

Clean Food Dirty Girl

TALKING ABOUT DEATH WITH AMBER CARVALY

Molly Patrick (Clean Food Dirty Girl) // Amber Carvaly (Undertaking LA)

- Molly Patrick: I want to have a conversation about death and what you do and I think it's really important and I guess for me personally it was last year and there was a friend of mind in my wife's who was really sick and close to the end of her life and there was a death café offered in our little town where we lived. It was with a Chaplain here, she's a Buddhist Chaplain and she was hosting this event.
- Molly Patrick: So we went and it was just a very small intimate group of people talking about just death and I thought it was really cool, and I thought not enough of this is happening because this is just something that isn't talked about and anything you don't talk about becomes big and scary and I know for a lot of people death is big and scary, and for most people because it's so final. I think everybody has been, to some degree, it's just the weight of it and the awe of it and the bigness of it is really overwhelming.
- Molly Patrick: So I started thinking more about it and I thought, "Okay, I just want to start to learn about it, read about it," just kind of immerse myself in it a little bit just so it is not as boogeyman in the closet. So I was recommended this book, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, by Caitlin Doughty who started a funeral home, if you can believe that, and then she also has, it's called *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes and Other Lessons from the Crematory*, which is a wonderful book. I loved it. I pawed through it, it's so good and then this is her second one, *From Here To Eternity: Traveling The World To Find The Good Death*.
- Molly Patrick: So that's how I got into her sphere and then I learned she had openings in this progressive funeral home in Los Angeles and this awesome... I'm not even sure really what it is, but it's this collective online space of just a ton of death stuff, which is really cool into the order of the good death with lots of people involved and you're the director of that funeral home that she started.
- Molly Patrick: So that's how I got into all this and I think I learned so much from her work and there were so many things that I had no idea about just because this isn't something that I ever want, like it scared me to learn about this

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stuff prior to really, really reading about it. So can you tell me a little bit what it is that you do and how you got into this.

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, so I run Undertaking LA. I'm the main funeral director and main director here and I guess now I'm sort of in a position to say that I am fortunate enough that we've hired another employee, Susanna Alba, who does the majority of our arrangements now, which has let me focus on the bigger picture, which is a really wonderful thing to be able to do, since I've sort of just very deep in the trenches for the last four years.

Amber Carvaly: So now this let's me focus on doing more administrative stuff, which is probably way less exciting to talk about, like Google Ad Words, they're so much fun to learn about, but I still do arrangements. We do dressings with our families, we do green burials, witness cremations and all of that I'm still very hands on with, so it'll be a long time before I get to say that I'm sitting on a beach somewhere and I'm not doing that anymore because we're so wildly successful.

Amber Carvaly: I got involved in the funeral industry I think six or seven years ago now and it was just very innocent enough. I had a friend who was a funeral director and I was looking for the next path for my career and journey in life and it just really appealed to me because it was just something I had never thought of before. Like nobody ever asks you when you're a little kid, "What do you want to be when you grow up, do you want be a doctor or a lawyer or a funeral direction?" Like no one presents you with that option.

Amber Carvaly: So I pursued it, I went to mortuary school and I really liked it. It just felt like something that I had an idea I'd be good at and I'm here today now running my own funeral home, so it's great.

Molly Patrick: So... yeah, I can't imagine picking that as my career. Is that something that scared you or just intrigued you or have you always felt just comfortable with it?

Amber Carvaly: I felt really familiar with it. It just didn't seem like something that's would bother me and again I didn't have any real idea why. I encountered death before. My cousin had taken his own life when I was about 15, I'd had elderly people in the family die when I was really young. My great

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grandfather died when I was three and whether or not it's a coincidence it's one of my first memories of just like developing through childhood, like it's one of the first things that I really remember is the day of his funeral. I don't really know if that has anything to do with like, "I was always destined to do this," or if it's just the way that my brain sorted out throughout life, I don't know.

Amber Carvaly: I think that the way that I process things are very logical in a lot of ways, like I consider myself an artist that death just is and I'm also very blunt and sometimes it's really wonderful and sometimes it's really embarrassing for myself and everyone standing next to me, but it really serves me well in the funeral industry and it serves me really well doing what I do because I'm always willing to say the thing that no one else wants to say. That's really important in the funeral world because everybody's trying to hide something, everyone's trying to make it okay and people just want to be heard and they want someone to look at them and go like, "Yeah, I get it."

Molly Patrick: So technically your training is mortician. That's what you trained doing?

