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# GREEN BURIALS: THE DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DEATH

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## Historical Perspectives of Burial

Throughout the last 200 years, there has been a significant change in American funeral practices. Pre-civil war preparation of the dead was an intimate experience performed by family members. Only the closest individuals to the deceased would participate in the “laying out” of the body, washing and dressing or wrapping with a shroud (Gonzales, 2009). It was uncommon for cosmetic work to be performed and minimal to no preservative measures were taken. The body would usually be kept in the home, under constant supervision for 1-3 days, and burial options included inhumation or entombment (Davies, 2005). Laderman (1996) states that in pre-civil war society, it was abnormal to consider other burial options than the two mentioned above, modern disposal methods would be viewed as “...impractical or inconceivable to the majority of the population. Indeed, any procedure that accelerated the destruction of the body and threatened its supposed integrity after death provoked outrage and horror...” (p.36). Attitudes regarding the preparation of the dead changed drastically when the United States faced the crisis of union succession.

During the Civil War, over 600,000 American citizens perished. The unparalleled amount

of human loss experienced within such a short period changed the trajectory of burial practices within the United States (Mitford, 1998). Laderman (1996) states, “Such excess of violence and human destruction during the contest was heretofore unknown in the history of the republic, and under circumstances the symbolism constructed around the dead began to demonstrate significant changes” (p. 94). Death was pervasive on the battlefield, and many men were not given funeral rites or disposed of in an inappropriate societal context. Soldiers were partially buried in unmarked graves or combined in large pits of 30 men or more. It was reported that battles would have to move location or be temporarily halted because of the decay present in combat conditions (Laderman, 1996).

Soldiers buried in unmarked graves in unknown locations with no formal systems for identifying rank (the later developed dog tag) were unable to be located by relatives. Newspaper coverage of battlefield conditions exposed American families to the reality of decay and many began to search more intensely for family members (Davies, 2005). The desire to bring family members home for burial in northern soil increased. Field medical practitioners were consulted and practical means for transporting bodies over long distances developed. Initially,

embalming methods included submerging bodies in ice, preserving with whiskey or stuffing bodies with sawdust, lime and charcoal (Laderman, 1996).

Although once perceived as a temporary measure during war time, the practice of chemical embalming with substances such as “arsenic, zinc chloride, bichloride of mercury, salts of alumina, sugar of lead and a host of salts, alkalies and acids” became the “American” way of burial (Laderman, 1996, p.113). The embalming of President Abraham Lincoln and funeral train extending over several states displaying the body to the American public was a defining moment in the acceptance and normalization of the practice (Mitford, 1998). It became associated with high social status, and demand for embalming increased among wealthy classes. Trickle down from affluence, it became accessible for middle class families and eventually became a federally regulated practice for all citizens. The medicalization of body preservation for the health profession was born and the role of the “undertaker” was formalized (Davies, 1996).

In addition to the process of chemical embalming, it is important to recognize the effect the Civil War had on the creation of private cemeteries and government-regulated burial grounds. The high death toll of the Civil War created industrialized burial space, including the Gettysburg National Cemetery (Davies, 2005). Concepts like the purchasing of grave plots, post mortem documentation and regulations for bodily remains within public cemeteries was developed as a result of the Civil War period. Within the scope of five years, burial rituals and methods of body disposal were dramatically altered. The historical method of natural burial with ecological and

religious underpinnings was transformed into mainstream “embalming culture” (Gonzales, 2009). The practice of personally preparing a loved one for the grave, allowing for natural decomposition, transitioned into a segregated medicalized practice that introduced hazardous chemicals into the ecosystem (Spellman, 2014).

### **Modern Funeral Practices**

After 1900, mortality rates dramatically fell, and death became more associated with old age. Preparation and disposal of bodies became a secularized practice run by privatized businesses (Spellman, 2014). Preparation of the dead integrated preservative and cosmetic procedures to create the “magic” of the funeral production. Morticians were careful to present the living as “sleeping” or “just like they once were” in attempt to temporarily present falsified versions of the dead for the world of the living (Gonzales, 2009). Spellman (2014) notes during this time, “Death professionals were even careful to emphasize the quasi-religious function of their specialized services, allowing friends and family the necessary time to separate themselves from the cosmetically enhanced physical remains of the departed” (p.189).

