Performing Death: A Performance Studies Analysis of Contemporary American Funerals

By
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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Religious Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The thesis committee for Renee Cyr certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Date Approved: May 14, 2020

Abstract

When faced with the death of a loved one, bodies serve as both the site of mourning and the vehicle through which individuals can embody grief. Using a Performance Studies lens this thesis examines the performance of bodies during a contemporary American funeral. This includes the deceased body, bodies of funeral participants, and the bodies of those who work in funeral homes. I seek to address the question-how do bodies perform the various ritual elements of a funeral service and what is the result?

Currently, the funeral industry is undergoing major changes. The rise of the funeral industry in the nineteenth century led to the creation of the traditional funeral which includes: embalming of the body, a visitation or viewing, a funeral service, transportation out to the cemetery, and burial at the gravesite. While this model still serves as the foundation of funeral services today, contemporary American funerals are characterized by personalized rituals that reflect the personality of the deceased and help the living play a more active role in the overall performance. A modern funeral must balance consumerism with customization to create a unique memorial experience. This thesis uses a Performance Studies approach to analyze all of the preparations and performances of the rituals associated with a contemporary American funeral.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support from Rumsey-Yost funeral home and in particular Todd Miller as well as Audrey Bell from Warren-McElwain. Thank you also to the families who let me observe their funeral services and death rituals.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee for their guidance in shaping this project and support during the writing process.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband and best friend Lewis Johnson. From all your sacrifices to support me going back to graduate school, and for your unwavering support during both my coursework and the writing of this; you are my rock. Love always and forever.

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INTRODUCTION

Opening Remarks:

Émile Durkheim once said, "that the ways in which we bury our dead and mourn them is a reflection of the way we live."[1] Death is a universal reality, and the presence of dead bodies cannot be ignored. Even in cultures where there is no formal ritual to memorialize the deceased, the body must be disposed of in some manner, and one can argue that process is inherently ritualistic. A culture's response to death can illustrate various aspects of their cosmology, religious beliefs and practices, values, and social structure. While death rituals are common across the globe, each incarnation represents a particular historical and cultural context.

In this thesis I will argue that to better understand certain aspects of American society today, one can examine prevailing contemporary American deathways. There are two styles of funerals that are common presently in the United States: what the funeral industry terms the traditional funeral and what I am calling the contemporary American funeral. Neither of these American death rituals are a singular act but rather a composite set, cycle, or what has been termed a ceremonial complex.[2] Together these activities form what many people may think of as a single distinct event. My discussion of death rituals involves the planning process, the private, and public aspects of the overall ritual performance of both styles of ritual.

Within the traditional funeral these components include embalming of the deceased, a public viewing of the body, a funeral service (usually with religious overtones), a procession to the cemetery, and burial at the local cemetery. The traditional funeral was not the product of a

[1] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain, 2012, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/41360, as quoted in Andrea Fontana and Jennifer Reid Keene, *Death and Dying in America (*Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 3.

[2] For a description of the term see, Michael J. Zogry, *Anetso, the Cherokee Ball Game: At the Center of Ceremony and Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 1–2.

specific religious doctrine. However, just as Protestant European-Americans had great influence in establishing other legal and social norms in the United States, members of those communities promoted this model, in combination with those individuals seeking to further the aims of the burgeoning funeral industry. As a result, since its inception in the nineteenth century, this iteration of a death ritual has been infused with Protestant European-American theology and has reinforced aspects of that theology as well.

Throughout its history, while serving as a vehicle for these specific theological ideas, the structure of the traditional funeral has also allowed for a certain degree of ideational flexibility. The fact that the traditional funeral's ritual script has been open enough to accommodate particular cultural variations while remaining highly homogenized has led many non-Protestant European-Americans to adopt the basic form while also making individual adjustments.[3] The combination of all of these factors resulted in the traditional funeral becoming institutionalized as an American way of death. Despite the diversity in this format, it is highly homogenized.

Nevertheless, since the inception of the traditional funeral there has been resistance to a way of death that was expensive, overtly Christianized, and reliant on funeral workers. In response, the contemporary American death ritual was created. This alternative death ritual begins with the structure of the traditional funeral, but those planning the event elect to drop some elements while simultaneously choosing elements from other religious practices, cultural traditions, or even their own creations to incorporate. There is no set format a contemporary American death ritual may take; the goal is to create a more personalized tribute that captures the spirit of the deceased. This may be achieved through the inclusion of particular ritual elements, incorporating secular popular music, utilizing technology such as livestreaming, or structuring

[3] Religious or cultural funeral traditions that do not follow the model of the traditional funeral are outside the scope of this thesis.

the performance around a theme. The overall tone frequently is more celebratory than that of traditional funerals, which tend to be more somber and formalized affairs. In addition, there is an increased emphasis on family involvement.

The distinction between a traditional funeral and a contemporary one is more of a continuum than a firm boundary. However, at present an increasing number of funerals are trending toward the contemporary model. This thesis will examine both types of funerals, explore reasons for this contemporary trend, and offer insights related to the performance of these two modalities of American death rituals. As this topic itself is such an expansive subject, this thesis will focus on contemporary funerals in Kansas. In doing so I will assess what can be learned about these American death rituals more broadly by using a Performance Studies methodology, and with an emphasis on embodied knowledge. When faced with the death of a loved one, dead bodies serve as both the site of mourning for the living and the vehicle through which people can embody grief. I will devote attention to all the bodily performances involved, including the deceased body, bodies of funeral participants, and the bodies of those who work in the death care industry.

The main questions I seek to answer are as follows: how do varying conceptions of death affect performance of mortuary rituals? How do bodies perform the various ritual elements of a contemporary American funeral service and what are the effects? And finally, what values are expressed through these ritual actions? It is my contention that death rituals allow individuals, especially those without a specific religious tradition, to embody certain values. Therefore, this thesis also will explore what values many Americans may share that are displayed in the context of the American funeral. Examining these American deathways and the values on display in turn

allows for a better understanding of widely held views of death in American society today, as well as of related contemporary trends in the funeral industry.

The thesis will focus on personal and social performances of identity crafted for and during a death ritual. I argue that the benefits of this approach are twofold. Analyzing death rituals as performance events helps scholars appreciate the centrality of the body while engaged in ritual action. Furthermore, it encourages considerations of the roles of space, language, materiality, impression management, roleplaying, and grief. For bereaved families, viewing death rituals as performances makes it easier for them to redefine their roles in the event and to play a more active part in commemorating the deceased. Many people find that talking or even thinking about death can be scary and unpleasant. It is my hope that this thesis, in addition to offering a fresh perspective on the subject matter, sparks conversations about embracing death and rethinking how individuals want to be memorialized. Furthermore, I hope to make people more aware of their rights and their options when it comes to dealing with the death of a loved one.

At present, the funeral industry in the U.S. is undergoing major changes. The traditional funeral model no longer defines American death practices. While there has also been an increase in direct burials and cremations, for families looking for an alternative to the traditional model that that still incorporates a complex of rituals there is the contemporary American funeral. Kathleen Garces-Foley and Justin Holcomb capture this new movement in the funeral industry when describing how, “The contemporary funeral is a constructive reaction against the impersonal, cookie-cutter, ostentatious, theologically focused, tradition-determined, somber

funeral practices of the twentieth century."[4] While still based on the foundation of the traditional funeral, contemporary funerals are taking on their own identity based on personalization, authenticity, and a more celebratory atmosphere. This shift in the way people are conceptualizing what makes a "good funeral" has forced the funeral industry to adapt their practices to support the performance of new rituals and an increase in family participation in those rituals.[5]

As the traditional funeral is waning in popularity, combined with less reliance on traditional religious scripts (perhaps the result of declining numbers of mainline religious denominations) individuals are left to create a death ritual that is meaningful to them. Not having a definitive religious framework to rely on when facing a death – their own or that of a family member or friend- can make it difficult to make choices when in an emotionally fraught state of grief or even shock if the death is unexpected. Absence of ritual knowledge and competency often compounds the difficulty to make what are, in the end, ritual choices. However, this lack of structure also encourages families to be creative in crafting a service that reflects the deceased and helps the bereaved process their grief. Therefore, I will explore, in relation to funerary customs, what people value and how ritual allows people to physicalize that appraisal.

To fill the desire for personalization, the death industry now offers a range of merchandise and material goods. At present, the guiding principal in the funeral industry is choice.[6] Whether it is adding small touches that reflect the deceased or a fully themed funeral

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[4] Kathleen Garces-Foley and Justin S. Holcomb, "Contemporary American Funerals: Personalizing Tradition," in *Death and Religion in a Changing World*, ed. Kathleen Garces-Foley (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 208.

[5] For a discussion on what makes a good funeral through the lens of a preacher/theologian and a funeral director see, Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1745). See also Thomas O'Rourke, Brian Spitzberg, and Annegret Hannawa, "The Good Funeral: Toward an Understanding of Funeral Participation and Satisfaction," Death Studies 35 (September 1, 2011): 729–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.553309.

[6] George Sanders, "Branding in the American Funeral Industry," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 12, no. 3 (November 1, 2012): 266, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540512456924.

service, a good funeral today is judged on authentically capturing the spirit of the deceased. Individually most of these personalized elements are affordable extras that can be added to the ritual. However, the cost of these items can quickly amount to a dramatic price increase if multiple options are selected. The average funeral today costs $10,000.[7] Therefore, grieving families must balance customization with their budget to create a unique memorial experience.

Methodology:

Rituals are expressions of personal and group identity. This examination of contemporary American death rituals from the perspective of performance highlights the connections between belief, performance, and ritual, and how these elements can contribute to the process of moving from grief to healing. Using a Performance Studies lens it becomes clear that the enactment of death rituals involves complex choreography, props and other visual aids, readings/speeches, food, music, considerations of space, and a large cast of supporting actors.

I contend all rituals are performative in that they involve bodies moving through space in intentional and scripted patterns. Rituals are a bodily experience enacted to fulfil a particular purpose. Even the spontaneous creation of new rituals involve what Richard Schechner termed "twice-behaved behavior."[8] These are small units of action that individuals train for and rehearse. Once part of an individual's repertoire these behaviors can be choreographed together in unlimited combinations to carry out a prescribed performance or to create something new.

However, I assert that there are three reasons in particular that funerals are performative. First is the centrality of bodies over text. What becomes of paramount importance is the

[7] "2020 Breakdown of Average Funeral Costs (Cremation, Burial, Etc) - Lincoln Heritage," *Lincoln Heritage Life Insurance Company*® (blog), accessed March 13, 2020, https://www.lhlic.com/consumer-resources/average-funeral-cost/.
[8] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35-38.

embodied engagement with the ritual. Second, funeral directors need to balance service with generating profits and are thus constantly performing their roles as ritual specialists when dealing with the public. Finally, mortuary rituals are constructed events designed to help people confront the reality of death. Funeral behavior reflects the beliefs and values of all the individuals involved.

This perspective offers several advantages. First, it allows me a theoretical stance that can most fruitfully encompass the full spectrum of ritual, staging, and display as observed in two local funeral homes. Second, it begins to fill a lacuna in contemporary American funeral studies, which, unlike examples of research on funerals from other cultures employing a performance focusing lens, have been largely isolated from this field of study. Third, performance provides a way to observe how mourning is connected through the interplay of the presence and display of the decedent, ritual choices, improvisation, the lack or presence of a religious tradition, and the consultation between grieving clients and ritual professionals.

To achieve this goal, I plan to incorporate a framing device similar to that of Amy Hughes in her analysis of nineteenth-century American theater. In that work, Hughes argued that nineteenth-century theater created visual and performative spectacles on stage to advocate for social reforms. Although funerals are not theatrical spectacles in the strict sense (although some can be), Hughes' attention to the theatrical body as/in/at the spectacle is helpful analytically in addressing what I will examine: the performance of ritual bodies as/in/at mourning.[9] Both as spectacle and ritual performance, bodies are things to observe, the tools through which one can observe other bodies, and the basis of an embodied experience of interacting with the world.

