure by telling and re-telling their stories, and designing and re-designing their coffins. The act of building a coffin provides repetitive movement, which allows for the headspace to think, to craft, to create. I suggest that as they craft their coffin, members also craft the relationships and social environment of Coffin Club into a safe space in which to share emotions and experiences. They craft a 'good death', and they craft a do-it-yourself movement for change

in death work. Woodwork, craftwork, and the practical and emotional work of death done simultaneously. It's kinda beautiful.

CHAPTER THREE

Coming to know the Katikati Coffin Club

My fieldwork has become a significant part of my life. What I anticipated to be a four-month project turned out to be a regular part of my week for more than a year (and counting). Before I began my fieldwork, I put a great deal of thought into it. Crafting this thesis was like crafting my coffin. For both I needed a plan, some design ideas, creativity, tools, time, flexibility, and a team of incredibly supportive people around me. And tea. Lots of tea.

In this chapter I discuss how I undertook this research project, and why I chose to proceed as I did. I have written parts of this thesis autoethnographically. This style encapsulates the embodied, sensory, and storytelling components of crafting. I have also chosen a very traditional form of anthropological fieldwork: participant-observation, without formal interviewing or digital recording. I argue that although it was not without its challenges, it provided me with the opportunity to immerse myself in the Coffin Club in a way that felt appropriate. This chapter ends with an account of my experience of building my own coffin. I use my own experience to consider what happens when a person builds their own personalised coffin at Coffin Club. It was the linchpin of my fieldwork, vital to my understanding of what was going on at the club.

The crafting of this thesis

Autoethnography combines reflection and personal experience to explore and represent observations and experiences. It takes into account that the anthropologist is a conduit through which perception flows; that one cannot separate the researcher from the person (Adams & Manning, 2015; Sparkes, 2003). There is an overlap between autoethnography, embodiment, and the senses. To give a colourful, enriched autoethnographic account of an experience, it is often necessary to include descriptions of your own sensory experience (Markula, 2003; Sparkes, 2003). This focus on the embodied, sensory experience appealed to

me, as it complements both the experience of crafting a coffin, and the themes that emerged in my research.

Autoethnography can create evocative accounts of an experience. It can help the researcher explore nuance in a way that they might otherwise miss. The style of writing that often accompanies autoethnography also has benefits. Autoethnographies tend to be rich with detail, reflective, emotive, and can give the reader a sense of the lived experience (Adams & Manning, 2015; Sparkes, 2003). This can make it more engaging and easier to understand, although it can also place the researcher at risk. The personal experiences the researcher reveals are open to scrutiny and criticism, making them vulnerable and potentially creating anxiety (Adams & Manning, 2015, p. 207). Again, this risk echoes elements of my research project. There is vulnerability in crafting anything personal, whether it be an autoethnography, a story, or a coffin.

Despite the vulnerable position autoethnography may put me in — or perhaps because of it — I have chosen to do it anyway. My reasoning for this is multiform. I chose to write this way to acknowledge my active participation in Katikati Coffin Club. I also want to firmly locate myself within the research field, to acknowledge my presence there, and to recognise that my personal experiences profoundly shaped how I understood things at Coffin Club. My experiences are central to my analysis and it seems vital to acknowledge that. Because I was participating in the same way as other club members, I was learning in the same embodied way as they do. Another reason is that I am very aware of the great privilege that Coffin Club members afforded me by sharing their stories, stories which were often personal and painful. I want to honour that. I want to give the stories the respect they deserve, and I feel that the only way to do that is to be equally forthcoming with my own stories. They gave parts of themselves to me; I want to reciprocate.

I have opted to write accounts of members' stories as just that: stories. Each person's narrative is kept as an individual story, rather than disaggregating them and arranging them by theme. I have also chosen to write these stories informally, for reasons I will explain shortly. Geertz famously writes of 'thick description' in ethnography, whereby subjective detail is included to provide context to behaviour. He describes ethnographies as 'fictions, in the sense that they are "something made," "something fashioned."' (Geertz, 1973, p. 317). In this sense, I have crafted stories for this thesis, just as the Coffin Club members and I crafted

our coffins. This focus on crafting is evident in multiple facets of this research project — the crafting of coffins, of narratives, of the social space of Coffin Club, and of this thesis — and I wanted to treat the stories in the same way. It is not enough to simply talk about it, I want to *do* it. Just as the line between the ‘anthropology of storytelling’ and the ‘storytelling of anthropology’ is blurred (Maggio, 2014, p. 92), so too is the line between the ‘anthropology of craftwork’ and the ‘craftwork of anthropology’.

My reasoning for this storytelling style is multifaceted. In part it is because these stories came to me in bits and pieces, over the weeks and months I attended Coffin Club. Storytelling helps bring these fragments together. It also allows the reader to ‘visit other worlds through the prism of another person’s memories, feelings and perceptions’ (Summerfield, 2019, p. 2). More importantly, though, is something I alluded to earlier. Many of the members’ stories are deeply personal. I feel that to write them another way — more formally, perhaps, or impersonally — would be to do them a disservice. These stories are rife with feelings. I want to do my best to enable the reader to experience that.

The lack of formality is not limited to just members’ stories. This entire thesis has a casual tone and a lack of jargon. This is for two reasons. First, this is how I write. I have the capacity to write in more technical language, but I prefer not to. I find jargon can muddy the water, and I value short sentences. Second, the language I have chosen to use reflects the nature of the Coffin Club itself. It is pragmatic, casual, and without pretension. As a Coffin Club member put it: ‘It’s a chatty subject. It needs a chatty tone.’ Or as another said, ‘don’t make it so confusing and boring that no one will read it.’ No pressure.

My role within the research

Part of autoethnography is considering how who I am as a person might affect the research. This means taking into account my different attributes; for example, my age. At thirty-one years old, I am less than half the age of most of the Coffin Club members. This means that I am frequently asked to explain my interest and validate my presence in the group. I quickly learned that I had to have a clear, satisfactory answer. Writing my ‘background’ section helped with this.

I found that my youth allowed me to inhabit the ‘student’ role more easily. Coming into this research, I knew nothing about woodwork. I found that this fact, combined with my youth, allowed members to see me as someone who was learning, rather than someone who was simply observing. This was confirmed by Grant, who commented that my age meant it was easy to teach me woodwork as I did not have a lifetime of bad habits to undo. My youth also made me somewhat of a novelty, which meant people sought me out to ask me why I was there.

My gender also influenced my experience in the group. When I first began attending Coffin Club, I found it slightly easier to get to know the women. They chatted while they worked, and asked me questions about my studies, my work and my life in general. They were all extremely welcoming. The men were no less so, but I felt that it was not until I started working with power tools in the shed that I really was considered ‘one of the crew.’ As mentioned earlier, my novice status helped ease the way. The blokes went out of their way to show me how to use the different tools, and I felt their approval in their back pats and their comments of ‘she’s alright, this one.’

Many of the club members — including me — are Pākehā, some are Māori, some are from England, and some from South Africa. The Coffin Club is not ethnicity-specific, and my research project is not specifically about ethnicity. I feel, therefore, that my ethnicity had little bearing on this research (beyond the influence that ethnicity has on everyday interactions). The main time that ethnicity became relevant in Coffin Club was when discussing different values with regards to death practices. These differences were particularly emphasised between Māori traditions, and Pākehā and other Western traditions. I observed death care practices being shared across cultures, which I will discuss in Chapter Four.

Joining the club

Before I applied for ethics approval, I wanted to find out if the Coffin Club would allow me to join, observe, participate, and write my thesis about their group. My first contact was with Jack, the club treasurer. I rang, introduced myself, outlined my research proposal, and asked permission to come to the next meeting. Jack was enthusiastic. I went to the next gathering

and he introduced me to the group during the morning tea break. I outlined my research idea and explained my interest in the group and the subject. I felt incredibly ill-prepared. In hindsight, I think it was nerves. I must have made a favourable impression, for members showed interest.

I applied for low risk ethics approval through Massey University Human Ethics Committee, and finally I was ready to start fieldwork in earnest. I returned to the Coffin Club and began attending regularly. On my first visit back, I explained participants' rights to the members and provided information pamphlets for them to take home. Over the following weeks I brought consent forms for people to sign. In the first few weeks I obtained written consent from the majority of the club members.

I was concerned about gaining consent from a group. It can be treacherous ground. People may feel coerced into participating or unaware that they have the right to decline at any stage of the research (Fluehr-Lobban, 1994, p. 8). To avoid this, I tried to provide as much information as possible, both verbal and written. I reminded people on a regular basis over the first few weeks that they were allowed to pull out of the research at any time. My fears were unfounded, nobody had any concerns.

After much consideration I decided against formal interviewing, in favour of observing, listening, and asking the occasional question. From early on in my fieldwork I noticed that the conversations within the club were incredibly organic. They ebbed and flowed, with no formality or structure. I was concerned that if I added a formal interview element or removed people from the group to conduct private interviews, I would disturb the innate comfort and naturalness of the environment. Ultimately, I decided that although I might miss out on some stories due to the lack of privacy, I would simply observe. I hoped that by observing with minimal interference, I would get a better insight into the group dynamic. After all, the group was why I was there; this research is not about individuals, but about Coffin Club as an entity.

This is also the reason I chose not to interview people away from the Coffin Club setting. Most of the club members do not socialise together outside the weekly gatherings. Their relationships are largely confined to Coffin Club. It is almost as if they have created a space separate from the rest of their lives. I decided to follow their lead on this. This meant I did not

have access to how the Coffin Club fit into the rest of their lives, but meant that my method was in keeping with the nature of the group.

I also decided to forgo audio recording when in Coffin Club, in favour of writing fieldnotes from memory. As a physiotherapist I have a lot of practice at writing notes this way, which influenced my decision. The main reason, however, was practical. The noise in the Coffin Club shed makes audio recording almost impossible. Another, admittedly more romantic reason was that the environment I was in is extremely tactile. Everything is manual: sanding, painting, woodworking, and sharing. To introduce a digital element into such a space felt alien and wrong.

Writing from memory increases the likelihood of omitting data, although studies show that recall of overall themes is broadly accurate (Lee, 2004, p. 870). I wonder if, by eschewing audio recording, I forced myself to attend more closely to what was being said. In other words, because I could not replay a conversation, I had to fully immerse myself on the first hearing. The longevity with which I have attended Coffin Club also helped cement my memory and understanding of what was happening around me. If I forgot an element of a story, it was easy for me to check anything I might have missed. Also, these stories are important to the storytellers, and were thus oft repeated. By repeating the same stories, the storyteller has more opportunity to search for meaning in them. Each iteration provides an opportunity for the storyteller to see how it is received, to maybe reconsider how they want to tell the story, to draw out different parts of the story for emphasis. Retelling gives the storyteller time and space to consider their thoughts and feelings about it, and to change it as they see fit. There are also benefits for the audience (me). Each time I heard these stories, different details were highlighted, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of the narrative.

I felt justified in my decision to eschew audio recording after a conversation with Gloria (the club secretary). She asked me why I was not recording our conversation. I explained my reasoning. She agreed, saying that it would feel wrong, and that it would somehow corrupt the security of the space. She said that the group would not feel as comfortable talking with me if I was recording, and that it might affect the natural flow of the conversations.

After I had been attending Coffin Club for five months, I raised another ethical concern: anonymity. I explained to the club that although I had change members' names, the

descriptive storytelling style in which I was writing my thesis, combined with the small numbers in the group and their familiarity with one another, meant that anonymity within the group would be impossible. I explained why I was writing in that style; that I value storytelling, and I felt to strip the personalities of people from their stories would be doing both the people and their stories a disservice. I said, however, that I did not have to write the stories so personally, and that if people would rather be more anonymous, I would change them. There was discussion regarding this, and the consensus was that they would prefer the stories left with the personalities intact. Mary summed it up: ‘There is no other way to do it. These are important stories, and we want to share them. And we want people to read them’.

I offered to provide draft copies of the sections of my thesis that were relevant to each participant, so they could approve and amend it as they saw fit. That idea was quickly thrown out: ‘If you do that, Bronnie, it’ll be endless. You write it, and we’ll read it after it’s done.’ I had variations of this conversation throughout my thesis-writing process, and each time, the response was the same. Then one day Grant emailed me to say he was interested in reading my thesis, if I was willing to share. I sent him the draft I was working on, and promptly felt so nervous that I wanted to vomit. Although I knew that it was an inevitability, the reality of having a club member read what I had written about them was horrific.

I need not have worried. Grant approved. He read my draft thoroughly, and provided detailed, multi-faceted feedback (Grant used to be a lawyer, which explains the rigour). He liked the way I had written the stories, and felt I had painted an accurate portrait of the club and its members. He said, however, that I needed to make more of the harsh realities of death; of its inevitability and finality, and of the fear of death that many people have. He also said that although I had discussed the idea of Coffin Club as a criticism of the funeral industry, he felt I had been too generous. Grant is of the opinion that the funeral industry financially preys on people when they are at their most vulnerable, and that Coffin Club provides a ‘release from obligation to the funeral industry.’

Grant and I had a long discussion about his views and my thesis. He provided insight, opinions and ideas. I listened to what he had to say, and took it on board. Grant’s feedback influenced some of my ideas and writing. You will hear his thoughts in more detail later in this thesis. It was incredibly helpful, and I appreciate the input, and the time and effort it took.

After I had been attending Coffin Club for six months, Jack (the club treasurer) asked me if I would be a part of the club's committee. He said they needed someone who 'attended regularly and was open to new ideas.' He was concerned that if he and Doug (the club president) died, no one would know how the club was run. I was flattered to be asked, and keen to contribute in any way I could, but was concerned that eventually I would no longer be able to attend regularly.

After some thought and a discussion with my supervisors, I decided to take Jack up on his offer. Since then, I have been performing duties as the club secretary. I transcribe documents, write and send out announcement emails, and do the annual financial return for the club. I induct and measure new members (what measuring means will become clear in time). I helped run the club's stall at the local Agricultural and Pastoral (A&P) show. The role gives me insight into how the club is run as an incorporated society, and makes me feel as if I am contributing.

There will come a time when I am no longer able to regularly attend Katikati Coffin Club. When that time comes, I will resign as secretary. When I took on the role, I made Jack aware of this. Withdrawing from the club will be a loss for me; it has become an incredibly significant part of my life.

Making my own coffin

Perhaps the most important element of my fieldwork was crafting my own coffin. This is the purpose of the club; not to do so would have been unthinkable. Building my own coffin allowed me to become an active member of the club, and helped me better understand the material and embodied characteristics of the Coffin Club, as I went through the same experiences as the other members. It transformed my fieldwork from a thought experiment into something, large, useful, beautiful (to me) and extremely tangible.

The following story is an account of my experience. This story provides insight into the Coffin Club, using myself and my experiences as a conduit. It opens up the themes of materiality, tactility, movement and creativity that will be explored in more detail at the end of the chapter. It shows transformation; of sheets of plywood into a coffin, of a novice

woodworker into someone with some (slight) knowledge of woodworking, of me into a Coffin Club member and ethnographer.

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

Building my own coffin

PLANNING

Before I started properly planning this research project, building my own coffin was very hypothetical. I thought about it in the same way one thinks about planning a dinner party for favourite celebrities; as a fun and interesting thought experiment, with little notion that it might actually happen. Admittedly, building my own coffin is considerably more probable than me cooking a tagine for Dylan Moran, Dame Maggie Smith, Dame Judi Dench and Tom Waits, but still, I thought about it as if it were something removed from myself. I also thought about my hypothetical coffin with little sentiment, as if it were simply a large box.

When I started planning this project more seriously, I still viewed building a coffin as secondary to the research process. I considered it to be something I would do while I did the more pressing work of anthropology. I put no thought into my own coffin, beyond being excited to have the opportunity to learn about woodwork. I was interested in other people's coffins, not my own. Nonetheless, I considered what I would do with my coffin after I had finished it. At thirty-one years old, I hope not to need my coffin for a while, and do not have the space (nor the inclination) to store it for decades. My solution was to hold on to it for a while — perhaps until after I had graduated — and then either give it away or list it on TradeMe² (yes, people sell coffins on TradeMe).

² TradeMe is the largest internet auction website operating in Aotearoa.

And then I started attending Coffin Club. I began helping paint and line coffins. I listened to members talk about their coffins; about why they had chosen to decorate it the way they did, where they were storing it and the conversations they had with friends and family about it. I saw the effort that people put into their coffins, and the joy they got from their completion. I watched the camaraderie of the group. I realised that the process of building a coffin was going to be a more meaningful experience than I had anticipated.

I began thinking seriously about what I wanted my coffin to look like. I considered what colour I wanted to paint it, the adornments I wanted on it, what fabric I wanted to line it with, what shape it would be. I found my ideas changed often. I also found that the more I thought about it, the more important my coffin seemed to become.



FIGURE 2: HANDLE AND ADORNMENT OPTIONS

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

My age has a bearing on how I feel about this coffin. As I mentioned, I hope not to need a coffin in the near future. It is unlikely that the coffin I made with the Coffin Club is the one I will be buried or cremated in. I simply do not have the capability to store it for the rest of my life. Also, there is every chance I will not fit in it when the time comes. This means I do not make the usual association between my coffin and my death. I do not see this particular coffin as my 'vessel into the unknown'. Instead, it is more of a project. It is a chance to learn about woodworking, to meet some wonderful people, and to listen to their stories. My coffin is still

a vessel, just not in the traditional way. It is not a vessel for my corpse, but for what I have learnt during this research project. It is the culmination of months of work, and a tangible symbol of the camaraderie the Coffin Club share, of which I have been a part.

I still wanted to approach making my coffin as if I would be using it. I felt that this was in the spirit of participation, and would better honour the efforts of the collective. This meant designing it with my own taste in mind, stamping my coffin with my personality, not just making it generic.