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, so I'm a licensed funeral director and a mortician is a synonym for it, but as far as what I would write down paper and say like, "I'm a licensed funeral director." I have my license number, I went to school to be trained as a funeral director and an embalmer, although I do not hold a license for embalming and then a mortician is an umbrella term for anything that falls under that.

Molly Patrick: Okay, one of the things that I was really surprised to learn was just about the... Well, a lot of things because like I said and I think for a lot of people because this isn't something that people often go down the death rabbit hole, it's something that we're trying to run away from and avoid and not bring up at all, it's like everything about it is brand new when you start learning about it, unless you've been through a lot of it with your loved ones, and even then I don't think that it's obvious what's happening like with the actual bodies and the actual process and also the legalities of what you can do with the dead body and how long you can have it and the different options for burial. It seems to me the death industry is definitely this machine almost.

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Amber Carvaly: Yeah.

Molly Patrick: So can you talk a little bit about... Well, I guess first of all the process of what happens to a body when it dies, not the decomposition, like technical biology bits, but the process in the industry. So if you are at home and you die or if you're in a nursing home and die, what are the steps of that body?

Amber Carvaly: I guess the easiest way to say it is the whole process takes, I always say, about 7-10 business days. It's important because the health office is closed on the weekends and all of this, the entire process is controlled by the death certificate and it's the one thing that people don't know about because it's completely unsexy to talk about and why would you talk about it, like why would that come up in conversation when you're talking about death, but everything revolves around that.

Amber Carvaly: So you die and you die at home. If you died at home and you're on hospice you can call the mortuary and the mortuary will pick you up and take you to the funeral home and place you under refrigeration. If you die at home and you're not on hospice that means that you might have died from unnatural causes. You weren't expected to die in the next six months, so if that is true you need to call the police and then the police come and then you go look, "My mom was really sick. She had cancer, she was probably going to die," and anyways, I actually just threw myself a curve ball there because I just thought, "Oh, well if she had cancer actually they'd call the doctor," and then the doctor would be like, "It's okay, I'll sign that death certificate," that I talked about, so that's a bad example.

Amber Carvaly: So you die at home and you have no preexisting conditions, but maybe you had a bad heart, the police come, you show them the medication, they go, "You know what? Doesn't look like any foul play was involved. We're not going to call the coroner." Then you call the mortuary and we come, we take the body to the mortuary and place it under refrigeration.

Amber Carvaly: If you died at a hospital, that means a doctor was on-call watching you when you died, trying to save you I assume, maybe letting you go and then you don't have to worry about calling the police unless the doctor needs to or if you die in the ER. Again, all this stuff plays back to the death certificate. You die in the ER then you occasionally have to call the

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coroner to notify them that that occurred because it could be a suspicious death.

Amber Carvaly: I'm sorry, I'm laughing at myself right now because I'm just thinking of like, "Well, there's so many different ways this could go," but realistically you call the mortuary and as long as there's no foul play involved the mortuary picks you up, you go to the funeral home, you're placed under refrigeration, you schedule an arrangement with the funeral director, they go over your options, do you want to cremate, do you want to bury. They help you fill out that death certificate that I keep wildly talking about. We contact the doctor, the doctor supplies the medical information. All that goes to the state and the county. They look at it, they go, "Looks like everything's okay with this death," they put their stamp of approval on it and then you can schedule a burial or cremation.

Molly Patrick: So you don't have the green light to do anything until you get that stamp of approval, so the body is hanging out in the refrigerator until you get that back?

Amber Carvaly: Yes, that death certificate is everything, as I've spent the last four years of my life with death certificates. They're really fun because they're really... People will be like, "Well, if you take the body you're not going to cremate them right away." It's like, "Oh, goodness, no." You have families that are trying to get in town right away or trying to get plane tickets two weeks out and everything just relies on how quickly I can get a doctor to sign off on a cause of death and then get the state and the county to approve it.

Molly Patrick: How long can a body stay in the refrigerator without being embalmed, like before it starts to decompose.

Amber Carvaly: It depends on how you died and that's, if you've ever tried to find the answer to, "How long does it take a body to decompose," and you might have found that it's hard to find an answer, there's a reason and that's because none of us want to commit to an answer because there's so many variables.

Amber Carvaly: I've had people that have died from cancer that was primarily located in a lower intestine area and they had suffered from cancer for quite a while and also had been on lots of medication they start to decompose faster.

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Someone who maybe just died of old age, was kind of fine, nothing was super, super wrong, the body just eventually gives out because that's what we're made to do, weeks, a couple weeks. I've pulled people out of the fridge like 11, 12, 13, 14 days later and they've still looked perfect. The only thing you'll notice is some swelling. Sometimes swelling in the lower intestine area and again, that has to do with just natural bacteria being present in the body and that's starting to breakdown first.