[9] Amy Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014). See especially 13-45.

The "body as a site of mourning" perspective includes attention to the presence and power of the corpse, including the dead body's agentic-like quality to initiate scripting of the performance of the living. A deceased body is charged with significance; it is not an inert object but a material presence that grounds the performance for all participants. The bodies in mourning aspect addresses the performance of individuals who work in the death care industry, predominantly funeral directors. Since the mid-twentieth century, funeral homes, as ritual intercessors in and displayers of death, have become the dominant mediators of these possibilities in American culture. As such, I examine the "behind the scenes" preparation and the "on-stage" work of managing all elements of the ritual.

Lastly, a focus on bodies at mourning examines bodies of friends and family of the deceased who are cast into the performance of the mortuary ritual. They are both attending an event that centers around mourning, and they will continue to be in a state of mourning after the death rituals. In this regard, I am interested in how participating in death rituals helps these individuals process their grief.

Within the field of ritual performance, Erving Goffman was the first theorist to suggest that the analysis of everyday life can best be viewed in terms of performance. Goffman's concept of framing is a foundational concept that I will begin with (and then expand upon) in order to analyze how death rituals are social performances designed to display and maintain certain desired impressions of the self to others.[10] The concept of "framing" provides a method for analyzing social interaction and value theory. There are also specific references to funeral practices in his work. Furthermore, there are implications in his work for both actor training and sociological analysis. Using the concept of performance as an analytical lens through which to

[10] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1 edition (Anchor, 1959). See especially 208-238.

view daily life, and in particular ritual behavior, allows people to deconstruct the performances, processes, and products created by themselves and their fellow players.

This thesis utilizes additional theoretical insights from Performance Studies as well. Richard Schechner, the father of Performance Studies, discusses how performance exists on stage as well as in everyday life. He writes, "everyday life also involves years of training and practice, of learning appropriate culturally specific behavior, [and] of adjusting and performing one's roles in relation to social and personal circumstances."[11] Funeral directors must constantly be aware of the role they are playing and how it is being perceived. Furthermore, funeral attendees are often aware that funerals are spaces governed by different behavioral expectations and that they are being judged on their ability to adapt and improvise.

Ronny Turner and Charles Edgley were the first to write about death rituals framed specifically as theatrical events. Their short article which was originally published in 1974 has inspired this thesis. As there has been no further scholarship in this area, this thesis will extend the boundaries of their study by providing a more extended investigation of the various components of a funeral.[12]

All in all, my performance-focused approach is meant to chart new ground in research on the American funeral industry by offering an account that is synchronic and locale-specific. This allows for sustained observation and analysis of the planning, staging, and performance of death rituals in multiple funerals at a specific place and time in American culture. As such, this project

[11] Richard Schechner and Sara Brady, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd edition. (London: Routledge, 2013), 28–29.
[12] Ronny E. Turner and Charles Edgley, "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral," in *Life As Theatre: A Dramaturgical Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Aldine Transaction a division of Transaction Publishers, 2017), 285–97.

takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding, in local context, the current moment of funerary culture, rituals and identity formation.

Much has been written about death rituals in specific cultures and historical periods worldwide. There also is a growing interest in the study of deathways across a multitude of academic disciplines. Scholars with a background in history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and neuroscience have taken up various aspects of this endeavor. However, there has been a shortage of research on twentieth and twenty-first century American funerals. Furthermore, most of the existing scholarship comes from historical or sociological frameworks. There is significant research on the history of the American funeral industry and funeral homes, and this scholarship will aid my study by providing historical and cultural context that parallels and has impacted the business life of the funeral home in which my study is situated.

I will combine information from these sources with data from memoirs, instruction manuals, and internet resources written by individuals who work in the funeral industry, as well as accounts of modern funerals intended for a popular audience. Interestingly, whether intentional or not, many of my sources use performative language to describe death rituals. These include academic books and articles, funeral trade publications, popular culture publications, and critiques of the funeral industry. This vocabulary usage suggests that there is something inherently performative about the enactment of death rituals.

This thesis adds to that discussion by merging a Performance Studies perspective with data gleaned from both historical research and ethnographic fieldwork. In addition, I will be drawing on a wide range of sources and materials. These sources can be grouped into four major bodies of literature: performance theory, ritual studies, embodiment/body studies, and

grief/trauma. This combination will illustrate the interconnections between how certain members of a particular society think about their place in the world, and how they create rituals to represent and maintain that identity. Together these materials will provide me with a broad knowledge base of methodologies with which to approach my ethnographic work, and specific details to add depth and context to my field work. They will inform my focus on how bodies move through space and the embodied performance of death rituals.

To sum up my approach, I will employ close textual analysis of a variety of historical, ethnographic, and theoretical studies as well as selected non-academic source materials in combination with observations and interviews collected during fieldwork. Primarily utilizing a Performance Studies approach, I will illustrate how funeral directors and participants conceive, construct, and control the contemporary American funeral. I assert that contemporary American death rituals can best be analyzed by means of the theoretical frame of rituals as process, which, along with recognition of their full historical scope and current iterations, clearly marks them as models for embracing life as a performative event.

My primary case study will be Rumsey Yost funeral home, which is located at 601 Indiana Street in Lawrence, Kansas. I chose this funeral home because the staff were the most receptive to my inquiries about doing research. Additionally, it is a family-owned business that has full-scale funeral service, including grief counselling and an onsite-crematory. Furthermore, it is a desirable field site because of its convenient location and the high volume of funerals they conduct annually. The main activities of my research were as follows: I conducted both formal and informal interviews with Todd Miller, one of the funeral directors on staff; I toured the facility; and I attended services both on site and at the local cemeteries.

To supplement my primary research, I also visited Warren-McElwain funeral home, located at 120 West 13th St. in Lawrence, Kansas. This is the other large-scale family run funeral home in Lawrence. There I conducted a formal interview with funeral director Audrey Bell. The other two area funeral homes are Grateful Gatherings and Lawrence Chapel Oaks, but both are much smaller operations and did not respond to my research inquiries.

Confronting Death:

Death is a fact of life. Sherwin Nuland, a surgeon and historian of medicine notes, "The appearance of a newly lifeless face cannot be mistaken for unconsciousness. Within a minute or two after the heart stops beating, the face begins to take on the unmistakably gray-white pallor of death; in an uncanny way the features soon appear corpse like, even to those who have never before seen a dead body."[13] Dead bodies do decay, and this is something we have to confront. Furthermore, there are reminders of death all around us, including but not limited to those in nature, in literature, across social media, on the news, in television/movies, and in video games.

When a death occurs, a series of events are set in motion. Arrangements must be made for how the body will be cared for, mourned, and what will be its final resting place. In the nineteenth century death was a communal affair, but today it is much more private. However, the passage of time has not changed the fact that death is a way to reaffirm the social order. Gary Laderman's description of historical attitudes towards death is still applicable today. He writes,

> Although the body had lost the spark that animated it, deeply rooted social conventions demanded that it be given proper respect and care from the living. Its uncertain status—as an empty container for a newly departed spirit, as an evocative representative of the lost loved one, of a highly charged object of reflection and remembrance, and as a

[13] Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter*, 1st Edition (New York: A. A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, Inc, 1994), 122.

> decomposing, unstable cadaver—also contributed to the deliberate, careful handling by the living survivors.[14]

Whatever the human reactions to death, dead bodies must be dealt with in an intentional way. Whether one is inspired by religious doctrines, historical or familial traditions, a deep sense of wanting to capture the essence of the deceased, or wanting to do the bare minimum, the presence of the dead simply cannot be ignored. The body itself is considered to be worthy of respect and care, while at the same time being seen as a potentially dangerous polluting force.

In his classic text *Deeply into the Bone,* Ronald Grimes surveys a variety of cross-cultural mortuary rituals. He determines, "There is infinite variation in the world's mortuary customs, but the motives for engaging in them are limited."[15] Death rituals are either to help the deceased transition into the afterlife, to help the living process grief, or for a combination of both. In contemporary American death rituals, the focus is almost entirely on the living. In general, it is not believed the spirt of the deceased needs help in transitioning. Rather funerals serve as a way for the bereaved family to express their grief and reaffirm social connections. Through the communal act of mourning, individuals are better able to navigate their grief and begin the process of moving towards healing.

Choose Your Own Adventure

Many psychologists as well as grief specialists and death care workers argue that having some kind of death ritual is important because it "can bring comfort and peace to those who mourn and bring people together to share in the sorrow of loss and the joy of having known

[14]Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Towards Death, 1799 - 1883* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996).
[15] Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 219.

someone."[16] That being said, there are infinite ways to hold a death ritual. Each can be tailored to suit religious and cultural practices, budget, desired mood, personal preferences, as well as be personalized to reflect the personality of the deceased. *Mortuary Management*, a trade journal among funeral professionals, illustrates the range of funeral options and the emphasis on personalization:

> Contemporary American funeral rites, rituals, customs and ceremonies reflect myriad persuasions such as race, religion, lifestyles, vocations, income, social status, philosophies, traditional values and geographical influence. Diversity is the bedrock of the death care institution. American funeral service is the stage upon which diversity, uniqueness and persona are crafted and performed to commemorate and honor the individuality of life.[17]

However, there are four main categories death rituals fall into: traditional burial, full-service cremation, direct burial, and direct cremation. Since the development of the modern American funeral, burial has been the preferred method of disposition. Disposition within death studies refers to the method and final placement of the bodily remains. The primary options are burial or cremation, but there is a growing list of alternative options as well.[18] Since the contemporary funeral starts with a foundation based on the traditional funeral, within the framework of these four categories it would be classified as traditional or full-service.

A traditional funeral includes embalming of the body, a visitation or viewing, a funeral service, transportation out to the cemetery, and burial at the gravesite. It is also common to hold a reception for friends and family after the burial. A full-service cremation, sometimes also referred to as a traditional cremation, is similar to a traditional burial but ends with the body

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[16] "What Is a Funeral?," Dignity Memorial, accessed November 17, 2019, https://www.dignitymemorial.com/plan-funeral-cremation/traditional-funeral/what-is-a-funeral.
[17] Jerry J. Brown, "A Cowboy's Funeral," *Mortuary Management*, May 2002, 8–9.
[18] For examples of alternative modes of disposition as well as uses for deceased bodies see, Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2008); Mary Roach, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003) "What Is Plastination? | History, Use, & Process," Experience Anatomy, accessed May 10, 2020, https://www.experienceanatomy.com/about/understanding-plastination/.

being cremated instead of going out to the cemetery. Again, it is common to hold a small reception after the formal ceremony. Even services that don't include all of the components of a traditional funeral use the traditional funeral as the model upon which they base their ritual.

Traditional death rituals have come to be seen as symbols of respect and honor.[19] Individuals often take comfort from participating in what they take to be a long-standing tradition. However, what is considered traditional within American death rituals dates only to the nineteenth century. Furthermore, these practices were designed not out of respect for the deceased but as ways to support the burgeoning funeral industry. For example, there was a financial incentive for funeral workers to advance the notion that the cost of a funeral was a way of honoring the deceased and showing respect (as well as social status). In addition, most elements of the early twenty-first century American funeral continue as a reflection of our fear as a society about the decay and decomposition of bodies. Such fears drove the practice of embalming and purchasing expensive caskets as well as reliance on funeral workers. This in turn has led to astronomical prices and a depersonalization of services.

In contrast, direct burial and cremation are the cheapest options and consist of the funeral home filling out the necessary paperwork and then a quick disposition with no service or formal ceremony. This is the ritual style that is used if the body is unidentified or unclaimed. However, it is also becoming more popular among families who do not want to spend money on an expensive funeral. Even for families who do choose this option, time and a space are provided before the body is either laid to rest in the coffin or prior to the cremation for families to have the opportunity to say a few words or engage in a simple ritual. This allows families the opportunity to spend some private time with the deceased and say goodbye.

