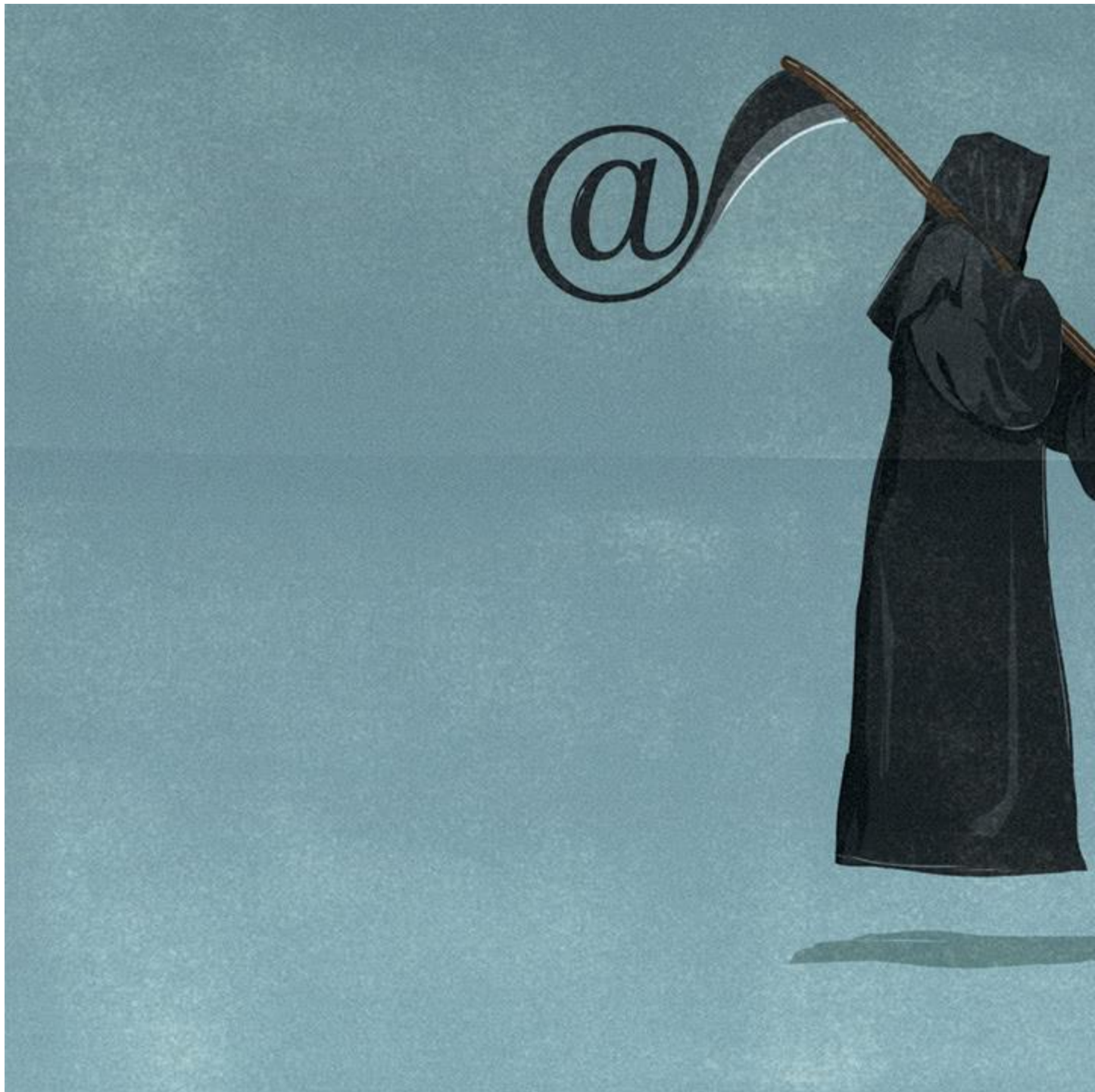




Making the reaper cheaper

Why undertakers are worried

The bereaved, better-informed, no longer always do what they are told or pay whatever they are asked



[Print edition | International](#)

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EVERY minute more than 100 people die. Most of these deaths bring not just grief to some, but also profit to others. America's 2.7m-odd deaths a year underpin an industry worth \$16bn in 2017, encompassing over 19,000 funeral

homes and over 120,000 employees. In France the sector is worth an estimated €2.5bn (\$3.1bn). The German market was worth €1.5bn in 2014 and employed nearly 27,000 people, a sixth of them undertakers. In Britain the industry, estimated to be worth around £2bn (\$2.8bn), employs over 20,000 people, a fifth of them undertakers.

