Karen Wyatt: Hello, and welcome to Death Expo. This is a special event hosted by End of Life University. I'm Dr. Karen Wyatt, the founder of End of Life University, and your host for Death Expo. I'm so glad you're able to join us today. I think we're going to have a fantastic conversation, and I'm really excited. My guest today is Caitlin Doughty who is a Mortician and Funeral Director in Los Angeles, and ever since I saw the first video of her YouTube series, *Ask a Mortician*, I've been wanting to talk to Caitlin, so I'm very excited she's here today. I will tell you a little bit more about her.

Caitlin was born and spent her childhood in Oahu, Hawaii, and after high school attended the University of Chicago where she graduated in Medieval History. She then moved to California where her first job in the funeral industry was as a Crematory Operator. Since then she has worked as a Funeral Arranger, Body Van Transport Driver, and returned to Cypress College for her second degree in Mortuary Science. Currently she works as a Licensed Funeral Director and Mortician in Los Angeles, and is in the process of opening her own alternative funeral service, Undertaking LA. The Order of the Good Death was founded in 2011, with the goal of bringing the realistic discussion of death back into popular culture.

Caitlin's web series *Ask a Mortician* and the Order website have lead to features on National Public Radio, BBC, *The Huffington Post*, *The LA Times*, Jezzebel.com, Forbes*, Bust Magazine* and *Salon*. Caitlin's first book, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory*, is a *New York Times Best-Seller*, and she's currently on a book tour and taking time out from that tour to talk with us today. She frequently gives talks on the history of death culture, funerals, and the funeral industry. In 2014 she'll be presenting for groups as diverse as The Center for Inquiry, South by Southwest Interactive, Dan Savage's Live Lovecast, Upright Citizens Brigade, and the Ontario Coroner's Association. You can find Caitlin at her website, Orderofthegooddeath.com, as well as on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Caitlin, thank you so much for joining me today, and I really appreciate you taking time out to be here.

Caitlin Doughty: Thanks for having me. That was quite an introduction. That's everything I've ever done in my entire life.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, we kind of just summed the whole thing up right there. *[Laughter]*

Caitlin Doughty: Let's not even do the interview. I'm spent.

Karen Wyatt: Actually I know from reading your book and studying your website, you have tons more. You have so much information and knowledge to share with us, so I really want to dive into some of that. Normally I ask my guests what in your life lead you to where you are right now, to this work you're doing around death and dying? I know you have a story about that, because I read it in your book, and I wonder if you'd tell our listeners who aren't familiar with you, a little bit about what makes a young person like you interested in working in the funeral industry?

Caitlin Doughty: Well I had always been very interested in death. I think the story you're probably talking about is that I witnessed a traumatic death when I was young, and that for me doesn't explain it for me. It's too easy a way out to say, "Oh, you saw something negative death-wise when you were a child, and now it makes total sense that you're this weird, dark person in the funeral industry, because you saw this trauma and it put you in a weird place." as opposed to the fact that we all should be interacting with death, and understanding death, and being involved in death, and I really felt that absence throughout my life and throughout my childhood, because I didn't have a better relationship with death, and I guess something always felt a little off for me.

So when I graduated with a Medieval History Degree, which was very death-y in its nature, I got a job in San Francisco, Oakland, actually, working at a crematory, which means I was the one who cremated the bodies when they came in. That was the real transformation point for me, because it became clear to me just how distant from death we really were in our culture, and all of the things that might need to happen to get that relationship up and going again. That started the seven year, almost eight year journey I've been on to change that.

Karen Wyatt: One thing, I'm a retired hospice physician, and many of the conversations we have in this series are about how we can improve the way we take care of the dying in this country, but what impressed me from reading your book and your

materials is your point that we also need to learn how to take care of the dead, and our problem with taking care of the elderly, and the dying, is we don't want to look at death at all, and we've really distanced ourselves from caring for the dead, and we won't be able to improve end of life care unless we do both. We have to look at all of it.