Molly Patrick: Yeah, I'm trying to imagine doing what you do and I just can't imagine pulling dead bodies out of the fridge and do whatever you're going to do with them. At that point the body will either get cremated, so no need to embalm or I guess unless there's a funeral and then you would embalm and then cremate after the funeral, yeah?

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, so we actually don't embalm, so that's one of the things that separates our funeral home from other funeral homes is that we... Yeah, but in-

Molly Patrick: Let's talk about embalming because that was one of the things that really surprised me. I thought you had to do it. I thought that there was a rule that you had to embalm and I was reading that, I was like, "That sounds terrible. Oh my gosh." So can you talk a little bit about the embalming process?

Amber Carvaly: The embalming process essentially is replacing the blood with a formaldehyde solution, so you're raising... it's been a while since I've done this and I'm just picturing all my friends who are embalmers listening to me going, "Yes, how do you do it Amber?" You raise an artery and you open that up and then you start to pump the body full of embalming fluid. You let the pressure build up for a little bit, you're basically using your arterial system. The same way that blood transfers through your body, embalming fluid transfers through your body. Then you'll open up the vein on the opposite side and then you let all of that fluid come out, so you're letting all the blood come out and you're letting all of that embalming fluid also come out.

Amber Carvaly: So you're not filling someone up like a water balloon, you're pushing it through and then pushing it back out through the arterial system. Then what that does is it helps get, obviously, the blood out, which is something

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that begins the decomposition process and then you're also putting that alcoholic solution into a body that helps preserve it.

Molly Patrick: So that process is pretty, what's the word? I guess-

Amber Carvaly: Invasive?

Molly Patrick: Invasive, yeah, super invasive and the point of that is so that people can see their loved ones in more of a natural state, but the few that I have seen do not look natural at all and it looks like a very waxed, more like a waxed figure or waxed replica of that person. So Undertaking LA doesn't do embalming at all, right?

Amber Carvaly: Mm-mm (negative). I will say that we've had two, like we sent someone home to Canada who was very badly decomposed and so embalming is something that in rare circumstances will I say, "Yes, this person needs to be embalmed," and then when have someone who works at our partnering crematory and they will do embalmings because there is a time and a place for everything, but 99% of the time it's unnecessary.

Molly Patrick: So I guess that brings me then to if you aren't... like I'm thinking of a traditional... not tradition because this is like we've gotten really far away from traditional anything with the whole death thing, but I'm thinking the funeral that I went to for my uncle long time ago and it's in a church and it's very proper. It's almost like a wedding but it's a death. So if you're not doing the embalming process then that funeral process is probably going to look different because I think most people who go to a funeral and a big one they expect that waxed like look.

Molly Patrick: So the funerals that you typically do at Undertaking LA are they just more like small intimate gatherings and then who prepares the body? Is that something that you guys do or the family members do or do you give them the choice?

Amber Carvaly: As far as how they look versus how they could look, most of our families do choose to have more intimate services. We don't have very large ones, but I don't think that there would be anything wrong with having an unembalmed body, like a large 100 or 200 person service. As far as what we do with the body, we'll actually have the body washed for us ahead of

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time and then usually Susana and myself will come into the funeral home and if the family wants to dress the body then we can dress the body with the family or one of us will dress it or also one of our colleagues, Louie, who I think is just this most fantastic person ever.

Amber Carvaly: He's actually an embalmer and I don't know if he would feel happy with how happy I am in his unembalming skills, but every time he takes care of any of our family members and sets their features, which is closing their eyes, closing their mouth, like I just always wonder if Louie is like, "Wow, not embalming people really is amazing." I just wonder if he marvels at how amazing everybody looks when he takes care of them for us because that's how perfect I think people look when they're unembalmed.

Amber Carvaly: I've never had a service where I've looked at someone and just thought, "Ugh, they look so waxy," and I can picture my great grandmother right now with her glasses set on her face and her hair was very nicely done by whoever embalmed her, her hair looked perfect and her outfit and just looking like a waxed figurine of my great grandma. I've never had a body at any of my services where I've thought that and people are usually so in awe because I don't hear like, "Oh, she looks so peaceful, but it seems like she looks funny." They always just think like, "Oh my god, it looks just like them. It's still them." Like they're just surprised by how it still looks like the body.

Molly Patrick: So is the whole embalming process then just like a line item for most funeral homes, is that basically what it comes down to and I guess people's comfort level because it seems to me there's a bit a shift happening around that, whereas like that's been the standard, but has that mainly been because the funeral home can charge more for that service?