In the coming decades, as baby-boomers hit old age, the annual death rate will climb from 8.3 per 1,000 people today to 10.2 by 2050 in America, from 10.6 to 13.7 in Italy and from 9.1 to 12.8 in Spain. Spotting the steady rise in clientele, money managers—from risk-seeking venture capitalists to boring old pension funds—have been getting into the death business. Last year the Ontario Teachers Pension Fund bought one of Spain's largest funeral businesses from 3i Group, a British private-equity firm, for £117m, and increased its stake in a French equivalent. The dead-body business is seen as highly predictable, uncorrelated with other industries, inflation-linked, low-risk and high-margin.

But in some of the world a profound shift is under way in what people want from funerals. As Thomas Lynch wrote in “The Undertaking” (1997), a wise book on practising his “dismal trade” in a small American town: “Every year I bury a couple hundred of my townspeople. Another two or three dozen I take to the crematory to be burned. I sell caskets, burial vaults and urns for the ashes. I have a sideline in headstones and monuments. I do flowers on commission.” Social, religious and technological change threaten to turn that model on its head.

In North America the modern undertaker's job is increasingly one of event-planning, says Sherri Tovell, an undertaker in Windsor, Canada. Among the requirements at her recent funerals have been a tiki hut, margaritas, karaoke and pizza delivery. Some people want to hire an officiant to lead a “life celebration”, others to shoot ashes into the skies with fireworks. Old-fashioned undertakers are hard put to find their place in such antics. Another trend—known as “direct cremation”—has no role for them at all.

Besides having to offer more diverse services, the trade also faces increased competition in its products. Its roots are in carpentry. “You'd buy an expensive casket and the funeral would be included in the price,” remembers Dan Isard, a funeral consultant in Phoenix, Arizona. The unwritten agreement

was that the dead would be treated with dignity and that families would not ask if there was an alternative to the \$1,000 or \$2,000 coffin, or whether embalming was really needed. The business has something in common with prostitution, reflects Dominic Akyel of the University of Cologne. It is legal (as prostitution is in some places) but taboo, “and certainly not to be discussed or haggled over”.

The undertaker used to be able to rely on a steady stream of customers who asked few questions and of whom he (and it was usually a he) would ask few in return. Protestant or Catholic? Open coffin or closed? And, in some parts of the world, burial or cremation? A new generation of customers, though, no longer unthinkingly hands over its dead to the nearest funeral director. They are looking elsewhere, be it to a new breed of undertaker, to hotel chains that “do” funerals, or—for their coffin or urn—to Amazon or Walmart.