Caitlin Doughty: Absolutely. That's definitely why I talk about The Good Death, and have the Order of the Good Death, and I think The Good Death is absolutely a multi-pronged attack on the way that we're currently doing things, and that includes things before death, during the process of death, and after the death occurs. We need allies in all different parts of the system, especially hospice and especially funeral directors to have the whole series of events that leads up to the person being prepared to die – no one's ever really completely prepared to die, but being informed of all of their choices, being aware of what they can and cannot do, having all the options available to them, and also being comfortable with what's going to happen to their body, and this family having some kind of ritual or some kind of closure when the death occurs. It's a process that's not just one part of it. It needs everybody involved, and that's what we're doing here, and that's what you're doing, and I'm doing.

Karen Wyatt: Your book, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, is filled with stories, many fascinating stories, of families that you worked with that lost someone, and you were involved with some sort of disposition of the body in your work, but one part I found heartbreaking is how many times families decided to forego a ritual, and how many times there was nothing like a ritual present, and I feel like that's a big issue in our society and something you talk about as well.

Caitlin Doughty: It is. So often it was just me in the crematory, and it was almost like a body disposal factory of some kind. We had two big cremation machines going, and we would process the bodies, and I would put them in the machines, and do the cremation, and there was no one in there with me. I really was their factory worker in a sense. I tried to have great respect for the people I was cremating, and tried to be present, and look at their faces, but I wasn't their family. I didn't know them, and there's no way to change that. So it was a feeling of incompleteness for these people, and we had something called a witness cremation, which allowed

people to come in and witness the body being loaded into the machine, and do whatever ritual might feel comfortable to them, push the button to start the process, etc… but really few people took us up on that, and I hoped to keep promoting that as a way that, whether you're religious or secular, you can have something to do, and be part of the process, and not just feel like you're calling the funeral director to take away the body, never to be seen again.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, and I was just shocked to read – you can actually purchase a cremation online without even going to visit your deceased loved one in the hospital, nursing home, wherever they are. You can purchase a cremation online and receive the ashes by mail. I didn't realize that even existed.

Caitlin Doughty: No, it sure does. You put your info into the internet, tell them what hospital Dad is at, send the forms in, and two weeks later, 10 working days later, you get a box, certified mail you have to send for, that's his ashes, and that's the only interaction. You never actually have to speak to anyone at all, or see the body, or have any interactions. It's death entirely removed.

Karen Wyatt: Wow, and yes, that's as far removed as you can get, I would think, and that was shocking to me. I know, I'm interviewing several grief counselors, and they've talked about the importance of ritual for families, and dealing with their grief, and letting go, and saying goodbye to the loved one. So it feels like this step in this direction of more technology is really going to do us harm in the long run. We're already at that place where we're experiencing harm because we're not embracing death, and not even experiencing it fully, and celebrating it fully, in our lives.

Caitlin Doughty: I think that's true and it's important to remember when you say ritual, there are people who are more secular, or are areligious who say, "Yeah, but what ritual am I supposed to do?" It's important to remember that ritual doesn't have to be connected to religion at all. Ritual is simply the act of a transition of some kind, and what's more of a transition than death? Not much. It's simply the act of being present, whether it's just sitting with the body, or washing the body, or doing some ritual with the ashes after it takes place. Just things to acknowledge that this person was part of the fabric of the community, and now they're not anymore.

They're gone and that hole is going to be there. There's a phrase that we use. Grief waits. You can say that you're going to have this cremation on the internet. "I'm not going to interact with this death at all." But if this was someone you loved, or someone you hated, but was a big part of your life, that grief is going to wait for you, and it's going to be in your subconscious, and it's going to come out in different, more negative ways. It's not possible to just bypass the grief process.

Karen Wyatt: Mm-hmm. That's such a good point, because I once read a survey that was done with patients in a mental health center waiting room. They were patients who were coming for some sort of counseling or mental health therapy, and over time they found that approximately 50 percent of the patients who were coming for treatment had some history of unresolved grief in their lives. So whether we can say cause and effect, but it makes sense. It does come back to us and it does rise up again in our lives in one way or another.