With all this in mind, I came a realisation: when I finished my coffin, I would not be able to sell it. Given the time and effort put into it, it would seem sacrilegious. Donating it to someone is still an option, as keeping it for the next (hopefully) forty-plus years may prove impractical. But selling it now seems crass.

MEASURING

The first day I came to Coffin Club, Jack took me in hand. He is the club treasurer and is in charge of inducting new members. He is cheerful and energetic, and makes people feel immediately at ease. Jack measured me; he called it a 'free measure and quote'. There is a small section of wall near the far right-hand corner of the shed which has two measuring tapes nailed to it, extended in a cross. I stood with my back to the centre of the cross, while Jack measured my height and width. He used his clipboard to flatten my hair. It was the first time I had been measured that way since I was a child. The irony was not lost on me. It seems particularly poetic that one of the few times we are measured once we have stopped growing is in preparation for our death, or once we have died.

Finally, I stood side on and Jack estimated my depth. I could tell it made him uncomfortable; it is impossible to judge a woman's depth without looking at her breasts. He did it quickly and as respectfully as possible. He jotted down my dimensions, along with my preference of coffin shape (traditional), type of handles (wooden, small) and embellishment preference (none). We talked about the need to add about 200mm to the length. He explained why by telling me the story of one of the first coffins they built in the club.



FIGURE 3: GETTING MEASURED FOR MY COFFIN

Taken by 'Gloria', May 2019

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She was one of the first members, and they measured her the same way Jack had just measured me. The club members worked together to build her coffin. It was finished, painted, lined and ready to use. And then she got in it to see if she would fit. It was then that everyone realised that they had measured her while she was standing, not taking into account the fact that people are longer when they are horizontal. Their feet drop, adding a few inches to their length. There was no way that she would fit.

And so, they made another coffin. They repeated the whole process. Except this time, they had made it too shallow; her toes stuck up out of the box. Jack joked that they considered cutting them off, but she thought her family might not approve, so decided against it.

They made a third coffin. This time it was a perfect fit. As Jack was telling me this story, I had images of Goldilocks and the Three Bears playing in my mind. Of porridge too hot, too cold, then just right. I did not tell Jack this.

After telling me this story, Jack told me that they lost some members because of this. That some people felt the process was too haphazard, not professional enough. As Jack said: 'We were learning how to build coffins. We still are.'

.....

Two months later, I had a conversation with Grant about breasts. Grant is direct and his language is colourful. The ‘starter group’ — the group of men who begin the coffin making process by constructing the box, and of which Grant is part — were having a problem with measurements for women. Because of the intrinsic awkwardness they found in measuring women, the blokes were overestimating measurements, and the coffins were being made too deep. This meant they looked out of proportion, that the body would look dwarfed by the coffin, and that wood was being wasted. They had been rectifying the discrepancy by cutting an inch or so off the top rim of the box after it had been constructed and before it was painted. This was not an ideal solution, however, as it was still a waste of wood, and it created more work.

The problem arises because, much like people’s feet, women’s breasts change position when they are lying down. They rest to the sides (even when wearing a bra) so the measurement needs to be taken from the sternum, rather than the nipple line. The men taking the measurements, however, felt uncomfortable having that conversation with the female members, and so resorted to taking ‘guesstimates’.

Grant and I talked about solutions. I suggested simply explaining the problem to the women; in my experience, women are generally pragmatic about their breasts, as long as no one is touching them without permission. I suggested getting women to measure themselves, or asking another woman to measure them. Grant, however, comes from a legal background; he is acutely aware of sexual harassment and its legal ramifications. He was loath — despite his usual frankness — to even broach the subject with women, for fear of how it may be taken. I was exempt from this because of my background, my role as researcher and my direct approach to the discussion. We did not reach a solution.

.....

The week after our chat, Grant — the driving force behind the starter group — announced that we would start work on my coffin. He read the sheet of dimensions Jack had recorded, looked me up and down, and declared the measurements wrong. I needed to be remeasured. I stood at the crossed tape measures and we went through the process again.

Grant looked over Simon's shoulder at my dimensions. 'Nah, she looks thicker than that.'

Simon is a retired microbiologist, and is exacting about measurements. He focused on me, frowning through his spectacles. 'Really? I don't think so.'

I grinned. 'He's talking about my intellect.'

Simon doubled over, incapacitated with laughter.

We added to my height — 'you're a tall girl, you'll need it' — and measured from my sternum to allow for my breasts shifting sideways. I asked for a little more width for some elbow room. Simon asked if I was planning on rolling over in my sleep. You never know.

Dion, a quiet man who listens with his whole body, commented that by the time I die, I may not fit anymore, that I will be wider when I am older. I replied that I was counting on it, but that I would wedge myself in, one way or another. Dion looked suspicious.

Finally, we had measurements.

CUTTING THE BASE AND THE ENDS

The base of the coffin is made of heavier plywood, so that the corpse does not fall through the bottom. It is the first part of the box to be cut. The Coffin Club have three pre-cut templates which they work off to cut the base, adjusting the measurements as needed. These templates are cut to proportions that are common, and are labelled '1', '2' and '3'. After holding each up and getting me to stand with my back to it — 'step this way, madam, for your fitting' — template 3 was decided on. It was laid out on a large piece of plywood and lined up with one edge. Grant and Dion traced around it in pencil. They then turned it over and retraced it, to account for any problems with asymmetry in the template.

Then it was time to cut it. I am a novice at woodworking, so I simply watched and helped brace wood as it was being cut. The blokes took time to explain things to me, asking me to get things from the shelves, so I could work out what everything was. Early on, I was asked to

find sky hooks, a left-handed screwdriver and tartan paint. Thank goodness I had heard of those stitch-ups before.

I helped clamp the sheet of plywood to the work bench, with a long metal rod in place to guide the saw. Dion cut it out using a skill saw. The skill saw is hand-held, and prone to wandering off track, hence the metal guiding rod.



FIGURE 4: WORKING ON A COFFIN BASE

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, January 2020

Once the base was cut, Simon cut out the end pieces. These were done on the table saw. The table saw looks like a metal altar, primed for sacrificial fingers. An angry blade protrudes from the centre of the table, the prominent teeth wider at the tip than at the base. Simon warned me to keep my hands out of the way. 'There's at least one horse under there, and it bites.' He set the saw to the right width, then pushed the wood through from one end. I stood on the opposite side holding it down, so that when the final cut was made it would not flick up and fly across the room, or worse, into Simon's face. The ends were glued and screwed to the base, and left to dry.

CUTTING AND SHAPING THE SIDES

The next week, we set to work on the sides. Long rectangles of plywood, cut to fit the depth of my body. Simon and I cut them on the table saw, the same way we had done the ends. The

table saw makes me nervous. It does not sound like the skill saw and the bench saw. They have a deeper noise, a low thrum that is somehow comforting. A bit like a cat's purr, albeit a large, metallic cat. The table saw has a banshee's wail, ominous and threatening. It seems to scream in violent pain. My nervousness could, though, have more to do with the size of the teeth on the blade, and my lack of confidence in using it.



FIGURE 6: BENCH SAW



FIGURE 5: TABLE SAW

Both taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

Once the sides were cut to size, we needed to make them bend. This required us to cut a series of lines in the wood, about 10mm apart, covering the section we wanted to curve. These cuts were the width of the wood, and about half the depth; enough to make an extremely weak section of wood about a foot long. I found out after the fact that this is called 'kerf cutting' or 'kerf bending'. It is a great Scrabble word, and is a job for the bench saw.

First, we had to set up the bench saw so the blade was at the correct depth. Simon and I did this, with Bill looking on and offering advice. Bill is a relatively new member, joined since I have been attending. He champions me by insisting that I have a hand in every part of the coffin building process, and he worries about people patronising me with their instructions. He has a tradesman's hands, white hair cut short-back-and-sides, and a name badge that reads 'Just Bill'.

Blade-depth adjustment is done by trial and error, and we made many errors. The lever to raise and lower the blade is quite heavy to turn, which makes slight adjustments more difficult. Also, the person adjusting the saw cannot actually see the saw, so it requires two people. I blindly adjusted the blade to what I thought was the correct height, while Simon

called out 'higher!' or 'lower!'. A bizarre game of Marco Polo, with much hilarity. Eventually we succeeded. Grant looked on, shaking his head.

Cutting the wood was a three-person job. Normally two would have sufficed, but the wood was bowed significantly, so more weight was required to keep it from kicking up in the saw blade. Although perhaps my lack of experience accounted for the extra caution. Whatever the reason, I was glad of the additional assistance. On the first side, Bill held the wood flat and Simon operated the blade. My job was to use a block of wood to align the end of the sheet of plywood with a series of marks etched on the bench, each about 10mm apart. By the time we got to the end of the series of cuts, it was a well-oiled machine; slide, brace, cut, repeat.

For the second side, Bill pointed out that I should be the one operating the saw, so Simon and I switched places ('Watch out for your hands. Those teeth bite.'). This piece of plywood was even more bowed than the previous. It meant that with the cuts being so close together, thin slivers of wood peeled back and tore off, flying across the room. Bill assured me that it would not matter; that by the time we were finished, no one would be able to tell. We carried the prepared wood over to the work space in pairs, taking care to hold them on their sides. The wood was now so weak that its own weight could cause it to break.



FIGURE 7: COFFIN SIDES WITH KERF CUTS

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

AFFIXING THE SIDES

Attaching the sides onto the coffin is a multi-person job. Grant held the sheet of wood so that it would not break under its own weight. Simon glued and screwed the side on to the base and ends, and Bill made sure the ends were lined up. I watched while they attached the first side, then Bill said 'Bronnie should be doing this,' and it was my turn.

We turned the coffin on to its side, and I spread a layer of glue along the edge. Simon commented that I was fast and even. 'It's just like icing a cake.' 'Then why haven't you brought us one yet?' Hoisted with my own petard, I promised a cake in the future.

After the glue was applied, it was time to screw the board in place. Bill and Simon showed me how to use a power drill, holding it so the screw remained aligned. After a few false starts, I was on my way. It took me longer than it had taken Simon, but the fellas were incredibly patient. Although when we were ten minutes late to morning tea because I was taking too long, they started to make a few good-natured digs. Watching people polish off a packet of Tim Tams is bound to make anyone a little antsy.

After both sides were attached — and after well-deserved tea and biscuits — a thin sheet of plywood was glued in place to cover the series of cuts which made up the bends in the sides of the coffin. These were clamped in place. The sides were measured for alignment, so they did not slope in or out, and a makeshift spreader clamp was inserted. This is made up of a bar with a clamp at either end. The middle is extendable, so once it is inserted into the coffin, the correct amount of tension can be applied to hold the sides out to the desired angle. When all this was done, the newly-made coffin was set aside to dry.

POWER SANDING AND FILLING

A week later, the coffin was ready to be tidied. First the ends needed to be sanded down, so that they were flush at the corners. Bill showed me how to use the power sander. We started with a fine grade of sandpaper, but quickly realised that it would take too long. Bill changed the paper to one with a coarser grain, warning me that it would bite into the wood more. He also warned me to keep the sander flat, otherwise it would begin gouging out the flat sides of the coffin, making unsightly scratches. I began, doing a few strokes with the sander, then

running my fingers along the edge to feel how much of a ridge was left. The aim was to have a seamless connection between the two pieces of wood. When I felt the corner was smooth enough, I moved on. The weight of the sander made the joint of my right thumb ache; a carryover injury from my work as a physiotherapist. I had to keep adjusting my hand position to account for the weakness.

Bill checked my work, and called out to Grant: 'She's better at this than some of those rough buggers.'

After power sanding, it was time to put filler in the screw holes to make them flat. We used putty, taking care to push it down into the crevices. Bill and I then worked around the top edge of the coffin, filling in the ends of the kerf cuts and any other chinks we could find in the wood. The coffin was then set aside to dry for another week.

SANDING

The following week, I sanded the coffin. Bill helped me carry it outside, and we balanced it on two sawhorses. As we did, someone — I think it was Dion — commented that it did not look deep enough for me. Grant instructed the blokes to stand it on its end, and I stood inside it. Sure enough, my toes stuck out the bottom. Grant got me to stand by the crossed tape measures again, and did a quick double-check. 'Ha, your feet are your widest part.' I worried for a moment that we would have to do something to fix my coffin, then remembered how feet drop when lying down. They add to the body's length but reduce the foot depth. It would be fine.

I set to work sanding with a small block of wood wrapped in sandpaper. I went over my entire coffin, feeling for rough areas with my hands, then sanding them off. I smoothed out the surface of the putty I had applied the week before. I sanded off the straggled wood ends left behind after sawing. I prepared my coffin for priming.

I worked on my coffin by myself, but not alone. Nearby, Mary painted Marg's coffin handles lime green and Peter sanded down a different coffin. Our workstations were positioned about a metre from each other. We chatted about the weekend job I had picked up driving to Napier and back, earning a tidy sum for my trouble. Peter described his weekend attending a

thirteenth birthday party, and how after the kids had gone to bed, the adults carried on the festivities. We talked about Mary's recent family trip to Bali and Mary recounted her first experience going to a ladyboy club; 'I looked for lumps and bumps, and I couldn't see any!'

It was a leisurely morning of work and camaraderie, and I took longer to finish sanding than normal. It was lovely. I set my coffin aside to be primed the following week.

ROUTING

The following week, I set up my coffin in order to prime it. I readied a bucket of primer, a small roller and some new foam roller heads. Doug and I turned over my coffin. Doug took one look at the base of my coffin and said 'Hold on. You can't prime it until you've got the KKCC carved in.'

Of course. I had forgotten. Every coffin that is made by the Katikati Coffin Club has to have its acronym (KKCC) carved into the base. This lets the funeral directors know where it was made. It is also my favourite part of the coffin. It is a visual symbol that sets the Coffin Club coffins apart from bulk manufactured ones, and I like it. It makes it feel more personal.

The letters are carved out using a router and a stencil. The stencil is made of wood, with a large 'KKCC' cut out of it. Each letter is just shy of a handspan in height; large enough that it can be seen from a distance and there is no mistaking it for anything else.

Doug called Simon over, and asked him to show me how to use the router; a hand-held power tool which has a small blade shaped like a hole-punch. Simon warned me that it had been a while since he had used one. Considering I had never used one, he was doing better than me.

We screwed the stencil into the base of my coffin, then went to find a router. Simon showed me where the blade extended down, how the depth of the blade was fixed, and how to turn the router on. He carved out the vertical line of the first K, showing me how to control the router with both hands. He then turned it off and handed it to me, with his usual words of warning: 'Remember, it's got teeth, and it bites.'



FIGURE 8: KKCC STENCIL

Taken by Bronwyn Russell. June 2020

I took over using the router. I guided it through the 'KKCC', trying to keep within the boundary of the stencil; because it is made of wood as well, a lapse in concentration can mean taking bites out the stencil itself. Simon watched my progress for a while, then declared me fit for unsupervised work. He wandered off to tend to his own coffin.

As I worked, I thought about this symbol of the Coffin Club, and what it meant. To me, it is an indelible stamp on each coffin, marking both the coffin and the body inside as being part of a group, and somehow more than the sum of their parts.

I finished the job, then sanded back the edges of the letters, getting rid of the rough ends of the wood. I puttied up the holes left by the stencil being screwed down, the underside ends of the kerf cuts, and any other blemishes I could find on the base of my coffin. I put the coffin aside to dry and gave up on the idea of applying primer that day. I put the primer and paint rollers away.



FIGURE 9: KKCC ETCHED INTO THE BASE OF A COFFIN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

PRIMER

The following week, I ran some sandpaper over the base of my coffin to get rid of any rough patches, wiped it free of wood dust and got out the primer and painting gear again. I was finally going to make it happen.

Applying primer did not take long. Pat and I painted the outside, while Peter looked on. We worked from opposite ends of the coffin, slowly making our way towards the middle. We left it to dry, and then after morning tea, I painted the inside of it, this time on my own. I left it to dry for the rest of the day, then put it aside to be painted the next week.

PAINTING

It took me a long time to choose what colour I wanted to paint my coffin. I like bold colours, so I fluctuated between crimson and royal blue. I considered painting the sides of my coffin with the spines of books, to mimic a bookshelf, then realised that kind of painting was outside my skill set. I tossed up between a pale, butter yellow and a warm tan, before settling on the yellow. And then my sister mentioned that she had half a can a paint left by the previous owners of her house. She said I could have it if I wanted, to save the cost of buying more. It was a pale yellow-brown, the colour of warm sand. Perfect.

The day I painted my coffin I did not want to be at Coffin Club. I was tired, sad, and angry. I had been burning the candle at both ends with work and study, and it was starting to affect me. I did not feel like talking or listening to people, not such a good headspace to be in for fieldwork. But I gave myself a mental shake, rearranged my facial expression, and got out of the car.

I caught up with Liz first. She was at a bit of a loose end as to what to do, so I asked if she wanted to help me paint my coffin. We cracked open the can of paint, gave it a good stir and poured it into the roller trays. She commented on what a lovely colour it was. We started from opposite sides of the coffin, slowly working towards one another. While we worked, we chatted about how relaxing painting is. The repetitive motion is soothing, and there is something calming about concentrating on making the strokes even.

We had not been painting long when Liz was called away to help sign up some new members. Peter stepped in and took up her roller. I asked how Peter was. He said that he was tired, feeling under the weather and did not really want to be there. I was happy to have a kindred spirit, and said as much. We kept painting and chatting, and I could feel my bad mood lifting, no match for the calm of the painting and Peter's conversation.

When we finished I left my coffin to dry, and set to work painting the handles. It is fiddly work, and I always manage to get paint all over my hands and t-shirt. It is perversely satisfying. By the time I finished I had six handles lined up on a sawhorse, looking like an oversized, sand-coloured zipper.

After morning tea, I asked Peter to help me turn my coffin over, and we painted the bottom. Peter complimented me on the paint. He liked the colour, but more than that, he liked how easily and smoothly it went on. Peter is a paint connoisseur.

