



Jesus and Fentanyl: A Mortician's Perspective

Description

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Author's Memo

"The Things They Carried: A Glimpse Into the Funeral Industry" analyzes the secondhand grief and experiences that morticians endure, sometimes on a daily basis. The author reflects on certain incidences she encountered during her nine years in the industry – particularly that of a murdered three-year-old she took care of.

The death care industry is often a forgotten profession. Sometimes known as "last responders," morticians face many mentally and emotionally challenging incidents that can leave lasting effects on their life. By examining the author's story, one can gain a better understanding of what goes on behind the scenes of a funeral, and thus increase one's knowledge of the care and passion that goes into taking care of each decedent that passes through.

Author's Note:

The author has changed names, places, and details to protect the identities of those involved.





The AutoEthnographer

By Fa Barboza for Unsplash

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His name was Isaiah.

Isaiah took what he thought was a Xanax one summer night and went to sleep. His parents couldn't wake him the next morning, and despite the efforts of paramedics, he was dead.

He was twenty-one – yet another victim of the fentanyl epidemic.

Being in the funeral industry for as many years as I have been, one sees a lot of terrible things – the worst of the worst, in my opinion, as far as the world goes. I've seen murdered children. I've seen car accidents, freak accidents, suicides, and babies born sleeping. Many funeral directors are desensitized to this, but I am fortunate that I am not to that point. Yet I can't help but wonder how and why God – if there was one – would allow such terrible things to happen.

My coworker drove to the Medical Examiner's Office the following Tuesday after Isaiah's parents had called us, asking for pricing for a simple graveside service. Only immediate family would be in attendance; they wanted a casket and a vault and nothing else. No minister for a committal or to speak comfort over them; no flowers or folders with Isaiah's picture printed on the front.

'He was twenty-one – yet another victim of the fentanyl epidemic.'

When I met with his parents, Carl and Judy, I was taken aback by how at peace they were with their son's death. Tears were shed nonetheless, but when I asked about Isaiah and who he was as a person, they both smiled and repeated the same two sentences: "He was the best son."

"He was the best brother."

I asked if they wanted to see him again before the graveside. Carl was adamant that nobody saw him. "He's just a shell," Carl said with his thick Southern accent. "I love him so much, but nobody needs to see him like that."

"I want to see him," Judy insisted. Her voice was soft and fluttery. "Maybe it's because I'm his mother, but I want to see him again – just one more time."

They argued politely, lovingly, as only a couple married for twenty-five years could do. I intervened, stating, "It's okay if you don't want to see him, and it's also okay if you do. It's your personal choice when you grieve. This is every parent's worst nightmare, but we are here to help you with whatever decision you make."

So his father obliged, and his mother saw him the following Thursday morning. It was my day off, but I knew Judy needed a familiar face to be there for her when she saw her son for the last time. I drove the forty-five minute commute and waited for her in the lobby. Isaiah's body lay on a table in the parlor with a blanket over him and a pillow underneath his head, his eyes and mouth closed. The family had, thankfully, allowed us to sew up the autopsy incisions the Medical Examiner had made. He looked like

he was sleeping.

“He’s just a shell,” Carl said with his thick Southern accent.

“Do you want me to be in the room with you, or would you like to be alone?” I asked Judy. She wrung her hands and said she didn’t know, then tearfully asked if I would go in there with her.

So I did. I walked her into the dimly lit parlor and shut the door behind us. Judy stood ten feet away from her son at all times. She paced the room, nodding her head and smiling through tears.

“Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for the last year he spent with us,” she repeated. I was surprised that she did not go up and get a closer look, or even touch her son. But a mother’s heart knows who her child is and where he is, and she knew he wasn’t on that table.

That was his shell after all, as his father had said.

After about ten minutes, Judy decided she was finished. I handed her a box of tissues when we exited the room and she blew her nose, dabbed at her eyes, and thanked me profusely.

“Should I go back in there to spend more time with him?” she asked me.

“That’s up to you,” I replied.

She smiled at me, thanked me again, but decided she was done. I told her I would see her at the graveside on Saturday.

‘That was his shell after all, as his father had said.

There was a cool breeze that blew the low hanging leaves of the trees around us at the cemetery. Isaiah was in his simple wooden casket that his parents had selected, and I brought three roses: two red ones for Carl and Judy and a blue one for Isaiah’s little brother. Those three family members, plus my staff and me, were the only ones at the graveside.

Carl stood and read two Bible verses from the book of Isaiah:

“‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord.” (Isaiah 55:8).

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)

Judy then took out her cell phone and played “Amazing Grace/My Chains Are Gone” by Chris Tomlin. A single bird chirped in the tree above us.

Carl nodded toward me as the song finished, and the cemetery crew lowered the casket into the vault in the ground. The family took a shovel and filled the vault with dirt that was in a nearby pile as they'd requested from the cemetery. It took about fifteen minutes, but each member of the family took their turn to place dirt on their beloved son and brother as if they were planting a flower: a final act of love for Isaiah.