Caitlin Doughty: Absolutely, and this is actually kind of a tacky example, but if you've ever seen the show *Hoarders*, the show on TLC where people are horrific hoarders, what was surprising to me, and this is not science or anything, but each story, each narrative, the turning point was where they became a hoarder, has to do with, "I lost my mother and I never got over it." Or, "My husband died and then it started." Every single one of them has to do with some kind of death story and unresolved grief. I think there's a lot of mental illness in our country that does have its roots in unresolved grief, whether on someone's deathbed that you loved, your own death that you can't come to terms with, a death you witnessed. I think death runs through the fabric of a lot of our problems engaging with the world.

Karen Wyatt: Uh-huh. Absolutely. One thing I really enjoyed and found fascinating in your book is you traced a lot of the history of death and dying in our culture and society, and the funeral industry, and I've seen it as well in the medical field, I've seen how medicine has distanced the dying process, and almost ignored it, almost decided that dying doesn't have to happen. We'll find enough technology or enough medications. We can hold death off. I've seen it in my own profession, but you've written very honestly about the

funeral industry and how the funeral industry has had a hand in some ways in our denial of death.

Caitlin Doughty: Right, and the medical industry, the funeral industry, it really was around the same time, the 1920s, the 1930s, where they came in, and everything became professionalized, because prior to that period, people used to die at home, and not only did they die at home, but the body was taken care of at the home. Then it became no, no, no, you have to die at the hospital where dying can be regulated, and safe, and sanitized, then the body needs to go to a funeral home where it can be regulated, and safe, and sanitized. These things that families had been doing themselves for thousands of years of human history, was taken into the hands of professionals.

Funeral directors, the way they started, funeral directors were experts with the dead body. They were just people who sold you things. They sold you use of a funeral carriage. They were cabinet makers who knew how to make coffins. They were people who sold you mourning rings, or mourning fans to give away at the funeral. They weren't "professionals", quote unquote. But when embalming came in, chemical preservation of the body, it was decided that they needed to professionalize. They needed to be people who did this job that nobody else was qualified to do, and that's when the push towards professionalization happened.

That's I think where we went wrong, in a way, because everybody is qualified to take care of a dead body. Not everyone is qualified to perform medicine, on a body, necessarily, but everyone is qualified to take care of a dead body, and that's where I think the sense of what a funeral home is, and what a funeral director is, went wrong.

Karen Wyatt: And as I think about it, in our own society, as we were evolving from the Victorian Era to a quote "Modern Society", I can see it was thought to be more modern to deal with illness, and death, and dying, in this new way, and it was embraced by people because they wanted to be on board with the latest and newest trends. So I can kind of see why that transition happened, and why people almost innocently embraced it without having any idea what the consequences would be down the road for our society as a whole.

Caitlin Doughty: Sure, and there was an obsession with sanitation coming out of the Victorian Era as well, which in some ways, obviously in a medical context, is good, taking our germs serious, it's good that we know about that, and the improvement in water quality, and the way that we perform medicine or surgery, obviously drastically improved. I think it was that and this sense in some ways, grief is part of the process of taking care of a loved one, is very hard, and being able to pay someone to do it for you, especially someone who's holding themselves out as qualified professionals who know exactly what to do with the body, is appealing, and it makes you feel like you're doing the right thing. This is what I should be doing. Because it's death and we're afraid to talk about it, there's not a lot of questioning of that system.

Karen Wyatt: And I remember – I probably won't state this right, but I remember a quote from your book, something about the privilege of developed society to not have to see corpses in our day to day life, whereas in third world countries, that's a common daily experience. I'm not sure I expressed that properly.

Caitlin Doughty: Yes, that's pretty much exactly it. Talk about first world privilege. That's seen in the way that we get to live. There are people who are 50 years old, 60 years old, my mother included, who until recently, had never seen a dead body in their lives, because we do so well at hiding them. We have unmarked vans who pull up to the backdoors of hospitals, to pick up the bodies. People come to hospices in the dead of night and sneak the person out the back. In hospitals there are gurneys that have holes in them to put the body and a flat top over it so you can't tell there's a body under the sheet.

