

AFD PROFILE

BY KIM STACEY

women In funeral service

Women have always played a critical part in helping to birth babies, as well as in caring for the dying and the dead. While it's true that part of this can be attributed to basic biology, the simple fact is that societies around the globe have long allocated death-care activities to women.

This was true in early America, too, but a major shift in death care in the United States – from a home-based, midwifery approach to a more profit-motivated, male-dominated business model – began early in the 19th century. While this effectively excluded women from death care for many years, women are returning to funeral service in greater numbers – restoring a centuries-old tradition.

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Let's consider the women of rural Greece. They have been completely in charge of caring for the body of the deceased, as well as the staging of related rituals – which go on (literally) for years after the death of an individual

– since time-out-of-mind. They are truly the caretakers of the dead.

This role is an ancient one, and codified in the mythology of the region. You may have heard of Libitina, the Roman goddess of death, corpses and funerals. While no images of her remain, she provides us with a foundational feminine image to reflect upon: that of the benefactor of the dead, and the keeper of ritual. However, throughout the millennia her very name – and for a time, her role – sank into such obscurity that it is seldom known by anyone outside of funeral service. Today, many young “goth” women have adopted her look. Dressed in black, they often stare into the camera with a combination of sorrow and

menace, attempting to capture how Libitina must have appeared. So Libitina lives on, if not in her original role.

This same phenomenon of sinking into obscurity and then resurrection or resurgence is true for the role of women in death care in the U.S.

From Women to Men

In “The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883,” Gary Laderman wrote, “By the end of the eighteenth and into the middle of the nineteenth century, women in the Protestant communities of the northern states indeed had the primary responsibility of getting the body ready for burial – a crucial activity performed by women in England for centuries.”

But as early as 1810, we see the rise of death care as a masculine endeavor. Laderman wrote that while “the