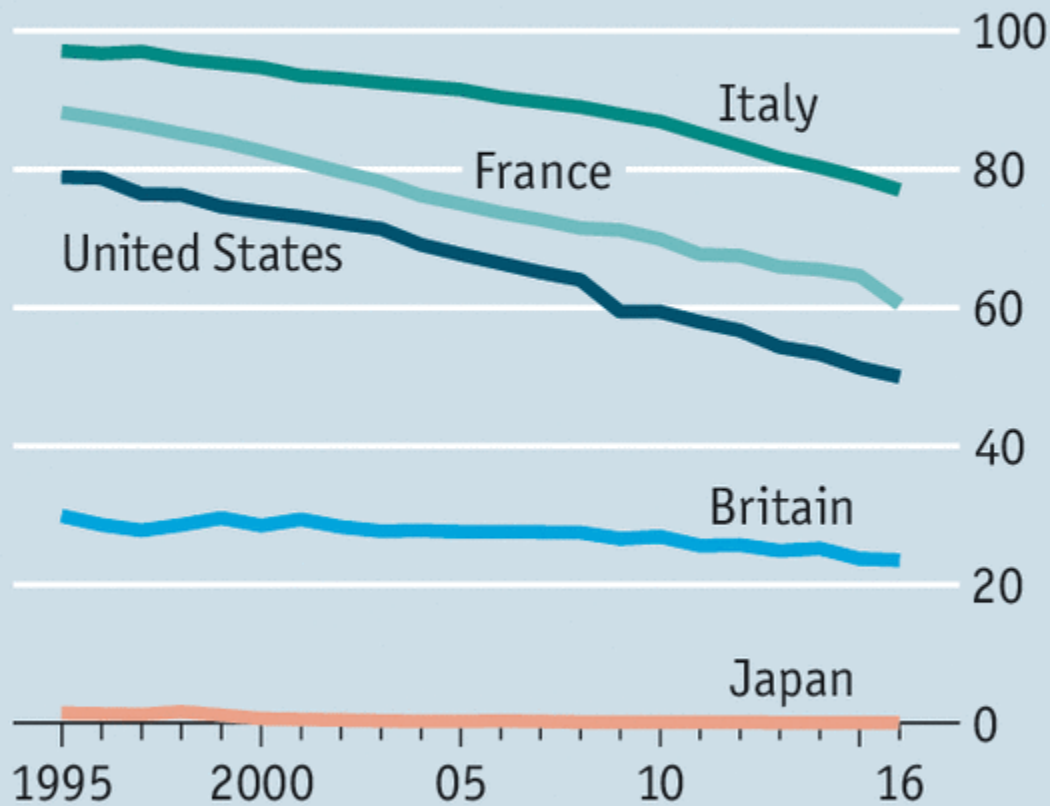
Stiff competition

“It’s happening in restaurants, nightclubs, wedding venues, country clubs and it’s very dangerous,” Bill McReavy, an undertaker from Minneapolis, told his vigorously nodding peers at the annual gathering of the American National Funeral Director Association (NFDA) in Boston last autumn. The NFDA expects the industry’s revenue to stagnate between 2016 and 2021.

One reason for this is a long-term trend towards cremation—both cheaper than burial, and open to a wider range of rituals. “You need two cremations to make the same as one burial,” says David Nixon, a funeral consultant in Illinois. As families move farther apart, relatives are less likely to tend to a grave in their hometown. As people increasingly identify with more than one locality, so they begin to hanker after more than one resting place.

Burning ambitions

Burials, % of all body disposals



Source: Cremation Society of Great Britain

Economist.com

In religious countries, burial is still the norm; Ireland buries 82% of its dead, Italy 77%. But over half of Americans are cremated, up from less than 4% in 1960 (see chart), and this is expected to rise to 79% by 2035. In Boston a Chinese delegation stocked up on free “Bereave-mints” but mainly came to learn about cremation, which rose in China from 33% in 1995 to 50% by 2012. In Japan, where the practice is seen as purification for the next life, it is nearly universal.

Cremation can get cheaper still. In an industrial park just west of Amsterdam, a low-rise building houses the headquarters of several budget funeral websites, all of them routes into the same company, Uitvaart24 (Funeral24), and offering direct cremation: a simple coffin, transport, cooling and burning without relatives present, at a price of around €1,250. “Our customers either don’t have the money or are sensible enough not to want to spend it,” says Jan-Jaap Palma, one of the owners. The business only started three years ago and now handles over 2,600 funerals a year. Mr Palma aspires to become the Netherlands’ largest funeral-provider.

An increasing number, of whom David Bowie, who died in 2016, was probably the best-known, are taking this direct-cremation route. In America a third of cremations are now direct. Dignity, Britain’s only publicly listed funeral provider, started offering “Simplicity Cremations” last year. Simon Cox, a spokesman, expects 10% of British cremations to be direct by 2030. This is not driven just by cost. Many mourners still commemorate their loved ones. They simply separate this from body disposal and may not see any reason to include an undertaker. With no body to worry about, they can arrange an event of their own at a local hotel at a time of their choosing. “The sombre Victorian funeral is slowly being replaced by more upbeat personal celebrations,” says Mr Cox.



At the convention in Boston, this separation of the body and the ceremony is seen as a worrying trend. “Where’s the guest of honour? ...No visitation and empty casket, no embalming. What’s the point?” asks Michael Nicodemus, an undertaker in Virginia, arms aloft in exasperation as he shows a slide of an empty coffin. Classes such as “Mastering cremation phone-inquiries” teach

attending undertakers how to deal with that tricky “how much is cremation?” phone-call. When the pretend customer, “Helen”, asks if she can bring an urn from Hobby Lobby, a crafts shop, she is reminded these are not designed for cremated remains. To a customer who is “just shopping around” the undertakers are taught to say, “I admire your due diligence”, and suggest asking budget cremators how they’ll know for sure that the cremated remains are their loved one’s.