Amber Carvaly: You know I think that if you asked someone in the funeral industry the answer that they would give you is that we embalm your loved one because we want you to have a wonderful memory, a wonderful last look of this person and who they were and we're going to restore them and make them look lifelike and give you that one beautiful last look and then privately it's like, "But we're also protecting from the dangers of a dead body."

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- Amber Carvaly: If you want my personal opinion I think that it's easier for them to embalm a body because it takes a lot of the guessing out. I, when I get someone in I'm like, "Okay, so when are we planning on a service? What did this person die of?" I have to think about a lot more things because I am doing a little bit of mental math. I'm like, "What's going to start happening to this body and in what amount of time," and if they're embalmed I don't have to worry about that. I don't even have to place it in refrigeration.
- Amber Carvaly: I embalm them, I'm done, they'll be fine in two weeks, they'll be fine in three weeks, and one could argue that that is a colossal benefit to a home that's working on a factory system. Like if you have a factory of bodies going through you probably want to ensure that your products look good going out the whole time and when people are unembalmed that's different. Things are just different with unembalmed bodies. Like I said, this goes back to how long does it take a body to decompose? What happens, how long can they stay in a refrigerator? There are just different variables and if someone died from a really aggressive form of cancer I might want to be like, "You know let's talk about having this viewing in the next couple days."
- Amber Carvaly: I had someone die, he passed away from AIDS and he's the person that I had a witness viewing 11 days after he died and he looked lovely. There was nothing changed, nothing happened. He was wearing a very snazzy little black turtleneck and he looked great. I don't know if that answers that or not.
- Molly Patrick: Yeah, totally. I think it's really interesting. So now let's talk about the two... So there's two options at this point, there's cremation and there's burial. So cremation is where the body is burned and for a long time before I dove any deeper into this, I thought that cremation sounds better than getting buried because I don't want to put in a box and like the whole process of the burial, like the casket thing kind of creeped me out, and it's not logical. I'm kind of claustrophobic right now and I know when I die that claustrophobia isn't going to be sticking around, but when I think about it I still don't like going in a box.

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Molly Patrick: So I always thought that, and I also didn't want to take up this space because, I don't know, I thought it'd be easier just to get cremated. But then I have been sort of rethinking that because of the things that I've been learning about like green burials and the different options now that you don't necessarily have to go in a box.

Molly Patrick: So the first thing I want to talk about is cremation and for people who don't know and I certainly didn't know until I read Caitlin's first book, is that the family can actually be at the cremation. So can you talk a little bit about that?

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, so we offer witness cremations. I don't know that everybody does would be the first thing to say, is that not everybody does. I would hope that they all would and there's no guarantees on what funeral homes have to allow you to see. I know there's a corporate home in Los Angeles that offers witness cremations and someone was explaining to me how it looked and it sounded like you saw the person in their cremation container and then they went through a hole in the wall and then you could press a button that probably did not start the retort to be perfectly honest and then they were like, "And that's the witness cremation."

Amber Carvaly: My colleague was telling me about this because she said that when she started working with us she was like, "I was so surprised to see how you guys did witness cremations," which is that I talk to you a little bit about what the condition of the body is, which like I said, is usually always fine, so really I'm just alleviating fears that the body has gone into some sort of massive decomposition before they've gotten to the crematory. I explain what they're going to see in the back, that it's an industrial crematory, it's nothing glamorous. It's going to be loud, it'll be noisy.

Amber Carvaly: Then we go into the back and then you'll see the two cremation chambers and you'll see the cremation container, which is what we put the bodies in and then the chamber opens up, we have the container next to the opening of the cremation chamber and then we, with the help of the crematory operator we'll push the box into the chamber and then our families are allowed to push the button to shut the door and turn the cremation chamber on.