Modern funeral practices completely remove death care from the public sector, and small mortuary businesses have become commercialized funeral companies. Many Americans are not aware of alternative burial practices devoid of mortuary intervention. Once a person dies, it is assumed a funeral director will be notified and have the body removed from the home in an organized, quick, and discrete manner (Gonzales, 2009). Davies (2005) notes that funeral directors tend to be traditional in matters of customary behavior. In times of intense bereavement,

it is much easier to follow a prescribed pattern of behavior. If a person did not have a burial plan, it may be hard for family to make alternative decisions with short notice. It is uncommon for beavered to change a funeral pattern unless they have a strong or special reason for doing so. Family members may be left with limited options in terms of pricing and funeral packages depending on geographic region and are “at the mercy” of the mortuary business (Mitford, 1998).

Families understand all burial arrangements will be coordinated as part of the ascribed professional package. This may include lead-coated steel casket inserts, adjustable innerspring mattresses, color-matched casket linings and coordination of funeral fashion (Mitford, 1996). The transition from preservation to cosmetic enhancement, Foltyn (1996) argues, is now evolving into restoration of the body presenting the dead devoid of illness, mutilation, and disfigurement. The commodification of modern funerals allows morticians to offer premium packages that can camouflage wounds, replicate lost limbs, attach severed heads, and even chemically adjust skin tone if it was affected by the dying process (Mitford, 1996). Trade language in the funeral industry has adapted to emotionally disconnect families from “death rhetoric.” Some of the terms include casket, not coffin, funeral director, not undertaker, coach, not hearse, and cremains, not ashes (Mitford, 1996). Davies (2005) argues that, over time, funeral directors reduced family ties to the body and death allowing for higher levels of acceptance in mortuary practices.

#### Green Death Movement

In response to mainstream death culture, some have begun to question the desirability of embalming and sustainability of disposal.

What was initially conceived as a temporary measure during wartime crisis is now an established industry that represents a cultural practice of bereavement. Societal views segregating death from the public sphere and acceptance of body perseveration as a medical trade are noted as main features for normalization of body preservation (Feagan, 2007). The long-term environmental effects are immeasurable, but approximations for current resources have been formulated. Gonzales (2009) states, “It is estimated that in each year, 827,060 gallons of formaldehyde for embalming, 30 million feet of hardwood and 90,272 tons of steel for caskets, 14,000 tons of steel and 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete for vaults are buried in cemeteries across the United States” (p.2). Burying preserved human remains in hardwood “perma-sealed” caskets with anti-leak technology is a societal indicator of dualistic views separating flesh from earth. The failure to accept death and the necessity of products that physically inhibit the fulfillment of “ashes to ashes” are reflective of cultural norms (Gonzales, 2009).

The green death movement challenges modern funeral practices, and what Davies (2005) identifies as the “cosmetic-casket-concrete-complex.” Green or natural burial, also referred to as the green death movement, is the practice of burying the dead without any chemically preservative measures. Bodies are disposed of in biodegradable containers, or ecopods, constructed from cardboard, wood, wicker, and other natural materials (“Green Burial Council”, n.d.) Davies (2005) states current burial practices “...Seek to express preservation of the dead even though, in practice, it really leads to the inevitable corruption of the body within its casket

rather than contact with the earth” (p.75). Conventional burial methods do not allow organic matter to return to the planet and encapsulation of the corpse in sealed containers promotes rot of the body (Gonzales, 2009). Mitford (1996) argues that the docility of American attitudes towards “conventional” burial is because they do not know what invasive procedures take place behind the “formaldehyde curtain.” During natural burials, the body is not altered or augmented in any way, however, modern forms of preparing a cadaver include incisions draining bodily fluids and replacing with cavity fluid, and in some cases, removal of organs (Mitford, 1996).