The Green Reaper

Cremation, direct or otherwise, is not the only rival to old-fashioned burial. A study in 2015 found that over 60% of Americans in their 40s and older would consider a “green” burial, with no embalming and a biodegradable casket, if any. Five years before the proportion was just over 40%. Jimmy Olson, an undertaker in Wisconsin specialising in green funerals, says it is inconsistent “for someone who’s recycled all their life and drives a Prius to then be put under the ground in a concrete vault, plastic-sealed casket and with their body pumped full of chemicals.”

Americans each year bury 70,000 cubic metres of hardwood, mostly bought at a hefty mark-up from undertakers—enough to build 2,000 single-family houses. They use 1.6m tonnes of reinforced concrete for vaults. Cremation is gaining popularity in part because it seems less wasteful. But burning (ever larger) bodies takes energy. A conventional gas-fired crematorium blasts 320kg of carbon into the atmosphere per body (the equivalent of a 20-hour car journey) and two to four grams of mercury from teeth fillings.

Britain now has over 270 green cemeteries, and 9% of funerals are now green, according to SunLife, an insurer. The appeal is more than just the lack of waste. Gordon Tulley and his wife run two green burial parks, one in a meadow in Lincolnshire, one in woodland in Yorkshire. Unembalmed bodies in a simple shroud or willow casket are buried in shallow graves under trees. “Six feet under [the standard elsewhere] is too deep for bacteria to break down the body,” explains Mr Tulley. Parks are far more pleasant to visit than cemeteries, both before and after a death. You can pre-book exactly where you would like to be laid to rest, explains Mr Tulley’s website: “We do not bury in rows but wherever you or your family feel most happy with.” Some terminally ill people have family picnics where they will be buried. For a

child to visit a grave site with happy memories of a then living parent is no small thing.

Such changes in “consumer preference” unnerve most undertakers. Responses range from outrage to embracing change; most stick their heads in the dirt. All these reactions were on display at the NFDA’s gathering. If it had a catchphrase, it was “They don’t know what they don’t know.” This refers to the undertaker’s supposed need to “educate” the public about the value of ceremony, commemoration and—crucially—the undertaker. But not every undertaker is fighting change with fearmongering or tut-tutting. Some see the necessity of change. According to an industry veteran, the convention—which opened to the song “Best Day Of My Life”—“used to be all hardware; hearses, coffins and embalming products. Now it’s all about services,” he says gesturing to a group of bright young things who help get undertakers onto Facebook and Instagram.

Take Mr Olson. Trained as a music teacher, he bought a funeral business in Wisconsin, converted one of its two chapels into a dining hall and became the NFDA’s go-to guy for green funerals. Walker Posey, whose grandfather was a carpenter and whose father runs a traditional funeral business in South Carolina, wants one day to turn the family firm into a “life celebrations” company, doing weddings and baby showers as much as funerals. “To appeal to non-traditional folks,” Mark Musgrove, from Oregon, sells spaces for urns in a hippy-themed, refitted Volkswagen bus in his cemetery. “The need to grieve is unchanged,” he says. “You just need to find different ways to express it. A picture at a [barbecue] will be more meaningful to some than looking at a body.”

Rather than just accommodating themselves to what their customers want, some undertakers are actually promoting change. Engineers have for decades searched for a socially acceptable alternative to burying or burning. Some crematoriums in North America now offer alkaline hydrolysis, often marketed as “green”, “water”, or “flameless” cremation. If the water companies can get past their squeamishness about dissolved dead people in the sewers, Britain will soon follow suit. The process involves dissolving the body in an alkaline solution and then crushing the bones to dust. It typically produces less than a seventh of the carbon of normal cremation. Joe Wilson, from Bio-response Solutions, which sells flameless-cremation machines, says

families choose it for environmental reasons but also because it seems gentler than fire.