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- Molly Patrick: So the bodies are stored... so the box is like a cardboard box?
- Amber Carvaly: Yeah, it's just like a cardboard box.
- Molly Patrick: So that's how they're stored in the fridge so you just to take the box out and put it in and then-
- Amber Carvaly: Yeah, and I'll have that out because I feel like there's some things that people don't need to see. I'll talk about it like, "This is what we do," but I don't know if that needs to be part of the... Like if someone wanted to see it by the way... Well, no, we wouldn't let them because you'd see everybody's names and privacy is a big, big thing for obviously reasons, I don't think I have to explain that. Yeah, so when you come into the back the bodies are even pulled out of refrigeration and placed on an electronic... not a gurney but a lowering device, so it's all set and ready for you.
- Molly Patrick: Okay, so I imagine that there's a bit of closure that witnessing it could bring to a family. I think that that's something that seems to me isn't widely known that is an option, but maybe I'm wrong. I don't know, I haven't been through a death with somebody who's close enough to me to go through this process firsthand. I imagine when that happens I'll know more about it, which I will, right, because that's the only thing that we really know for certain in this life, is that we're all going to die, which is why it's so important that we talk about the process.
- Amber Carvaly: Yeah, absolutely.
- Molly Patrick: I think that through this whole process for me and I'm still learning and still diving into it, but it hasn't taken my fear away from death totally, but it has softened the edges a little bit, to be able to just have the conversation about it and talk about it in the open.
- Molly Patrick: I think learning about what happens with the bodies is really interesting because when I really think about it it's not that part of it that scares me anymore, it's more like the vast nothingness, like that's what happens when we die. Like where do we go, what do we do? So is that something that you ever think about? Do you have any fears around your own death?

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- Amber Carvaly: Yeah, I think it's really important, I always feel like there's this bizarre competition where people are like, "I'm not afraid to die. I don't care, I'm not afraid to die," and that's fine if you're not, but I also think that's ridiculous and everybody is welcome to feel however they want and if people are genuinely not afraid to die and it comes from a healthy place, blessings to you, I'm so happy for you. I'm terrified of dying. I don't want to die. I enjoy being here, doing a lot of great things with my life, things feel pretty awesome. So what death does is it just gives me the tools to process being alive with more ease. I don't have, like I'm neurotic but this neuroses that could stem from my ultimate demise is greatly been lessened because I have a working understanding of the thing that I fear. I think that's the knowledge of the other, it's understanding the things that you fear the most and realizing that it's not scary. It's deeper because it just sends you on an existential crisis, but that's completely different.
- Molly Patrick: Yeah, exactly. Like in the middle of the night when you wake up or trying to go sleep you just have that moment of like, "What the fuck?"
- Amber Carvaly: Yeah, definitely, I have those. I think that's also a modest curse of intelligence, you just made yourself awareness, but yeah, definitely afraid to die. There's not part of me that's not in fear of that, but it doesn't... what's the word I'm struggling to say? The idea that I am not held victim by my fears, I'm sort of set free.
- Molly Patrick: Right because you work with it every day too. I really do feel like as humans we're not good at facing things that are difficult or painful or unsettling or uncomfortable and we live in a society that really reinforces the message of you should feel good all the time. If you don't feel good all the time there's something for that, we can fix that.
- Molly Patrick: There's instant gratification everywhere and I think that that's just another part of that, it's maybe the biggest part of that because yes, I can be uncomfortable because I have a fight with my wife or I can be uncomfortable because the thought of death, but both of those need to be looked at.
- Molly Patrick: Being okay with relaxing into those things that make you uncomfortable I think there's a lot to be said about that and there's a lot to learn from that

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and a lot of peace that can come with that once you do it and it's hard. You're uncomfortable for a reason, fears are there for a reason, so it's not easy.

- Molly Patrick: Okay, so we talked about the cremation part, let's talk a little bit then about the burial. How do your burials look different from the traditional funeral home burial?
- Amber Carvaly: The important thing is that... So Undertaking LA is a funeral home and we don't have a cemetery. I only say this because we get so many emails from people that are like, "I work at a funeral home. How do I become a green funeral home?" I'm like, "You just do. You just tell people there's green burial and then you talk to the cemetery and so you arrange a green burial at the cemetery and like ta-da."
- Amber Carvaly: We work with Joshua Tree because they're really nice and they offer amazing prices. It's like \$7,000 for a green burial and they're super, super cool people. So when we do a green burial with them... and I say this because I've also done traditional burials because I'm a funeral director, I'm steering the ship, you just tell me what ship it's on, if it's traditional or a green, I respect your wishes.
- Amber Carvaly: So greens burials are a little bit different because you cannot embalm. You are allowed to have a shroud, so you do not have to choose a casket, there's no outer burial vault. That's the thing that in a traditional cemetery the casket is lowered into.
- Molly Patrick: It's like a cement vault.
- Amber Carvaly: Yeah, that big cement box, yeah. The graves are shallower, so they're three to four feet deep, they're hand dug. There can be no electricity used when digging them. I feel super bad for Joshua Tree because that means they have to dig them during the day and it's very hot out there and then they're also hand buried.
- Amber Carvaly: I don't know how you say that, they're buried by hand, you're shoveling that dirt back in with not... and if you've never been to a cemetery and seen the machinery that's used to open a grave you should look it up because they're like giant industrial monster trucks that are used to dig a

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grave, like you can understand why hand digging it is such an amazingly different thing and by also being able to fill that grave back in is so cathartic and just so much more beautiful than a giant machine that's like, "Beep, beep, beep, mrrrrr-ra-ra." You're just like, "Grandma was so amazing," "Mrr-ra-ra-ra," and it's like pounding on the dirt and it's just a complete polar opposite to dignity and grace and, "She'll be at ease here with giant tractors rolling over her for all of eternity."