By the end of the morning, everything was dry. I stashed the handles inside my coffin, and we put the whole lot inside the shed. The following week, while I was away, some of the blokes screwed the handles on my coffin for me.

LINING

Lining my coffin with plastic was quick and easy. Mary, Peter and I did it together, with two new members looking on. Mary and Peter held the plastic in place as I stapled it down. It was easy work, made fun by the company. Afterwards I cut the plastic down so it did not stick above the rim of the coffin. Mary gently berated me for not being prepared with fabric liner. 'If you had brought it, we could have finished lining it today.'

Not long afterwards, I bought fabric. I chose a beautiful tapestry-style fabric. It is varying shades of blue, and looks a bit like a Mexican blanket. I took it to the woman in the store to have it measured and cut.

'Oh, this stuff is lovely. What are you planning on making with it?' It made for an interesting across-counter conversation. To her credit, the store clerk was unflappable.

A few weeks later, Liz and I stapled the fabric into my coffin, covering the plastic. Liz took care that the fabric stayed straight and even throughout the coffin, and I stapled it in. Finally, my coffin was finished. The product of weeks of work and the efforts of many people. It was beautiful. It is beautiful.

Doug came over to look at it. ‘So, I was thinking. We should make it into a bookshelf for you.’



FIGURE 10: MY FINISHED COFFIN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, January 2020

Each of the stories I tell in this thesis present two significant ‘analytical thinking opportunities’ (although they are not as clearly delineated or limited as the phrase implies). The first is when the events that make up the story happened. For this story, this was when I was building my coffin. It took months. I was in no rush because it meant more opportunity to listen to the stories of the club members. I had a lot of thinking room.

Building my coffin was critical to my understanding of the embodied experience of Coffin Club. Working in the shed is a multi-sensory experience; the noise of power saws, the smell of paint, the feel of the smooth wood and gritty sandpaper, even the taste of wood dust in the air. Perhaps because of the immediacy of my thoughts (I was thinking about events as they

were unfolding), I was focused more on my bodily experience. Whatever the reason, my sensory experience — particularly touch — was so pronounced, it drew embodiment to my attention. And after some research, the mind-body connection which is key to concepts of embodiment led me to consider what was happening to the mind, while the body was undergoing this sensory overload. Why did people (including me) relax when they were sanding? What was it about sanding that made people's shoulders relax, grip loosen, and conversation flow? What was the significance of the tactility between people at Coffin Club? Embodiment, with a focus on touch and movement, provided direction for my thoughts.

The second opportunity for analytical thinking happened after I wrote the story. I wrote this particular story as journal entries. Each Wednesday I came home from Coffin Club and wrote what I had done, seen and felt that day. By the time I finished making my coffin, I had written the story above. The problem was that I had written it as separate parts. It was not until I read the story in its entirety that I could see themes emerging which, up until that point, I had missed.

One theme was particularly prominent. My account of building my coffin is a story of transformation. Or rather, of many transformations. It is the transformation of sheets of plywood into something functional and beautiful. It is a story of my changing level of skill as a woodworker (I am not brilliant, but I like to think I have improved). It shows the transformation of my views of my coffin, from viewing it as a cumbersome by-product of my fieldwork, to seeing it as a cherished material symbol of the Coffin Club and my experiences there. The story documents my transformation from a researcher attending a group to observe and analyse, to a club member who participates in every facet of the group. Even the (many) times I changed my mind as I was designing my coffin show transformation; of the way I wanted my coffin to look, of how I wanted it to represent me.

This last transformation made me consider what was happening in that process. Why was I so focused on the way my coffin looked? Was there something more happening in the designing process (beyond me simply playing with colours)? What role did creativity play in all of this? The more I considered it, the more I considered my coffin as a representation of part of myself, and as such, a form of storytelling. So what story was I telling with my sand-coloured coffin? Although I prefer bold, bright colours, I chose a softer colour because it is peaceful, and the specific sand colour because it reminds me of all the beaches I love so much. I chose

the lining fabric because it reminded me of textiles I saw while travelling, because I have to have bright colours represented somewhere, and because it reminded me of a hammock. So, my coffin is a hammock on a beach.

Somebody recently asked me how attending Coffin Club had affected my views about my own mortality. I fumbled through an inadequate answer, then spent a few days thinking about the question. How *had* my views on death altered? I initially wanted to say ‘not much’. I have long known that one day I will die, and have accepted it. But then I realised that was not completely correct. I had intellectually accepted the idea, but not made my peace with it. Previously, I accepted the idea of mortality but put it into a ‘not to be thought about too much’ box in my head. Coffin Club has changed that. It has made thinking about my mortality easier. It has given me a sense of peace about it. It has changed death from being a black void of unknowability, to something which I feel reasonably relaxed about. Obviously it is still unknowable, but it is no longer a black void. More like death is a beach, and now I have my hammock ready.

Thus, my coffin is a story of death acceptance. And all the different versions of the story I drafted (the many times I redesigned it) are an important part of coming to that acceptance. Research into literature on storytelling introduced me to the concept of subjective composure (Summerfield, 1998; Summerfield, 2004). Every iteration of my coffin design was a re-telling of my story, showing the transformation of both my narrative, and of my attitude towards my coffin. I composed a tangible story, while achieving composure about my mortality. My sand-coloured coffin is the result of planning, creativity, reflection, teamwork, and serendipity, and it makes me happy.

The experience of building my coffin helped me understand that everyone who attends Coffin Club crafts a tangible story. I was able to see and interpret stories that I might otherwise have missed or misunderstood. Some stories (like mine) were about death acceptance, some were about grief. Some people told stories about their life, their interests, or any other narrative they chose. But the ‘doing’ of crafting a coffin allowed for those stories to materialise, and allowed the storyteller to craft and re-craft their narrative until it made sense to them.

Crafting my own coffin and listening to the members’ stories generated and helped develop my understanding of what I was seeing and hearing at Coffin Club. In the following section

of this thesis, I tell my experiences of those stories, and interweave them with the literature to explore different facets of the club. Chapter Four looks at expressions of grief at the club. Chapter Five is concerned with the storytelling component of coffin construction, and how by crafting a coffin, members are making a ‘good death’. Chapter Six argues that by providing different coffin options to those sold by the funeral industry, Coffin Club is crafting a do-it-yourself movement for change in death work. But first, I will tell a story which describes a typical day at Coffin Club.

PART TWO

Conversation



FIGURE 11: TALKING WHILE WORKING

Taken by 'Gloria', June 2019

Setting the scene

The following story is an account of a typical day at Coffin Club. Think of it as a prologue. The aim is to set the scene. I have described what it was like to build my coffin over weeks and months. Now I want show what it is like to be in the Coffin Club for a day. It provides the context for the stories of the club members which are in the coming chapters. It also provides the first introduction to most of the club members who you will meet in more detail later.

These are people with whom I have spent one morning a week, every week, for more than a year. They have become woven into the fabric of my life. This story includes small snapshots of my impressions of those people. It does not include everyone who belongs the Coffin Club. With more than 250 members, that would be impossible. Only about a dozen people are featured in this thesis. I would like to acknowledge the countless others who talked with me, taught me things, and made me feel welcome in infinite ways.

DEATH AND AVOCADOS

A day at Katikati Coffin Club

It takes twenty-seven minutes to drive from my home to the Katikati Coffin Club. The road is flanked by kiwifruit and avocado orchards, protected behind rows of tall trees. The journey is riddled with speed traps and blind corners. Police are a constant presence. I listen to podcasts to pass the time, and watch the scenery roll out before me. It is lush and green, often with frost lingering in shady patches. I am impatient to arrive.

The last four minutes of the drive are my favourite. I turn off the main road onto a rural one. I drive past the local squash club, over a single lane bridge and into 'the country'. More orchards, winding driveways, tall windbreaks, a seed wholesaler and a surfeit of agapanthus. The push of traffic gives way to something gentler, more benign. My impatience wanes, replaced by calm and anticipation. The sign for the naturist camp is my cue to start slowing down — no matter how many times I come here, I almost overshoot the Coffin Club entrance every time.

Part of the problem is that you cannot see the Coffin Club sign until you have almost passed it. White, with the words 'Coffin Club' painted in black, the 'I' in red, and in the shape of a coffin. It sits to the right of the driveway, beneath the sign for the Men's Shed³. The Men's Shed holds the main lease for the building and rent the use of the space to the Coffin Club once a week. I pull into the gravel car park outside the shed. I get out of the car, and the smell of woodsmoke and autumn settles over me like a blanket. Leaves scrunch underfoot and the crisp air jolts me out of the last of my driving-related funk.



FIGURE 12: COFFIN CLUB SIGN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

A small flat squats to the right of the shed, sharing a common wall. It is dwarfed by the shed, to the extent that I did not notice it for two months. I was made very aware of its existence one day when I pulled up and noticed the front door was open. A sign nailed to the fence read, in dangerously red letters; 'PRIVATE. Keep clear at ALL times. NO PARKING!' I considered my car placement and deemed it far enough from the door to be safe.

³ 'Menzshed New Zealand' is a charity which provides space for men to share skills and socialise, while working on group or individual woodworking projects. They provide tools and supplies, and rent large sheds all over the country so that these goals can be achieved. These sheds are known colloquially as Men's Sheds.

That is when I heard the shouting. It was coming from inside the house, but grew steadily louder. A man erupted from the flat. He was rangy and barefoot, sporting a buzz cut and a wild temper.

'They're all fuckin' arseholes!' He noticed me watching him, a rabbit caught in the headlights of his rage. He glared at me with loathing, and pointed, his fingers making a gun. 'That includes you.'

With that, he turned, charged back into the house, and slammed the door behind him. It took me a moment to recover from his vitriol. When I asked the Coffin Club members about him later, they assured me that this was his normal state. An unhappy man.

That was a one-off. Normally my arrival at the Coffin Club is a homecoming. The peace of the place envelops me in its hug. I am never the first there, and never the last. I walk down the side of the building, passing through the concreted area where we work on coffins outside. By the time I arrive several coffins have been set out on sawhorses, and Simon is working on his. He is designing his coffin to look like a packing crate, complete with plastic sleeve and transfer slip. He is quietly intense, a problem solver, and one of the only members who wears coveralls; the blue and orange kind. We exchange greetings before he turns back to his work, head bent in concentration.

The roller door to the shed is opened wide, letting in light and air. The shed is huge, with high ceilings and mezzanine floors at either end. A corrugated iron cathedral dedicated to woodwork. The mezzanine floor on the right holds completed coffins, stored until they are needed. Sections of the roof are made of clear corrugated plastic to let in more light. The back wall is covered with tools hanging on nails and large shelving units packed with paint brushes, screwdrivers, sandpaper and scraps of wood. Sheets of plywood are stacked on end, waiting to be turned into coffins. Two extended tape measures are nailed in a cross on an unobstructed section of wall, used to measure members' height, width and depth. Work benches are set out in rows perpendicular to the door, disfigured with the scars of years of use. Each has a dust collector stationed at either end: a white lung the size of a water cooler, designed to contain the wood dust. Still, enough escapes to turn everything sepia. Dust motes spiral upwards in the sunlight. The warm, buttery smell of wood is a salve.



FIGURE 13: THE SHED

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

Only the smell is warm though, the shed is invariably cold. I do not feel the cold easily, but even I put thought into what I wear. Covered-in shoes, jeans and a t-shirt which I do not mind getting dirty, with merino underneath to ward off the chill. Still, people comment that I must be freezing; everyone else is rugged up in woollen jerseys, beanies and scarves. They look at my bare arms and compare layers, tutting at the constitution — or stupidity — of youth.



FIGURE 14: DISCUSSING HOW BEST TO PROCEED

Taken by 'Gloria', June 2019

In the far corner is the space for measuring and cutting. Usually four or five blokes are bent over a piece of plywood, amiably arguing over dimensions. Grant is taking the lead. He is slim and forceful, and in past lives has been a lawyer, a pharmacist, a coroner and owned a plant nursery. He knows a lot about a lot of things. Next to him is Doug, the club president. Doug has white hair and a lazy gait; made lazier by the injury he is carrying. He recently came off his motorbike and had an altercation with a fencepost, which he lost. When I first met him, his leg was bandaged with duct tape. The physiotherapist in me died a little.

As I walk in, they look up. 'Morning, Bronnie. Back, are ya?'

I grin and reply that I am a glutton for punishment. Guffaws follow, before they turn back to the job at hand.

Tucked inside the entrance is a long white table. This table is important. It is where people gather for morning tea, where new members get inducted, where elbows rest during difficult conversations. On it is a box filled with name badges; I rummage through them until I find mine, and clip it to the pocket of my jeans. Next to the box is a small white container and a hardcover book. I sign my name in the book under the correct date, a nod to fire regulations. The container has the words 'Katikati Coffin Club Donations' scrawled in blue marker and a hole cut in the lid. I deposit my gold coin. It is used to buy tea bags and biscuits, a cause I am more than willing to support. Sometimes people — including me — bring fruit to share. Kiwifruit, avocados, oranges, mandarins, feijoas. These get left in bags on the table for people to help themselves.



FIGURE 15: THE TABLE

Taken by 'Gloria', May 2019

I go and stand near the men who are measuring out a coffin template. I watch as they discuss the best way to measure and cut. I do not interject; I have nothing to add. I am a novice at woodworking, and nobody likes a sciolist. I simply listen to the banter that flies back and forth, the ideas that are put forward, the teamwork and camaraderie.

Gary is working nearby at a separate bench. He is a short man with a weathered Chiefs cap pulled low over his eyes. It is only when he looks up that you can see his perpetual smile. He is an expert woodworker, and makes the trickier objects; urns, handles, wooden embellishments, coffins for stillborn babies. If anyone has any special requests, Gary is the man to ask.

I head outside to see if there is anything I can help with. As I do, more people arrive. Some carpool, others come alone. Some bring fruit, biscuits, articles of interest ripped from magazines. All call out cheery greetings as they pass, making a beeline for the name badges and collection tin. I know that if I were to head back into the shed, I will find them lingering around the table, swapping stories and catching up. But I continue outside. There is work to be done.

One of my favourite tasks is sanding. We do it outside in the concreted courtyard area. Working outside means I can hear the rustling of the nearby trees, smell the woodsmoke and feel the breeze playing across my face. A coffin is balanced on two sawhorses and we sand it down ready for painting. I like it for its tactility. It is much like physiotherapy — I use my hands to feel for imbalances. I find myself treating the coffin as if it were a patient. I close my eyes and run my fingertips over the lid, following the grain of the wood. Finding a rough patch is like finding a knotted muscle in a person's back. There is the double satisfaction of finding it, and of knowing that you will soon be rid of it.

The sanding itself is equally satisfying. The rhythmic sound and motion of the sandpaper rubbing smooth the imperfections are hypnotic and soothing. I am working on a coffin with Peter; we tend to sand in pairs. Peter is tall with a long, unruly white beard. He moves as if he knows the future, steady and unrushed. We work from opposite sides of the coffin, slowly moving around so that we go over each section at least twice. Without plan or discussion, we become synchronised. It is impossible to sand out of time.



FIGURE 16: SANDING

Taken by 'Gloria', June 2019

The meditative value of sanding lends itself to conversation. I find discussions over sanding take on a dream-like quality. We talk about sports, family, illness, death and the price of petrol with the same degree of equanimity. Topics flow from one to the next, a melody harmonising with the background rasp of sandpaper over wood.

By the time we are finished, my hands are covered with a fine dust. So is my t-shirt, my jeans and my face. My fingertips are hypersensitive from searching for imperfections and the sandpaper is rendered useless from being so clogged with wood dust. But the coffin is ready. Two pairs of hands have covered every inch of it multiple times. I think of the oil from our hands on the wood, an invisible imprint covering the entire coffin. It will soon be painted over, but perhaps the ghosts of our fingerprints remain.

After sanding is completed, we move on to painting. People choose the colour they want their coffin painted from paint swatches, just as they would if they were renovating a kitchen. The colours have fabulous names, like 'seance' and 'tiramisu'. A primer coat is applied first, the screws puttied over and a final sanding done. Then painting begins. This is done with small

rollers, often in pairs and always outside, so the smell does not become too overpowering. The same slow rotation around the coffin happens, so no area is missed. I always end up with paint on my hands and clothes. The t-shirt I usually wear is becoming an artefact, a work of art documenting all the coffins I have helped paint.

Painting coffin handles is fiddlier. It must be done with a brush and takes much longer. We stand around the outdoor picnic table, chatting as we hold the handles up in the sunlight, looking for missed patches. The picnic table bears testament to the coffin painting as well. Strips of colour decorate the peeling white of the table. Purple is a popular colour; I know this because the table tells me.



FIGURE 17: PAINTING HANDLES

Taken by 'Gloria', May 2019

Lining a coffin is a group exercise. A group of women gather around a coffin, chatting as they work together to finish the inside. Mary is small and inquisitive; two parts human, one part sparrow. She has long greying hair pulled back from her face into a chignon, and is filled with a light that sparks in her eyes. She makes a mean chocolate cake, which she calls 'whānau cake', and she is generous with portion sizes. Pat is a walking cuddle. She often wears purple, and is always the first person to ask me how I've been, aren't I cold, make sure to take some fruit home with you when you go. She is next to Marg, who has a grey pixie haircut and brightly coloured hearts sewn on the back of her puffer vest. Marg does not talk

much, but her eyes say plenty. Liz is vibrant and moves with purpose. She likes to do things once and do them properly, and is an exceptional artist. Her coffin is painted with exquisite birds and flowers — far too beautiful to burn.

First, we affix a layer of plastic. This is ugly and cumbersome, but is a legal requirement. Many hands hold it in place, smoothing out creases and pushing it into the corners of the coffin. It needs to lie flat against the wood. If it is too tight, it will sling like a hammock and hold the corpse up off the base of the coffin. This is unacceptable, as the plastic could tear and drop the corpse abruptly.