The company's latest offering is a flameless pet-cremation machine. Nearly one in five American undertakers now offer dead-pet cremations; Mintel, a market-research firm, says one in four British pet-owners either have already arranged, or would like to in future, some sort of send-off for their furry friends. Mr Tulley sells "Togetherness Resting Places" in his green burial grounds, where pets and humans can be reunited "when the time comes". The Bio-Response machine has room for up to 20 domestic pets at a time, each in its own compartment. "But only one hippo," adds Mr Wilson, intriguingly.

Another way to make money out of cremations is to do more with the ashes. Ascension, a British startup, releases them at "the edge of space"—after a 30km balloon ascent—and offers a video of the process.

Pointing to her earrings, Lori Cronin, who works in the industry, says "My Mom is in my ears, I take her wherever I go, I even swim with her." SecuriGene, a Canadian Biotech firm, invites people to "celebrate life in its purest form" by sending in a blood sample of the deceased and \$500, in return for which it will send a small stainless steel capsule with the extracted DNA.

As far-sighted undertakers extend into the exotic, more mundane colleagues find themselves undercut on the basics. Amazon, Alibaba and Walmart sell a range of coffins and urns online. So far relatively few people buy, but they do learn what they cost—and notice their undertaker's often quite dramatic mark-up. In America income from selling such products, still accounting for nearly a third of undertakers' revenue, has been falling for the past five years, according to the NFDA. So has revenue from preparing bodies (another 14%), the main skill taught at mortuary school.

Technology brings a clientele better informed in other ways, too. Reviews of undertakers on Google or sites such as Yelp are becoming more common. In America Funeralocity lets people compare prices. Dignity is in dispute with Beyond, a British comparison site, which last year claimed it was charging customers far more than the market rate. In the last quarter of 2017, Dignity's warnings about growing price competition from new entrants led to a sharp

share-price drop. The fall continued in January, when it felt forced to slash its prices to preserve market share.

“Google yourself!” barks one of the trainers at an NFDA seminar on dealing with millennials. “Change or get left behind,” says the other. “It’s all about the hashtag.” Instilling in the profession insights into use of social media can be an uphill task, says Zachary Garbow, who left IBM with a colleague to start a company called Funeral Innovations. He says they have to advise undertakers who want to plaster Facebook with pictures of hearses and coffins: “No, please don’t do that; don’t advertise death.”

More and more mourners want to live-stream funerals: many venues in Britain enable such virtual attendance. Tribute and funeral videos, often online, are ever more popular. FuneralOne in Michigan sells software that helps create thousands a year. At the Boston shindig a young man dressed in rock-star black gestures towards a drone that his team flies around the country to film backdrops for these “Personalised Life Tributes”. Nearby undertakers cover their ears at the thumping soundtrack that goes with his presentation.