[19] "Plan a Traditional Funeral | Burial," Dignity Memorial, accessed November 17, 2019, https://www.dignitymemorial.com/plan-funeral-cremation/traditional-funeral.

In this thesis I will examine funerals that have as their foundation the traditional model, but that also inject new rituals and creative elements to create their own event. I refer to these as contemporary American funerals. This is a recognition of the style of the funeral more than of a time period as both traditional and contemporary-style funerals are conducted currently. Not every funeral features each of the elements I discuss here, but I aim to present how the performative elements operate in each aspect of the contemporary American funeral. While direct burial and cremation are becoming more common, they inherently involve less ritual activity and will thus be incorporated in my discussion of all the potential rituals.

Previews:

The remainder of my thesis is broken into three major sections: Contextualization, Preparation, and Ritualization, then ends with a brief conclusion. Together these illustrate my theoretical approach and chronologically all of the potential activities associated with the overall death ritual during a contemporary American funeral. The ritual performance is not limited to the funeral service, and I explore the activities from the moment a death is discovered through the post-funeral reception. The act of disposition such as burial and cremation are outside the scope of this study but is an area I plan to explore in future research.

The first chapter traces the history of death rituals from their earliest beginnings through the formation of the traditional American funeral and finally the contemporary funeral. Next I consider the roles of each of the major players in a death ritual: the funeral director, family and friends participating in the ritual, and the body of the deceased. The chapter concludes with an investigation of that various spaces associated with a death ritual and how different bodies interact with these spaces. This includes the physical space both public and private as well as theoretical space that allows the ritual to serve as a transformative event.

Chapter Two considers the preparations that are made before and just after a death. This includes notifying the authorities, arranging the funeral, and the process of embalming. Most people are not aware of the choices they have regarding how to deal with a dead body prior to being confronted with the death of a close family member. Although it is not legally required to have a funeral home take charge of the body, as families can care for the deceased in their own homes, many people are unaware this is even a possibility. Even when families know taking charge of the body is an option, most are ambivalent about taking on this role and would rather leave it to professionals to clean and care for the body. Additionally, it is usually left to the funeral home to deal with legal matters even though families can do so on their own. As most contemporary American funerals are staged in conjunction with a funeral home, I will focus on these. Preparations involve families participating in arrangement conferences and preparation of the deceased through the process of embalming to be ready to be displayed during the public performance.

The final chapter investigates the various components of a funeral/memorial service. There are infinite variations regarding how to conduct a funeral, however the majority are based on what is still referred to as the traditional funeral. A traditional funeral includes embalming of the body, a visitation or viewing, a funeral service, transportation out to the cemetery, and burial at the gravesite. It is also common to hold a reception for friends and family after the burial. A full-service cremation is similar but ends with the body being cremated instead of going out to the cemetery. Again, it is common to hold a small reception after the formal ceremony. The funeral provides an opportunity for friends and family to interact with the deceased and say a final goodbye as well as be there to support each other in their shared grief. This chapter will consider the public elements of a traditional funeral and how each is utilized during

contemporary funerals. What characterizes contemporary funerals is creative staging and incorporation of new rituals.

I end with a brief conclusion that examines the current state of the funeral industry and how current events and popular trends may shape the future of American death rituals. This includes the growing trend toward home funerals, which are driven by families with little or no involvement from the funeral industry. Home funerals offer an alternative to both the traditional funeral and the contemporary funeral. Next I investigate the effects of COVID-19 in reshaping both how people die and how death rituals are conducted. Lastly, I reflect on the importance of having some form of ritual to help individuals confront the inevitability of death.

CHAPTER 1—CONTEXTUALIZATION

Historical Overview:

To fully understand the function and model of death rituals common today, it is necessary to have a sense of the historical context that shapes contemporary scholarly thought and societal action in how death rituals are presently performed. In many ways, it can be said that religion and culture revolve around putting the dead in their place, the relationship between the living and deceased, and explaining the presence of death. The role of death in shaping culture is best articulated by Gary Laderman who writes, "Throughout human history the problem of bodily decay has had to be solved in a meaningful way—the social body cannot function without agreed upon principles to respond to the universal presence of dead bodies."[20] This sentiment is echoed by Caitlin Doughty who states, "Even if we move through the day finding creative ways to deny our mortality, no matter how powerful, loved, or special we may feel, we know we are ultimately doomed to death and decay."[21] The inevitability of death is part of the human experience.

Sociologist Clive Seale concurs, stating that how "humans construct social and cultural life in the face of death, and so all of culture can be viewed as a manufactured defense against mortality."[22] This need to mark death is part of what makes us human. Patricia Kelley argues that due to self-consciousness, humans unlike other animal species ponder their own mortality. Man feels compelled to create "a complex structure of explanation," and corresponding ritual

[20] Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*, 1 edition (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), xv.
[21] Caitlin Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory*, 1 edition (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 57.
[22] Clive Seale, *Constructing Death* (Cambridge, England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), as quoted in Katherine Susan Isaac, "Theories of Death, Ritual and Space: Evolving the Funeral Typology in Twenty-First Century Canada" (Masters of Interior Design, University of Manitoba, 2006), 46.

practices.[23] For Americans, this fear of decay in particular has shaped not only our self-understanding but also our funeral customs.

Across history, an array of religious beliefs and practices regarding life and death have developed, undergone organic or forced change (with some disappearing altogether), and in some cases, codified and systematized into the recognizable religious systems that exist today. Yet across religions, people continue to question the meaning of life, what happens when we die, and the connection between the living and the deceased. While the structures and beliefs associated with mortuary rituals may vary, at their core they all serve to reaffirm who we are as a species and our place in the world. Through understanding these rituals, we can appreciate our shared humanity.

Ancient Death Rituals

One trait that makes us human is our propensity to create ritual. Having a conception of there being a past, present, and future, gave rise to a need to mark major life events. This was first seen in death rituals among Homo neanderthalensis. In the next section I will briefly summarize some of the historical traditions that directly influenced present day American death rituals: Neanderthal, Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and early Jewish and Christian traditions.[24]

Evidence suggests that primitive humans were performing ritualized burial ceremonies. Even before the full development of language, Neanderthals had a symbolic conception of life and death. From their speculation about what happens after death, came the impetus to create rituals to both mark and mitigate such occurrences. Archeological digs have discovered bodies

[23] Patricia Fernandez Kelly, "Death in Mexican Folk Culture," *American Quarterly* 26, no. 5 (1974): 516–35, https://doi.org/10.2307/2711888.

[24] These are the traditions that the American traditional funeral is derived from, it does not include the variety of other mortuary traditions that have existed outside this lineage. Furthermore, other than Scandinavian, these are the only cultures/religions discussed in my sources that cover the history of funeral practice.

buried in the fetal position, facing east toward the rising sun, and evidence that graves were filled with flowers.[25] This suggests that at least some of the time, bodies were intentionally buried, accompanied by rituals to help the soul be reborn into the afterlife. Since then every culture has created some form of a burial ritual. While it may be impossible to say with certainty it may in fact be the only ritual that is common across all cultures through both space and time.

While little is known about the specifics of Neanderthal burial practices and beliefs, we do have well-documented reports from other ancient civilizations. Besides building the pyramids, ancient Egyptians may be best known for their intricate system of care for the dead and the process of mummification. Their practice of embalming bodies was a reflection of their belief that "after death the soul left the body to travel through 'time' and eventually came back to re-inhabit the dead body."[26] However it is unknown what came first, their belief in an afterlife or their funerary customs.[27]

Among the earliest cultures for which we have records, we begin to see a diversity of approaches to death. For the ancient Greeks, care for the dead was provided by the family and embalming was not practiced. Instead perfumes and spices were used to mask the scent of decay. Additionally, the deceased would be adorned in flowers and dressed in special clothing donated by friends and relatives who also served as funeral experts. In contrast, a wealthy ancient Roman

[25] Jeffrey D. Sommer, "The Shanidar IV 'Flower Burial': A Re-Evaluation of Neanderthal Burial Ritual," Cambridge Archaeological Journal 9, no. 01 (April 1999): 127–29, doi:10.1017/S0959774300015249. See also Ker Than, for National Geographic, December 16, and 2013, "Neanderthal Burials Confirmed as Ancient Ritual," National Geographic News, December 5, 2015, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/12/131216-la-chapelle-neanderthal-burials-graves/. For a different example of this practice see Patricia Kelley, 515

[26] Vanderlyn R. Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead: The American Funeral Director* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1975), 12. See also Robert Wesley Habenstein and William Lamars, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 5th edition (Brookfield, WI: National Funeral Directors Association, 2001).

[27] See William Rendu et al, "Evidence Supporting an Intentional Neanderthal Burial at La Chapelle-aux-Saints," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 1 (2013): 81-86. https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/111/1/81.full.pdf.

was cared for by a professional undertaker or *libitinarius*, the direct ancestor of the modern funeral director whose work was largely bureaucratic.[28] In Greece and Rome, both burial and cremation were practiced at various times in their histories. Interestingly which method of disposition was most popular alternated with which was more expensive (determined by what resources were more readily available space for burial or wood for cremation.) Regardless of mode of disposition there were strict cultural protocols for how to care for a dead body.[29]

For the early Jews, cremation was considered an indignity; burial with or without a coffin was always practiced. Jewish funeral rituals were carried out by experienced family members and "included the washing and perfuming of the dead, and, for hygienic reasons, burial on the evening of the day of death."[30] Early Christian burials were simple affairs which continued the Jewish custom of watching over or "waking" the dead, developed in response to fear of burying someone alive. In the fourth century the church organized feast days to publicly commemorate the death anniversary of the martyrs. While many funeral practices of early Christians were carried out by family, they were increasingly done under the direction of the clergy.

During the middle ages a Christian version of embalming was developed that involved "removing some body organs, washing the body with water, alcohol, and pleasant smelling oils, chemically drying and preserving the flesh, wrapping the body in layers of cloth sealed with tar or oak soap, and mummifying in a way similar to the Egyptians."[31] Yet most embalming during this period was used not as a part of death rituals but as a medical technique to preserve the body

[28] Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead*, 13. See also "Burial," Ancient History Encyclopedia, September 1, 2018, https://www.ancient.eu/burial/.
[29] For examples of this see Robert Wesley Habenstein and William Lamars, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 5th edition (Brookfield, WI: National Funeral Directors Association, 2001), 51–77.
[30] Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead*, 14.
[31] Pine, 14–15. See also Robert Wesley Habenstein and William Lamars, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 5th edition (Brookfield, WI: National Funeral Directors Association, 2001).

for dissection and anatomical study. What was seen as most important was crafting a distinctly Christian way of dealing with death which focused on Christian charity and respect for the dead.[32] The power of the Christian church across Europe during this time meant religious rituals became entwined with cultural practices. The combined legacy of each of these influences but especially the development of Christian practices shaped the way death would be conceptualized and commemorated in America.

Creating an American Way of Death

In colonial America, funerals of European-Americans generally consisted of a church service and brief prayers said at graveside ceremonies. Especially in New England death was seen as "natural and inevitable," thus there was no reason to disguise cemeteries or hide the fact death was a constant presence in people's lives.[33] Reflecting Puritan culture, ceremonies were simple and communal. Mourners accompanied the coffin to the grave and then filled in the dirt.[34] Paradoxically, the accompanying displays of morning were often elaborate, and directly related to an individual's wealth. Public mourning served as "a vehicle to allow wealthy people to show off their riches."[35] In a culture that generally emphasized austerity, a funeral presented an opportunity to assert one's social and economic status.