“Green” body disposal is not limited to the traditional natural burial context. Cremation is generally discussed as an alternative practice to traditional burial and is promoted as a sustainable practice, however, ecologically, the process emits harmful toxins. Although it can be considered as less environmentally damaging than the traditional burial process, it releases greenhouse gases and vaporizes embalming chemicals (Feagan, 2007). Also, the process of cremation does not allow the body to integrate back into the ecosystem, feeding biological life. Other green methods include eternal, or “memorial,” reefs that combine a loved one’s ashes with non-toxic materials to replicate and sustain deteriorating oceanic reef habitats (Gonzales, 2009). Although the environmental issue of cremation was discussed above, this method is included because of its restorative purpose as an alternative burial option. Another method of green disposal includes the process of promession. This is marketed as an alternative to cremation and is a process in which the body is frozen with liquid

nitrogen until it becomes brittle. The body is shaken producing powdered “premaings” (Gonzales, 2009). The process does not emit harmful toxins or have negative environmental effects, but is not yet available in the United States

#### Theology of Death and New Age Spirituality

Laderman (1996) asserts the theology of death and symbolic nature of burial shifted with the invention of embalming and medicalization of the “death work.” He argues that the secularization of western society during the post-enlightenment period contributed to the cultural separation of the human body with nature. The Christian church began to lose its position within funeral proceedings as Americans became more exposed to scientific methodology and medicalized practices. The breakdown of the theological understanding of the natural world and its relation to mortality was a result of this cultural shift (Laderman, 1996). Embalming and public burial spaces, once conceived of as abnormal and sacrilegious, are now preferred by some religious populations as a preservative measure. Christian populations view the integrity and intactness of the body as ideal, because it preserves the physical human form for Christ’s return, uniting the eternal spiritual being with its corporeal shell (Davies, 2005). Today, Christian ideology is still followed in the basic constructions of gravesites with bodies facing east, towards Jerusalem, symbolically waiting for the return of Christ (Davies, 2005). Dogmatic religious aspects of afterlife judgment and resurrection conflict with the New Age’s decentralized “grab bag” spirituality. Incorporating aspects of mysticism, eastern philosophy, neo-paganism and Native American traditions with other esoteric beliefs sculpts

a variegated belief in the ambiguity of the afterlife experience for many New Agers.

Early New Age concepts include interpretive definitions of death that diverted from Christian theology. This was reflected in transcendentalism and spiritualism, describing an uncertain destiny of the soul and presenting death as a spiritual transition. Transcendentalists pronounced a holistic concept of body-earth integration of death within the “Gospel of nature” (Davies, 2005). Defining features of the New Age that contribute to the discussion of green burial’s eco-spirituality include “new science,” referencing interconnection among life and ecological philosophy, addressing a total planetary state and human’s responsibility within it (York, 1995). The New Age paradigm represents the shift in world view from the authority of the church and will of God to monistic spirituality and the destiny of humanity (Feagan, 2007).

Hanegraff (1998) states that our society is in planetary crises due to the Newtonian/Cartesian paradigm that deeply influences thinking and permeates our way of life. The ecological crisis the earth is facing is based on “fundamentally flawed” presuppositions of the duality between humans and nature. Transition in the way we are thinking about humanity and the interconnectedness of life and death within a holistic framework philosophically aligns the New Age with the green burial movement. Hanegraff (1998) argues that a new perspective of an integrated ecological world view reflects the transformative humanistic restoration of the earth. The ecological framing of our identity and concern for future generations is reflective in mainstream practices of recycling, energy reduction and land conservancy (Davies, 2005). Being conscientious of waste disposal is

disseminated in American culture, but we do think of sustainability within the context of our bodies. Feagan (2007) states body disposal is the ultimate ecological contribution that ensures “ecological immortality”. Natural burial ideologically embodies the concern for the destiny of the planet and its application represents an extension of the practices Americans are implementing in everyday life. The purpose of green burials is to emphasize the “intrinsic relationship between the human body and the world as a natural system within which the ongoingness of life is grounded in the successive life and death of the individual, animals, plants, indeed, of all things” (Davies, 2005, p. 87). Contributing to the mass of living organisms allows personal values to be reflected not only in lifestyle but also in “death-style” (Gonzales, 2009).