I am charged with stapling the plastic to the wood. The staple gun is heavy and prone to jamming, and my hands have been judged the strongest. I have to get in close to the inside of the coffin to get the angle right. This means ducking under arms, reaching around shoulders. Leaning into a many-armed hug. I look at the hands around me. They are wrinkled, liver-spotted, gnarled, bearing the marks of decades of hard work and the tell-tale signs of arthritis. They have painted and unpainted nails, many rings, no rings, bracelets. They all work together to make this unseen part of the coffin as perfect as they can.

After the plastic is in place, a fabric lining is inserted. This is chosen by the person for whom the coffin is intended, its purpose is to hide the ugly plastic and to frame the corpse. Often a pre-made coffin lining kit is used. This is made from white satin, slippery and synthetic to the touch. It is ruched at the top, falling in folds like a petticoat. The ladies hold it in place along the rim of the coffin, and I fix it down, taking care to hide the staples from view.

The final touch is a thin mattress covered in white satin, with a matching pillow. These are placed in the coffin and smoothed down. It is the final gesture in an act of care; the smoothing down of blankets after being tucked in, the smoothing back of hair after being brushed. Mary takes a few photographs of the coffin; she documents every single coffin the Coffin Club make. We all stand back for a moment, to look at the finished product and admire our handiwork. It is always beautiful.

At ten o'clock the call for morning tea echoes around the shed. People set down their tools, their paintbrushes and sandpaper, and go to the small kitchen. A queue forms, people chatting as they wait their turn to get a hot drink. While I wait, I chat with Gloria, the club

secretary. Gloria is a firecracker with purple glasses, fabulous hand-knitted clothes and a grin that shows all of her teeth and none of her secrets. She asks me questions about my thesis, about how I am finding university, about my experiences with death. I get the impression she can read my mind, or at least parts of it.

The kitchen is a shed kitchen; somewhat ramshackle with chipped countertops, a scuffed floor and small floral curtains covering the shelves. Mismatched mugs are unceremoniously upended on the bench, next to a jar of instant coffee, a bottle of milk and a Tupperware container of tea bags. You can have any kind of tea you like, as long as it is gumboot. A heavy brown teapot sits next to the hot-water urn. By the time I get there, the tea is strong enough to strip paint. I water it down from the urn.



FIGURE 18: THE SHED KITCHEN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020



FIGURE 19: TEA PARAPHERNALIA

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

We each collect a plastic lawn chair from a stack in the corner and sit around the table. Sometimes announcements are made by Jack, the club treasurer. He is a small, puckish man with twinkling eyes and a firm grip. He makes spectacular kites in his free time, and uses his finished coffin to store them. He stands at the head of the table as he announces upcoming events, illnesses of members, deaths, and funerals. Sometimes questions are asked about local funeral directors, or the legalities of scattering ashes, or who to go to get a pacemaker removed from a corpse. Sometimes conversations are left to roam wild, splintering into small groups and meandering where they will. Always, there are jokes, camaraderie and care.

And biscuits. There are always biscuits. A large blue tin filled with malt biscuits, vanilla creams, gingernuts, chocolate chip cookies. Some days a member will bring a packet of Squiggles or Tim Tams, which are well received. The tin gets passed around, more than once.



FIGURE 20: THE BLUE BISCUIT TIN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

When I started coming, there were about ten people in regular attendance. Over time, numbers have more than doubled. The table — the one so vital to the club — is now too small. People squash up to make space. Where one packet of Squiggles used to suffice, now two are needed. The burgeoning numbers do not curtail conversation though, voices are simply pitched a little louder so everyone can hear.



FIGURE 21: LINGERING OVER A CUPPA

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

After morning tea, we get back to our tasks. When one finishes, another starts. The coffins are built communally and at an easy pace. There is no rush. Time is made for conversations, advice and communion, for sallies and irreverent jokes. But if there is a need, a coffin can be completed in a day. Above all, there is care.

Around noon we pack up. Coffins are carried back inside and stacked in the corner. I help carry them in; my strength and height are an advantage. Carpeted wood is placed between each so they do not get damaged. Sawhorses and tools are put back in their proper places, paint brushes washed and put away. People collect their jackets and keys, fruit from the table and scraps of untreated wood to use as kindling. The roller door is closed and locked. It has a smaller door in it, one small enough that I have to stoop to pass through. A final holler to check that nobody remains inside, and this door, too, is locked. The week's gathering is over.



FIGURE 22: PACKING UP

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

We head back to our cars, exchanging farewells. Before I get in my car, I make one last stop. On the far side of the car park, past the unhappy neighbour's flat, is a casimiroa tree. I check the ground below it for fruit. They often look bruised beyond hope and are sometimes bird-pecked, but they are delicious. I collect two or three, and cushion them in my cardigan on the passenger's seat of the car, so they do not get more battered on the drive home. I connect my phone to my speaker, turn on a podcast and start the journey. It takes me twenty-seven minutes. I do not mind — it is a lovely drive and I am not in any hurry.

For this story, the first analytical thought opportunity (while the events were happening) is not easily delineated. This story is an assemblage of lots of days. I cannot attribute any thoughts and ideas in this story to one particular day or action. But all the days, thoughts and ideas were profoundly important to my understanding of what was happening around me. I wrote this story after I had been attending Coffin Club for about four months. I had spent many weeks there, and had become familiar with the people. Going so regularly and for so long taught me what to expect from Coffin Club, and how to behave while I was there. It helped me understand the general emotional tone of the club. It helped me to work out what was usual there, and what was not. It allowed me to write this story.

When I wrote the stories for this thesis, I was fully engaged with them, but not in an analytical way. First, I reread the relevant field notes. Then I sat with music playing and a pot of tea at hand, focusing what I wanted to portray and how I wanted to portray it. I thought about words and emotions, and how to marry the two. I thought about the picture I was trying to paint. I thought like a storyteller. Analysis came later.

So it was not until I reread this story much later that it struck me. I had inadvertently written a love letter to the Coffin Club. This story is about people, compassion, and camaraderie. The peace I felt writing the story was because of the subject matter. Coffin Club is a soothing place. This led me to wonder why? What was it about Coffin Club that made it such a peaceful space, despite the clangour of power tools and the sometimes terribly painful conversations I had there? The answer I came to is the people, and their calm acknowledgement and acceptance of death, grief, loss, and of one another. The members of Coffin Club work together, in every sense of the word. They do woodwork, death work, and the work of grief together. They do hard work, but in a gentle way. They work together to craft things which are personalised and meaningful to them; coffins, and the club's social space.

This led me to consider what role the acceptance of mortality played in Coffin Club. It is not something discussed often at Coffin Club. People at the club talk more of funerary rites than of death itself. The acceptance of mortality is almost taken for granted. It is much like the smell of wood dust; it is steeped into the atmosphere of the club, it is calming, and after the first time attending, most of the time people do not notice it. I explore the idea of death acceptance at Coffin Club in more detail in Chapter Five. First, I will consider Coffin Club as a space to express and deal with grief.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Crafting as a strategy for coping with grief

Discussion of the thoughts and emotions surrounding death and dying is integral to Coffin Club. Grief is one such emotion. It is woven through the club; at times discussed, at times ignored, but always inextricably intertwined. There are threads of grief in many of the stories in this thesis, not just in this chapter.

Coffin Club is a contemporary approach towards dealing with grief. It combines sociality with the practicality and creativity of building a coffin. It allows space for the unpredictability of reactions to bereavement, and provides an opportunity for active death work. In this chapter, I consider how Coffin Club helps people cope with grief. I explore some of the emotions linked with grief, particularly rage. I suggest that Coffin Club draws together creativity, sociality and activity to create a space ripe for helping people cope with grief. But before I do, let me introduce Mary, Gloria and Peter.

TEAL AND GOLD

Mary

Mary is a small Māori woman with shoulder length hair, a quiet regal way about her, and eyes that seem to see the future and the past simultaneously. Her face is lined with stories. She grips my forearms in greeting. A warm, tangible, mutual acknowledgement of care. She has wonderful hands; strong, warm, creased with lines and laden with rings. Around her neck she wears a chunky gold chain with a sizeable gold tiger connecting the two ends. It is at once fierce and beautiful, much like its owner.

Mary is Christian. Her beliefs inform her coffin-related decision-making; she wants to look her best to come before her Maker. She adheres to Māori values when it comes to death

rituals. She feels it is incredibly important to have the body at home before the funeral. She also feels strongly that the remains ought to stay together, with no dividing of the ashes.

In some ways, Mary feels like the heart of the Coffin Club. She has been attending for about four years. She gathers people in, often arriving with new members. In particular, she liaises with the local Māori community, encouraging people to attend. If people are nervous, she helps ease them through the decision-making process, discussing colour choices, coffin design and funeral plans. Mary works on the painting and lining aspects of coffin building. She takes great pride in the way a coffin is finished. Every detail should be done to the highest standard, even the parts you cannot see. She attends a lot of funerals, and when she does, she looks at the coffin to assess the craftsmanship. No detail escapes Mary.

Mary's own coffin is a beautiful pale teal, with a large gold cross on the top, and lined with white and yellow satin. She finished it long ago, and keeps it stored in the loft of the shed. She is currently planning to make a second coffin as a spare for friends and family. Mary intends to paint the back-up coffin a warm butter yellow, and have it lined with orange.



FIGURE 23: MARY'S COFFIN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

Mary is one of the most long-attending, regular members of Coffin Club. When I asked what keeps her coming back, Mary replied simply: 'I like helping people.' I asked Mary how she came to find out about the Coffin Club. She told me of how when her sister was dying, she asked Mary if she would organise her a coffin. She wanted it to be bright pink. She had

already researched and knew that Coffin Club was the only option to get what she wanted at a reasonable price. She was too unwell to make it herself. That task was left to Mary.

At first, Mary was not sure about attending Coffin Club. In fact, she did not want to come at all. She was nervous and uncomfortable, but her sister had asked this of her, so she did. After a few visits, she realised what the club was about, and she began to appreciate it. The community, the care, the lengths people go to help one another.

Before long, Mary and the Coffin Club had finished her sister's coffin. And not too long after that, her sister died. Before she did, she was able to see her hot pink coffin. She was happy with it, and she loved the colour. Mary was glad to have been able to fulfil her wish.

After that, that Mary did not come to Coffin Club. I assume she felt no real need for it. And then, she did.

About four years ago, Mary's son committed suicide. He was living in Australia at the time. Mary described him as being a caring, joyful person. Mary spoke of the hate and anger she felt after his death. An all-consuming rage that was tearing her up from the inside, and affecting her relationships with her other family members, in particular her other children.

Mary began attending Coffin Club to try to combat the rage. Through the camaraderie of the group, she has come to let go of it. She said she will never be the same again, but at least her relationships with her remaining children have been saved. She credits the Coffin Club for the change. Being around people who speak about death directly when necessary, who withhold judgement, and who understand that sometimes silence is the best option.

She also credits Coffin Club for helping her overcome her shyness. It must have, for I cannot see any trace of it. She has a fantastic sense of humour, and is often irreverent about death.

'When people ask me why I'm late, I just tell them I don't like to be dead on time.'

As Mary spoke of her rage, I was struck by how visceral her description of it was. Although Mary did not explicitly describe her bodily experience, she spoke her rage as if it were a wild thing tearing at her from the inside, a separate entity living within her that needed taming. The thing that struck me the most forcefully was that Mary told her story of rage, pain and grief so calmly. For Mary, talking about death and loss is the most normal thing in the world. I got the impression, though, that it had not always been so. That is the Coffin Club effect. It normalises conversations about death and grief, turning them from something terrifying and painful, to something more manageable. It tames the wild thing, somewhat.

As I considered the composure with which Mary told her story, I considered that it may have taken her some time to achieve it. It was clearly a story she had told many times before. Thus, the concept of subjective composure became important in my understanding of how Coffin Club was helping people cope with grief. Mary had told and re-told her story enough times to achieve a level of equilibrium about it, and what I was hearing was the result. Though, as Mary herself said, ‘it never goes away completely’.

BUTTERFLIES

Gloria

Gloria is a gamine. She has close-cut silvery-grey hair which flicks up at the front, a bit like Tintin's. She usually wears a fabulous hat; a chunky persimmon-coloured knitted beanie, or a mustard yellow felted wool cap which looks like the top of an acorn. Gloria has jazzy purple glasses, wonderfully multi-coloured homemade clothes, and sparkly earrings which are fashioned to look like tiny snakes are biting her earlobes. I have wardrobe-envy every time I see her.

When we talk, Gloria looks at me like she understands me better than I do myself. I am fairly certain she does, too. She always asks about my studies, and we discuss my thesis in depth. She is incredibly insightful and open, and always happy to talk and share ideas.

Gloria's coffin is simple. It is a rectangular plywood box, unpainted. The ends and sides are covered in a kaleidoscope of butterflies. Gloria spent evenings in front of the television, cutting glossy photographs of butterflies out of book she bought years ago at a library off-casts sale. She fell in love with the pictures, paid two dollars for it and kept it, thinking it would come in handy one day. And now it has.

Over a few weeks, Gloria and I (and sometimes Marg and Pat) glued butterflies to Gloria's coffin. They are purposely stuck on at all different angles, so the whole thing looks chaotic and haphazard. The lid has been left bare, to be covered with messages and drawings when the time comes. The handles are made from rope and sections of chair legs. The finished product is like Gloria; colourful, fun, and unique.



FIGURE 24: WORKING ON GLORIA'S COFFIN

Taken by 'Gloria', June 2019

As we glued butterflies to her coffin, I asked how Gloria came to be at the Coffin Club. Her mum found it first, after being diagnosed with a terminal illness. She built her own coffin before she died. Gloria described a woman who was fierce, frank, and driven by a desire to make her passing as low-key and cost-efficient as possible. She had wanted Gloria to prepare, wash, and dress her body before it was cremated. 'I couldn't. I just couldn't. There are some things you just can't do.' And so, when her mother died, Gloria asked a funeral director to prepare her body, a decision she does not regret.

About three weeks after her mother died, Gloria's son committed suicide. He was twenty-nine years old. She told me of how he had moved to the United States to pursue a career as a professional gambler. He was good at it, and managed to make a decent living. He stayed there for eighteen months, made friends and explored the country.

And then he came back to Aotearoa. Gloria talked of how happy she was to have him home, and how she had no idea how unhappy he was. He realised that he had a gambling addiction. He thought, Gloria realised in hindsight, that it made him weak. He felt hopeless. 'He hung himself in Auckland.'

Gloria talked about her son on a number of occasions. She spoke about how she had gone to support groups for people whose children had committed suicide. She told of how she entered a room where couples sat crying, talking about their sons and daughters who had died years before. Gloria looked at around and thought 'is this what years of support looks like?' She felt that it was not going to work for her, so never went back.

I asked how she processed things. Gloria replied that Coffin Club had helped a lot; a space where people were pragmatic and practical but still caring. She commented that it also helped that there were a few people in the club who had lost children to suicide, so there was a sense of kinship. 'We don't always talk about it, but it's nice to know that they're there.'

She also processes her thoughts by writing a lot, and talking to friends and family. She explained how wisdom comes from everywhere. She recently had a conversation with a friend who is a psychotherapist, about what made people commit suicide. She came to a realisation: 'Some people are just born to it.' Conversations like this, and her own insight, made Gloria realise that there was nothing she could have said or done to prevent her son's suicide. It was his choice. 'And who's to say it wasn't the right choice for him? Maybe it was. Not for me though.'

Gloria spoke of how, after her son's death, she had gotten to know some of the friends he had made in America. She went to the States a few months after his death, and visited some of them. And not long after, one friend came out to Aotearoa, and together, they hired a campervan and drove around the South Island. As she spoke, I could see Gloria's genuine delight at those she called her 'new children'. She spoke of them fondly, and talked of how

welcoming and friendly they were. She grinned ruefully. 'That's not to say that I wouldn't swap them all for my son back.'

One day, Gloria came to Coffin Club around morning tea time. She stood slightly separate from the group. She seemed unhappy. I approached her and asked her how she was. She replied that she was okay, but seemed as if she did not want to talk. After a short while, she left. Soon after, Mary approached me. She told me of how Gloria was having a hard time at the moment. It would have been her son's birthday that week, the first since he committed suicide. Mary talked about how the anger and pain would ebb and flow, and of how there would be good days and bad days. She said it would get a little easier in time. 'I know how she feels.' Mary understood, through her own experience, what Gloria was going through, and instinctively knew what Gloria needed in that moment. She needed space. And later, when what Gloria needed was hugs, Mary knew that too.

About three months after I began attending Coffin Club, Gloria told me that she was going to stop attending the club as frequently. It had been the one-year anniversary of her son's death recently, and she had marked it by a trip to Australia with her sister. The journey had made her realise it was time to make some changes.

'This group has given me a lot. Now I need to pull away a bit.' It felt like a next-step decision, one in a direction that was right for Gloria. Her daughter is about to have her first child, and Gloria wants to be around for that. She is working on a photo album for the impending grandbaby. A visual storytelling of all the things that led up to the birth of this new life; her daughter and son-in-law meeting, dating, living together, marrying and then becoming pregnant. Major life events and important people, including her son. 'I have learnt the importance of taking photos, to tell stories and document lives.'

Like Mary, Gloria's description of her rage and grief was visceral. Perhaps more so, as her son's suicide was more recent. I listened as she tried to make sense of this senseless thing, and watched grief hit her so hard it might as well have been a physical blow. It made embodiment both pertinent, and not something I ever asked Gloria about. I did not need to, or want to. It was too raw.

Talking with Gloria made me consider the role creativity played in Coffin Club. Gloria is an extremely creative person, and values making, doing and self-expression. She articulated the benefits of creativity as an outlet for emotion, a way of thinking through and coping with grief, and as a way to keep one's hands busy. She also highlighted the importance of storytelling to narrate the lives of her family, herself, and her grief.

