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Remembering at Death: Funeral and Related Rituals

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A Historical Perspective

People have always died at all points in history and the living have always mourned the death of loved ones with some type of ceremony. The typical funeral that is popular in modern day America is, however, a very recent happening. In the past, funerals tended to be very plain, a pine box, family and friends caring for the body, and simple burial. This is in dramatic contrast to the modern funeral that is carried out by professionals who transform the dead body into a living memorial.

Making Critical Decisions

Most people give little thought to type, cost, and transactions in a funeral until they are thrust into a crisis context of resolving critical questions. People tend to go with tradition, most do not shop around, and few seek alternatives to a standard funeral. Choice of a service or last rites is influenced by family preferences, traditions, religious beliefs, and customs of the community.

The various ways of remembering people when they die involve going back in time to reflect, cry, mourn, and start the healing process. One can start the healing process, and one can over time learn to live with and accept the death of loved ones, but few if any people actually completely heal.

It was not until the time of the American Civil War that embalming was used with any type of systematic application, and it was not until the late 19th century that it became widespread in America. Embalming the dead for eternity is indeed a very recent and foreign practice to what Americans have done for many centuries. With embalming and modern funeral practices has come a general denial of death in America. This denial is illustrated in words used at the time of death. For example, the words mortician and funeral director have replaced undertaker. The corpse is now the loved one. Loved ones are now interred, not buried. The coffin has become a casket and embalming is now preparation. The list goes on and on.

The Changes

But while all these changes have occurred with the now accepted standard funeral, some other changes have also occurred in post World War II America. These changes are welcomed by

many people as they permit people to have more choices and options at this major crisis time in life.

The alternatives are many. Embalming is not required by law anywhere in the United States. If one wishes to ship a body or keep the body for a longer period of time, then embalming may be a necessary choice. One can, however, refrigerate the body, and keep it for a period of time while funeral services are pending.

The standard American funeral is a coping mechanism and a fairly good one, but there are many other useful ways of disposing of a body and coping with death. Worldwide, the dead are regularly burned, buried in the earth, buried in the sea, exposed to air, and preserved.

In America most bodies are buried in the earth, but cremation, as an attractive alternative, has gained great acceptance in the last 40 years. Cremation was practiced by Native Americans, is widely accepted in Europe today, and is the preferred method of body disposition in India and China. In 1985 there were 277,000 cremations in the USA, accounting for about 13.5 percent of the total number of deaths for the year. There were 847 crematories in the United States by 1985, up from 567 in just 10 years. It is estimated that by the year 2000, 25 percent of deaths will be taken care of via cremation.

Cremated remains can be buried in a cemetery plot, placed in a columbarium niche, scattered at sea or on land, kept by the family, or buried in an urn garden. Cremation costs much less—anywhere from \$50.00 up to \$500.00. The \$500.00 amount covers everything—picking up the body, completing the paperwork, cremating the body, and disposing of the ashes.

Cremation and memorial societies are clearly meeting a need felt by many Americans. Also, with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) ruling of April 30, 1984, it has become relatively easy to obtain information and compare costs of funerals and body disposition. A telephone call is all that is necessary to obtain relevant pricing information. The new regulations stipulate:

1. Funeral homes have to provide price information over the phone and provide, upon request, a written itemized price list.
2. A prohibition of embalming for a fee unless authorized by the customer or required by law.
3. A ban on requiring a casket for direct cremation.

The general motivation for the new law was to prohibit unfair practices in terms of protecting grief-stricken customers.

Memorial Services

A memorial service after cremation or quick burial is seen by many as a very attractive alternative to the standard funeral. Dealing with disposition of the body at death is the most pressing issue for almost all families. If the decision is cremation, then all energies can go into dealing with friends, family, and other loved ones. One does not have to “get ready for a funeral.” Later—many times a week or more later—one can invite friends and family to a memorial service that serves many of the same functions of a funeral, but relatively free of the time pressures of the funeral. As we move into the 21st century, memorial services and cremations will more and more replace the standard body preparation for ground burial and the traditional funeral service.

William Lamers has defined the funeral as “an organized, purposeful, time-limited, flexible, group-centered response to death” (1974).

The Standard Funeral

Funeral costs are usually made up of the following:

1. Services provided by the funeral director, use of facilities, the casket, and related funeral merchandise selected by the customer.
2. Actual disposition of the body is a second category. This may include cost of a grave site, opening and closing a grave, entombment, cremation, etc.
3. Memorialization is a third cost and includes grave markers, plaques, or a memorial niche for cremated remains.
4. A fourth category of expenses may include fees paid for use of clergy, limousines, flowers, notices of death for newspapers, and other supplemental expenses.

People spend a lot of resources on a funeral, but clearly this is not always necessary. People often feel they have no choice but to have a standard funeral in order to document to themselves that they are good people, that the dead person was loved and appreciated, that they are respectable people, and that they have resources. People do not want to be seen as “cheap.”

Perspectives for the Future

Americans place great value on improving the kind of lives they lead. It is important to extend life whenever possible. It is also important to help people cope, help people prepare, and deal more adequately with the end of life. Quantity of life is important, but so is quality. When we make decisions about those who have died, we ought to do what will help us cope best, not what others think is the best thing to do.

In summary, it costs a lot to die in America. About 85 percent of all people die in a hospital or care center and incur high levels of expenses during this final time in their lives. The typical standard funeral in the United States costs about \$3,000.00. A cemetery plot costs anywhere from \$300 to \$1,000.00. The average cost of a headstone is \$1,000.00 to \$1,500.00. Flower costs would be in addition to all of these. Why do we take care of our dead in this fashion? We have noted that practices are influenced by tradition, religion, customs, and history.

Death leads to bereavement. Bereavement literally means to “tear up, the loss, the issue against one’s will.” We cope with bereavement through grief. Grief is one’s emotional reaction to the actual event of loss. And mourning is the process by which we incorporate the experience of loss into the ongoing life process.

We have looked at the typical funeral and related arrangements in terms of bereavement, grief and mourning. We have also reviewed some of the alternatives to the standard funeral. In short, modern America is a land where people have many choices and people need to know various options and costs related to choices. Funerals and caring for the dead should be very personal and meaningful to the people involved. It is usually a mistake to make choices based on public perception, fear, and ignorance. Change and choices are the twin hallmarks of our lives in the 20th century. It is important to employ these two elements as we also deal with practices involved in dealing with death and dying in modern America.

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