New Age beliefs emphasizing holistic views of humanity as a planetary culture incorporates not only ecological relatedness, but biological and spiritual relationships as well. Spangler (1984) advocates increased accountability for treatment of the earth based on chemists James Lovelock’s Gaia theory. The Gaian model suggests that the earth is a single, self-regulating organism without separate or detached biological systems. Lovelock (1979) proposes we “revision” our view of the planet as a complex entity of interacting systems. The New Age must view the earth as “Gaiamorphic” and transcend anthropomorphic views (Spangler, 1984). Detaching from the human-planetary binary, he suggests we no longer “act upon” the world but “with the earth”. Spangler (1984) states, “The image of Gaia restores us to being part of an Earth community, first among equals perhaps, but only because of

our potentially great ability to understand and serve the whole” (p.48).

Although some philosophers categorize paganism separately from the New Age movement, Hanegraff (1998) incorporates Neopagan beliefs into the new paradigm, as they are ideologically compatible with terminological differences. Pagan beliefs grounded in reincarnation as the “ever-turning wheel” of death view the decomposition of the body as the organic balance of planetary wellbeing (York, 1995). Starhawk (1997) presents the integration of our physical bodies within the Pagan context of karma. She asserts the consequences of the way in which we treat the earth inspires Pagans to consider the long-term view of the planet’s future. From a Pagan perspective, decomposing, or being ingested by other entities, is fundamental to the spirituality of reincarnation (York, 1995).

### **Deinstitutionalized Death in Life**

From a bereavement perspective, the reintroducing of death back into the familial sphere could be societally beneficial and demystify the “funeral production” (Gonzales, 2009). Institutionalized death practices are not limited to postmodern procedures. Choices regarding quality of life and patient surroundings are other forms of a medically controlled dying process. What Davies (2005) coins as “supervised death” in a hospital environment may not reflect personal preferences of terminally ill patients. During the 1960s, the development of hospice philosophy as a holistic medical treatment for chronic illnesses began to emerge. Initially, social resistance to hospice services was rooted in the lack of understanding of non-curative philosophy. Opponents of hospice stated that services accelerated death by not implementing life-prolonging measures

and promoted active euthanasia (Spellman, 2014). The negative formulation of this conviction is deeply rooted in a western medicalized society which aims to combat death. Alternatively, hospice philosophy is a personal decision only employed when the individual no longer wants life-sustaining measures and recognizes his or her own mortality. It encourages self-determination and autonomy in medical decisions (Davies, 2005). Interdisciplinary hospice practitioners address physical, psychological, and spiritual systems of the patient and do not impose values or preferences on patients and families (Spellman, 2014). Comparing burial choices with individualized hospice care represents holistic values that honor the way in which a person desires to die. Spellman (2014) explains that the goal of hospice is to return the power to the dying individual, stating, “What marketers declared as appropriate in terms of the funeral, what the medical and psychological communities define as ‘normal grief’, what culture endorsed in terms of the proper disposal of the body—all of these efforts to classify, bureaucratize and rationalize death were challenged as examples of arbitrary power in Western society” (p.194).

With medical advancements, ethical issues regarding artificial biological preservation prolonging life is frequently debated in palliative care. Davies (2005) states, “Though life support machines may perpetuate the existence of human bodies, for the great mass of people the difference between life and death is stark and obvious” (p. 61). Health care directives and “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR) orders are used extensively within hospice services to guide patients in determining personalized medical treatments. Funeral planning

and preferences are discussed in an open manner and encourage patients to make accommodations that best fit with their “death style” (Spellman, 2014). Hospice is a therapeutic approach that does not view the dying as a “set of body parts” but as an integrated person. Hospice deviates from the institutionalized medical complex and returns a sense of agency to the individual (Davies, 2005).