SUNS AND MOONS

Peter

There is something about Peter which reminds me of Father Time. It has a little to do with his long white beard, and a lot to do with his demeanour. He has a gentle way about him. He moves steadily, as if he has planned out each movement before he makes it. He speaks quietly and without rush. I find him both calm, and calming. But not boring. His calm demeanour belies a wry sense of humour.

Peter's weekly uniform consists of a faded, paint-splattered blue overcoat with the words 'Air New Zealand' printed on the back, and the kind of brimmed hat fishermen wear. He is tall, and originally hails from Worcestershire. He still retains a lilting accent. He used to work as an electrician for airlines, and lived in Dubai for about five years. He has great stories.

Peter does the outside work of sanding and painting. He is the only person who operates the industrial spray painter, so he paints a lot of the coffins. This is not because he has prior experience as a spray-painter. He has simply been assigned the job. He seems bemused by the role allocation, but not upset by it. I get the impression he prefers working outside. I sometimes help sand the coffins, so we chat. While we work, we cover a slew of topics; death, sport, work, our weekend adventures, the overall state of the world. Most importantly, we share an appreciation of Guinness, something which always brings people together.

During one of our many chats, Peter told me about how his experience of death and funerals has changed drastically since living in Aotearoa, and even more since joining the Coffin Club. He spoke of how, when he was a boy, women were not allowed to attend funerals. Peter remembered asking his grandfather why. He said his grandfather replied ‘that it was bad enough having men at the graveyard blubbing, let alone a bunch of women.’ Peter also described how when a funeral procession passed through his village, everyone closed their curtains. There was a culture of silence and denial surrounding death.

When Peter came to Aotearoa, he was struck by the different approach towards death, particularly among Māori. And then he joined the Coffin Club, and learned even more about different cultural practices. This had a significant impact on Peter, changing his entire approach towards death.

The same week I started attending Coffin Club, Peter’s wife died. She died on a Sunday. Peter took her body home, and kept it there until she was cremated on Tuesday. The next day, Peter came to Coffin Club briefly, to share his grief, to thank people for their support, and to be around people who cared. I kept my distance. I was new to the group, and felt it would be wildly inappropriate to insert myself into the conversation.

After a while, Peter approached me. ‘I’m not ready to talk to you yet, but I will be at some stage.’

A few weeks later, Peter was ready to talk. I cannot remember how the conversation started, but I do remember that we were sanding a coffin together at the time, and that it came about organically. Sanding has that effect on conversations. Peter told me the stories about his formative experiences with death, of the distance between the living and the dead. He shared how discussions with people in the Coffin Club had dramatically altered his view of death and dying, in particular, his conversations with Mary.

Mary is Māori, and follows Māori traditions in death rituals. Peter said that if it was not for Mary and her influence, he would never have brought his wife home before the cremation. It simply would not have occurred to him. It was also Mary’s influence that made Peter reconsider what he was going to do with his wife’s ashes.

Before her death, Peter's wife had stated that she wanted her ashes to be divided in half. One half was to be scattered at a memorial service here in Aotearoa, while the other half was to be delivered to England and scattered there. After conversations with Mary, however, Peter was mindful that in Māori tradition, remains ought not to be divided. Although not Māori himself, Peter felt an affinity to this tradition. He spent some time deliberating. While he did, he kept his wife's ashes at home. 'That way I can still talk to her.'

Ultimately, Peter decided that because his wife had always planned on half her ashes being scattered in Britain, he would honour her wishes. Half of her ashes were sent to England and scattered at a memorial ceremony on the same day that the other half were scattered at a memorial service here in Aotearoa.

A family member requested to be given some of the ashes so she could get them made into jewellery. Peter struggled with this. On one hand, he had sent half the ashes to England, and understood that they were therefore out of his control. On the other, it was exactly that lack of control which Peter struggled with. He did not like the idea of his wife's ashes being divided further, and of not knowing what was happening to them. And he found the idea of making them into jewellery disturbing. In the end, it did not end up happening.

Peter wrote his wife's eulogy. He read it at her local memorial service. A copy was sent to England, and their best man read it during the British memorial service. His wife had a colourful life, and was married once before she married Peter. She travelled a lot and had friends all over the globe. There were so many people who were a part of her life, it made it impossible to include everyone in the eulogy. 'There's so much to cover, and so many people involved, some I don't know well. I'm bound to offend someone.'

One day, over the table at the morning tea, I asked Peter how his weekend had been. 'Not so good. I have been struggling with feeling blue the last few weeks. Melancholia, I think they call it.' Before I could respond, Robert called out from across the table. 'Melancholia? Doesn't he live in Matamata?' A chuckle rolled around the table. 'I dunno, but I bumped into him in Ngatea the other week', I replied. 'Well, you would, there.'

I asked Peter if he had made a coffin for himself. He has. It is navy blue, and is lined with material that has suns and moons on it. A fitting motif for Father Time. It is stored in the loft section of the work shed. 'There used to be two up there. Now there's one.'



FIGURE 25: PETER'S COFFIN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

Because Peter was processing the death of his wife while I was conducting my fieldwork, I was privy to both the practical and emotional work of death. For Peter, a coffin meant sliding a casket into the back of his car, and taking it home for his wife to rest in. It meant permanently separating the pair of coffins that were being stored at the shed. The practicalities encompassed the paperwork of death, the writing of the eulogy, the coordination of two memorials on two different continents, and the negotiations necessary for all of those things to happen.

Talking to Peter made me consider the differences between the practical and emotional work of death. The practical work of death is finite. Once Peter had prepared the coffin, informed friends and family, written the eulogy, planned the memorials and scattered the ashes, the practical work was finished. The emotional work of death is much less bounded. Peter's grief was raw and dynamic. It still is. There are good days and bad days. Coffin Club gives Peter a space to voice his feelings (if he wants to). It provides him with a group of people who care and share. It gives him something to do on a Wednesday, and a reason to get out of the house at least once a week. It gives him something to do with his hands.

I was told each of these stories as we were working on a coffin, typically painting or sanding. The action of crafting eased the way for these conversations, allowing the body to relax and thoughts to mull. I chose to tell these particular stories because they show grief at different stages. Mary's loss was the longest ago, Peter's the most recent. These stories show grief and some of the ways it is expressed at Coffin Club. They show how Coffin Club acts as a strategy for coping with grief, and as an opportunity to craft a narrative of grief. And they show how that storytelling (and the grief work that accompanies it) is dynamic and without end.

Discussion

When I began attending Coffin Club, I thought that there would be dedicated 'talking about death and grief' time. I assumed that at some point during the gathering, everyone would sit in a circle and talk about how they were feeling about their situation or loss, and that ideas would be shared and sympathy expressed. I could not have been more wrong. Yes, thoughts and ideas are shared, and yes, sympathy is expressed, but it is done organically. It comes up naturally and progresses gradually. If someone needs to talk, they do. If they do not want to talk, they keep quiet. There is no pressure, and most often these conversations occur while performing a task, such as sanding, lining or painting a coffin. The strength of the group comes from this; the freedom to let conversation flow where it needs to, and the acceptance of expressions of grief. It allows room for empathy.

Grief responses vary from person to person, and can be accompanied by other emotions; guilt, sorrow, blame, relief, anger, rage (Aiken, 2001; Davies, 2002; Davies, 2005; Small, 2001; Strange, 2002). Rage in grief is a common theme in Mary and Gloria's stories. They

both spoke of the blinding rage they felt after their sons committed suicide. Rage at the selfishness and finality of the act. Rage at their sons for making a decision with no thought of how it would affect those who loved them. They both spoke of how their rage was at times all-consuming, and had a negative impact on their lives. When both Mary and Gloria joined Coffin Club, they found a place to talk about their emotions to people who were empathetic and non-judgemental.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, I focused on rage in grief, not because it is the most common emotion expressed at Coffin Club, or because it is more important than other emotions, but because it is often denied or ignored in Western cultures (Rosaldo, 1993). This was not the case at Coffin Club. Mary and Gloria openly talked about their rage. They acknowledged it, discussed it and explored it. They talked to one another about their similar experiences. They also talked to people who did not have the same understanding (for example, me). It begs the question; why? What it is about Coffin Club that made Mary, Gloria and many others feel comfortable expressing such a denied emotion?

Part of it is the innate peacefulness that pervades the club space (as discussed at the end of the previous section). The approach towards death work is gentle and non-judgemental. And the club members work together to craft that social space. Sociality also plays an important role in facilitating conversations about grief. At Coffin Club, members come from all walks of life. People have different religious convictions, different views on the afterlife (or lack thereof) and come from different cultural backgrounds with different death beliefs and rituals. Through the crafting of coffins, people share their different ideas. The repetitive movement and creative atmosphere foster the expansiveness of mind needed to discuss sometimes challenging topics.

Juxtaposing the benefits of unfamiliarity is the support that comes from sharing similar experiences. Mary and Gloria both expressed on separate occasions that there is a comfort in knowing that people understand. The relationship between Mary and Gloria is particularly poignant, due to their similar experiences with losing a son to suicide. Mary's understanding of what Gloria was going through, born of lived experience, was different to mine. Her experience gave her an intimate understanding of Gloria's grief, which made her better equipped to support Gloria. It also let Gloria see an example of someone who had successfully navigated through a similar grief.

Interaction with a group of people can trigger memories and emotions (Rosenblatt, 1988, pp. 72-73). I saw this regularly. Well-meant enquiries into how Peter, Gloria or other members were coping with their respective losses brought their grief to the forefront. In Peter's story, the well-meant enquiry was from me. This reminder can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it allows an opportunity for an expression of grief or other emotions. It also provides the person the opportunity to explore coping strategies for the emotion. In Peter's story, the emotion under discussion was depression. The ensuing gentle jokes (hopefully) showed Peter that we all had some understanding of how he felt, and were empathetic. On the other hand, it can bring pain. Perhaps it has a similar effect to exposure therapy, allowing the person multiple opportunities to explore and come to terms with a difficult emotion in a safe environment. Painful in the short-term and invaluable in the long-term. It is also another way in which Coffin Club members work together. The journey through grief is shared, and therefore so is the pain.

In Coffin Club, sociality is enacted through making a coffin. When considering coffin construction, there are two ways to think about it; as an act of practicality and as an act of creativity. It is this practicality and creativity which sets Coffin Clubs apart from other grief support groups. Both are important, and both underscore the embodiment of preparation for death. Here, I will focus on the creativity of coffin construction, and how it can facilitate conversations about grief.

Creativity can help promote discussion of grief and rage (Gillis, 2012; Oschner, 2016). Literature acknowledges that being creative with other people can allow room for reflection, sharing of ideas, and transformation of the relationships between the people involved (Havelka, 2017, p. 219). This is apparent in both Peter's and Gloria's stories. It was while we were performing creative tasks, such as sanding a coffin with Peter, or gluing butterflies with Gloria that we had the most intimate conversations. It was through those conversations that I came to know them and their stories better.

I suggest that the creative space provided by the Coffin Club allows for and magnifies the social and emotional space necessary to share ideas. If a person is thinking creatively about the decoration of a coffin (or the creation of a photo album), they are in a better position to think creatively about other things, such as grief, loss and funerary rites. This creative space,

combined with the introspection needed to create an individualised coffin, and the sometimes different and confronting perspectives of less familiar people, provides an environment ripe for processing through grief, however painful. As such, the Coffin Club members are not only crafting their coffins, but also their narratives, their meaning in grief, and the social space around them.

In this chapter, I have considered sociality and creativity as the elements of Coffin Club which promote discussion of grief. There is another element which unites and magnifies these concepts in Coffin Club: embodiment. Practice is critical to the club. The creative and social elements of Coffin Club are active. They are enacted through making, doing, crafting. The stories above illustrate how activity is integral to aspects of Coffin Club. Scholarship on grief acknowledges the importance of groups in processing through grief. Literature on creativity and crafting underscores the reflective nature of both, and how they can help people deal with grief. Theories of embodiment enable the benefits of those attributes to be enacted. It allows for the tactility between club members, and between the members and the tools and materials they are working with.

Thoughts of embodiment led me to Ingold's work on walking (Ingold, 2018, p. 23). His ideas offered some insight in to how the repetitive movements of coffin construction can relax the body and provide thinking space. It allows the crafter to look without seeing, and *become* their movements. Their torso sways and their arms draw sandpaper or a paintbrush over a coffin. The repetition of the movement becomes second nature. This has a meditative effect on the mind, letting thoughts roam unfettered. This freedom of thought, combined with the magnification of creative thinking that crafting provides, creates a space perfect for sharing ideas and working through grief. Thus, Coffin Club sits at the place where creativity, sociality, and activity meet.

Conclusion

Many of the stories I heard at Coffin Club were threaded with grief. I was not able to include them all in this chapter. Some of them are in different chapters, and some of them remain in the work shed, in my fieldnotes, and in my memory. I chose to pass on these three stories because they show people at different stages of dealing with different forms of grief, coming together support one another. That is the essence of Coffin Club. It is a space crafted by the

people that form it, so that members can support one another through grief (and other emotions). The Coffin Club is a meeting place. It brings people and ideas together. It combines socialisation, creativity, reflection and action to create an environment prime for sharing the work of grief. In the following chapter, I explore and expand on storytelling through coffin-making, and link it to the concept of the ‘good death’.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Crafting, storytelling, and the ‘good death’

Death is largely uncontrollable. We have very little power over when or how we will die, and none of us have any definitive evidence as to what happens to us once we have expired. Since time began, humans have been trying to demystify death. Ghost stories, theories on the afterlife, life-lengthening elixirs, cryogenic freezing, memorials, and cannibalism are all examples of the myriad ways in which people try (or have tried) to tame or thwart death (Bauman, 1992; Becker, 1973; Doughty, 2014). Coffin Club is a practical way people try to wrest what little control they can back from death. Although people cannot (typically) predict their deaths or know what will happen to them once they die, they can have some control over their funerary rites.

In this chapter, I consider how building one’s own coffin is a way of taking control of both personal narratives and funeral rites. I suggest that by involving friends and family in death work, club members are acknowledging that death does not affect only one person, but a wider social network. I argue that in order to be able to attend Coffin Club, people have to have accepted their mortality (to at least some degree). Finally, I link these ideas to that of the ‘good death’. I argue that Coffin Club allows members to craft their own version of a good death by crafting their personalised coffin, and in turn, crafting a good funeral.

PACKING CRATE

Simon

In a past life, Simon used to work as a microbiologist. I have no trouble imagining him in that environment. There is something about the way he focuses when he works which lends itself to a laboratory. He moves with purpose, pays attention to detail and does things by the book. He values order and neatness, and is good at solving technical problems. He designed

and built a frame for painting coffin handles which speeds up the process and minimises getting paint on your hands. Like I said, he values neatness.

Simon wears orange and blue coveralls over his clothes, which makes him seem shorter than he is. He is one of the few club members who has a typed name badge. He has short white hair, metal-framed glasses and often looks like he is thinking about two important pieces of information at the same time. Which he probably is. When I first met Simon, I thought he was quiet and a little aloof. I was mistaken. He is easy to talk to, and he has a quirky sense of humour and a disarming giggle. He puts a lot of effort into teaching me how to use power tools properly, and is always very concerned for my safety. I appreciate his attention to detail on both fronts.

Simon's coffin is a rectangular box, as opposed to the more traditional vertically-flattened-hexagon coffin shape. Simon decorated it to look like a packing crate⁴. He reinforced the edges and the sides of the coffin with sturdier wood, to give the overall effect of panels. He then applied wood veneer strips, to emulate the look of pallet wood. It was fiddly, time-consuming work, as each small piece of wood veneer needed to be cut at an angle to fit neatly against one another; a mitered corner. Simon possesses patience that I do not.

The pièce de résistance of the packing crate coffin is the packing slip. Simon has fashioned a plastic sleeve, which holds a sheet of paper with the words:

For Delivery

Return to sender

Life was good!

Reincarnation option requested.

⁴ Unfortunately, I do not have a photo of Simon's coffin. I took some, then my camera was stolen. I was able to retake photos of all the other coffins, but Simon had since left the club (due to other commitments), and taken his coffin with him.

To watch Simon craft his coffin was to watch meticulous creativity in action. He had a vision for his coffin, and problem-solved his way to actualizing it. Watching this process made me consider materiality, and how a personalised coffin means something different to each person. Simon's coffin was about practicality and creativity. It was a chance to save some money, be prepared, and challenge himself with a complicated woodworking project. The act of crafting his coffin was just as much an expression of Simon's identity as the coffin itself. It was less about telling a story of Simon's past, and more a narrative about the present. It is storytelling through the doing, rather than just through the finished product.

LIME GREEN

Marg

If Marg were an animal, she would be an owl. She is of average height, but is made smaller by a significant stoop. She has pale blue eyes and a very direct gaze. Her short grey hair is sometimes streaked with faded pink. Marg feels the cold easily, so is always bundled up in a lot of layers, adding to the owl impression. She has a way of looking at me as if she is taking my measure, and some days it feels as if she finds me wanting. Marg is always friendly and welcoming, so I think this is my insecurities talking. Her increased thoracic kyphosis (the exaggerated curve of her upper back) means her coffin is much deeper than it would otherwise need to be. The physiotherapist in me wants to address her kyphotic posture and forward head position; it looks uncomfortable. But I keep that to myself. It is not my place in this setting.

Marg does not instigate conversation often. She usually stands to the side, watching, and listening and contributing to the conversation when she feels like it. She does not offer up personal information unless she is directly asked. So I did.

When I first asked Marg how she was going to decorate her coffin, she was not sure. Perhaps something with butterflies and flowers. Perhaps unpainted. She appeared uninterested by the decorating process, but I felt that this had more to do with indecision than any real apathy.