By the 1800s the tendency to "show off' during European-American funerals became intensified across people of all social classes.[36] With the rise of industrialization and greater

[32] Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, 13.
[33] Pine, 15. See also Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, Reprint edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 114-137.
[34] I am focusing mainly on New England Protestants because their approach to Christian theology shaped American's conceptions of death as a somber event. This is also a product of the fact that none of my sources focused on colonial American deaths among other communities or geographic regions.
[35] Andrea Fontana and Jennifer Reid Keene, *Death and Dying in America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 71.
[36] Amongst African Americans funeral customs developed differently. Funerals were seen as both a celebration of life (long before that was common for other Americans) and protest. Black funeral homes were created to protect these traditions and were a thriving part of the funeral industry until recently when many have been closed due to

conspicuous consumption funerals transformed into "a status seeking display as they became increasingly elaborate, and greater attempts were made to make them beautiful, with colors, ornaments, music, and elaborate caskets."[37] Simultaneous with the rise in extravagant funeral displays was the change in imagery seen on headstones. Starting in the sixteenth century the most common image was a skull which symbolized the finality of death. However, by the nineteenth century most graves featured cherubs suggesting hope for an afterlife.

Furthermore, views about burial began to change during the early nineteenth century. Instead of mass graves, the general societal opinion was that all people regardless of wealth deserved a decent burial which necessitated individual plots. However, not everyone could afford this and thus embalming took on greater importance as it was used to preserve bodies while a family raised the money to pay for the funeral expenses. Embalming was also used if a person died away from home and needed to be shipped across the country.[38]

During the Civil War the staggering number of dead necessitated widespread temporary preservation by embalming. This facilitated a general shift in societal acceptance of embalming, even though the procedure was crude and not always effective.[39] The recasting of embalming as defining a particularly American way to die was crystalized by the funeral procession of

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economic pressure and struggling to keep up with a changing industry. For more information see, Sara J. Marsden, "Homegoing Funerals: An African-American Funeral Tradition," US Funerals Online, accessed April 8, 2020, http://www.us-funerals.com/funeral-articles/homegoing-funerals.html#.Xo39hohKjIU. Elaine Nichols, "African American Funeral and Mourning Customs in South Carolina," South Writ Large, accessed April 8, 2020, https://southwritlarge.com/articles/african-american-funeral-and-mourning-customs-in-south-carolina/; Suzanne E. Smith, To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2010); Tiffany Stanley, "The Disappearance of a Distinctively Black Way to Mourn," The Atlantic, January 26, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/black-funeral-homes-mourning/426807/.

[37] Fontana and Keene, *Death and Dying in America*, 71.

[38] George Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," *Poetics* 38, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 50, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.08.001.

[39] See Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying," *The Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 1 (2001): 3–38, https://doi.org/10.2307/3070083.

President Lincoln. As his body was transported from Washington D.C. to Springfield Illinois people got to see how embalming could preserve a body for long periods of time. In fact, despite being buried in 1865, "Lincoln's body was so well embalmed that as late as 1899 it was viewed and claimed to be in a perfect state of preservation."[40] However, embalming practices were still experimental at this time and few captured the successful mixture that preserved Lincoln so effectively.

By the end of the nineteenth century most European-American communities had a local undertaker who would go to the home of the deceased and take care of all of the associated tasks: locating a casket, notifying relatives, arranging a service, contacting an appropriate religious leader, coordinating with the local graveyard, and preparing the body.[41] Technological advances such as the invention of embalming machines, improvements in cosmetics, and electrical wiring for businesses transformed the nascent profession from a collection of cottage industries to a corporate industry. George Sanders describes how, "Where once a disparate collection of craftspeople (e.g., cabinet makers and wheelwrights) contributed to the production of funerals in customer's homes, funeral parlors, occupied by fulltime funeral workers, began to appear."[42] Mark Harris contends that craftspeople who agreed to "undertake" all of the required elements of dealing with death such as arranging transport and filing legal paperwork in addition to providing a coffin, took on the name undertakers.[43]

Undertaking became a full time and lucrative business. The shift from multiple industries to a single profession responsible for caring for the dead also shifted the location of their work

[40] Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead*, 16. See also James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*, American Civilization (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).
[41] Laderman, 5. This section does not consider indigenous communities who had their own models of death rituals and did not rely on the funeral industry.
[42] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 50.
[43] Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 134.

from the home of the deceased to funeral homes. Having their own place of business was a sign of status of undertakers as practitioners of what was now a professional occupation.

The shift of moving funerals out of the home and into funeral homes, specifically designed for the purpose of hosting death rituals, was also aided by changing domestic spaces. Suzanne Kelly notes that, "The close cramped quarters of city dwelling and the growing loss of community made it difficult to have larger customary funerals, and the once quasi-public space of the home parlor was, at least for the middle class, slowly becoming a thing of the past."[44] More space was required in order to fully stage the increasingly elaborate rituals. Yet new urban housing was designed to be smaller and more private. The original name of funeral homes "funeral parlors," was a direct reference to these venues replacing the parlors in family homes as the standard setting for displaying the body of the deceased.[45]

In order to achieve their own middle-class aspirations, undertakers "began to build associations, publish journals, and found schools devoted to establishing their credibility as trustworthy and knowledgeable experts."[46] In 1882 at the first national meeting of undertakers, they re-cast themselves as "funeral directors," and began charging fees commensurate with their perceived status.[47] They began to see their role as facilitating healing by "providing an aesthetically pleasing memory picture."[48] Assuming the role of "grief therapist" alongside their

[44] Suzanne Kelly, "Dead Bodies That Matter: Toward a New Ecology of Human Death in American Culture," The Journal of American Culture 35, no. 1 (2012): 41, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2011.00796.x.
[45] Pine, Caretaker of the Dead, 17.
[46] Laderman 5.
[47] Gary Laderman, The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Towards Death, 1799 - 1883 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996), 168.
[48] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 51. Sanders describes how the term '"Memory picture' is used in the trade to describe the visual object that is created for loved ones comprised of the prepared and dressed body displayed in the casket."

already newly-created role of "funeral director," undertakers cemented public perception of their trade as both professional and of value to society.

However, "early methods for charging customers were highly irregular, and raised serious questions about ethical standards that have persisted to this day."[49] Additionally there were cases of funeral homes intentionally misrepresenting their goods and services, acting without the consent of the family, and taking bodies for cremation and just stockpiling the bodies or illegally selling them to medical schools.[50] The funeral industry as a whole has been tainted by this legacy of corruption. Furthermore, while the majority of funeral directors strive to serve the public with professionalism and high ethical standards, there continue to be cases of corruption and abuse of power to this day.

Another major factor that influenced the development of contemporary American funerals was the shift in the first half of the twentieth century with regard to why people died. The leading cause of death transitioned from receding pandemics to degenerative and man-made diseases.[51] This change in the health of the social body led to an explosion in the growth of hospitals which became the "primary institutions to care for the sick and monitor the passage from life to death."[52] The spread of hospitals and their increased control over death contributed to the separation of death from daily life. Lack of exposure to death bred a widespread cultural fear of death and dying. Due to this development and "With the blessing and patronage of the public, these funeral men—and most, though not all, were men in this period—took the dead out of the hands of living relations and performed all of the necessary, increasingly complicated, and

[49] Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, 5.
[50] Caitlin Doughty, "Order of the Good Death," The Order of the Good Death, accessed March 11, 2020, http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/.
[51] Paul Zopf Jr., *Mortality Patterns and Trends in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 2.
[52] Laderman, 3.

for many Americans, deeply unpleasant tasks associated with the death of a loved one."[53] As death became less common in daily life, people became less comfortable dealing with it. Thus, they were happy to turn this responsibility over to the professionals.

Shifting attitudes toward death combined with technological advances continued to shape the "traditional American funeral" that is still prevalent today. In the 1920s the funeral industry codified a particular mortuary ritual that they called the traditional funeral: embalming, purchasing expensive caskets, public viewings of the body, a religious and formal funeral service, and a concluding burial that was presided over by a funeral directory in tandem with a clergy member. Liz Crabtree describes how these death rituals "were dictated by a combination of tradition, religion and the presumed authority of the funeral director. The funeral process was considered a comprehensive and whole event, comprised of the usual time-honored steps."[54] Each of the component parts fused to become a singular ritual.

While this ritual was based on historical traditions, this was a new iteration that used the phrase "traditional" as a way to establish legitimacy. It was not a return to the simplistic death rituals of Colonial America but rather the creation of a tradition that reflected modern American identity. By injecting Christian overtones in these rituals, funeral directors were able to claim a level of authority and professionalism for their work. The American funeral became fully synonymous with a Christian rite. Even though many of the elements of the ritual were quite recent inventions, they were presented as traditional and connected to an imagined past. As a result, from the inception of this model through the 1950s funerals were much more homogenized than they had been in the past. The majority of funerals conformed to this

[53] Laderman, 4. See also Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, "Modernity, Self-Identity and the Sequestration of Death," Sociology, August 1, 1993, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038593027003005.
[54] Lisa Suzanne Crabtree, "The Changing Discourse of Death: A Study of the Evolution of the Contemporary Funeral Industry" (Louisville, Kentucky, University of Louisville, 2010), 52.

traditional model, even among people who did not identify as Christian. The traditional funeral quickly became accepted as the standard American death ritual.

In the 1960s there was a cultural shift away from the dominance of Christian rituals in dictating mortuary practices. People began both to both inject influences from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds into their rituals and to question some of the practices that had become common among funeral homes. In 1963 Jessica Mitford published *The American Way of Death,* a scathing rebuke of the funeral industry. As a result, the Federal Trade Commission began to investigate cases of unethical business practices among funeral homes and to advocate for consumer rights in purchasing funeral goods and services. These changes were initially met with fierce resistance by funeral directors. However, they quickly realized such a hard stance alienated them from potential clients and was not a sustainable business ethos. Begrudgingly, as a whole, the death care industry came to see that "the transitioning religious landscape was not an elimination, but rather an alteration to a more lax, less-institutionalized approach that better fit the myriad social movements introduced in the late 1960s."[55] The changing religious landscape was only part of a larger societal transformation. As an industry based around serving the needs of the community, it was clear major institutional changes would be necessary.

Based on the FTC's investigations, they corroborated Mitford's claims of widespread abuse within the funeral industry. In 1984 the FTC instituted the Funeral Rule which provides consumers with protections when purchasing funeral goods and services. It begins by legally defining who is a funeral provider, and thus who is subjected to the rule. This includes anyone who sells funeral goods and services, even if they are not a licensed funeral director.

[55] Crabtree, 48.

The Funeral Rule guarantees the right to purchases only the products selected and to be able to compare prices at different funeral homes and choose which one to work with.[56] It mandates that an itemized price list must be provided in writing and available over the phone. Furthermore, when making arrangements, consumers must be given a written explanation of any legal cemetery or crematory requirement that requires the purchase of any particular goods or services. This helped to make pricing more transparent and prohibited deceptive practices. However, some of the initial protections were removed when the rule was revised in 1994. Additionally, the FTC only has limited resources to enforce the Funeral Rule and thus many funeral homes are not in compliance.[57] Regardless most funeral homes feel that the Funeral Rule is a good guide for their business practices and take pride in following the stipulations.

By the 1990s shifting economic realities changed the funeral industry yet again. The decline of the traditional funeral is directly linked to increasing numbers of individuals who have viewed embalming as expensive and unnecessary. Without embalming people are less likely to spend money on an expensive casket and many are forgoing caskets entirely in favor of cremation or other alternative forms of disposition. Historically, the casket had been the primary source of profit for funeral directors. Crabtree notes that, "As casket sales dwindled, so did profits. A side effect of the decrease in demand was a steep increase in price."[58] This included a spike in casket prices as well as in ancillary goods and services, which all dramatically rose in price. Thus, atempts at reforming the industry led to astronomical prices. As Crabtree notes, "A cycle resulted where this new pricing structure unwittingly contributed to the demise of the

[56] Federal Trade Commission, "Paying Final Respects: Your Rights When Buying Funeral Goods & Services," July 2013, www.consumer.ftc.gov.
[57] Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2000), 176–88.
[58] Crabtree, 60.

corpse-focused traditional rituals."[59] Families were less inclined to spend money on hosting a public viewing of the deceased. However, less focus on the body created opportunities to emphasize the life and unique personality of the deceased.