So there's all these systems in place to make sure nobody ever comes into contact with a dead body, whereas if you're in a place like India, on the Ganges, there's dead bodies floating down the Ganges. There's cremations happening next to the river. In many third world countries, there's all manner of interaction with the corpses, and corpses being paraded down public streets, just things that we would never see in a first world country, and it's a privilege, but a privilege loosely defined, because in some ways I'm not sure that it is a privilege.

Karen Wyatt: Exactly, because we've lost so much. We've lost so much of our appreciation of what it means to be alive, how precious every moment of life is when we're not aware of death and we don't even understand that this life is fragile, and we can lose it at any moment. We take life for granted.

Caitlin Doughty: Sure. When you don't see death, or dying, or dead bodies, what is there to say that death is real at all? There's no proof. You've never really seen anything that tells you that death is real other than TV, which is obviously fake and the person can pop back up again if it's a person on a cartoon or a person on a crime show. They're still alive. They're still living, so what is there really tangible to tell you that life is finite?

Karen Wyatt: Exactly, and without facing that, facing the finiteness of life, you miss out on the depth of life and the deeper meaning of life, because you're not compelled to search that out. You don't have a driving force within you that says, "I need to understand why I'm here before I leave, before this life is over. I've got to figure it out." If you don't ever realistically address the issue, there's nothing that propels you towards that search for meaning.

Caitlin Doughty: I agree with you, and it's important to remember that death is the driving force of creativity and everything we do, really, as a human species, and we are one of the few species that know and understand death, and the fact that we do know and understand death is why we have become the dominant species on Earth. If we don't keep that relationship with death going, we can do a lot of harm to the Earth because we think we're above death, and the death of ourselves, our species, our planet.

Karen Wyatt: Exactly. We don't even recognize that destroying our own planet will ultimately destroy us. As you said, we think we're above that.

Caitlin Doughty: Spoiler, it will. Those things are infinitely connected.

Karen Wyatt: Well I wanted to ask you about – first of all, I want to ask about everything. I want to ask about The Order of the Good Death, and how you formed that group, and what your goals are for that. I know it's a website, but it's kind of a group, a community of people.

Caitlin Doughty: Right. The Order of the Good Death was founded I guess almost four years ago now, and originally the idea was to get together people who wanted to have a public conversation about death, people who were doing something, who were professionals, who were artists, who were academics in the death sphere, somehow, who were doing a good job at putting information out there, who were doing really fascinating projects, and who wanted to I guess be an example of having an open conversation about death, and working in death.

It's grown and grown and grown since then. It started with probably eight people, and it's grown substantially since then, and now the idea is anybody can be a member of the Order of the Good Death if they have the same principles we do which is that this is a fascinating time to be involved in the conversation about death, and it's a fascinating time to work in innovation around death. We should all be having this open dialogue about it. So yeah, it's grown to that, and we now have something called Death Salon which grew out of the Order of the Good Death, and Death Salons are public conversation events.

We had the first one in LA. We had the next one in London. We just had one in San Francisco, and we're bringing it back to LA at the Getty Villa, the Getty Museum. They're day-long or sometimes multi day-long presentations of people in the order, or adjacent to the order, sharing their work, sharing their research, and having the public come in and get much more of an intimate view of what these people are working on, and being able to keep the conversation going that way. So it's really grown and I'm really proud of what we've been able to do in the past couple of years.

Karen Wyatt: That's wonderful. So I'm thinking there will be some listeners here, to our conversation, who may like to apply and become a member of the Order of the Good Death, so I would encourage people to do that if you feel you have something to contribute. We need more of this. This is my feeling, as much networking, and connecting as we can do, we will be increasing the power of this movement.

Caitlin Doughty: Absolutely, and the idea now is that again, anybody can be a member. The people who are on the website are people

I'm working in direct collaboration with, but I'm always looking for new collaborators, especially people in the medical field, because originally it was much more geared towards people working post-mortem, pathologists, funeral directors, academics about mortuary history, but it's really become a point now where we do want the continuum of collaboration. Like we were talking about hospice workers, medical professionals, people who are involved, grief counselors, people who are involved in all parts of the death and dying process.

