

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Confessions of a Funeral Director

How the Business of Death
Saved My Life

by
Caleb Wilde

CHAPTER 1: DEATH NEGATIVE

1. What personal experiences of death do you bring to reading this book?
2. What emotions went through you as you read the opening story of the death and funeral preparations for the two young boys and their aunt and uncle? What might these emotions reveal about your own attitudes toward death?

3. Would you say that you consider death and dying as something negative, positive, or somewhere in between? What is your initial reaction to the suggestion that there is beauty and goodness in death (p. 5)?
4. Have you ever seen someone die? If so, how has that experience shaped how you view death?
5. Caleb Wilde uses the term “death doula” to describe those who lead the dying through their final life stage (p. 7). Think about this role in comparison with the role of a birth doula. How is it similar? What kind of resources (emotional, spiritual, interpersonal, etc.) are needed in both cases?
6. Wilde writes that his Christian upbringing contributed to his negative view of death, because it framed it as a curse, the result of sin, and something to be fought against and transcended (p. 7). How does your own religious upbringing (or lack thereof) shape your view of death? Do you feel like you need a new death narrative, or are you satisfied with the one you have?

CHAPTER 2: PLAYTIME IN THE CASKET ROOM

1. Have you had any experience with funeral homes? What feelings do they evoke for you?
2. Wilde describes a childhood where life and death were not compartmentalized, but existed under one roof, as both sides of his family lived at their respective funeral

homes. Was death a normal part of your life growing up? How did your family approach the fact of death?

3. Growing up in funeral homes meant that Wilde was regularly around dead bodies. How do you react to the idea of being around dead bodies? Does the idea scare you, repulse you, or seem unremarkable to you? What experiences, or lack thereof, do you think contribute to your reaction?

CHAPTER 3: BROKEN OPEN

1. “Death and dying are a sacred art of the human condition, where we learn about ourselves, build community, and contemplate meaning, much like houses of religion” (p. 20). What do you think it means that death and dying are a sacred art? How might thinking about death as a sacred art push against contemporary practices, which turn death into a medical process?
2. Do you relate to the idea that people have feared death because of the fear of hell? Why or why not?
3. How have you confronted death, mortality, and the deeper questions of life? Or have you avoided them? If and when you have confronted “these inevitabilities,” have they broken you open, or broken you apart (p. 26)?
4. The author speaks of death and dying as wild, something we can’t control as much as we would like to: “For those who are actively dying, this phase can be

an experience of losing control of your physical functions, setting the stage for death to come. When it does, it creates a whole different culture for those left behind, where schedules are always in flux, emotions trump mental function, and love trumps control” (p. 26). How does the lack of control over this area of life make you feel?

5. What kind of wild places (literal or figurative) have you encountered in your own life? How might these encounters prepare you for the wilderness of death?
6. Wilde writes that confronting death at a young age was “the single most difficult and the single most beneficial influence” in his life (p. 27). This goes against the idea that children should be shielded from the void of death. How have you seen death presented to children (in your childhood, with your own children, or with children you know)? Discuss what you think is helpful or unhelpful in these approaches.

CHAPTER 4: DEATH SABBATH

1. Wilde describes the Jewish practice of a death Sabbath—the initial burial; the week after with no music, shoes, or sex; and the thirty days following when mourners work their way back into normal life (pp. 30–31). How does this compare with how your culture normally processes death? Why do you think we often allow ourselves so little time to grieve?

2. “No grief is the same” (p. 37), Wilde says. Whether it is for the death of a loved one or some other loss, what are some ways you’ve grieved in the past? Would you change how you have grieved in the past, knowing what you know now?
3. Have you ever responded to the invitation to pause for death, to sit in its presence, and listen to it (p. 37)? Describe the experience, if you can. How did you feel? What did you hear? How were you changed by it?

CHAPTER 5: SEARCHING FOR THE DIVINE IN THE DARK

1. Wilde’s first experience bringing a dead infant back from the hospital calls into question his belief in a good, loving, all-present, and all-powerful God. What experiences in your life have most challenged your view of God? How did you work through the contradictions? In what ways has your image of God changed throughout your life?
2. How have you wrestled with the problem of evil and suffering?
3. Wilde describes one of the popular ways to explain the problem of evil—through a redefinition of God’s power. Read the full paragraph beginning with “One of the more popular paths to remake God . . .” (p. 43). Are you satisfied with this explanation? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 6: SACRED DIRT