Yet full acceptance was a slow process. Crabtree's analysis of the industry trade journal *Mortuary Management* suggests that not until 2005 had the industry "by and large acquiesced to consumer demand for services reflective of restrained religiosity, diversified religiosity, or the absence of religiosity."[60] There was a recognition that Americans were more interested in exploring a wider range of progressive religious ideas, including those prevalent in Eastern religions, and new-age or emergent traditions. There also was recognition of an increase in atheism. Therefore, most funerals today are characterized by "adaptation of traditional rituals, the manipulation of cross cultural practices, the creation of new rituals, and the individualization and personalization of existing rituals [in an attempt] by the funeral industry to capture social trends, regain dwindling profits, and ultimately, remain viable."[61] Remaining profitable required that funeral homes shifted their services to reflect what the American public was looking for in in the staging of death rituals.

As a result of religious influences diversifying and diminishing, the funeral industry has had to radically adjust its business model. Not only is there a stronger desire for personalization, there is also an increased emphasis on the family taking an active role in the ritual performance. Despite the initial trepidation, this transition away from a Christianized monopoly opened doors for industry expansion. Part of this cultural shift was an increased focus on the individual which has supported an increased commercialization and opportunities for sales within the death care

[59] Crabtree, 60.
[60] Crabtree, 51.
[61] Crabtree, 51.

industry. As a result, modern American funerals are characterized by a high level of consumerism and commodification, but also by an increased element of personalization.

Key Players:

The funeral director plays multiple roles during the performance of contemporary American death rituals: dramaturg, director, and lead actor. Funeral directors are responsible for having the background knowledge of the various religious and cultural elements that can be incorporated into a funeral as well as presenting that information to families (dramaturg). They coordinate all of the technical and theatrical elements of the performance such as lighting, music, projections, props, setting, and house management (director). As part of the rehearsal process the funeral director takes on the embodied role of caring for the body of the deceased and preparing it for presentation. Finally, on the day of the event funeral directors are the people guiding the public performance from the inside (lead actor).

When the public is present, the funeral directors must constantly be mindful of their performance of self. They must recognize that they are being judged by guests who are in an emotional state and thus may respond unpredictably to anything they deem less than a flawless performance. Ronny Turner and Charles Edgley note the pressure on funeral directors to fully embody their role as ritual specialists. They write, "Given the one-shot nature of the funeral service and the impossibility of doing it over in the event of mistakes, the funeral director must necessarily be concerned with the performative aspects of his business which will lead the audience to be impressed favorably by his effective staging of the show."[62] If a family is unsatisfied with the ritual performance not only does it reflect poorly on the funeral home and

[62] Turner and Edgley, "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral," 286.

potentially hurt their business, it can further traumatize the family, making it difficult for them to come to terms with their grief.

In the past, funeral directors made themselves identifiable at funerals by wearing mourning dress. Today they rely on their actions and reputations as trusted members of the community as well as ritual experts.[63] At present, sometimes a funeral director will carry around arrangement cards that have notations about the details of the funeral. In almost all instances the director knows all of the details and the card holds no value other than to give the audience the impression the director is prepared for the event. This focus on impression management often involves actively demonstrating their professionalism as well as their ability to help participants deal with their grief.

Additionally, many funeral directors confidently cast themselves as grief specialists insisting "they have the training and indeed a social duty to help bereaved relations understand the profound emotional and psychological consequences of their choices when planning a funeral."[64] Part of the shift away from the term undertaker was in response to a perceived need for grief therapy to be part of the death ritual process and for funeral workers to be the ones to provide it. Jessica Mitford, in her seminal text, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, describes the changing "dramaturgical role, in which the undertaker becomes a stage manager to create an appropriate atmosphere and to move the funeral party through a drama in which social relationships are stressed and an emotional catharsis or release is provided through ceremony."[65]

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[63] Vanderlyn R. Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead: The American Funeral Director* (New York: Irvington Publishers 1975), 99.
[64] Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*, 1st edition (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 137. Some funeral directors adamantly reject being seen as grief counselors because that implies a licensed psychologist or other professional. However, they are happy to provide resources and when requested refer individuals to a therapist.
[65] Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, 16–17.

Thus the term "funeral director" suggests both a level of professionalism as well as the important role these individuals play in the enfolding ritual performance.

It is true that as part of their mortuary science degree program, aspiring death care professionals do take at least one (and usually two) classes dedicated to the psychology of death and or grief studies.[66] However the bulk of coursework focuses on the scientific knowledge and skills to embalm and prepare dead bodies. Continuing education is also required for maintaining a funeral service license and this often includes courses on dealing with grieving families. Some funeral directors take great pride and even specialize in this aspect of the business, yet there are others who have only minimal experience in the emotional and psychological dimensions of grief.[67]

While it can be a useful metaphor to see the funeral attendees as the audience watching the performance of the funeral director, I propose a better approach is to cast them not as passive audience members but rather as spect-actors. These spect-actors are equal participants in the performance of the ritual. This term was originally coined by Augusto Boal, the Brazilian theatre theorist and practitioner who developed Theatre of the Oppressed. Theatre of the Oppressed teaches that all people are both actors (they act) and spectators (they observe.)[68] This is especially true in a ritual context where the success of the performance is contingent on community participation.

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[66] Samantha Watson, "A Look At Mortuary School Curriculum," *Frazer Consultants* (blog), May 27, 2016, https://www.frazerconsultants.com/2016/05/reading-riting-and-rithmetic-a-look-at-mortuary-school-curriculum/. See also "Mortuary Science - Associate in Applied Science," Kansas City Kansas Community College, accessed January 11, 2020, https://www.kckcc.edu/academics/degrees-and-certificates/aas/mortuary-science-aas.html. "How to Become a Mortician: Education and Career Roadmap," Study.com, accessed December 1, 2019, https://study.com/articles/How_to_Become_a_Mortician_Education_and_Career_Roadmap.html.

[67] Todd Miller, Personal Interview, Voice Recording, September 5, 2019.

[68] Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), xxvi. See also Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, trans. Charles A. McBride, Tcg ed. (Theatre Communications Group, 1993).

Using a performance perspective, the behavior of spect-actors can be seen as part of the "on-stage" performance. Turner and Edgley describe how,

> Their behavior is reviewed and judged by others whose comments on how well the family "held up" during the funeral will later be taken into account. Observations of funerals and especially post funeral gatherings show that such evaluations comprise much of the conversation, and the bereaved who shows too little emotion for the audience's conception of their relationship to the deceased, or those who show too much when it is known their relationship did not warrant it, are likely to be judged negatively. Mourners are aware of this and may construct their performances accordingly.[69]

During this heightened emotional time, people tend to be instinctively aware that they are performing. Even if they are unconscious of their own performance, they engage in critique of the performance of others. There are unspoken expectations about what is the appropriate amount of grief to express based on how close an individual was with the decedent.

Among the spect-actors, the most central to the performance are the immediate or closest family of the deceased. This can be an individual or a small group. They are the people responsible for making the funeral arrangements and also for financing the funeral, which can be quite an undertaking. They are the ones who would have initially contacted the funeral home and engaged its services. Thus, they are the most emotionally and economically invested in judging whether the ritual is a success. Sometimes they are guided by a will or preplanned funeral arrangements provided by the deceased. This can help remove the emotional burden of deciding what their loved one would have wanted and how to best honor them.

While this is the preferred situation for all involved, it is still rare.[70] The trend has been gaining popularity recently, but it has been slow to catch on. Frequently it falls to the family while in a state of grief to make all of the final decisions. Most individuals have little experience in funeral planning. They are not even usually aware of what their options are, let alone their

[69] Turner and Edgley, "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral," 292.
[70] Miller, Personal Interview, September 5, 2019.

rights when it comes to consumer protection. In this vulnerable state, they often place their trust in the hands of the professionals. A goal of this thesis is to encourage families to see the potential value of a funeral director while also having the tools and knowledge to advocate for themselves and the deceased in the process of funeral planning.

The final key player is the body of the deceased. Whether present or not at the ritual performance, the body exerts a strong presence. It can even be argued the decedent is the star actor. The deceased is the reason everyone has gathered. Their individual "life and attributes comprise the plot," of the performance.[71] The wishes of the deceased, specifically laid out or not, provide the foundation for how the performance will play out. In addition, there is a common belief that the newly deceased can in some sense see what is going on, hear people's final words to them and about them, and find comfort knowing they are being sent to whatever lies beyond with love and well wishes.

Assessing the Space:

Essential to the study of ritual performance is a consideration of space and place. I am interested in the way people conceptualize space and how space is transformed through ritual activity. My conception of space encompasses physical locations, theoretical notions of liminality and transformation, mental space, as well as movement of individuals through the various spaces associated with the funeral performance.

The Place of the Dead

The modern funeral home is a multipurpose space which allows it to fulfill in one location all the needs of a funeral service. As described by Katherine Isaac in a discussion of Canadian funeral homes, but generalized to include American funeral homes, it is a "space

[71] Turner and Edgley, 292.

designed to house rituals, purvey merchandise such as caskets urns, to accommodate funeral planning processes, and store the deceased body and prepare it for burial or cremation."[72] Additionally, many funeral homes serve as the home of the owner of the business or the manager. Funeral homes are designed to feel like a domestic space and yet they also function as "ceremonial, retail oriented, client focused, and biomedical" facilities.[73]

The modern funeral home interior was designed to create and perform its identity as a "recognizable, unthreatening space that would not intimidate its clientele, who would be unfamiliar with the typology and its processes when it was first established around 1920. Adopting the parlour in both name and spatial arrangement was a reassurance to clients. And through the evolution of funeral space domesticity has prevailed as the simulatory source."[74] Funeral homes strive to create a welcoming atmosphere that emphasizes warmth and community. For the bereaved this provides a place for them to both show and share their grief and vulnerability. The aspects of funeral practice not in keeping with the venue's image as a domestic space are relegated to basements, offices, and other areas into which the public is not allowed.[75]

With the decrease in religious affiliation that has been a marked trend in American society over the last 50 years, churches are no longer the dominant venue for funerals. While it is common for individuals to incorporate religious funeral liturgy into a contemporary funeral service, such events are most often held at the funeral home. Even when a church is used for the

[72] Katherine Susan Isaac, "Theories of Death, Ritual and Space: Evolving the Funeral Typology in Twenty-First Century Canada" (Master of Interior Design, Manitoba, Canada, University of Manitoba, 2006), 1.
[73] Isaac, 1.
[74] Isaac, 39.
[75] The use of private spaces within the funeral home is described in the section on backstage regions.

main service, a funeral home will most often be used to host the viewing. Therefore, an onsite chapel or some area marked as sacred space is an essential part of the modern funeral home.

These chapels have been for the most part inspired by Christian religious architecture. This design provides a sense of tradition and authority. Isaac outlines how, "When the funeral home adopted the service from Christian religion, it fashioned its chapel to emulate the sanctuary. This space would need to refer to the familiar doctrine of a religious ideology yet maintain a distance from its identification as a church."[76] A funeral chapel needs to be able to fill a religious function for people from multiple faith backgrounds as well as those with no religious affiliation. Such a space must balance having the feel of a church for those who expect it with also being accessible to all people. While there are some smaller community funeral homes that focus on a particular community with a homogenous religious and or ethnic background, most funeral homes serve a diverse range of families. Thus, it is important to have a space that can accommodate a range of mortuary traditions.