Karen Wyatt: That makes so much sense because we really do need to address the whole issue and all sides of the moment of death, both sides of that, if we're going to make progress in this country in how we deal with that.

Caitlin Doughty: I agree.

Karen Wyatt: All right. So that's just one thing. I would encourage people to go to the orderofthegooddeath.com, and check out that website, and see if there is a way to become involved in it. I just have to tell you how much I really enjoyed your videos, Caitlin, on the *Ask a Mortician* series, because it appears to me that you're really attracting a younger audience through those videos. I'm not sure but I'm seeing you've had as many as 100,000 views on some of your videos, and I'm guessing that would be younger people, and I love it that you're putting this information out there, that people of all ages can consume in a way that is appropriate for them. I'm just curious how you got the inspiration to do it.

Caitlin Doughty: Thank you very much, and it is – there really is people of all ages who watch them, but the majority are younger people, people in their 20s and 30s, but really all ages and spectrums do watch them. But *Ask a Mortician* came about – I was working at a funeral home here in Los Angeles, and I had just started The Order of the Good Death, and was looking for ways to get information out there, and there was this woman who was the Vice President of the company, and she was making informational videos for the company, and they were very – they were not the best. They were like, "Here are the cremation options you don't know about." At the end of the video you could see her walk up and turn off the camera. *[Laughter]*

Ah, cringe. I was looking at it and thinking, why didn't they just ask me to do this? I don't know anything about video editing, but obviously teenagers on YouTube can figure it out. I can probably figure it out. I know I would be more dynamic than this person, bless her heart. But I guess I came to the conclusion of I could be doing not videos for the company, but videos for my own work, and for my own advocacy work, for The Order of the Good Death. So I put out the first *Ask a Mortician*, I guess it would be three years ago now, almost exactly, November 2011. That's exactly three years ago, right?

Karen Wyatt: Yeah.

Caitlin Doughty: I put my first one out and it was successful almost immediately, and it's been great ever since. I don't make as many as I should, because they're a little more difficult than they look. There's the Dolly Parton quote that says, "It costs a lot to look this cheap." *[Laughter]* It takes a lot of time to make something as cheaply made as the videos do, but yeah, it's been a really good tool to get people – the idea is to make people comfortable having questions about death, and me saying hey, it's totally fine to be fascinated by death, and mortality, and these questions aren't deviant, and they aren't wrong, and there are people out there who want to answer them for you.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, I think it's fantastic, because one of the facets of changing how we deal with death is just educating people, but also validating the people who already have curiosity, and interest, and questions, and giving them a safe space where, hey, it's okay. Bring up your questions and let's have a conversation about it. In the videos I feel at least – this is my impression – that you strike the perfect balance of being factual and humorous at the same time, without being disrespectful at all of the dead, but you're able to bring humor into the video so the viewer is totally comfortable watching and is totally fascinated in everything that you're saying. I just think you've done a masterful job at putting those together.

Caitlin Doughty: Well thank you. I like this interview, very good to hear. *[Laughter]* That is really – walking that line is really a big part of what I do, is trying to figure out – there are a lot of websites that do really good work but have graphics of trees, and it's about the end of life, and those are good, but

they don't really get younger people, especially excited, to get involved in end of life issues. Then you have the opposite end of the spectrum where there's gore, or too many details, and that puts people off as well.

Trying to strike that balance between those two things where you can be funny and irreverent, but not disrespectful, or gory, or overly intense, is really what I try to do. And you're right, there is a sense of, are you preaching to the choir here? Are these people already interested to come watch a video like this? yes, in a way I am preaching to the choir sometimes, but my view on it is the more of us there are, the louder the choir becomes, the more that people will hear us.

Karen Wyatt: And you know what's interesting, because as a hospice medical director, I'm part of the choir I guess, but honestly I don't know that much about the funeral industry, or embalming, or corpses, or decomposition. I don't know that information either, so that's one reason it's been fascinating for me to think, oh, guess what, my medical training completely left out everything that happens after the last breath, and in many cases left out those weeks before the last breath as well.