Molly Patrick: So why no electricity? What is the... like behind that rule, the reason why not?

Amber Carvaly: I have never looked into why I just imagine that because it's not green. It's a terrible answer, but I think it's because the idea is that all-

Molly Patrick: A lower footprint all the way around.

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, just natural, because I asked that too. I was like, "Why don't you guys just dig at night," and they're like, "Yeah, we'd like to, but we can't use electricity." I was like, "Can you station lights farther away that accidentally look on the grave or something?" I don't know. Sorry.

Molly Patrick: So the body is just wrapped in a cloth?

Amber Carvaly: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Molly Patrick: And just gently placed into the ground and then that's it?

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, when you come up to the grave... Well, if you're having a service and the body is in a shroud it needs to be unbleached cotton muslin or some sort of unbleached, so no dyes, no bleach, it will be laid out on one, two, three, four slats of wood and then it'll have lowering straps underneath it.

Amber Carvaly: Then when it comes time to lower the body you'll have a few volunteers that... usually I'm one of the people that pulls the planks out and then we'll have the family members grab the lower straps, so you sort of, on the count of three, pull the slats out from across the grave and then the family will gently lower the body into the grave. So also getting to be a part of the lower process, which is really amazing, versus at a traditional place where it's cemetery workers sort of mechanically lower in the casket and that's it.

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All of this is so much more hands on and I think just really helps... I mean I don't have any proof, I don't have any statistics that say like, "Nine out of 10 people say they grieve better with green," but I just believe that they do in my heart.

Molly Patrick: Yeah, it's almost like they get to be part of the process instead of witnessing other people handling it because it's such an intimate thing and it's just such a final thing and personal thing that I can totally see that there's such a big contrast between those two.

Molly Patrick: So Joshua Tree is who you partner with for the green burials and you mentioned something earlier, like people who work at funeral homes will contact you saying like, "How do we have green burials?" LA is so lucky that they have you guys and I wish that your model should be like franchised, that would be a great franchise to offer because I think the more and more people learn about this, the more that this kind of establishment is going to be just wanted and needed. So if there is no green cemeteries, can you just call up any cemetery and be like, "Hey, can I do a green burial?" What's the law about that and the logistics?

Amber Carvaly: I'm not very well versed in the rules and regulations of how to create a certified green burial area, but I know that unfortunately it's not as simple as calling up a local cemetery and being like, "I'd like this plot to be green. Make it so." They're like, "Nope we have to have..." and I can imagine that it's a lot because again most death certificates there's so much red tape and so much bureaucracy in death, so I'm just like, "Oh, I'm sure there's a bunch for green cemeteries," and that's not the thing that I know, know.

Amber Carvaly: So it does come from cemeteries finding that there would be monetary value in it, which does again come back to people needing to request it. I would want to encourage people to let their local funeral homes know that they want it. Like I want other homes to copy us. There's more than enough death for all of us. I don't want this to be the thing that we do the best, I want it be the thing that we show that anyone can do this. Like I answered an email to a girl and she's like, "I'd love to see how you guys make your home green. I already work in a funeral home." I was like, "I got good news for you. You can start tomorrow if you've ever dressed a body you're already halfway there, just don't put any embalming fluid in them."

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- Amber Carvaly: I know it's completely bonkers to promote what we do as essentially not special, but I need people to understand that it's something that truly anybody could do today if they just wanted to do it.
- Molly Patrick: On the funeral home side?
- Amber Carvaly: Yeah, on the funeral home side.
- Molly Patrick: Yeah, and I guess the whole process of getting the licenses to be able to offer green plots in a cemetery too would be the funeral homes that would advocate for that.
- Amber Carvaly: Yeah, well it'd be the cemeteries. The cemeteries would have to find a financial value in it. Like they're not going to go out of their way to do whatever they need to do to establish a section of their cemetery to be green if they're not going to make money off of it, which comes back to people just calling up and being like, "I want a green burial. Do you offer this?" And then them be like, "No, we don't," and them going, "Cool, well then we're going to go to Joshua Tree."
- Amber Carvaly: Cemeteries have to see that they're losing out on money. I wish everyone just worked altruistically and that we were all in it because we care, but they're businesses, they answer to stockholders, they're doing what they're doing to stay in business, they're not trying to make... they're trying to make the world a better place, I want to be really careful with my words, but in different ways. It's an industry.
- Molly Patrick: Right, I got you, yeah, totally. I have some friends who in New Mexico they actually went through the county and got a permit to have a portion of their land be a burial site.
- Amber Carvaly: Good.
- Molly Patrick: They did green burials for their loved ones and for all of their pets and I always thought that was so lovely, but not something that I ever really asked about because I was scared and I didn't want to know and I didn't want to think about it, but now that I'm remembering again, I'm like, "I