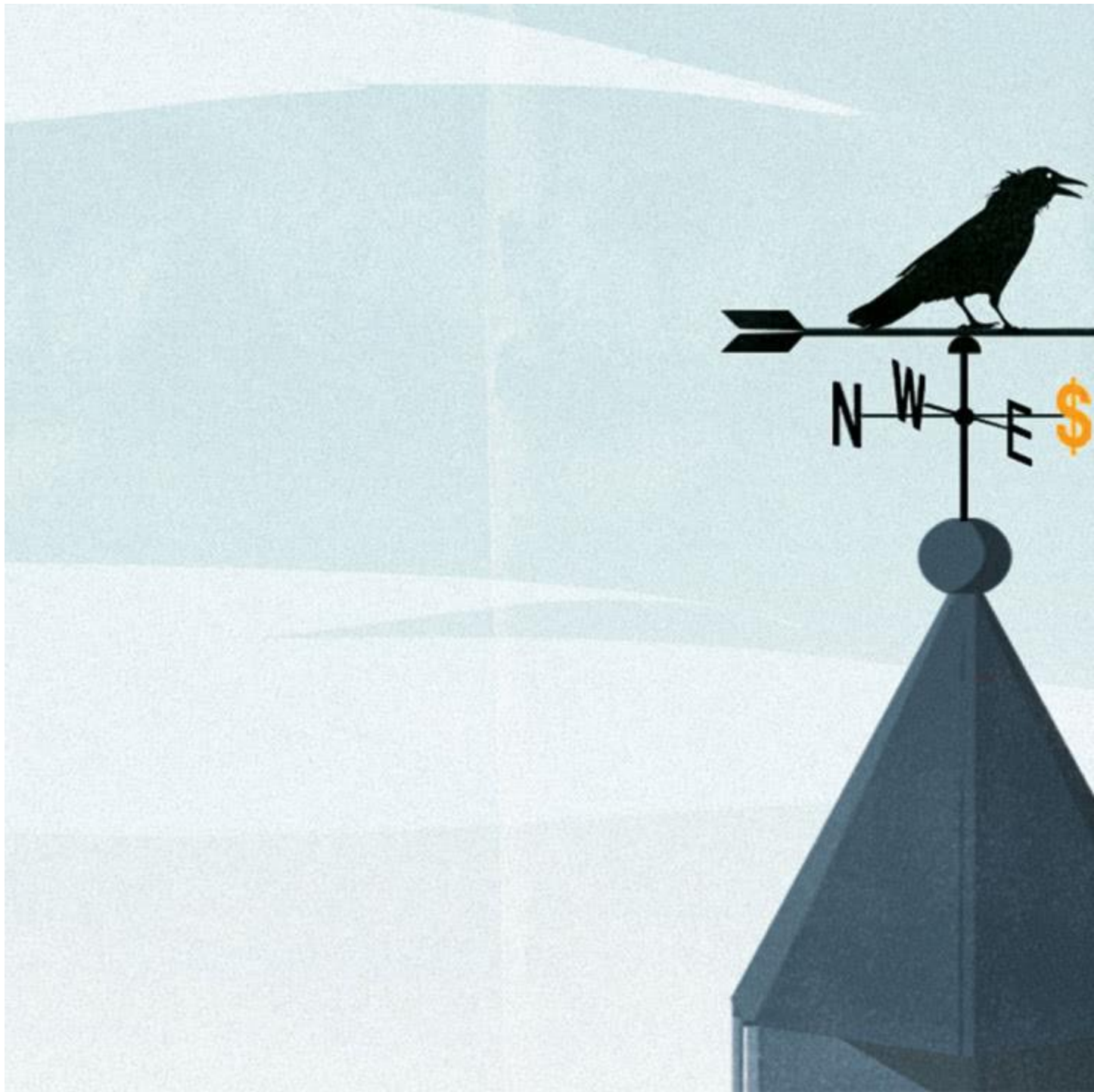
The dead have two lives, explained Robert Hertz, a sociologist, in a paper in 1907: one in nature, as matter, and one in culture, as social beings. The internet greatly expands that second realm, and businesses are jumping in to help, with “virtual candles” and QR-codes that can be stuck to a tombstone linking to an online-tribute page. Facebook now offers “Memorialised Accounts” to clarify the status of deceased users. Many profiles are kept up and running years after a user dies. Over a third of those who have signed up with Cake, a startup trying to nudge people to share their end-of-life wishes, want their Facebook account to stay live after death.

Franklin Roosevelt might have liked Cake. His family found the four pages with his instructions—for a “service of the utmost simplicity”, a simple wood coffin, no hearse, no embalming and a grave not lined with cement or stones—only a few days after most of those wishes had been ignored. It was this that led Jessica Mitford to write “The American Way of Death” in 1963: “Odds are that the undertaker will be the arbiter of what is a “suitable” funeral...Even if [the deceased] is the president of the United States.” In an updated edition published posthumously in 1998, Mitford was disappointed

at how little had changed: prices had kept rising and undertakers still sold services customers did not know they could refuse or felt too embarrassed to question.

A noble undertaking

Had Mitford a grave to rise from (she hasn't; her ashes were scattered at sea), she might be pleased by some of the changes slowly shaking the industry, if acerbic about some of their aesthetics. Mr Lynch, who in 2013 co-wrote and published another book, "The Good Funeral", finds his industry its own worst enemy. An emphasis on selling things, and thus "mistaking stuff for substance", has led to public distrust. But he is a staunch defender of the essence of the undertaker's role: "a promise to get the dead to where they need to go".



“The public is right to be wary of being sold boxes,” he says. “Anyone with a catalogue and a credit-card machine can make such a sale. It’s the service to the body that you call an undertaker for.” Such service will always be needed, whether it leads to direct cremation, or soft decay beneath a growing tree, or a rocket in the night sky, and however closely linked it is to the

commemorations of life that come after that. Undertakers who understand this probably have nothing to fear.

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