Caitlin Doughty: Right, and I hear that all the time from doctors, and from hospice. You'd think hospice people, especially they would be very – they would make sure very much that you were trained in all of these issues, because families tell me all the time how amazing the hospice workers are talking them through the dying process, and you want the hospice worker also to know about the death process and how to advise the families there as well.

Karen Wyatt: And especially because at the time of death, and I picked this up from your book as well, there's so many misconceptions about what the law says you can do with the dead body. I'd love for you to just enlighten our listeners right now a little bit because most of us don't really know what the law says. You assume you have to call a funeral home immediately if someone dies in your home, and they have to pick up the body right away, so maybe you could just fill us in a bit on what does the law say.

Caitlin Doughty: Sure. It's a little tricky because laws are different in each state. Each state has their own Cemetery and Funeral Board that does the laws there, but what's universal across all 50 states is that you can keep that body in your home and do the death care for the first couple of days yourself. You don't need to hire a funeral director. In some states – there are about eight states where you do need to have a funeral director involved in what is called "the final disposition", so the funeral director can come transport the body, or take it to the cemetery, or do the death certificate.

But in those states, you do not need a funeral director to do the initial care of the body, the washing of the body, the having it in the home and laying it out. You can do that on your own and it's especially easy if somebody was on hospice care and did die at home, and is already in the home. That can be a really beautiful, powerful experience. Dead bodies are not dangerous. Every once in a while, in the case of something like Ebola, or SARS or some wildly communicable disease, a dead body will be dangerous, but that's not a dead body that would have died peacefully at home in their bed. That would be a body that died under watch in the hospital, and the doctors wouldn't just let you take it home.

But every other body, cancer, HIV, heart attack, kidney disease, all of those bodies are very safe to handle in the home, and they don't become more dangerous when they die, somehow. So the family really is empowered to have the body there, and take the time they need, and they don't have to hand it over to a funeral director if they're not ready.

Karen Wyatt: And that's really where a lot of death midwives and death doulas come in to help the family at that time with the preparation of the body, and maybe even helping the family create a ritual at that point.

Caitlin Doughty: Yeah. There are a lot of people – you can say that, and of course my grand ideal is that the family wants to do everything themselves, and has so much information, they're completely empowered, but that's a little high in the sky at this point because we've become so distant from death. So it really does help to have people like death midwives, or even a really sympathetic funeral director who can come in and hold their hands a little bit, and say,

"Okay, I know you're not totally comfortable moving the body or dressing the body. Here. Let me show you how this can be done." Letting the family take the lead but being there for any questions or concerns that they have.

Karen Wyatt: That's really wonderful. I think it's so important that we be aware of what our options are, and even for hospice workers to know when they're counseling a family, what the options are, so they're not just pushing, "Let's call the funeral home right now and have them pick up the body." They're not pushing in that direction, but opening it up in case the family would like to keep their loved one at home longer.

Caitlin Doughty: It's the simplest thing, because people always want to know what their options are and what they can do. So if they ask the hospice worker, "What do I do when they die?" Even just a simple answer as, "It depends on how much you want to be involved. You could do everything from keeping the body in the home, to having it picked up right away by a funeral home or crematorium." Just knowing the simple options, knowing there's a whole continuum of what they can choose, in a way having that choice can be incredibly empowering for a family at a time when they feel like they have no power at all, because somebody they love is dying and there's nothing they can do about it.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, and I'm impressed. I mean, you yourself are a licensed funeral director and technician, so you are an example that there are some funeral directors out there, it sounds like, who are sympathetic, who could be consulted and would be helpful at the time of death for families who want an alternative.

Caitlin Doughty: Absolutely, and it has to come – I guess what I would say is that I don't know that funeral directors are going to change necessarily on their own, and the structure of the funeral industry is going to change on its own, because there's not much incentive for it to do so. The biggest change in the funeral industry in the last 20 years has been cremation, has been the astronomical rise in the level of cremation, and that's because people were demanding it. Families were demanding it and funeral directors were having to adjust if they wanted to stay open.