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should call them and see what the process was like for them to do that," because I always thought that was really cool.

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, and that varies state by state, so that's also why it's a really difficult question for me to answer, because as far as embalming goes, I had this conversation with people in the funeral industry and it's pretty frustrating. Embalming is, 99% of the time, never legally required. There's like three states that require it within like 48 hours. There's two states that require it if you die of a communicable or contagious disease. Please note that they do not say what those are, and then there's like two states that do not allow embalming if you die of a communicable or contagious disease, which I always point out, when people are like, "Well, embalming is meant to protect you."

Amber Carvaly: I'm like, "Then why do two states both disagree on whether or not you should or shouldn't embalm someone?" because Hawaii is like, "For the love of god, don't embalm someone that died from a communicable disease," which I think is the right answer and then there's another state that's like, "Oh no, you have to." Both of those rules are coming from the same idea of protecting people, but it's so silly, but yeah, the idea of like not having to embalm is something I know that cemetery laws and burying on personal property and all of that, they just vary so much from state to state.

Molly Patrick: One other thing. I'm always curious about the length of time that a body can be in somebody's house when they die. So, my wife Luanne is from Malaysia and she's been here for about 16 years in the States. She's Chinese so she grew up with when her family would die the body would be right there in their house, they would have like a three day party, be a ton of food and the body was just there and there was no embalming. So when she came here she was just shocked about how different it is. So I was like, "Wait, they just let you take the body to your house for how long?" She was like, "Yeah, can't you do that here?" I'm like, "I actually don't know." So what are the laws regarding that?

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, so again, technically speaking there is no law that prohibits a home funeral. There are states that make it exceedingly difficult, Michigan I believe. Michigan has a weird law where the body has to be... I think they

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say that regardless the body has to be refrigerated within 24 hours. So you've got a 24 hour window to have a home funeral there.

Amber Carvaly: Louisiana I think you just have to have a funeral director involved, which to me is a pretty easy fix, you hire a funeral director to come over to the house and now you've met that requirement, but yeah, I don't know because I want to be fair to the industry and say that maybe everyone is just worried about being sued because we also are always worried about being sued. We have people sometimes that ask for things and I'm like, "No, mm-mm (negative), no," and that's a lot coming from us to be like, "No, that sounds like a bad idea." We yes to everything and I'm like, "No, no, that scares me."

Molly Patrick: Okay, now I'm really curious, but I'm not going to ask.

Amber Carvaly: They're not so bad but sometimes it's more like we get... I read the things people say about us sometimes from industry people and we actually do, contrary to their belief, care very deeply for health standards, sanitation, bodies leaking fluid. Like that again goes back to like the difference between embalming and not embalming is like is it makes my job harder and you know what? If it does it does.

Amber Carvaly: I'm fine, I'm willing to take that on to give people something different. So there are things that you have to take into consideration, how did this person die? I don't want to describe how people look when they come from the coroner's but it's not pretty and I don't think anyone, except for me and the coroner and every other funeral director understands that.

Amber Carvaly: So that's something where if someone is like, "I want you to take my dad from the coroner, bring him directly to the house." Like I would say, "No," I would explain why. I would be like, "I'd feel more comfortable going to the funeral home first, having him sutured, having him washed, having him cleaned and then I'm having to take him back to your house of course." Or taking someone directly from the hospital that passed away of cancer, that's just sort of an easy one to say, but, "My my mom died of cancer in the hospital, can we take her back to the house directly?" I would say, "Sure, that sounds like okay situation," but most funeral homes...