One way to increase the efficacy of a funeral is to emphasize sensual experiences. Thus, intentionally designed funeral homes benefit from haptic, sensory architecture. Isaac argues, "The use of forms, finishes and textures that promote touch, convey temperature or reflect light, for instance, engage the bereaved user with the interior in a way that flat, featureless forms and volumes do not. An emphasis on sensory experience brings the funeral home's users to a conscious state, where they connect with the passage of time and the ephemeral nature of life."[77]

Liminal Space

While the funeral home represents the physical location of most modern American funeral rites, another important aspect to death rituals is the creation of liminal space.

[76] Isaac, 40.
[77] Isaac, 73–74.

Anthropologist Victor Turner developed the concept of liminality to discuss rites of passage. If the funeral event is analyzed as a rite of passage, we can see that the liminal phase connects the profane reality in which the ritual begins and connects it to the sacred.[78] In this context the sacred is not necessarily a religious category, but more a way of denoting a transcendental state and a connection to something larger. The sacred is a place of transformation that exists outside of normal space and time.

Not only is the funeral itself a liminal phase, all of the participants, including the body of the deceased, are transformed into liminal personae. Using Turner's framework, Katherine Isaac argues, "the deceased is essentially a liminal personae when their body is initiated into the process of ritual preparation within the funeral home. The funeral home, as the site of the rite of passage, is the transition space for the deceased, from their active, physical place in the social fabric to something new."[79] Liminal personae elude classification and instead are open to paradox. They exist "betwixt and between" the natural and cultural as well as the sacred and profane. The deceased no longer occupy their living roles in society, but they have not yet transitioned to their post-ritual status.

Liminality also can be used to describe individuals who are grieving. It is a state, in the words of Turner, "betwixt and between" that has both communal and individual dimensions.[80] Isaac describes how "Liminal space has the potential to attract a diverse group of survivors, an imagined community that grieve together and share the experiences of both the physical environment and loss."[81] Turner also uses the word "communitas" to describe a temporary

[78] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Jersey: Aldine Transaction a division of Transaction Publishers, 1969), 94–95.
[79] Isaac, "Theories of Death, Ritual and Space," 49.
[80] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 93.
[81] Isaac, 52.

community that is operating in a liminal state.[82] Those who are grieving the loss of a loved one, even if they don't feel personally connected to the larger community of others affected by the death, are in a state that is removed from everyday society. This gives them the space to heal as well as to redefine their familial and social roles.

Backstage Regions

When viewing death rituals as a performative, what is seen as the main event is the public performance of the funeral/memorial service. In this framework that is the "on-stage" element of the ritual, and I will discuss this in Chapter Three. However, for a funeral to be judged a successful performance it requires a series of preparations and rehearsals that occur in backstage regions. According to Turner and Edgley, who are building on the theories of Erving Goffman, "A backregion or backstage is simply a place and enclosed activities strategically hidden from the audience. It is ordinarily a place, but may also be constituted by the shielding and masking of information in an interpersonal situation so the audience does not realize certain things that would conflict with the performance as staged."[83] I find this inclusive definition of backregions to be a particularly helpful way to conceptualize the inner workings of a funeral home where both spaces and sometimes information are clearly denoted as either public or private. The ritual performance is presented to intentionally convey a sense of comfort, professionalism, and ritual expertise. Viewing these preparations may undermine the desired image crafted onstage.

The primary backstage space at a funeral home is the preparation room. Sometimes referred to as the medical laboratory, this is the space where dead bodies are stored, autopsied,

[82] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 132. See also Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 273-274.
[83] Ronny E. Turner and Charles Edgley, "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral," in *Life as Theater: A Dramaturgical Sourcebook*, Second ed. (Routledge, 2017), 287–88.

embalmed, cosmeticized, and prepared for public viewing. The preparation room is "spatially segregated from the funeral chapel, visitation rooms, viewings rooms, offices, and other areas the public frequents."[84] Often it is located in the basement and behind locked doors marked "employees only." It is also common to have tunnels or back hallways that directly connect the preparation room to spaces where bodies are viewed so that the body is never transported through spaces open to the public.[85] Thus the body can magically appear when it is time for its performance.

There are times a member of the public requests to see these spaces, and funeral directors may allow this because it helps put the individual at ease. There are often misconceptions about how bodies are prepared. For most individuals their notions of what occurs in these backstage spaces are based solely on movies and TV shows which are highly inaccurate.[86] The funeral directors I have interviewed have all noted how these wild misconceptions can breed fear. They do want to be upfront and transparent about the procedures, however, tours of the preparation room are not routinely offered or suggested. They suggest a level of mystery and an almost magical appearance of the corpse made to look like they are sleeping to be therapeutic for bereaved families.

The distinction of backstage areas is not drawn just by funeral workers, as the audience are also willing participants in demarcating boundaries. Most people "voluntarily avoid areas where they are uninvited," within the funeral home (as well as in daily life).[87] Spect-actors are there to participate in the ritual, but within the established parameters of the performance. There is a sense that attending a funeral is not an opportunity to wander into spaces not actively

[84] Turner and Edgley, 288.
[85] Miller, Personal Interview, September 5, 2019.
[86] Miller.
[87] Turner and Edgley, 289.

engaged in the performance. Goffman writes, "They want to be put on by the show as much as the producers of it, and they recognize that part of the meaning of any performance will be diluted with disenchantment if one knows too much."[88] Like theatre audiences, funeral attendees willingly enter into a suspension of disbelief. Part of the enjoyment or satisfaction of the show comes from letting yourself be fully immersed in the world being created by the performance.

Occasionally, people think they will be comforted by seeing all of the inner workings of a funeral home including backstage spaces, and this may be true for some people. But in reality, for most people, breaking the illusion negatively alters their perception of the overall ritual and may be detrimental to helping them process their grief. As Goffman notes, "if the bereaved are to be given the impression that a loved one is really in a deep and tranquil sleep, they will have to be kept away from the area where the corpse is drained, stuffed, and painted for its final performance."[89] If one has a full understanding of the backstage proceedings they will be unable to buy into the illusion the deceased is asleep. And once seen, the procedure cannot be unseen.

Furthermore, most funeral homes have policies against allowing members of the public (even researchers) into the preparation room if there is a body present. It is considered a matter of respect and privacy for the deceased. In some states, such as California, limiting access to areas where bodies are prepared is even mandated by law. More than any other location within the funeral home, the preparation room is firmly marked as private and backstage.

Mary Roach, who discusses the interesting uses of bodily remains in scientific experiments, admits that she would not want to witness an experiment involving the remains of someone she knew and loved. While she is not specifically referring to the preparation of a body for a funeral, the principle is the same. She writes, "I feel this way not because what I would be

[88] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 229.
[89] Goffman, 106.

watching is disrespectful, or wrong, but because I could not, emotionally, separate the cadaver from the person it recently was. One's own dead are more than cadavers; they are place holders for the living. They are a focus, a receptacle, for emotions that no longer have one."[90] Bodies take on a special meaning when they belong to someone you personally know. The site of the physical body is where most people feel closest to the deceased.

Hence within the funeral home, even with no one present, bodies are not generally referred to as corpses or cadavers. While the deceased is most often unknown to the embalmers, the term cadaver is seen as dehumanizing and thus antithetical to creating a client-centered "homey-feeling" atmosphere. Funeral etiquette dictates that when referring to specific bodies, they should always be addressed by name, such as Mr. Jones.[91] Therefore, when describing funeral rituals, I also refer to them as bodies of the deceased or decedent. When preparing a body, funeral workers exhibit respect and even ceremonialism in their interactions with the decedent.

Many embalmers talk to the deceased throughout the procedure. This is a way of acknowledging the decedent's continuing personhood and the moral imperative to treat them with the dignity afforded to all humans. In some states there are even laws against using profanity or obscene language in the presence of a deceased body. Funeral directors are taught to behave as if their actions are being judged by the deceased. Performing the actions necessary for a successful embalming is seen as a sign of respect both for the deceased and the family who loves them and will be comforted by having a final memory picture of them.

However, to an untrained observer the process would seem disrespectful and possibly even inhumane. One might wonder if one can talk about inhumanity when the object is a corpse

[90] Mary Roach, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 11-12.
[91] Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, 17.

but in fact, "yet it is precisely this 'human identity' conception of the enterprise, that supports the funeral profession, and indeed, which becomes the basic polarity between which the mortician must balance his act."[92] The actions practiced backstage allow for the polished final product, complete with, in most cases, the made-up corpse that the public will witness. Backregions allow for the illusions and impressions, to use Goffman's terminology, to be openly constructed so they can be employed and embodied during the public performance.

[92] Turner and Edgley, "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral," 289.

CHAPTER 2—PREPARATION

When someone dies, there is a series of steps that must be completed and decisions that must be made. What is often thought of as a singular ritual is in fact a series of individual rituals linked into a ceremonial complex.[93] In order for the funeral service to be deemed successful the ritual activity begins right after death. Each step in the process, including the preparation, is an aspect of the larger ritual.

In this chapter I will examine each of the preparatory steps necessary for crafting a funeral. In other words, what happens immediately following a death? I open with a discussion of first steps: having the body declared deceased and beginning the legal process. Next I consider the value of preplanning a funeral. Following this, I describe the arrangement interview, the initial meeting between the family and the funeral director where they will script out what ritual elements will be included, how those elements will play out, and the roles of the various participants in executing the ritual. Lastly, I detail the history, process, and critiques of embalming, a practice which is central to the traditional funeral, and remains a common element of the performance.

Most deaths in the United States today occur at hospitals or under hospice care.[94] Under these circumstances the doctor or nurse who is present will know who to call and what needs to happen next. If a death occurs when an individual is not receiving medical care, the family will need to initiate the process. In these cases, there are online checklists that a family can consult which lay out initial steps to be taken, or a family can contact a funeral home to walk them through the process. The process also varies by state. A death does not have to be reported right

[93] For a description of the term see, Zogry, *Anetso, the Cherokee Ball Game*, 1–2.
[94] Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, "Modernity, Self-Identity and the Sequestration of Death," *Sociology* 27, no. 3 (1993): 418, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038593027003005.

away, giving the family time to be with the body. However, the rest of the process cannot begin until the death has been reported.

The first step is obtaining a legal pronouncement of death. If the person is under medical care this is done automatically. If the decedent is not under medical care the family should call 911. They also can contact a funeral home at this point, although the funeral home cannot receive the body until the death certificate has been signed. In the state of Kansas, state statute requires that all deaths not under medical supervision be sent to the County Coroner's Office to officially determine the cause and manner of death.[95] The coroner will determine if a full autopsy is required. In Douglas County, at the time of writing, all autopsies are contracted out to Dr. Erik Mitchel at Frontier Forensics in Kansas City. Once a cause of death has been determined, the body can be sent to the funeral home of the family's choice.[96] Alternatively, the family can request the body be turned over to them so they can have a home funeral.

Making Choices:

Crafting a successful death ritual takes planning and preparation. In the immediate aftermath of death, many choices must be made and there is an inherent timeframe in which next of kin need to make them. Funeral homes recognize this is a difficult process and they pride themselves on having a funeral director who can guide families through the process. Funeral directors perform a public service, but it is simultaneously a business transaction. In order to be viewed as a caring and compassionate professional, a funeral director cannot come across as overly eager to make a big sale. However, they do want to make a profit, and most members of

[95] "Douglas County Coroner's Office | Douglas County Kansas," accessed March 15, 2020, https://www.douglascountyks.org/external-agencies/douglas-county-coroners-office.
[96] For a description of the process of body removals see Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, 39–50. See also Janice J. Richardson, *The Making of a Funeral Director*, 1st edition (Canada: Janice J. Richardson, 2017).

the public accept that they are paying for a service (one that, as I have stated above, many people don't want to perform themselves).

While a funeral director must balance service with profits, the bereaved must balance the funeral they wish to create with their budget limitations. The family of the deceased have to decide how to best remember their loved one: will there be a service, what form will the final disposition take, what will be written in the obituary, who will be notified/invited to participate in the ritual, and importantly what will the budget be?