So the same thing is going to happen with things like home funerals that we're talking about, or natural burials for instance where you're just buried not in a heavy casket in a vault underground, but just buried naturally in the ground, in a shroud, or decomposing casket. Those are things that we have to demand as families, and advocate for, and that's hard to do when you're in the middle of a death, and you're not thinking about what a great advocate you can be. You're thinking about your grief, but the more we plan ahead and know to demand these things, the more the funeral industry will have to adjust to keep up with what the community and the family wants.

Karen Wyatt: And that makes sense. In several other interviews we've talked about the fact that it's going to take a grassroots movement to change end of life care in this country, because likewise, the medical system won't change on its own. It's going to take consumer demand to make that change happen. So the same is true in the death industry, the funeral industry as well, that we need people to rise up and say, "We want something different."

Caitlin Doughty: Yeah, absolutely, that beautiful piece in the *New York Times* about a month ago where the woman was talking about her father's death, and how difficult that was just to get him home and get him what he wanted. The more op-eds we have, the more people speaking out, the more people saying, "I've had a negative end of life experience and I want to talk about how it could have been better." Or, "I had an amazing end of life experience and I want to share how we did it." The more people are comfortable talking about it and the conversation of death becomes more open, the more it's a safe space to have these conversations.

We could talk about how to make better cars, and how to make better televisions without fear of somebody judging us, because those are products. In a way the experience of end of life is also a product in that we pay for it. We certainly pay a hefty price for it, so we should be able to have those same conversations as consumers in a rational way instead of being shamed because it's death and we're talking about it openly.

Karen Wyatt: Caitlin, you're definitely doing your part in fostering these conversations, and going out there, speaking all over the

country, and I know you're on a book tour right now where you're traveling the country, speaking and doing book signings, so you are – it seems to me that you may be getting a sense as you travel. Is change happening? Do you feel over the last few years while you've been involved in this work, do you feel things are beginning to change?

Caitlin Doughty: I really do. When I started being public, which I guess is four years now, almost four years ago in January, when I put myself out there on the internet and my face on the internet – it's really just been – it felt pretty lonely at first, and there were people who had been doing work for many years whose shoulders I stand on, but it wasn't really until the last two years I would say that there's been in the media and the number of people who want to be involved, just an explosion in the conversations, and that stretches out to things like death with dignity, and hospice care, and funeral planning, and natural burials, and home funerals, and just the explosion of attention from all sectors, and people who want to see those changes happen, has really been exciting, and in some ways it's hard to control because at first you think you know what you want, and how you want to go out there and do it, and then all of the sudden there's all these people who have the same but slightly conflicting views, and how do you get everybody on the same page, and organize them. It's still incredibly heartening and exciting to see the sea change in people's ability to talk about it and demand change.

Karen Wyatt: What would you say to listeners of this series who – what do you feel we all need to be doing? How can we be helping bring this change about in our society? Do you have any thoughts on that, all of us, whether we're in the end of life industry, or whether we're just interested in it and open, do you have suggestions?

Caitlin Doughty: Well because everybody's going to die, and everybody has people they know in their lives who are going to die as well, I think forming an opinion on what you want is the best thing to do, formulating a plan, and formulating an opinion, so when the inevitable does happen, say you have an elderly parent, if you have that conversation with your parent and you know they don't want any invasive medical procedures, you get them an advanced directive, you know they would want to be on hospice if at all possible, you know that they want to be cremated, not buried, when the

time comes, if you feel really competent in those decisions, then you feel better about advocating for that. You're not going to be a babe in the woods. You're not going to come in and say, "I think we should put the pacemaker in." Or, "Yeah, I guess she would have wanted to be embalmed and buried." If those aren't the things your mother wanted, then you need to stand up for that and be that advocate, and that's only through your own education and sense of self around that that you can feel confident doing that.

Karen Wyatt: Absolutely. I think each person needs to feel empowered, and getting more education is the beginning, and finding out what you don't know, then having conversations. That's so crucial, to sit down and have these conversations with our families and loved ones.

Caitlin Doughty: Especially with the knowledge that this is not something that might happen. This is not like getting hurricane insurance because there might be a hurricane. There will be a death. Death is coming for all of us, so planning is never a superfluous thing. It's a necessary thing.