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- Amber Carvaly: Like I said, I double backed to wanting to be fair and I don't know if they're just afraid of getting sued and they don't give humans credit for being as strong as we are because they're just like, "Oh, that would just be so traumatic for them," but disagree, we've done it before and it wasn't traumatic and they were really thankful for it.
- Amber Carvaly: It was a teenager actually, who had passed away from cancer and we brought her home and from everything the family said it was amazing and I say from everything the family said because taking care of the dead is so natural for us that they didn't need me to be present. I talked to them, I had phone conversations, talked them through what to expect, what to do and they took care of their daughter and then they drove her up North to have her buried at a plot that was donated to them and that's amazing and we did all that for like... they didn't have a lot of money. I think their bill was \$450 and basically just helped facilitate bringing the body from the hospital to their house, but it was also-
- Molly Patrick: And the death certificate, don't forget that.
- Amber Carvaly: And the death certificate. And doing the death certification, which again was stressful because I was like, "All right, so here's the thing. Maybe..." and this actually is a really... When people ask like, "Well what about like how long would you keep the body at home?" It's like so what we did is we kept her at the hospital until I had the death certificate ready and we had her burial set up and then we brought her from the hospital to her home.
- Amber Carvaly: So she was still kept in refrigeration the entire time, so we weren't being wildly irresponsible by leaving a corpse in a home. We kept her in refrigeration at the hospital, the hospital was super, super nice about it, we had a conversation with them about what we wanted to do, brought her from the hospital to the home and then that was it and yeah, it really can be that easy.
- Amber Carvaly: Again, there can be variables and hiccups and it just depends, but I don't know if funeral homes don't want to do it because it's a lot of work and not a lot of money. Like I said, I made \$450 off that, which is essentially I made nothing, but I got to help a family lay someone to rest.

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- Molly Patrick: I can't even imagine just doing what you do every day. I think it's really intriguing and admirable because I just can't imagine doing the hands-on bit and also just the interacting with families too has to be really... is that something you ever get used to?
- Amber Carvaly: That is, I think, just as much as like wondering how the body is going, like what will happen to the body if the body is going to be great the entire time, family dynamics can also be always a little bit terrifying because grief is not linear and you don't meet the same person every time you meet that person. Again, all of this just sort of doubles back to why I think I figured I'd be good at this and it's because nothing surprises me, everything just is. I just say things that make people uncomfortable sometimes and it's only because I just am very present, whatever it is that I'm seeing or feeling and I'm just in it and it also makes me really going at dealing with that coming from someone else, because I don't take things personally.
- Amber Carvaly: I waited tables for 15 years. If you want to learn how to not take things personally, get yelled at about salad dressing on a daily basis and you will learn that life is not about you and people are not yelling at you because they don't like you. They're yelling at you because they're angry about something else that has nothing to do with you.
- Molly Patrick: True, true. Let me ask you this. Is there anything, any common misconception or mysteries that we didn't hit on in this awesome conversation that you want to tell people?
- Amber Carvaly: I think I really got in that death certificate thing there. I encourage everyone to look up advanced healthcare directives. Depending on what state they live in they can have... because I've had other people tell me in their states that they don't weigh as much, but in California an advanced healthcare directive is everything, especially because this is such a transient area in Los Angeles, it's super important.
- Amber Carvaly: An advanced healthcare directive for people that don't know, it seems like you know what I'm saying, is a simple piece of paper that lets you designate who you'd like to take care of your funeral wishes and it's very important if the people who are in line to take care of you, if their views

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don't match your own and sometimes it just makes it easier on your family if you have seven brothers and sisters and I have to hunt down a majority of them and you're old sibling is just the one that you can trust to take of things it's a kindness that you can do for your family and for your funeral director.

Molly Patrick: Yeah, that's a good point. One of my wishes for this conversation is to maybe spark some people to have conversations with their loved ones about this stuff and there's never an easy way to do it, but I think that having that conversation not only about the advanced healthcare directive, which is just super easy, like I just did one and it literally is one page and you notarize it and that's it, but also what your family wants and the options available because somebody will die but if you don't know what that person wants, if you don't know that that person really wanted to be cremated and you just are thinking, "Okay, well I'm just going to bury them," I think that there's this peace of mind that comes with just at least knowing what your loved ones want. You don't have to make that call.

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, I've had people agonize, like agonize over it, "I just don't know, I just don't know what she would have wanted." It's like even when people are like, "I don't care what happens to my body," I'm like, "Well then tell the person who's in charge of you that you don't care to relieve them of guilt because the arrangement will go better if you can do that for me."

Molly Patrick: Yeah, so let's be specific and tell our people what we want and it makes it less scary when you actually start to talk about it, just like anything and bring it out of the dark and shed some light on it. So that's what you've really helped me do here today and I really thank you for your time. This has been a long talk, but I really think it's been super valuable and I really, really thank you for doing it.

Amber Carvaly: Yeah, not a problem.