1. As a result of seeing how capricious, sad, and heart-wrenching this world could be, the author developed a heaven-centered orientation (p. 45). This, in turn, made tasks like the care of dead people and cleaning the morgue seem small and unimportant, too much of this world and not the next. What are the benefits and pitfalls, in your view, of a heaven-centered orientation?
2. “Heaven may be glorious, but so is the earth, and we miss too much when we focus on one to the exclusion of the other” (p. 50). Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree, and why? How do you juggle a hope for the future with an appreciation for what is already in front of you?
3. Wilde returned from his mission trip to Africa with a shifted sense of calling. Instead of “waiting and watching for the life to come,” he sensed the call to “be present in the here and now” (p. 51). How has your own sense of calling changed as you’ve experienced more of life (and death)? In what ways do you feel called to be present-oriented instead of future-oriented?
4. *Tikkun olam* means “the healing of the world” and is accomplished through presence in the midst of pain (p. 51). How have you seen this idea at work, either in your own life or in events you have witnessed? Can you share an instance where you have received the gift of

presence in the midst of pain? What did it mean to you? How was it healing?

CHAPTER 7: THE MYTH OF THE DEATH-CARE AMATEUR

1. Wilde describes the Ricci family as thoroughly involved in the death-care process after the passing of their loved one, not at all afraid to touch death. What do you think about dressing a loved one's dead body for visitation? Would you want to do this yourself? Why or why not?
2. In what ways have you bought into the modern American vision of self-mastery and control over death (p. 61), or in what ways have you been jolted out of this illusion?
3. What do you think would change if we did not simply hand death over to the professionals, as Wilde describes? If Americans were more in touch with death, how would we live differently? Die differently?

CHAPTER 8: FRONT-DOOR POLICY

1. What are some ways you have seen death hidden and evaded? What are some ways you have seen death recognized and honored? What effects did the different approaches have on you?

2. “Sacredness is defined by love,” Wilde writes (p. 73). By this definition, even our aging, disabled, and dead are sacred, because they are loved. How does this vision compare to how we normally think of aging, disabled, or dead bodies? If we really considered such bodies as sacred, how might we treat them differently?
3. At the nursing home Luther Acres, the dead are processed through the halls to the front door as staff stand by, to honor them. Can you think of any other ways we might honor death? Why is it important to honor someone in death?
4. “It wasn’t just Mrs. Taylor that they were acknowledging; in an indirect way, they were acknowledging me. They were acknowledging my work and my profession in a profoundly special way. I didn’t feel like I needed to be hidden. I didn’t feel invisible” (p. 74). When we see the beauty in death and honor the dead, how does this change how we see those like Wilde, who work in the service of families during their time of loss?

CHAPTER 9: LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF SILENCE

1. What is easier for you to embrace—Holy Saturday, “that sacred day in the Christian calendar when we worship in doubt, uncertainty, and the feeling of abandonment” (p. 80), or Easter Sunday, with its proclamation of resurrection and fulfillment? Why?

2. Can you describe a time when your faith has been “quieted” (p. 80), the phrase Wilde uses as he tried to make sense of Robbie’s death? What kinds of ideas or explanations no longer sufficed? How did you deal with the uncertainty?
3. “Perhaps we fear silence more than death” (p. 82). What, for you, is the most unsettling aspect of silence? Take some time, as a group or individually, to be silent now. What feelings and reactions come up?
4. How might silence be “the first step in pursuing life” (p. 82)? What would it look like to accept silence in your own life?

CHAPTER 10: GRIEF AS WORSHIP

1. Can you describe any experience in your life where death brought people together and made vulnerability normal, as happened at Chad’s funeral?
2. Wilde traces the “death as punishment narrative” back to the Garden of Eden, “where death is the inherited punishment for the sin of Adam and Eve; or, in the phrase used by St. Paul, ‘the wages of sin is death’ ” (p. 90). Do you think it is possible to believe in the story of creation and the fall without also buying into the “death as punishment” narrative? How might it be possible to view death as a result of sin, but also acknowledge that death is not all bad?

3. What are some ways in the past or present that you have been “ashamed by your mortality” and felt that you “will never be enough” (p. 91)? What is your response to reading about Wilde’s “mortality positivity,” the idea that our humanity, mortality, and limits aren’t inherently bad or sinful, but are actually good things that push us to be vulnerable and reach out to others for help?
4. Our desire to transcend our mortality, Wilde says, is related to our image of God as “having no need, a God who is immortal, who isn’t dependent on others and who can stand alone unhurt and untouched by relationships” (p. 93). How does this description compare to your image of God? What is your response to Wilde’s description of a God who is vulnerable, “who stands, maybe even kneels, with us in weakness” (p. 94)?

CHAPTER 11: SARA’S MOSAIC

1. “In death, we find the individual creating community; perhaps nowhere more apparent than at a funeral” (p. 103). Have you experienced the kind of community that forms around someone’s death? How is this community different from the kinds of communities we experience in other parts of life?
2. Describe a funeral you’ve attended, if any, that was done well. Describe a funeral that you’ve attended, if any, that could have been improved. What are some

of the most memorable ways you've seen the dead remembered and "resurrected" at a funeral?