Every time I asked, she vacillated between different floral motifs. I could relate to this; my own coffin decoration decision-making process had been long and circuitous.

So, I was surprised one day when Marg announced, with immovable certainty, that she would be painting her coffin lime green. And sure enough, the next week she brought in a can of violently green paint, and we set to work painting her coffin handles. When I asked about any other decorations, Marg said she would leave it otherwise plain, for people to write and draw on at her funeral. This choice is becoming more common, and in my opinion is a lovely idea.



FIGURE 26: MARG'S COFFIN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

It took me another week to work up the courage to ask about the sudden change of heart. ‘So, is lime green your favourite colour?’

‘No.’ And without preamble, Marg told me about her granddaughter. She was eleven when she was diagnosed with leukaemia. From then on, Marg’s granddaughter and her mother — Marg’s daughter — spent the majority of their time at Starship Hospital⁵, her mother living in the Ronald MacDonald House⁶. Her father and two brothers stayed at home.

⁵ A children’s hospital in Auckland.

⁶ A charity which provides housing for families near hospitals, so that families of sick children have somewhere to stay while their child is admitted. There is one in Auckland, near the aforementioned hospital.

Marg's daughter and granddaughter passed the time by making arts and crafts. Marg told me of how talented they both were, of the beautiful things they made. She spoke of how upbeat her granddaughter was, even during the hardest of times.

Marg's granddaughter died when she was thirteen. 'They say they're going to heal them. It's a load of crap.'

They held the funeral. The coffin was a brilliant lime green, and all of Marg's granddaughter's family and school friends covered it with their messages, drawings and hand prints. It became very clear why Marg had chosen to paint her own coffin green.

'She would have been twenty-one this year.'

If the coffin is a form of storytelling, then Marg's decision-making process to design her coffin is an act towards achieving subjective composure. Marg, while planning her coffin, was telling and re-telling her story, until she landed on the iteration that made the most sense to her. Similar to the stories in the previous chapter, Marg's storytelling is a means of dealing with grief. Creativity, materiality, and storytelling are united to produce a coffin, a vessel for a narrative, and to create meaning in grief.

BIRDS AND FLOWERS

Liz

Liz is fond of birds. Sometimes she reminds me of one herself. She has the friendly, curious look of a fantail. She is short, South African and vibrant. She exudes energy. Liz used to work as a caregiver. I imagine she would have been good at it. She has a way about her which would make even the most unpleasant situation more bearable.

Liz is fiercely efficient. She is an organiser and a problem-solver. She likes to get things done, and get them done right the first time. Liz gives each task her full attention and

maximum effort. This extends to her interaction with people as well; she listens completely, and is fully invested in each conversation. I get the impression she has never done anything halfway in her life.

She is a lot more than simply efficient though. Liz is a fantastic artist. She paints exquisitely. Her coffin lid is beautiful. She has painted an intricate dream catcher, each circle enclosing a different bird or flower from either Aotearoa or South Africa. I do not know how long it took her to paint it, but it is incredibly detailed. Her family have commented that it is far too beautiful for cremation. Her daughter wants to keep the lid and turn it into a coffee table. Other family members have put in orders for her to paint a few more coffin lids, so they can do the same.



FIGURE 27: LIZ'S COFFIN

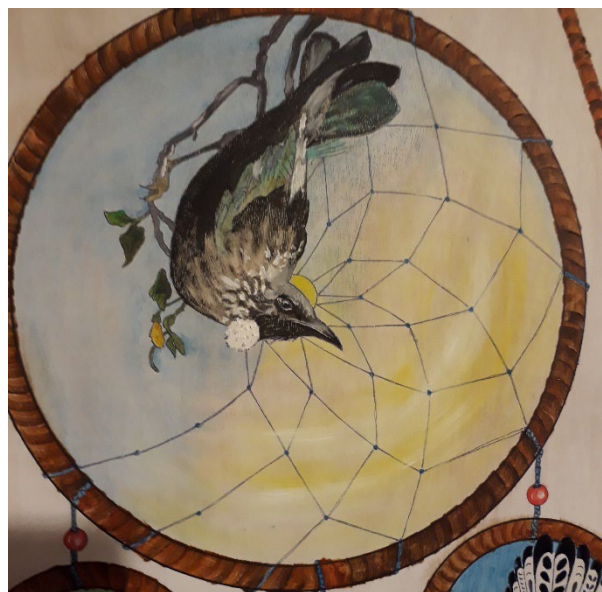


FIGURE 28: CLOSE UP

Both taken by 'Liz', June 2020

The downside to being such a good artist is that many Coffin Club members want Liz to paint motifs on their coffins for them. I get the impression that Liz wants to help people, but does not always want to paint other people's designs. It is time consuming work, and sometimes must feel like she is being taken advantage of. I could be mistaken.

Liz is Christian and her faith is a huge part of her life. She does not talk about it at Coffin Club too much, but sometimes it comes up, especially when discussion of the afterlife arises. Her position is that it does not matter too much what happens to her body, as her soul will be back with her Creator.

I asked her what made her start coming to Coffin Club. She replied that it was to save on the cost of a coffin. She has convinced her sister to come, and I think her brother-in-law and husband are considering it as well.

When I first started coming to Coffin Club, Liz told me she had asked Gary to make her a coffin for her pet lorikeet. He — Liz's bird — was getting old and unwell. The coffin was small and looked similar to those pencil boxes everyone makes in woodwork at high school. Liz painted a lorikeet on the top. Not long afterwards her bird died. Liz and her husband had raised him from when he was a baby; they called him Giggles because he chortled and chattered all the time. She spoke of how he used to ride everywhere on her shoulder, even outside while she hung out the laundry. She said how he was always cheerful and happy, and how having him around brightened her life. He died at fifteen years of age. Liz was heartbroken. She told me how her husband said that putting Giggles in his coffin was the saddest thing he had ever done.

It took me a long time to decide whether to include Liz's story. I was worried that it did not add anything to the thesis I was crafting. It is not that the story was any less important, but that I was not sure it *said* anything. It tells parts of Liz's life, but not much about Coffin Club. Or so I thought. I had a midnight epiphany, and realised I was wrong. Liz's story says a huge deal about Coffin Club. It is an example of the most common type of story I heard there. A person comes to save money by building their own coffin, and they do just that. They build a coffin and save money. And while they do, they craft something that is unique to them,

something that tells a story, something that they like, and of which they are proud. This story (and Liz's coffin) is about Liz's life, and the things she likes. Liz's narrative — her artistry, her South African roots, her home in Aotearoa, her Christianity, and her love of birds — is materialised in her coffin. Like Marg's, Liz's coffin is a vessel.

DARK BLUE

Gary

Gary is short, with a wide smile and large 1980s-style wired-rimmed glasses. He always wears a baseball cap; I am not sure I have ever seen him take it off. He has the hands of a labourer; short blunt fingers with broad palms and a firm grip. He usually has ear muffs slung around his neck and a piece of wood in his hands. The way he handles wood is fascinating. Sometimes he strokes it as if it was a small animal in need of comfort. Other times he looks at it as though he is trying to decipher its genetic code. When I see Gary treating wood this way, it reminds me of the quote from Michelangelo about releasing statues from their marble constraints. I have not told Gary this.

I cannot paint an accurate picture of Gary without mentioning his workbench. Technically no one can claim any of the work space as their own, but everyone understands that this particular bench is Gary's zone. It is not large, only about a metre and a half long, but Gary makes good use of it. On the left-hand end of it sits a stockpile of wooden urns. Coffin handles are often stacked along the back of the bench, in varying stages of assembly. A small shelf above the bench holds containers of specialty nails. Strewn over the bench itself are tools, scraps of sandpaper, sanding blocks, pencils, glue, offcuts of wood. It looks chaotic, but Gary seems to have a system. And by the end of the day, everything is tidied into some semblance of order.



FIGURE 29: GARY'S BENCH

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

Gary loves woodwork, and is good at it. He does not work on the main construction of the coffins, but has his own separate projects. His skills are put to good use; Gary is in charge of making the urns, the coffin handles, and any other tricky or specialty items. If you want to turn your coffin into a replica pool table or a giant jandal, Gary is the man to talk to. He comes to Men's Shed as well, so spends more time in the workshop than many other club members.

Gary's bench is situated near the space in which the starter group construct the coffins. Gary works on his own, with his back to the group, but by no means is he anti-social or excluded. As he moves around the shed, he chats to people, interested in what they are working on. People stop at his bench to ask advice or an opinion. He is always ready to set down his tools to help with a problem.

Gary made my urn. He makes all the urns. The word 'urn' is a misleading, as most people associate the term with something vase-shaped. This urn is a wooden box, similar to one in which you might keep jewellery and trinkets. In fact, that is exactly what I use mine for. It has a separate lid (as opposed to hinged), which will be screwed down when it is filled with my ashes.

Before he started making my urn, Gary asked me if I had any requests for the design. I did not. On the contrary, I wanted Gary to take the lead. I said that he had full artistic license,

and that I would be happy with whatever he came up with. And I am. Gary found a piece of wood the colour of manuka honey with a lovely grain. He fashioned a lid out of it. It was slightly too small, so he pieced it together, so the lid looks like it has three horizontal stripes. The body of the box is held together with bronze rose-head nails; delicate pink-bronze nails with faceted heads. I never knew a nail could be so beautiful.



FIGURE 30: MY URN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

While he was making the urn, Gary kept me updated with his progress, checking if I liked his ideas and the wood he had chosen.

‘Bronnie, smell this. Doesn’t it smell great?’ He was right. It did.

.....

One day Jack (the club treasurer) called for silence at morning tea. He described how a woman had called the Coffin Club a few days earlier. She explained how she had recently had a miscarriage. Her baby was eleven weeks old. She said how the hospital had unceremoniously given her the foetus and sent her home. She rang around to different funeral homes to procure a coffin. She was quoted \$400. She was distraught. It was too much on top of an already overwhelmingly distressing situation; too much both financially and emotionally. She rang the Coffin Club, and asked if they could help. They could.

Jack contacted Gary, who got to work. It did not take Gary long to make up a coffin small enough to hold the baby. It is jarring to see just how small those coffins are. He left it undecorated, as the mother wanted to do it herself. They sent it to her with a small hand-knitted teddy bear nestled inside: 'Every baby needs a teddy.'

.....

Gary has been coming to Coffin Club since it was formed about four years ago. His wife joined first, then recruited Gary to help with the woodwork. His wife has long since stopped coming to Coffin Club, her arthritis now so bad it is too hard for her to navigate the space.

I asked Gary about his own coffin. He has built two, one for him and one for his wife. They are kept upstairs in the loft of the shed. They are both painted blue; his is dark, hers is pale. They have matching urns at home. I asked him why he keeps coming back to Coffin Club after all this time.

'The workbenches are better here than at home.'



FIGURE 31: GARY'S COFFIN (AND OTHERS) STORED IN THE SHED LOFT

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

Craftwork is a vital part of Gary's story. His dedication to woodwork is evident in his love of wood, his willingness to make specialty items, and his continued attendance at Coffin Club. Similar to Simon, it is not so much that Gary uses craftwork to explore his narrative, rather that craftwork *is* his narrative. He does not tell his story by the things that he makes. Indeed, I have never seen him make anything for himself, only for other people. Thus, he helps people craft *their* narratives, rather than his own. But the act of crafting is integral to his story. Once again, the act of crafting is the storytelling, rather than the object crafted.

PLAIN

Grant

Grant reminds me of Paul Holmes⁷. I am struck with the thought every time I see him. I do not tell him that; I am not certain he would take it as a compliment. I am also not sure why he reminds me of Paul Holmes. Perhaps it is because he is forceful and eloquent, or perhaps it is because he has a head of thick more-salt-than-pepper hair and small glasses. But the resemblance ends there; Grant is taller and slimmer than Paul Holmes ever was. And funnier. Grant has a way with words which I appreciate; straight-forward, no-nonsense and peppered liberally with colourful cuss words. Our conversations are largely based on taking the mickey out of one another. Perhaps I should tell him he reminds me of Paul Holmes after all.

Not long after we met, Grant showed me his tattoo. It is emblazoned on his chest, in bold, unavoidable letters.

DO NOT RESUSCITATE

⁷ Paul Holmes was a well-known journalist and television and radio broadcaster in Aotearoa, active from the late 70s until 2012. He was famously outspoken and at times controversial. He died from illness in 2013.

Grant had a stroke a few years ago. As a result, he has a John Wayne walk, his left leg dragging slightly. His left hand still has residual weakness as well. Or in Grant's words; 'it's fucked.' He told me of his rehabilitation, of the long, slow process it took for him to get to his current function. The remaining weakness means that Grant needs to be careful with some tasks, particularly the heavier or more fiddly ones.

Despite this hindrance Grant contributes a great deal. He is an organiser; he is in the 'starter group' and is the driving force behind a lot of the decisions around making the coffins. He often mediates discussions concerning woodworking, such as ascertaining the best technique for bending wood.

In the past, Grant has worked as a pharmacist, lawyer and a coroner, as well as owning a plant nursery. He has had a lot of experience with death, both practically and legally. This means that he is a fount of knowledge about the practicalities of death and dying. If you want to know what paperwork is required on a person's death, the legal requirements of a sea burial, or how best to remove a pacemaker, Grant is the man to ask.

His experience also means that he has an extremely pragmatic approach towards the whole business: 'At the end of the day, it's just a lump of dead meat that you've gotta get rid of legally.'

I once asked how Grant had decorated his coffin. 'It's just a fucking box, Bron. Why the fuck would I spend any time on it?'



FIGURE 32: GRANT'S BOX

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, January 2020

Grant emphasised (in no uncertain terms) that to him, a coffin is simply an object. It is a ‘thing’ without deeper meaning or symbolism. Which, of course, made me consider the meaning behind it. As with the others’ stories, I considered the narrative elements of coffin building; of how, by not emblazoning his coffin with curated images, Grant was still choosing a particular story to tell. His story is of pragmatism, a homage to brass tacks.

Throughout all of these stories (and the many others I heard during my fieldwork), there was a common thread. Each person was *doing* something about their eventual death. They were actively preparing for it, in a practical way. They may have had different viewpoints and goals, but all were united by doing. Thus, the stories (coffins) are tangible, just as the storytelling (coffin building) is embodied.

Discussion

The stories above — particularly Simon’s, Marg’s, Liz’s and Grant’s — demonstrate how club members use their coffins to express aspects of their personalities and life stories. The anthropology of storytelling gives us the concept of subjective composure. This is where the storyteller chooses which elements of their story to tell, in order to tailor it to their audience (Summerfield, 2004; Summerfield, 2019). Reflection is necessary to achieve that. In order to craft a story (or a coffin), one needs to think about it. Why did Liz choose to have birds and flowers on her coffin, as opposed to other things she likes? Why did Simon choose to build a packing crate, rather than a different-but-equally-tricky woodwork project? I do not know the answers to these questions, as I am part of the audience, not the narrator. I am not privy to the decision-making process. This is an outcome of my methodological approach of observing Coffin Club as it was presented to me, and not delving deeply behind the story or persona the person chose to present.

I *was* aware of Marg’s decision-making procedure. Her process more explicitly demonstrates the curation component of storytelling, as Marg cast aside other design ideas in favour of painting her coffin neon green. Marg’s story also shows how she used the storytelling of coffin design to achieve composure by materialising her grief over her granddaughter’s death. Club members create meaning in grief, loss, and death by building their own coffin. They

craft a tangible representation of death and paint their story all over it. In designing and making a coffin, members are attempting to create meaning in something which is ultimately outside their control.

But the storytelling of coffin building is not limited to only design. The ‘doing’ of building a coffin — the craftwork — is just as much a form of storytelling. Both Simon and Gary told their stories through the making of coffins, not the coffin itself. And all of the club members, when they build their coffins, tell a story of pragmatism in the face of death. Building a coffin is very practical death work. It is making, creating, crafting. Death work involves more than building a coffin, however. Practical (though less tangible) elements of planning a funeral include deciding on body disposal, and choosing how you want death memorialised. There are also the emotional and social elements to consider. This is where conversations about death and grief come in, facilitated by the embodied experience of building a coffin, by the sociality of the group, and by tea and biscuits.

All these actions — attending Coffin Club, discussing death, building a personalised coffin, composing a narrative — have an element of seeking control in them. Building a coffin is a way of practically preparing for death. Being prepared to any degree can give people comfort in the face of death. Decorating it to reflect individual personality and life stories is a way of making death rites more personal. I argue that the club members are working to craft a ‘good death’; a death that has an element of asserting control in it, involves a wider social network, and is an acknowledgement of mortality. At the club, coffin construction is done as a team. It is a move away from the professionalised, standardised, hidden death work, to a more communal, less formal style of preparation. This communal characteristic also is also present in the conversations between club members. The work of death is both tangible and intangible, and there are many ways in which community can be included. This acknowledges that when a person dies, it is more than just that person who is affected.

Another way in which Coffin Club allows people to craft a ‘good death’ is the acknowledgement and acceptance by members that they are going to die. They are not necessarily unwell (although some are), and they do not necessarily know *when* they will die (although some have more of an idea than others), but all club members have wrestled with thoughts of their own mortality, and come to accept it. It would be impossible to attend

Coffin Club and build your own coffin without some degree of acceptance of death. In order to prepare for funerary rites, one has to acknowledge that someday they will happen.

This acknowledgement is something which is not often discussed at Coffin Club. At least, not in front of me. I talked about death acceptance with Grant. He flagged it when he read my thesis. He thought I had not focused on it enough. Grant argued that although members *did* have to acknowledge their own death to attend Coffin Club, their levels of acceptance varied. He spoke of people who, as they built their coffins, mourned their own impending death, or struggled to come to terms with a diagnosis. He spoke of how hard it was for many people to truly accept that they would one day die. When I spoke about my understanding of mortality, Grant cut to the heart of the matter with his usual accuracy: ‘But it’s not staring you in the fuckin’ face, Bronnie.’ He is not wrong. My age affects my understanding of death acceptance at Coffin Club. Although I have seen many people near death, and can intellectually understand what that means, I have never been near death myself. My youth unavoidably limits my understanding of what is happening around me, and possibly makes club members unlikely to share their fears of death with me.