Funeral arrangement offices are frequently stocked with a brochures and other handouts that can help identify all of the available options a family has. In some cases, those resources blend statements of compassion with statements that no doubt put additional pressure on the families and may be said to encourage extra spending. For example, one such brochure given to grieving families reads:

> Someone you know has died. You are about to make funeral arrangements. You must consider many things. After the funeral you cannot undo what you should have done but didn't. After the funeral you can't undo or change what was done. If you are like most people, you are sad and will go through a trying time, because for most persons there is no more difficult period than that encountered immediately after death and separation.[97]

Not only must choices be made in a timely manner during a time of grief, but after the funeral families must live with those choices. There is no opportunity to do it again. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the funeral can extend the grieving process.

Jessica Mitford laments how multiple factors, mostly outside the control of the consumer, can negatively affect a funeral transaction. This includes, "the disorientation caused by bereavement, the lack of standards by which to judge the value of the commodity offered by the seller, the need to make an on-the-spot decision, general ignorance of the law as it affects

[97] National Funeral Directors Association, "Someone You Love Has Died: Some Thoughts and Suggestions About Funerals," As quoted in Howard C. Raether *Successful Funeral Practice* 116-117.

disposal of the dead, [and] the ready availability of insurance money to finance the transaction."[98] Grief mixed with the pressure to make timely decisions makes it much more difficult for the bereaved to rationally consider all of their options. Furthermore, because most people do not have a lot of experience with death and dying, they don't know what their own preferences are and thus are more inclined to trust the funeral director as the ritual expert.[99] Unfortunately this often leads to over-paying and has prompted abuse within the funeral industry.

Personal Preparation

One nascent but growing trend within the funeral industry today is people pre-planning their own funerals. Pre-planning can take multiple forms: from a few ideas of what someone envisions for the style of their funeral, desired merchandise, or preferred method of disposition, to a fully planned template with specifically selected and pre-paid-for merchandise. This information can be incorporated into a formal will, informally written down and kept in a safe location, or just discussed with loved ones.[100]

Many individuals find the idea of thinking about their own death or that of a loved one as unpleasant and something to be avoided. However, there are a multitude of resources to help guide people through the process that explain the numerous benefits of doing so. These include multiple websites that offer free resources that help individuals to think through their options and

[98] Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, 20–21.
[99] Tony Walter, "Facing Death without Tradition," in *Contemporary Issues in the Sociology of Death, Dying and Disposal*, ed. Glennys Howarth and Peter C. Jupp (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1996), 193–204, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24303-7_15.
[100] Having a legal document that specifies last wishes is the most ideal situation for the deceased because it provides a clear written and binding record of one's preferences. However even without creating any documentation, the act of discussing your final wishes with your loved ones seems to be psychologically beneficial for all parties. Death scholars agree that talking about death can alleviate fears.

record their preferences.[101] In addition, the websites for the Federal Trade Commission as well as the Funeral Consumers Alliance are full of helpful articles and planning tools.[102] Additionally, all funeral homes offer pre-planning services which can be accessed online or in person.[103] Most funeral homes offer these pre-planning consultations free of charge whether you walk in or schedule an appointment. Often funeral homes, as is the case with Warren McElwain and Rumsey-Yost, have a member of staff whose sole job is to assist in pre-planning.

All of the pre-planning resources suggest that when making advanced planning arrangements it is helpful to bring along any paperwork or documentation. While this is not required it will simplify the process when death occurs. Helpful items to have on file include: "social security number, veteran discharge/benefit papers, a list of all surviving relatives, birth date, organization memberships, and basic information to be used on the death certificate and in the newspaper obituary."[104] During the consultation, details can be decided such as musical selections, who will officiate, who will be pallbearers, special readings or prayers to be included (and who will perform them), flower requests, and if a person would like donations made to any particular charities or organizations. These choices can be changed later, but many people find that it is helpful to have a starting point.

There are multiple advantages to pre-planning a funeral, and I personally advocate for doing so. For people who are dying, they often find comfort in planning out their last wishes. It

[101] For example see FuneralWise: https://www.funeralwise.com/wise-planning-system/ and Everplans: https://www.everplans.com/how-to-get-started, and Funeral Resources, "Cost to Have a Funeral, Funeral Expenses, General Price List | Family Funeral Resources Center," Funeral Resources, accessed March 31, 2020, https://funeralresources.com/plan-a-funeral/general-price-list/.
[102]FTC: https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0305-planning-your-own-funeral
Funeral Consumer Alliance: https://funerals.org/consumers/general-information/
[103] For resources from within the funeral industry see the National Funeral Directors Association websitehttps://www.nfda.org/for-the-public/preplanning-a-funeral
[104] Kansas State Board of Mortuary Arts, "Pre-Planning Your Funeral Arrangements," accessed March 27, 2020, https://ksbma.ks.gov/resources/publications/pre-planning-your-funeral-arrangements.

is a way to establish a sense of control and agency. It also can bring peace of mind knowing that having these decisions in place relieves a burden for your loved ones. In addition, pre-planning can be done long before death. Despite the clear advantages to funeral pre-planning, it is the exception rather than the rule in American funerary culture. A cultural aversion to death results in individuals not wanting to confront the thought of their own death or that of a loved one. Thus, when a death does occur, families are often left wondering how to proceed.

Even if the family knows what the decedent wanted in terms of funeral arrangements those wishes may not be feasible or may not be supported by the family. Even a will can be legally challenged if a family thinks they know better how the death should be handled. There is also sometimes conflict over who will be responsible for making these decisions. Tanya Hernandez describes how, "There is no definitive legal rule as to who has the right to control the disposal of mortal remains because there is no agreement as to who owns a body after death or whether the cadaver is subject to traditional property rights."[105] Each state has their own laws and many of these leave a lot of space for interpretation. Pre-planning can help alleviate some of this uncertainty.

Other times the family is so emotionally distraught they don't want to have to make any decisions. In such cases they may be happy to turn complete control over to the funeral director. If the deceased had requested a simple service but the family wants to do something more elaborate, the funeral director will follow the wishes of the living, because from a business perspective it is better for them. If there are competing family claims, again funeral directors are

[105] Tanya Hernandez, "The Property of Death," *U. Pitt. L. Rev.* 60 (January 1, 1998): 971. See also Mark E. Wojcik, "AIDS and Funeral Homes: Common Legal Issues Facing Funeral Directors," John Marshall Law Review 27, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 411-434

inclined to side with whoever is offering to spend the most money. There have been multiple cases where it has taken a legal injunction to have the written wishes of the deceased upheld.[106]

In Kansas an Advanced Directive (living will), which will mandate who has control and can represent the wishes of an individual once deceased, requires two separate forms: a Living Will Declaration and a Durable Power Of Attorney For Healthcare Decisions (a.k.a. Health Care Proxy). These most be notarized or signed by two witnesses who cannot be relatives or beneficiaries of the will.[107] Having an Advanced Directive offers the best chance that one's final wishes will be followed.

As part of advanced funeral planning, it is possible to enter into an arrangement with the funeral home or cemetery (in some states this is done through an insurance company) where an individual can pre-pay for their funeral and other associated expenses such as a burial plot and headstone. The benefits to advanced planning are that it means the individual has decided at least most of the details of a desired funeral which removes that burden from the family, there are theoretically no additional expenses the family must pay, and it locks in the prices of selected goods and services in the event of price increases.[108] There are multiple forms contracts can take and money is either payed in a lump sum or installments.

However, prepaying may not be as good of a deal as it sounds. There is little regulatory oversight of such contracts and state laws vary in terms of how much consumer protection is

[106] See Hernandez, "The Property of Death."
[107] For access to these forms as well as a link for ordering death certificates, the organ donation registry, and information on state laws regarding death see https://www.everplans.com/articles/kansas-health-legal-and-end-of-life-resources
[108] Lincoln Heritage Life Insurance Company, "Complete Guide to Pre-Paid Funerals: Plans, Costs, Pros & Cons," *Lincoln Heritage Funeral Advantage* (blog), accessed March 27, 2020, https://www.lhlic.com/consumer-resources/how-pre-paid-funeral-plans-work/.

available.[109] Often the arrangement is made with a particular funeral home, so if the buyer moves or the funeral home closes, they may not be able to recoup money paid. Additionally, if the buyer fails to keep up with the payments, the contract will be voided with no money refunded.[110] There have been multiple state and federal investigations into funeral homes who fail to honor prepaid contracts. Therefore, it is important for consumers to do their research before entering into any prepaid funeral arrangement. In addition, there are other options available if people want to make sure money is set aside for funeral expenses, such as funeral insurance or placing money in a trust.

Another reason individuals are wary of pre-planning a funeral is because they have likely heard about the dangers of prepaying and assume that pre-planning is synonymous with being locked into a contract to fund their funeral wishes. If pre-arrangement is done through a funeral home, they may encourage prepaying because they have a financial incentive to guarantee that their funeral home will be used for services in the future that they get to collect money immediately. However, these are two separate processes and pre-planning does not require any financial output (except perhaps for legal fees if a lawyer is consulted to draft a will.) Based on my research of funeral consumer rights and the benefits of confronting death, I support all people engaging in some level of pre-planning. The value of prepayment needs to be evaluated on an individual basis.

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[109] For a breakdown of funeral laws and protections by state see Josh Slocum and Lisa Carlson, *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*, 1 edition (Hinesburg, VT: Upper Access, Inc., 2011).

[110] For more information on the various types of prepay options as well as stories of funeral abuses see Lincoln Heritage Life Insurance Company, "How Pre-Paid Funeral Plans Work." See also Kansas State Board of Mortuary Arts. "Pre-Planning Your Funeral Arrangements." Accessed March 27, 2020. https://ksbma.ks.gov/resources/publications/pre-planning-your-funeral-arrangements. Laise, Eleanor. "Prepaid Funeral Plans Can Be a R.I.P.-Off." Kiplinger, November 18, 2011. http://www.kiplinger.com/article/retirement/T037-C000-S001-prepaid-funeral-plans-can-be-a-r-i-p-off.html.

Selecting the Script

When a death occurs, after the appropriate authorities have been contacted (medical professionals or the police), the next call is usually to a funeral home. Some families have a funeral home in mind, usually one they have worked with in the past or at which they have attended a funeral. For others it is a matter of doing a quick internet search for local funeral homes and picking one at random. That said, funeral homes can differ widely in the services offered and especially with regard to pricing. It is highly recommended by the Funeral Consumers Alliance that consumers shop around to find the best fit for their needs. However, when people are in a state of grief this is usually not done. Therefore, this is another reason that some level of preplanning is useful. Funeral homes are required by the Funeral Rule to supply a general price list in person or over the phone to anyone who inquires; many also post this information on their website. Once a funeral home is selected the family will set up an appointment for an in-person arrangement conference.

If the death occurred in a private residence the first face-to-face meeting may occur at the home, in conjunction with the removal of the body. In this case Howard Raether in his guidebook for funeral directors, *Successful Funeral Practice*, insists that "The employee of a service company, or the driver of the first call vehicle, should not be the first person to be seen as a representative of the funeral home. Nor should an associate or driver go with the funeral director to the door with the cot on which the body is going to be removed."[111] This is already a traumatic experience for the family and the goal is to project an air of comfort and professionalism. The first impression created will set the tone for how the family will chose to stage the funeral as well as judge its success, which in turn is a judgement of the funeral director.

[111] Howard C. Raether, *Successful Funeral Service Practice* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 115.

Immediately after a death, emotions can be volatile so great care must be taken for funeral directors to embody their role as ritual experts and grief specialists, even if that is more of an act than an accurate description of their skills.