When they were finished, I walked up to them with my fistful of roses and handed one to each member of the family. They thanked me, and with tears streaming down their faces, they walked away.

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)

I received a text from Judy a few days after the service letting me know that their church had offered to hold a memorial service for Isaiah. She asked if the funeral home could assist in creating a video and folders for it. To hear from her once more made me happy; there was something about her and Carl that brought a sense of peace upon me. I happily told her it would be an honor to create the memorial products for her.

Over the next week, I communicated almost daily with Judy. We discussed which picture she wanted on the folders, she dropped off photographs for the video and told me which songs she wanted for it. We ended up running into each other at the local Starbucks one afternoon, and she sent me a text saying, “Seeing you at Starbucks will always remind me that God is good.”

A few days later, after texting me her approval of the video, Judy texted, “Will you come to the memorial service? If you can? We would love to have you there.”

In my many years in the funeral industry, people have never invited me to a service. I either direct it or the family does a memorial service on their own. I have never received an invitation, so I delighted in this seemingly small request from Judy. It meant so much.

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On a bright and sunny summer Saturday three weeks after the burial, I drove to a little town about ten minutes west of my funeral home and walked into the air conditioning of Northern Star Baptist Church. It was a quaint building, but it was bustling with men in suits and ladies in dresses as the memorial service for Isaiah was about to begin. I found my seat toward the back and sat alone. Other than for directing services, I had not set foot in a church on my own accord in two years. They handed me a pamphlet with Isaiah's handsome face printed on the front – the pamphlets that my funeral home had helped create. He was grinning in the picture, his blonde, curly locks swept over his forehead. One

could practically count the freckles on his nose.

It was, naturally, a packed house. It was evident how well-loved Isaiah had been and will forever be based on this alone. The minister, a tall, boisterous man, stood and greeted everyone.

The service lasted over two hours – far longer than an average memorial service – but it was fitting for Isaiah, as he did not get much time on this earth to experience and enjoy. We had to cram twenty-one years of life into a single morning. He was able to, however, make an enormous impact on everyone around him during his short life, which was evident by the testimonies that his friends shared.

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The most important words spoken that day, though, were not the ones that his friends said or even the minister. They were the ones which his father shared. Carl stood and spoke of his son’s testimony for a full hour. I wish I could share every word he said here, but instead I’ll summarize.

Carl began by confessing a prayer he and his wife had prayed one night when Isaiah was eighteen.

“We didn’t know where he was,” Carl said. “He was living on the streets, strung out on drugs and alcohol. We prayed to God that if Isaiah was going to die, to please save his soul. We would trade our moments with him on earth for eternity if that meant he would be saved.”

Carl then spoke of the various treatments Isaiah went through. He’d been to four different rehabilitation centers, but the most recent one – a Christian-based center in Wisconsin – worked wonders for him.

After he completed the program, he was brought back home.

It was exactly one year to the day before he died.

Carl brought out a leather bound notebook and wept. “I found Isaiah’s journal the other night while cleaning his room,” he said. “He’d written this passage only days before he passed: ‘My name is Isaiah. I am twenty-one years old, and I am a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.’”

Judy then joined Carl on the stage and affirmed in her fleeting butterfly-like voice that the Lord had gone above and beyond what they’d asked. God brought Isaiah home, and the last year for them was “heaven,” she described.

“Every day was pure joy. Every day there were hugs and kisses. Every night there was a family dinner,” she said.

‘I walked out of the church doors, drove straight to the bookstore, and purchased a Bible.

“This last year has been the best year of our lives,” Carl professed. “And – and finding this journal...” He broke down into sobs. “I know where my son is today.”

As I watched Carl and Judy speak, something in me changed. Knowing that a parent's worst nightmare had come true and yet they were praising God anyway spoke to my heart. My family raised me in church – yes – and I'd been a believer my entire life – yes – but did I have the same faith that Carl and Judy did? If I lost one of my children, could I stand at the pulpit and say the same things? Could I thank God for my son's death like Carl and Judy instead of admonishing Him for taking away my heart and soul?

After the service ended, I found Isaiah's parents in the crowd and gave them hugs, telling them how beautiful their words were. I walked out of the church doors, drove straight to the bookstore, and purchased a Bible.

A week later, Judy showed up at the funeral home with a gift bag. She dropped it off for me and as I opened it, it was surprising to see two gifts wrapped in pink paper. One present was a soft throw blanket; the other was a gift card to Starbucks (where we'd ran into each other that day shortly after Isaiah died). There was a thank-you card which the entire family signed at the bottom of the bag.

'But the real gift she and Carl gave me was the reignition of my beliefs as a follower of Jesus. They had inadvertently thrown gasoline on the dying embers of my faith with their own testimony mixed with Isaiah's, and for that, I am deeply grateful.'

But the real gift she and Carl gave me was the reignition of my beliefs as a follower of Jesus. They had inadvertently thrown gasoline on the dying embers of my faith with their own testimony mixed with Isaiah's, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

"Good people pass away; the godly often die before their time. But no one seems to care or wonder why. No one seems to understand that God is protecting them from the evil to come." (Isaiah 57:1)

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