So what is a ‘good death’ to Coffin Club? It has nothing to do with dying. Coffin Club does not have the capacity to make dying swift, or painless, or dignified. Coffin Club’s attempts at control are concerned with what comes after: funerary rites. It is achieving a good death by having a good funeral. This acknowledges that a person can die ‘well’ (perhaps swiftly, painlessly and with dignity), but if they have a bad funeral, it does not necessarily mean they had a good death. It acknowledges that a good death and a good funeral are inextricably linked.

Coffin Club also acknowledges that a ‘good funeral’ does not look the same to everyone. Maybe it is a lavish affair with flowers and pallbearers. Maybe it is a picnic in a public garden. For a surfer, it might be a paddle-out ceremony. Coffin Club allows (to the best of its ability) for individuality, and provides the opportunity for people to craft their own good death, whatever that means to them.

Conclusion

As I considered Coffin Club and the good death, I kept returning to the practical nature of the group. They are actively preparing for their funerals, in a way that is both practical and creative. The stories the club members shared showed how creating a personalised coffin is a way of crafting narratives. I also considered how Coffin Club allows for a practical and communal approach to death work, including conversations about death.

These different themes have one element that binds them together; control. Each is a way in which Coffin Club enables members to exert some level of control over their funerary rites. And this is part of what, in Coffin Club, a good death is. It is a personalised coffin, a funeral tailored to the individual. It is including friends and family in the work of death. It is move away from the professionalised approach to death work, to something more personalised and communal. It is crafting with friends.

CHAPTER SIX:

In our own hands: Crafting a do-it-yourself movement

Jack (the treasurer) has said very clearly and often that the Coffin Club is not intended to be in competition with the funeral industry. He maintains that there is no bad blood between the two, and that Coffin Club is simply providing a place for people to source cheap, personalised coffins. Jack appreciates that funeral directors offer an invaluable service, and states that the work they do means that families are given the emotional space they need to deal with their grief, without worrying about the practicalities of death.

I would suggest, however, that the very existence of Coffin Clubs implies that there are needs not being met by the funeral industry. Indeed, Katie Williams states that one — albeit secondary — reason for starting the first Coffin Club was to provide an alternative to the expensive and impersonal coffins available commercially (Death Hangout, 2019). The coffin building element of the club exists (at least in part) because people perceive a need for it, otherwise Coffin Club would be simply another discussion group.

In this chapter, I draw on the experiences of members to explore the relationship between Coffin Club and the funeral industry in Aotearoa. First, I consider Coffin Club as a response to the financial strain that funerals often bring. Then I explore the idea of Coffin Club as a space to enable personalisation of funerary rites. Finally, I bring these two concepts together, and consider Coffin Club as providing alternatives to the funeral industry, and thus as a movement for change, one which is being taken up overseas as well.

BUTTERCUP YELLOW

Robert

Robert wears the same clothes every week. Navy-blue jeans with a navy-blue woollen shirt tucked into the waistband. On his head he wears a navy-blue and black chequered cap, also woollen. He has silver-rimmed glasses, blue eyes, grey hair, and the most contagious smile. It comes from the very heart of himself, and one cannot help but reciprocate. His laugh could only be described as a chortle. To me, he is the personification of the word 'jolly'.

Due to virulent cancer and two total knee joint replacements, Robert walks with crutches. 'I look healthy on the outside, not so much on the inside.' The crutches mean that Robert cannot help with the work of making coffins. This does not stop Robert from contributing in other ways. Each week he drives to Katikati from Thames, often bringing with him club members who are unable to drive themselves. He also brings packets of chocolate biscuits. He and his biscuits are always warmly welcomed.

As he wanders around the shed, Robert stops to watch the proceedings and chat. I call it his supervisory role. As he says; 'it's a tough job, but somebody has to do it.' He picks his way through the work space, taking care not to trip over cords and equipment. He stands and watches as I learn how to use power tools, making wry comments I am never certain are compliments or taking the mickey. Honestly, his smile is so joyful, I do not mind either way.

Robert's coffin is buttercup yellow with black handles, lined with ruched white satin. When I asked why he chose yellow, he replied 'because why not?'. The black handles were an accident. He initially wanted them black, then changed his mind to yellow. Unfortunately, the message was mislaid. He seems unconcerned by the mistake. His plan is to get his granddaughters to paint pictures on his coffin. One granddaughter will paint a picture of his cat, Buttercup.



FIGURE 33: LINING ROBERT'S COFFIN

Taken by 'Gloria', May, 2019

I asked about Buttercup. 'He was a boy cat. Now he is a dead cat.' Buttercup died recently, and is buried in a small cardboard coffin in Robert's garden. Buttercup's coffin was painted the same shade as Robert's. He had some paint left over, and decided not to waste it. They will have matching bumble bee paintings as well, courtesy of Robert's other granddaughter.

'He's buried sitting on my knee.'

I felt that statement deserved some further attention. Robert explained that when he had his knees replaced, the nurse asked if he would like to take his old ones home with him. He thought 'why not?' and kept them in a bag in the freezer: 'It was a good conversation starter.'

When Buttercup died, he thought of burying his knees with his cat. It would serve two purposes; a good way to dispose of the knees, and Robert liked the idea of his cat lying curled up on his lap in death. And so that is what he did.

As Robert told me this, all I could think about was if someone were to dig up the gravesite in 150 years' time, what they might make of it. I said as much to Robert. We discussed the conclusions these future archaeologists might come to after finding a cat skeleton with two human knees. I thought perhaps they would consider it some ancient ritual of a more

primitive culture. Robert put forward the idea of a cat-human hybrid. It was a fun conversation.

One day during morning tea, Jack (the club treasurer) made an announcement about liaising with funeral directors. He put forward the idea of getting a funeral director to come and talk to the club, about the kinds of services they provide. Jack reiterated that the Coffin Club are absolutely not opposed to the industry. He highlighted that funeral directors can be exceedingly helpful at organising funerals, taking the stress off the family and allowing them the space to grieve as they need to.

Afterwards, Robert sought me out. 'I don't agree.' I asked him why. Robert told me the story of when his wife died.

Robert's wife was ill, so she, Robert and their family had time to prepare for her death. Both Robert and his wife wanted their bodies donated for medical research. To that end they contacted a doctor at a teaching hospital and discussed their wishes. The doctor was on board; Robert's wife had a rare form of Parkinson's disease, and her brain would be a useful resource to learn more about the condition. They also contacted the funeral home, and outlined their wishes to the funeral director. Everyone was on the same page, and Robert and his wife felt as prepared as they could be.

She died on a Sunday. When Robert told me this story, I got the impression that although he was sad, it was also the end of a long battle for both of them. There was an acceptance that comes with watching a person you love suffer. She died on Sunday, and Robert rang the funeral home. The usual funeral director was away, so he spoke with the stand in. Robert reminded him of his wife's wishes for her remains to be donated to the teaching hospital, and the locum funeral director said he would ring the hospital to organise a transfer.

A short while later, the funeral director rang back with some disappointing news. He had contacted the teaching hospital, and had been informed that due to superfluity of donations, Robert's wife's body would not be accepted. Robert was disappointed. But he was in the throes of informing family members, organising last-minute details, of dealing with the business and grief of death. He had to be pragmatic about this unfulfilled wish.

A few hours later, when Robert had a moment to himself, he thought about the situation with the teaching hospital. Something did not seem right with the scenario. He described feeling unsettled. He felt the whole exchange had happened too quickly, and that it did not seem in keeping with the previous conversations he had had with the doctor from the teaching hospital. He decided to ring the doctor himself.

Robert rang and left a message. As it was a Sunday afternoon, he thought it unlikely that the doctor would get back to him. But soon after, he received a call. The doctor offered his condolences. It soon became apparent that he had not received any phone call from the funeral director. They did not have a surfeit of cadavers to research, and even if they had, they had especially wanted Robert's wife's brain, because of her rare disease. And now, because of the delay caused by the dishonest funeral director, too much time had elapsed since his wife's death. Her brain was no longer viable to be studied.

Robert was in shock. To have his wife's final wishes so completely thwarted, and in such an apparently deceitful way, was a blow more than he could articulate at the time. He carried on with the preparations, and a few days later, had a funeral for his wife. 'The kids were happy.' The way he said it made it clear that although the kids were happy, he was not, and that he did not think his wife would have been either. The whole thing left a bad taste in his mouth.

A while after the funeral, he rang the funeral home. He spoke to the main funeral director, the one with whom he had been in contact before his wife had died. He confronted him about the situation with the fill-in, and demanded an explanation. The only response he got was; 'he lied.'

That was the extent of the explanation he received. When Robert told me this, his anger and disgust were apparent. His trust in funeral directors had been irrevocably shattered. This loss of trust was the driving force behind Robert coming to the Coffin Club. He wanted me to know that although he respected the Coffin Club's diplomatic stance on the funeral industry, he absolutely did not share it.

When Robert told me his story, I felt sick. This story hit me hard in two ways; as a person, and as a physiotherapist. As a person, because it is heart wrenching and horrible. I could see the pain and anger on Robert's face, which is usually wreathed in smiles. And as a physiotherapist because of the loss of trust. Professionals in positions of power over vulnerable people (like physiotherapists and funeral directors) have a responsibility to be respectful and honest towards their clients. That was not the case in Robert's story. The funeral director's conduct offends me on both a personal and professional level. It angers me on Roberts's behalf, and I struggle (read fail) to maintain neutrality when I think about it. But I shall try.

Before speaking to Robert, I had considered the existence of Coffin Club as a gentle implicit criticism of the funeral industry in Aotearoa. Members mentioned the price of coffins and funerals as being the motive for joining Coffin Club. Robert's story was the first I heard where the criticism was explicit (and not gentle). He had a deeply personal and negative experience, which directly resulted in him seeking out the Coffin Club. His story distilled the vague murmurings about the funeral industry I had heard at Coffin Club into something specific, definite and somehow more real. His story is a condemnation of funeral professionals, and one that is not simply economic.

TIRAMISU

Pat

Pat is sunshine in human form. She is one of the most welcoming people I have ever met. When she greets me, she seems delighted to see me. She asks me how I have been, what is going on in my life, and genuinely wants to hear the answers. It is gladsome and rare. Pat is short, with twinkly eyes and a penchant for rings. She bustles around the shed, making sure everyone feels welcome. She reminds me of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, minus the prickles. And the pinny.

Pat always wears a few necklaces. A couple of chains, and a necklace with a heavy glass pendant. The one that stands the most out is a silver fishhook on a simple chain. One day, I

commented on how beautiful it was. 'That's my husband.' The hook is made with some of her husband's ashes. It is a reminder of her husband, and a symbol of his love of fishing. She never takes it off.

When we first met, I asked Pat how she wanted her coffin decorated. At the time, she had decided on leaving the plywood unpainted, getting Liz or Gloria to draw some butterflies and dragonflies on it, and then varnishing it. And no white satin liner for Pat, she wanted something different: 'Maybe something with butterflies on.'

Unfortunately, the message that she wanted her coffin unpainted was lost in transit, and one week while Pat was away, primer was painted on. This did not seem to faze Pat much; she simply redesigned her coffin decoration. Now, her coffin is painted a rich brown colour, which I would call mahogany and the paint company calls 'tiramisu'. She intends on making a large ball of yarn, spearing it with two oversized knitting needles, and affixing it to the top. She loves to knit, and wants her coffin to reflect that.



FIGURE 34: PAT'S COFFIN

Taken by Bronwyn Russell, June 2020

I asked Pat why she began coming to Coffin Club. She told me the story of when her husband died. He died without warning. He had been unwell, but it was still unexpected. One minute they were talking and laughing in bed, the next, he was dead. It was a shock. Pat told me of how he died in the beautiful new sheets she had bought only three days before.

She went to the neighbour's house to ask for their help. They came over, and between them they picked up Pat's husband, wrapped in the new sheet, and carried him downstairs. One took his feet, one supported his middle, and Pat carried his head. He was heavy, and awkward to lift.

'I dropped his head on the floor.'

I did not know what to say. I fumbled around for the words, and said something stupid.

'I wonder how he felt about that.'

Pat was kind in the face of my ineptitude. 'He wasn't there. He wouldn't have noticed.'

She told me of the shock of her husband's death, of how she felt so alone in the early days. Her husband's family were close by, but her side of the family — her children, her siblings — had not arrived yet from their homes around the country and in Australia. She felt very alone, and was, she felt in hindsight, vulnerable.

She went to the funeral director to start organising her husband's funeral. She knew from previous conversations with her husband that he wanted an eco-friendly coffin. Something cheap, unadorned and made from easily-biodegradable materials. She said as much to the funeral director. He shot down the idea.

'They're ugly, I don't like them, and I won't sell them.'

Pat felt like she had no choice. The funeral director convinced her that she needed to buy a \$12,000 coffin. And so, she did.

Pat's family arrived soon after, from their respective homes. When Pat told them of her conversation with the funeral director, they were livid. They felt he had targeted Pat at her most vulnerable moment, and were disgusted by it. But they reasoned that the funeral had not happened yet, so there was still time to rectify the situation. Pat's sister rang the funeral director and asked him if they change the coffin. His response was a resounding no. He

stated that Pat's husband's body was already in the \$12,000 coffin, and that it could not be removed.

The funeral went ahead, and Pat's husband was cremated. The coffin conflict continued. After the funeral, Pat's sister rang the funeral director again to confront him. She voiced her opinion of his actions, that they were unscrupulous and manipulative. She stated that they were not going to pay for the coffin. The phone call devolved, ending with the funeral director swearing and yelling at Pat's sister, all while Pat listened in. They hung up. Soon after, the funeral director's wife rang to follow up. That conversation also degenerated into a screaming match. Pat was distraught.

Later, Pat's cousin went to visit the funeral director to talk to him, to try to be the calm voice of reason. Pat's cousin explained the situation to the funeral director, and said that if there was some way they could come to an agreement. Perhaps a reduced fee, although preferably no fee at all, considering the funeral director went directly against the wishes of both Pat and her husband. This suggestion was not well received. Everyone left the situation unhappy, and Pat still had to pay for the coffin.

While telling me this story, Pat had the mien of someone putting a good face on things. It was obviously an incredibly upsetting experience, and she still felt it. The passing of her husband — already an extremely painful situation — was made worse by anger and hurt.

There were two things about this experience that Pat was particularly upset about. She was (and still is) convinced that the \$12,000 coffin that she was pressured into buying was reused. That her husband's body was put in a cheap coffin, placed inside the more expensive coffin for the viewing, and removed on body disposition, so the more expensive coffin could be kept for the funeral director to re-sell.

The second thing Pat was upset about was the sheets. The funeral director promised he would return them to her, and he never did.

'They had only been used for three days. They were brand new.'

Like Robert's, Pat's story is a deeply personal, negative experience with a specific funeral professional. And like Robert's story, Pat's story horrified me (for the same reasons). Pat's experience was money-related, and is a more explicit version the general complaints of expensive coffins voiced by other members. As she told her story, I considered the emotional impact of the economic facet of the funeral industry, and how the two are intertwined.

Both Pat and Robert were let down by funeral professionals. Pat's experiences with the funeral director when her husband died taught her that the funeral industry is just that; an industry which is profit-driven. Robert's experiences taught him that not all funeral directors are above deceit. Both Robert and Pat learnt that the wishes of the deceased and the deceased's family are not paramount to every professional in the industry. And because of these experiences, both Robert and Pat now view the funeral industry with deep suspicion and resentment.

Both of these stories echo those in Chapter Four, in that they are about rage and grief. Pat and Robert were both angry about the way they and their loved ones were treated. It is rage in bereavement, brought upon by the actions of funeral professionals. And like with Mary and Gloria, Coffin Club provided a space in which to express that rage. Both stories also illustrate the concept of 'good death' that is crafted at Coffin Club, by showing examples of when it does not happen. In the stories, the deaths of both Robert's wife and Pat's husband were made 'bad' by their funerals. The rage they felt is directly in response to that sense of being thwarted out of a good funeral (or good death) for their loved ones.

Rage and the 'good death/good funeral' link are part of the reason I chose to include these two stories. They show how badly wrong the relationship between the bereaved and funeral professionals can go. I think they are important stories to tell, and to be honest, not only for the sake of my thesis. The main reason I included them, however, is because they were the only two stories that dealt explicitly with the funeral industry (apart from briefly in Gloria's story in Chapter Four and Gary's story in Chapter Five). Many other members' spoke about the industry, but it was always in more vague terms; 'coffins are expensive', 'I'm not sure I want a professional funeral.' Pat and Robert's stories are directly concerned with specific funeral professionals. But it is important to note that their overtly negative opinions of the funeral industry by no means represent the majority. Most members (perhaps unsurprisingly) were less vehement. They had similar opinions to Pat and Robert, but scaled down versions.

The general feeling about the industry within the club was that they imperfectly provided an overpriced but necessary service.

Discussion

Coffin Club members made it clear that they attended the club for financial reasons. Time and again I heard things like ‘people come here to save money’, ‘coffins are expensive these days’ and ‘I’m not spending that much money on a bloody box.’ Even Jack, club treasurer and fierce defender of the funeral industry, when I asked him why more people were doing do-it-yourself funerals these days, replied ‘because people are feeling like they are getting ripped off.’ He was quick to point out, though, that although people may *begin* attending Coffin Club for financial reasons, they *continue* attending for other reasons, such as sociality and creativity.