3. "In death, we find both the repulsive and the beautiful; perhaps that is nowhere more apparent than in the gruesome, and yet at times beautiful, art of embalming" (p. 103). Have you ever thought of death, and especially embalming, as something beautiful, artful? Why is seeing death in this tension so hard for us?

CHAPTER 12: HEAVEN ON EARTH

1. With the death of Donnie, Wilde confronts the way that death suspends time—Donnie's daughter doesn't want to leave her dead father's side, everyone else is moving slowly or not moving at all. Have you experienced how time moves differently in moments like this? Do you think you would be capable of entering with a family into their moment of grief, as Wilde does, over and over again?
2. Have you ever been stricken with compassion fatigue? What kind of self-care and spiritual practices have helped you to regain a sense of compassion and feeling?
3. "To be human is not to be closed off, detached, emotionless, and on a strict schedule. Being human means the opposite: connecting, being fluid, feeling, and—at times—weeping" (p. 112). Much about our technology-dependent and hectic lifestyles seems to go against this

definition of humanity. How might getting close to death recover our sense of humanity? How can you protect your humanity in your own life?

4. Wilde writes that “heaven is wherever love reigns” (p. 112). How have your own views of heaven developed throughout your life? What conventional understandings of heaven or hell do you question?

CHAPTER 13: SAM MCKINNEY'S MYSTICISM

1. Wilde writes that death can cultivate mystical belonging or cause more fear and division. What circumstances or attitudes do you think lead to one over the other? How can we as a society respond better to death?
2. What feelings did you have when reading Sam McKinney's story, of finally receiving the acceptance of her church community after her death? Are there communities that have excluded you, or that you have left behind? Thinking about your own death, would you want to make peace with them somehow?
3. Can you share any personal experiences of death being “the mystical unifier that helps us see the delusions of our tribal divisions and stitch us back together” (pp. 125–126)?

CHAPTER 14: ACTIVE REMEMBERING

1. What is your initial reaction to having a “shrine” for the dead, as Jennifer’s parents made at her place at the kitchen table (p. 131)? Where do you think that reaction comes from?
2. How do you, and others in your family, relate to your dead loved ones? Are there ways in which you actively remember them? Are there ways you’ve tried to find closure and detachment?
3. Recall someone (or something) that you have grieved, or are currently grieving. What kind of “stages” did your grief have, if any? How did the grief change as time went on? If grief is an ongoing part of your life, how have you adjusted to this new reality?
4. Wilde, citing other writers, suggests that the idea that our loved ones become part of us is literal, that “our neural pathways can become reflections of who we love so that our brains have neurologically wired bits and pieces of those closest to us into our mind” (p. 135). Can you give an example of how the people you love have become part of you?
5. What do you think of Wilde’s assertion that we have a “continuing relationship with the dead” (p. 138), and that the dead remain a real presence in the lives of those who live on? Would you agree that “the idea of closure is a myth” (p. 136)?

CHAPTER 15: FINDING MY WORDS

1. Based on your own or others' experiences, what are the most helpful ways someone can accompany a person who is grieving? Wilde lists some phrases that are helpful and unhelpful to say to someone who has just lost a loved one (pp. 147–148). Would you add any to the list?
2. Writing, for Wilde, became a way to process after facing the silence and mystery of death over and over. How do you process? Who do you process with?
3. In our churches and communities, how might we “create a space that allows for death talk” (p. 154)? Have you found any such spaces already? What do they look like?

CHAPTER 16: YIN AND YANG

1. Wilde confesses some of his fears of becoming a father—his demanding workload, fear of the death of his children, his fragile psychological state due to wrestling with the silence of death. Whether or not you are a parent, what kinds of fears and uncertainties does the prospect of children (or currently having children) raise for you? If you are a parent, how do you deal with the ongoing pressure of nurturing young lives in the face of many threats of death?

2. Can you relate to the experience of disenfranchised grief, “the kind that is overlooked and unrecognized by society” (p. 161), either from miscarriage, infertility, or another kind of loss? What social pressures kept you from openly mourning? How did you process your grief?
3. “Death opens up the newness of life” (p. 166). How have you seen this truth play out in your own life?

TEN CONFESSIONS: AN EPILOGUE

1. How have your thoughts and attitudes toward death changed as you have read this book?
2. Of the ten things Wilde shares about the spirituality of death, which left the most impact on you? Why?
3. Are you ready, as the author eventually was, to allow death into your life? What things might be holding you back? Are there any concrete steps you might take to “embrace death”?