The resistance and misinformation of the hospice movement as an individual or “different” practice parallels choices of alternative burial selection. After regulations allowing death in the home as a standardized palliative practice changed, attitudes regarding non-curative death shifted within the medical field (Spellman, 2014). In relation to the green burial movement, there is notable resistance of deinstitutionalized burials from death benefiting industries. Although not originally conceived to economically injure the mortuary market, it fundamentally threatens the livelihood of embalming practice. The funeral industry is a business, and selling products for the afterlife is like any other form of merchandise (Gonzales, 2009). Morticians have become responsible for many tasks as a “coordinator of services” that expands beyond the original preservative purpose. Funeral directors exploiting the vulnerability of the bereaved have been criticized for using selling strategies to tack on additional and unnecessary funeral options (Mitford, 1996). From the green burial perspective, the entire concept of mortuary practice is unnecessary, costly, and unsustainable.

Another practical implication includes not having a natural cemetery or hybrid space, allowing both embalmed and

unembalmed bodies, within regional and even state-wide proximity. Another option is burying the deceased on personal land, but requires special permits for the zoning of inhumation and transportation of a dead body and is only allowed in some states (Feagan, 2007). Currently in the United States, there are 51 operating green burial cemeteries, three of which are in Michigan (“Green Burial Council”, n.d.). Other facets of the green burial industry include companies producing biodegradable grave products and “green-certified” morticians aiding families in planning natural burials. On average, the cost for green burials is significantly less than traditional burial that often amounts to thousands of dollars (Gonzales, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Participants in the green death movement include not only environmentalists, but those who are seeking to spiritually reunite their body with the earth. Although green burials represent an eco-spiritual practice, the movement is ultimately about death (Feagan, 2007). Medical discussions about death and funeral planning are increasing with the intervention of hospice social workers and medical directives available in hospitals and other social services settings. However, societally, the subject is avoided in conversation and considered taboo. Although some discuss “final arrangements” with family, an overwhelming number of patients neither have burials plans, nor have discussed preferences with loved ones (Spellman, 2014). The lack of end-of-life planning or consideration of the “ethos of disposal” ultimately represents the tendency to deny death in western society. Culturally, we are addressing “ethos of waste,” but are failing to recognize our bodies as decomposable matter.



Gonzales (2009) presents an alternative image of current burial practices stating “...Cemeteries serving as quiet beacons of eternal rest becomes one of the quasi landfills of chemically processed human remains. Being able to look at the body in this way would be difficult for some and even insulting or sacrilegious for others” (p. 44). From this perspective, the modern funeral concept is presented as unnatural, unsustainable, and slightly macabre. As adequate burial space decreases, with the acknowledgement of the need for improved land conservancy, concern for natural resources increases. We are forced, as evidenced by the green burial movement, to question the practical means in which we dispose of human remains. The movement challenges the perceived need to remove dead from the public sphere and create a private medicalized practice (Feagan, 2007).

To address the growing interest in alternative funeral practices, morticians will need to change and expand services to meet the demand for human-centric approaches of death. This may include practitioners becoming green certified, developing hybrid cemeteries and adapting to different forms of disposal. Changes in federal regulations and state laws regarding disposal practices may be altered to accommodate ecological and spiritual needs of the public (Mitford, 1996). Some developments within the field include “do it yourself” death books, including *Caring for Your Own Dead* and *New Natural Death Book*, with detailed instruction and resources for green burial methods and procedures. Mitford (1996) explains the “true American tradition” is a burial practice without mortuary intervention. Breaking the trend of mechanical and impersonal journeys to the grave will depend on societal acceptance

of the unenviability of death and cultural norms surrounding death work (Walter, 1993). The state of the world ultimately reflects the dominant culture. The New Age movement represents a spiritual shift in the ways we think about ourselves and the world. Conversations and consideration of our death and disposal will ultimately integrate more sustainable burial practices into our ecological conscious.

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