For Coffin Club members, the desire to save money on a funeral extends beyond simply making their own coffin. A number of members talked of various ways of making their passing cheaper, by forgoing flowers or avoiding body transportation costs by organising their own conveyance. Indeed, a few have decided to forgo a funeral altogether. When I asked them why, they stated things like ‘it’s a waste of money’, ‘I don’t want to saddle my kids with any expenses,’ or ‘I’d rather spend the money on my boat’.

Some of the stories in this thesis identify an interplay between the economic impact of a funeral, and the other, more emotional concerns. In Gloria’s story (in Chapter Four) we can see how she was grateful that the funeral director prepared her mother’s body, something she did not feel she could have done herself. Funeral professionals provided an invaluable service when her mother died, and Gloria had no qualms about the cost. Thus, the funeral director provided a practical service which had emotional benefits for the bereaved. Pat’s experience was negative because she felt as if her husband’s wishes had been thwarted, or perhaps because the financial impact was greater. I suggest that the financial impact of a funeral is inextricably linked with other, intangible values. It is like any exchange; the cost is acceptable, until it is not. It is not merely a financial exchange for goods and services (if any such exchange is ever that simple). There are other psychological, social and emotional elements at play. In the previous chapter, Gary’s story shows how the cost of the coffin for her stillborn baby was too steep for the young mother, financially and emotionally. Robert’s

story also has elements of this. He never spoke of money, but it was the intangible currency of the funeral industry — trust and respect — that he was disappointed by.

It is important to note that for the majority of club members, a desire to save money does not translate to a lack of interest in commemorating their death in some way. Perhaps they want to save money, and perhaps they do not follow more ‘traditional’ practices in funerary rites, but most members feel the importance of acknowledging death and honouring life: ‘Funerals are for the living, not for the dead’; ‘it’s important to do something to mark the passing’. This viewpoint was particularly evident in a conversation I had with Jack. When we first met, he said, ‘people put so much time, effort and money into planning a wedding. Why should it be any different for a funeral?’

The effort that Jack was talking about extends beyond the financial. There are other ways people demonstrate care when planning funerary rites. One of these ways is personalisation. Throughout this thesis, I have described personalising coffins as an expression of self and as a way of crafting a narrative. Here I consider personalisation of coffins as providing an alternative to the coffins offered by the funeral industry. As noted in Chapter One, the funeral industry has adapted to reflect the contemporary values of personalisation (Engelke, 2015; Kearn & Jacobsen, 2013; Schäfer, 2016; Warpole, 2009). Some forms of personalisation of funerary rites include curated music choices, use of an alternative vehicle for body transportation (as opposed to a hearse), and readings at the funeral which are meaningful or relevant to the deceased. Personalisation of coffins falls into this category, allowing for the creative expression of individuality.

Katie Williams (founder of the first Coffin Club) discussed personalisation of coffins in a recent interview (Death Hangout, 2019). She told two stories where the Rotorua Coffin Club helped people have their desired funeral. One was of a young man who, when he was a child, had always wanted a go-kart, but never had the chance to own one. The Rotorua Coffin Club helped him build a go-kart coffin, complete with wheels, grille and nameplate. Another was of a Jewish man who had religious requirements for his coffin. It had to be made a specific way with particular materials. The Rotorua Coffin Club helped him make a coffin that was in keeping with his religious values (Death Hangout, 2019).

These stories (and many others in this research) show how Coffin Club provides a broad scope for creative personalisation of coffins, either for the sake of whimsy (as in the first story), religion (as in the second), or any other reason. A big difference from the funeral industry is that Coffin Club members join the club while they are still alive. They are able to discuss their ideas for a coffin, so even if they are unable to help build it, they can design a coffin that is particular to their tastes. This is not the case with the funeral industry, where people only become clients once they have died (most of the time), so it is family or friends who choose their premade coffin. Although Katie observed:

Quietly, I look around and I see they [funeral companies] are getting more options for people. They have patterned coffins now. Okay, they're not cheap and cheerful like ours, but they have different things. We have made a huge difference in our own small way, I feel.

(Death Hangout, 2019)

The more I considered coffin personalisation and the funeral industry, the more I felt that Coffin Club was making some sort of implicit statement about the industry. But what was it? Was it a criticism of the way the industry handles death rites? Was it a critique of the professionalisation of death and funeral rites? For some members, these statements are true. Some club members are openly critical of the funeral industry. For the majority of the club members, however, I think the answer is more nuanced. Yes, almost all members spoke of how expensive coffins are. That criticism is explicit. But they also spoke of the benefits of the funeral industry; how it takes some of the burden of death off the bereaved. They see the funeral industry as a necessity, albeit an overpriced one.

The real statement members seem to be implicitly making about the funeral industry is similar to what Coffin Club members are doing when they build a coffin: they are crafting a 'good death'. It is about control. The club members do not all feel strongly that the funeral industry is innately 'bad', but I would suggest that they are trying to regain some control of funerary rites.

This idea of control is one that Grant flagged when he read my draft thesis. Grant is one of the club members who has strongly negative opinions about the funeral industry. He admits that the industry provides some benefits to the bereaved — 'the industry wraps a blanket

around their shoulders’ — but states that the industry needs to be countered by some alternatives. Or in his words; ‘it needs a fuckin’ handbrake’. He finds the cost of coffins and other services exorbitant, and is of the opinion that funeral professionals take advantage of the vulnerable bereaved. In his view, the Coffin Club provides people with options, specifically the option of a ‘release from obligation’ to the funeral industry.

Grant argued that I had been too generous with my analysis of this aspect of Coffin Club. I understand his position. He fiercely advocates for the dead and bereaved. But my observation was that this view of the funeral industry was not held to the same extent (or at least, not as vocally) by most of the Coffin Club members. The majority of club members view the funeral industry as overpriced and imperfect, but also as a useful tool which provides a necessary and beneficial service to the bereaved. And for many, the funeral industry is simply not discussed at all.

Perhaps that is where I have gone awry. I have been trying to identify the ‘statement’ that club members are making about the funeral industry when they build their personalised coffins. But Coffin Club is about action, not words. Club members *do* things. A better way to define the Coffin Club’s role (when compared with the funeral industry) is as a ‘movement’. I am not sure that if asked, the club members would state it so explicitly. But the Coffin Club offers an alternative to some of the services the funeral industry provides, and an opportunity to actively prepare for death. A thread throughout the previous chapters has been how Coffin Club is a pragmatic, practical approach towards death work. This is what going on here. A need has been identified — for cheaper coffins and more control over funerary rites — and so club members do what they do best; they craft a solution. They craft a do-it-yourself coffin, and while they do, they also craft a do-it-yourself, grassroots movement for change, one which is gathering momentum across Aotearoa and the world. They simply do not talk about it much.

Conclusion

In considering Coffin Club’s relationship to the funeral industry, I fluctuated between seeing the club as a gentle criticism of the industry, and seeing it simply as a group of people doing death work their own way. Both ends of the opinion-spectrum are evident at Coffin Club.

There are members who are vehemently opposed to the funeral industry, and others who see it as providing a vital and beneficial service. The majority fall somewhere in the middle. For most, the financial benefit of building a personalised coffin is a strong motivator to attend, which is something of a criticism in itself.

Thus, I argue that Coffin Club is both a gentle criticism of the funeral industry, *and* provides the opportunity for people to do death work in a way which is practical, creative, and personalised. There are elements of criticism in the motives of saving money and personalising a coffin. However, there is something bigger at play. The club provides options. By constructing personalised coffins, the club members are providing alternatives to more expensive, less personal premade coffins. Thus, Coffin Club is a movement (albeit a largely undiscussed one) to take regain some control over funerary rites from the funeral industry and to create a personalised ‘good death’, while still acknowledging the benefits of the services that funeral professionals provide. Club members are crafting a do-it-yourself movement, in every sense of the phrase.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Conclusion

Crafting this thesis: An overview

I began this research project with no real understanding of the magnitude of it. On paper, the idea of attending a Coffin Club and helping build my own coffin seemed perfectly straightforward. I would attend, participate, watch, listen, and return home to think about my analysis. To some extent, this is what happened. But it was so much more than that. People shared their stories with me, some of them painful. They offered me advice, insight, and taught me new skills. They enveloped me in their collective hug. I cannot overstate the very great privilege I felt being included in such a community.

Attending Coffin Club made me consider what was really happening there. Why did people attend? The obvious answer — to save money — is valid, but too simplistic. The longer I spent at Coffin Club, the more nuanced it became. This thesis is my attempt to understand those nuances. Through the stories club members shared with me, and my own experiences and observations, I identified key themes, thus the ethnographic data informed my research. These themes became my three ethnographic analysis chapters: ‘Crafting as a strategy for coping with grief’, ‘Crafting, storytelling, and the ‘good death’’, and ‘In our own hands: Crafting a do-it-yourself funeral’.

Throughout these chapters I have woven ideas from material culture and the anthropology of crafting with storytelling and embodiment. These are useful for making sense of Coffin Club, because of the coffin-building element; crafting a material object to tell a story of one’s life. Embodiment — and through that, touch and movement — became important when I realised how tactile and dynamic Coffin Club is (as is always the case when you make something).

I saw how the action of building a coffin had a meditative effect on the club members, allowing them to talk about painful subjects more freely. Through this observation and

conversations with members, I arrived at grief (particularly at grief and rage), and how building a coffin allowed people the space to give voice to emotions they might otherwise avoid talking about. By exploring this more fully, I have shown that creativity, movement, and sociality all play a role in making Coffin Club a safe environment for people to talk about painful experiences.

One of the things that drew me to Coffin Club was its active, practical approach towards preparing for, and talking about, death. As I built my own coffin and helped others build theirs, I considered how building a personalised coffin could be seen as a form of storytelling, highlighting the importance of, and connection between, materiality, crafting, and narrative. This, in turn, made me consider how crafting a narrative and actively preparing for death could be understood as an attempt at trying to take control of death (or at least of funerary rites). I have shown that this element of control is important in the concept of the good death, and how a ‘good death’ and a ‘good funeral’ are linked.

Finally, I considered Coffin Club as a gentle tacit criticism of the funeral industry in Aotearoa. This line of thought was the result of the ethnographic information I was gathering; the stories of interactions — both good and bad — with funeral professionals, as well as the overall perceptions of the industry. I have shown that the existence of Coffin Club provides alternatives to the funeral industry. It would not exist if there was no need for it. It provides a way to personalise and ease the financial burden of funerary rites. I argue that Coffin Club is an attempt to regain some control of death work from the funeral industry, while still acknowledging the industry’s worth. Thus, the club members craft a do-it-yourself movement for change, along with their coffins.

My research project emphasises the importance of crafting, touch and creativity for performing death work in Katikati Coffin Club. It supports (and is supported by) literature that investigates the positive affect creativity has on processing grief. Creativity is part of crafting and storytelling, and scholarship underscores the reflective and transformative nature of both. Sociality magnifies these attributes. Literature concerned with grief and sociality emphasises the importance of groups in helping people deal with grief. My research sits where these literatures intersect, brought to tangible life by materiality and embodiment.

Although my research is specifically concerned with death work in Katikati Coffin Club, my findings can be applied craftwork in general; how crafting can be used to navigate difficult emotions, craft stories, build relationships, and create social spaces. My findings link craftwork, embodiment, storytelling, and emotions. These things make for important and interesting literature, but more importantly, they are incredibly human. Humans craft things. We use our hands to express our ideas, beliefs, thoughts and intentions. We craft our stories, and feel to the edge of our understanding of those stories. We make things, in order to make sense of things.

Crafting space for conversation

When Katie Williams started the first Coffin Club, one of her goals was to create a space free from taboo, where people felt safe to discuss worries, fears, thoughts and ideas about death and dying. This aim is integral to the Katikati Coffin Club. So, are they achieving their goal? To answer that question, I will tell one last story.

STOATS, GOATS, AND CANDY FLOSS

The Katikati Agricultural and Pastoral Show

The Katikati A&P show was held on a sweltering Sunday morning, in a field in the middle of town. There had been no rain for weeks. The grass crunched underfoot, and the air was claggy. The paddock was crowded, everyone with the mildly panicked look of people who have been too hot for too long. Still, the relentless heat did not deter the wood-cutting competitors and the avocado-and-spoon racers. Men in white pants sweated through their shirts as they chopped logs. Kids hared about in small tumultuous packs while parents chatted in the shade. Teens sloped by, far too cool for the heat.

The Coffin Club had been allocated a stall. Liz, Jack, Bill and Dion had set it out the afternoon before, so when I arrived, it was resplendent with coffins. Liz's coffin was there, its flowers and birds on display. Bill's was there too. His is a packing crate with rope handles, and is stencilled with slogans like 'spare parts', and 'handle with care'. There was one

decorated with daisies, and another painted in camouflage colours with a huge rack of antlers attached to the lid.

The stall was set up in a small field slightly separated from the main show. A short distance away, but close enough to smell the sausage sizzles and candy floss. The show organisers had grouped stalls by subject matter. On one side of the Coffin Club stall was the museum group. Men and women in period costumes taught people how to make rope and grind corn by hand. On the other side, a local conservation group was recruiting volunteers. Their stall was decorated with the most extensive collection of taxidermy I have ever seen. Cats, stoats and possums snarled menacingly at vulnerable-looking native birds, in a tableau that was at once frozen and chaotic⁸. I considered our placement. Craft on one side, death on the other. Fitting, I guess, but also weird. Across the field, a goat stared at me while it munched on everything it could reach.

Liz and I spent all morning at the stall together. Our job was to garner interest and answer questions. This posed a challenge. The idea of Coffin Club (and everything it entails) is one which has become totally normal for me. I was reminded, though, that it is not the same for everyone. Many people hovered at a safe distance, with a ‘I-am-interested-but-also-nervous-and-if-you-come-too-close-I-will-either-bolt-or-bite’ smile. I tried to encourage them over to take a closer look. It took me half an hour to work out what to say to break the ice. ‘Come on in.’ People laughingly wondered out loud if I was inviting them into the stall, or into the coffins. I let them wonder.

Over the course of the day, I saw the gamut of reactions to the coffins (and the Coffin Club). There were the women who instantly signed up their husbands or fathers. The men who strode up to the packing case coffin, gave it a robust thump, and admired its clean lines and neat finish. There was the eight-year-old boy who lay down in Liz’s coffin, and happily let his dad close the lid. The two women, still dressed in their belly-dancing costumes, who fiddled

⁸ Unfortunately, all the photos I took at the A&P show were on the camera that was stolen, so were lost. It is regrettable. To the rampallian who took it, you created a nuisance.

nervously with their sequined parasols as they looked more closely at the artwork on the daisy coffin. There was the man who, when I said 'good morning!', took a step back and half-yelled; 'I'M NOT INTERESTED'. The three-year-old girl who thought the coffins were a climbing frame, much to her father's mortification (and my delight).

The reaction that surprised me the most was also the most common. After overcoming their initial wariness, many people began telling me stories of loved ones who had died. Parents, spouses, siblings, friends. The stories came thick and fast, with details of expensive funerals, homespun affairs, ash-scattering mishaps, family feuds, drawn-out illnesses, accidents and tragedies. Recent losses, long-ago bereavements, and impending deaths. It was as if the sight of coffins had opened a floodgate. I had not expected the readiness with which people shared their stories. It took me a moment to get used to moving so quickly from one deeply personal story to the next.

In the afternoon Bill and Dion took over, so Liz and I could have a break. We wandered around looking at the prize-winning marrows and the best cake in show. We voted on the 'People's Choice' photography competition, and bought ice cream in an attempt to cool down. We looked at home-made jewellery, then headed back to the Coffin Club stall. By the time the raffle winners were being called, the foot traffic had all but stopped. We packed the coffins onto Bill's trailer, said goodbye, and went our separate ways. I walked past the goat, still munching on hay. Dust coated my feet, hair and tongue. My legs ached from standing for so long, and my shirt stuck to the small of my back. It was a good day.

So, to answer the question: Are Katikati Coffin Club facilitating conversations about death and dying? The answer is yes. My experiences at the Katikati A&P show taught me that people do not even have to belong to the club to feel more comfortable talking about death. Simply being in the presence of a few coffins and a couple of friendly faces (who were already comfortable with the subject) was enough for most people. It underscored how normal talking about death really is, or should be. All we need is someone to start the conversation.

Finally

My supervisors suggested I think of one word to sum up what my thesis is truly about. One word that encapsulates the soul of this piece. For me that word is ‘craft’. This research project is about crafting: the crafting of a coffin, the crafting of a social space, of narratives, of identity, of relationships, and even the crafting of this thesis. The word ‘craft’ encompasses elements of storytelling, materiality and embodiment. It enables the crafter to give shape to death, grief, and their narrative. It holds both action and reflection, and can be simultaneously practical and metaphoric. If I dive deeper still into (and through) the realms of metaphor, I must consider all the meanings of the word. A synonym of the word ‘craft’ is ‘vessel’. A coffin is a vessel for a corpse, just as Coffin Club is a vessel for conversations about death and grief. Thus, ‘craft’ is a verb and a noun, at once concrete and abstract. More importantly, it is short and without pretension; an entirely fitting word to represent Coffin Club.

When I began attending Coffin Club, I thought I would find a space in which people spoke about death. I had pictured a group of people who dolefully worked on coffins, treating each as if it were the last and most important thing they would ever do. I envisaged mournful conversations in hushed tones, punctuated by the occasional meaningful sigh. I was wrong. Indeed, I did find a space where people sometimes talk about death and loss. But they also talk about life and joy and the collective merits of baking. And yes, they do make coffins, but not at all in the way I had imagined. Each is crafted together, a labour of care and community. They are built communally, joyfully, and noisily. Creativity abounds, as does camaraderie and laughter. Each coffin is a celebration, both of the person for whom it is intended, and of the people that build it. Coffin Club is so much more than simply a death-related support group, or a place to contemplate mortality. It is a community of people who work together to craft their coffins, relationships, and stories. I hope I have done them justice.

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