Karen Wyatt: And I love that all of your work reminds us constantly of that. Death is always present with us, and even when we have these conversations, we need to remember that, and not think, "Death is something I deal with now and again. Now and again I'll look at it." I love the point you make that we need to keep death always in our vision, and be always aware of it, respectful of it, but even love death for what it brings to us.

Caitlin Doughty: Right, because not only is death inevitable that we're going to die, but it's inevitable in that it's running a lot of our lives. The fear of it is what is pushing us forward, and pushing us to achieve. We don't have to love it when our mother dies. Of course we're not going to love it when our mother dies. We had a relationship with her, and that's not going to be happy or exciting, but on a day to day basis, you can love death for how it changes our culture, and how it moves us forward, and how it affects our lives, and just love the psychology of it, and the history of it, and love its place in the world. That's not a deviant or a bad thing.

Karen Wyatt: No, and I think if you spend any time in nature at all, it becomes apparent that death is an essential part of the life cycle. Being out in the forest, it's so clear that without

death, the forest wouldn't grow, and wouldn't foster – we wouldn't have the forest that we have. So it makes it clear if you begin with nature. It's easier to look at it and appreciate the power of death in the life cycle, and the importance of it, and of course that's also true in our own lives.

Caitlin Doughty: Yeah, without death, and even going as far as decomposition, and things like that, and how that drives the nature cycle, and remembering that we are a part of nature, we are out of nature. It feels sometimes in our Mac Book society that we're above nature somehow, but we're really not. We are animals, just like any other animal, and we are part of the natural cycle, we are part of life and death, and it doesn't hurt us to reflect on it.

Karen Wyatt: Absolutely, and one of the things I think of often, is as I've worked with hospice patients, those patients are suddenly confronted with their own mortality in a very brutal way, almost, but they have no choice but to look at it, and accept it, and be aware of it, but what I see take place is this beautiful transformation when suddenly they realize they're mortals, are going to die, and accept their deaths, that suddenly their life begins to take on different meaning, and they begin to seek out what really matters in life, and start focusing more on love and connections with people, and finding deeper meaning. That quality is what is missing in much of our society right now, and maybe this death awareness would bring all of us to that point if we had more of it.

Caitlin Doughty: Sure, and one would hope that there was a way to confront death, and have those realizations, and those effects before you were at a point where you had three, four months to live, because when you have three or four months to live, there are definitely, as you've seen, things you can do, fences you can mend, statements you can leave the world with, but it's not enough time to really change your life and move it in a whole different direction, because you are dying, and you are incredibly ill. If there is a way to face it without having to actually be staring down the barrel of literal death, wouldn't that be a great thing?

Karen Wyatt: Absolutely, and I hear that message in the work that you're doing as you're inviting people to wake up, become aware of death, become more knowledgeable about death, just

embrace it and accept it, and I want to thank you for that, just for your dedication to this message, and I know that you have to get going soon, so I want to remind our listeners how they can connect with you. One thing is through your website, orderofthegooddeath.com.

Caitlin Doughty: Right, exactly, orderofthegooddeath.com, if you look up *Ask a Mortician* on YouTube, if you look I'm on Facebook and Twitter, just my name, Caitlin Doughty, and pretty much anywhere online. I'm lurking in the dark spaces of the internet, and on my website there are e-mails for me there as well.

Karen Wyatt: All right, and yes, I encourage everyone, watch the YouTube videos. They're very entertaining, but also informative and fun, and the book, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory*, it's a fantastic read, and I'm so happy that you've had so much success with that, with your book, Caitlin, and I'm excited to see what you come up with next.

Caitlin Doughty: Thank you so much, and thank you for the work you do, and let's keep the conversation going.

Karen Wyatt: Absolutely. I wish you good luck in your travels as you're touring around the country, and hopefully we'll connect again sometime soon. Take care. I've been talking with Caitlin Doughty of Orderofthegooddeath.com, and *Ask a Mortician*, and the book, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory*. Thanks to everyone who's tuned in today and listened to this interview. I appreciate your time, and attention, and participation in these conversations by being there to listen. So take care, and goodbye.

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