If the first meeting is the more formal arrangement conference, first impressions are still vitally important. However, since the death likely took place several hours ago at this point "reactions and responses to the funeral director are more controlled."[112] To convey the best tone, funeral directors are encouraged not to sit behind a desk during these meetings. A room with no desk is ideal because the implied power dynamics can make people feel uncomfortable. If the only available room has a desk, it is recommended that a funeral director sits with the family and away from the desk.[113] While the funeral director needs to collect specific information about the deceased which is needed for the death certificate and other legal paperwork in a more relaxed manner, it should feel like a discussion instead of a list of questions. They must balance this more conversational style with the need to gather a lot of details in a short amount of time. The other preliminary step before specific funeral arrangements are discussed is for the funeral director to ascertain if the family has a clergy member that they want to officiate the service. If this individual has not yet been contacted, the funeral director will volunteer to reach out to them. If the family desires a religious rite those aspects of the funeral cannot be finalized until the clergy representative is on board.

After preliminary details have been gathered, the funeral director can transition into the main part of the meeting. This is their chance to talk through the significance of the funeral and what services they offer.[114] This is also an opportunity to dissuade a family from choosing

[112] Raether, 115.
[113] Raether, 116.
[114] Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead*, 90.

immediate disposition. While funeral directors want to comfort the family, the primary goal is to make a sales pitch for the necessity of spending money to ensure the funeral is both efficacious in helping the family grieve and is judged by others as a fitting tribute. They need to justify the high costs of a funeral as a way of demonstrating the value of the decedent. Jessica Mitford cites an article from the *Nation Funeral Service Journal* that illustrates this attitude:

> A funeral is not an occasion for a display of cheapness. It is, in fact, an opportunity for the display of a status symbol which, by bolstering the family pride, does much to assuage grief. A funeral is also an occasion when feeling of guilt and remorse are satisfied to a large extent by the purchase of a fine funeral. It seems highly probable that the most satisfactory funeral service for the average family is one in which the cost has necessitated some degree of sacrifice. This permits the survivors to atone for any real or fancied neglect of the deceased prior to his death.[115]

Different funeral directors will lean less or more into the "hard-sell approach." Today, as more consumers are increasingly critical of the high price tag associated with funerals, there is more focus on helping them craft an individualized ritual. It is unlikely a funeral director would say to a bereaved individual that funerals should represent a financial sacrifice. However, this underlying mentality is still present. While it is discouraged for funeral directors to push people to spend more than they can afford, it is considered ethical to induce them to spend as much as can be afforded. There is also the assumption that a funeral can be a chance to symbolically repair relationships with the deceased.

As the conversation transitions to specific funeral preferences, the funeral director will give the family a copy of the General Price List (GPL) which itemizes all of the goods and services the funeral home offers. The Funeral Rule allows services to be bundled into packages for the convenience of the buyer, but the price must equal the sum of each component included and no more. Additionally, consumers have the right to add or remove any item from a package

[115] *National Funeral Service Journal*, quoted by Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2000), 20.

or select everything ala carte. There is always a base fee for the basic services of the funeral home, which cannot be waived and can range from $1500-$3000.

While all other services are optional, if a family selects certain arrangements such as a public viewing, the funeral home may require embalming. This is not mandated by law, but is a common company policy.[116] If just a private family viewing is requested the funeral home may offer refrigeration for the body in lieu of embalming, which is much cheaper, but often families have to specifically inquire about this and not all funeral homes provide it as an option. If burial is selected, many cemeteries require the addition of a vault because it prevents the ground from collapsing and makes grounds upkeep easier for them. These added expenses are responsible for the high cost of the traditional burial.

The family must also decide how they would like the deceased dressed for public presentation. Families can provide their own clothes or funeral homes can use items from their own stock such as white burial gowns and an assortment of suits. Frequently clothing will have the backs removed, making it easier to dress the body.[117] Clothing is not so much worn as it is artfully draped over the body. To complement the viewing of the body, families must decide on what music will be played at the event. Families can provide a CD of music they would like played, have the funeral director hire live musicians, or let the funeral home play their own selection of recorded music.

This is also the time the family can begin crafting the obituary, the written record for how the deceased will be remembered. This can be done entirely by the family or with any level of assistance from the funeral director.[118] The obituary will also likely guide the eulogy that will be

[116] Miller, Personal Interview, September 5, 2019.
[117] Harris, *Grave Matters*, 2008, 9.
[118] Miller, 2019.

spoken as part of the funeral service. Therefore, it will be shared widely and define how the identity of the deceased is framed which will guide the public performance and the public memory of the decedent.

Historically obituaries were published in the local paper as a way to publicize the death to the community and inform community members where services would take place. Today it is common for obituaries to be posted digitally on the funeral home's website. This allows wider exposure as well as a virtual "place" where friends and family can leave condolences and well-wishes. Furthermore, it makes the experience more interactive while expanding the time and space people have to share memories and honor the deceased. Also, there is usually a link from these online memorials to send flowers or make charitable donations.

The amount of choices when planning a funeral easily can become overwhelming. Josh Slocum and Lisa Carlson in *Funeral Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death* include an anecdote about a couple, Pat and Bud, who are pressured into buying a full-service funeral that neither of them really wanted. Pat describes how, "It was just easier…to go along with what the funeral home called 'traditional' than it was to think carefully about what we felt was really important and within the budget."[119] Since the process of selecting funeral arrangements can be difficult, many individuals are comforted by the word traditional. This includes people who don't come from a strong religious background and those who are not even fully aware of what a traditional funeral entails.

In the end, many individuals expect a funeral to be a costly endeavor. They find comfort in spending money on ready-made consumables such as caskets and urns on which they can project their grief. George Sanders writes, "In terms of funerary ritual, consumers delegate a

[119] Slocum and Carlson, *Final Rights*, 83.

portion of their subjectivity to one or more of the commodities provided by the funeral industry."[120] Whether people are purchasing products for a traditional funeral or are buying an assortment of smaller ticket items that have been customized, there is a general acceptance that consumerism is a necessary byproduct of crafting a meaningful death ritual.

Fortunately for consumers, there are many modern ways to hold a funeral that are inspired by the traditional model but can be more customized and can cut costs. For example, if a visitation is requested and the body will not be present, there is technically no need to have it at the funeral home. Such an event "can be scheduled anywhere, anytime-without the cost or formality of funeral home involvement."[121] This would still provide an occasion where families can gather in a more informal setting to share memories and support one another. If the body is not going to be publicly viewed, one also can forgo embalming. This option does not preclude having a private family viewing in which the body can be prepared. Those interested in simple and dignified burial, especially if they are environmentally conscious, may even consider natural burial in which the body is not embalmed and is buried without a casket in a simple biodegradable burial shroud.

Alternatively, there are forms of disposition besides burial and cremation that can be considered. One of the most popular is donating the body to science. In Kansas this means the body will be transported to the University of Kansas Hospital. There the body will be embalmed, in a process similar to but not the same as for funeral preparation, which will preserve it so it can be used by students. A body will be kept for two years, then be cremated, and the ashes returned to the family.[122] If families want to donate parts of but not the whole body it is possible to donate

[120] Sanders, "Branding in the American Funeral Industry," 265.
[121] Slocum and Carlson, *Final Rights*, 66.
[122] Todd Miller, Personal Interview, Voice Recording, September 5, 2019.

organs, cornea, skin, and leg bones. While there is no cost for the actual donation, funeral homes charge for their basic services, filing the legal paperwork, and transportation which at the time this thesis was written cost $1475.[123]

Once all of the other details have been decided, the funeral director will present the GPL for caskets and urns. The Funeral Rule mandates that families must be given a written list of all prices before they are shown the selection room.[124] I detail the casket selection process in the next section. Once a casket or other commodities of disposition are selected, the family will be escorted back to the arrangement office to review their choices and to transfer those to an itemized contract listing the prices for each of the chosen goods and services. Once the family has crafted the script of how the funeral will unfold, it is up to the funeral director to finish preparations and be ready to effectively stage the public performance of the ritual.

The Casket Dance

Since the early days of the funeral industry in America, caskets have been an integral component of the funeral ritual. Many undertakers, who would evolve into funeral directors, began as casket makers. In conjunction with the rise of the funeral director was the increased elaboration of coffin designs. Harris recounts this history, detailing how, "By the end of the nineteenth century, a utilitarian pine box no longer sufficed for the respectable funeral. Now the coffin needed to be handsome as well as functional, an object beautiful (and expensive) that

[123] For other examples of alternative forms of disposition see: Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, 1 edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017); Harris, *Grave Matters*, 2008; Lucinda Herring, *Reimagining Death: Stories and Practical Wisdom for Home Funerals and Green Burials* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2019); Mary Roach, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003). "What Is Plastination?," accessed April 1, 2020 http://www.vonhagens-plastination.com/sandbox/pages/medical-teaching-specimens/von-hagens-plastination.php/plastination.

[124] Federal Trade Commission, "The FTC Funeral Rule," Consumer Information, July 26, 2012, https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0300-ftc-funeral-rule.

reflected the bereaved family's good taste and status to the greater community."[125] To this end, the traditional tapered coffin shape was seen as suggestive of the decomposing corpse inside, thus not a reflection of the overall aesthetic desired. Therefore, in the 1850s manufacturers began altering the coffin shape, straightening the sides to form the rectangular box that is common today: "The re-formed coffin was christened a casket, a word that referred then specifically to a jewelry box."[126] The corpse was being transformed into a precious object, thus requiring a setting to match this new status.

At present, if burial is chosen, casket selection continues to account for the bulk of the overall cost of the funeral. Even if burial is not the selected method of disposition, it is common for families to purchase a casket. Until very recently buying a casket was a ubiquitous component of American funerals.[127] However, with the rise of cremation, this is becoming less common. According to Audrey Bell, a funeral director at Warren McElwain, in the last five years the most frequently purchased caskets are rental caskets that are used for viewings and then the body is transferred to a cardboard container for cremation or is buried in an alternative container such as just a shroud, as is required for green burial, another growing trend in the industry.[128]

Even with the influx of sales of cheaper rental caskets, casket sales are still the primary driver of profit for funeral homes. Therefore, this process represents one of the most charged moments in a funeral director's performance. There are two models used by funeral directors when arranging casket selection, a more hands-off approach where the family is left alone to browse and select a casket with the funeral director nearby to answer questions, and a guided

[125] Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 43.
[126] Harris, 43. See also Sanders, 58.
[127] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 58.
[128] Audrey Bell, Personal Interview, Voice Recording, January 6, 2020.

sales approach. The methods employed by individual funeral homes are typically as follows: small community funeral homes prefer the customer driven method and cosmopolitan funeral homes, which often are more concerned with sales, typically employ the guided sales approach.[129]

Notably, even at cosmopolitan funeral homes, caskets are not sold on commission. This allows funeral directors to display a detached air about the purchase. However, "the firm keeps extensive business records which analyze the quality of sale made by each counselor over a six-month period. So, although a specific sale is relatively uninfluenced by efforts to sell expensive caskets…counselors admitted that in the long run they are concerned with sales."[130] Part of the industry's reluctance to embrace cremation was based on fear of losing revenue from casket sales.

The caskets that families can choose from today range in materials, style, and price. How these caskets are displayed and presented to consumers is a performance in itself. Trade publications published by the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) report that it is generally accepted that fourteen to sixteen casket model are required to give each family an adequate representation of the differences in design and quality. The average selection room across the country holds twenty to twenty-two caskets, with some larger funeral homes displaying thirty-six to forty. Jessica Mitford describes how in selection rooms, "a minimum of forty square feet of floor space is need to display a burial casket, although if possible sixty square feet should be allowed for each unit."[131] In addition to adequate space, consideration must be given to lighting. In dim lighting "it is hard to distinguish between low-grade rayon and

[129] Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead*, 92–93.
[130] Pine, 93.
[131] Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, 39.

transparent velvet casket lining."[132] Lighting in conjunction with cool colored walls helps to show off the quality of the various caskets.

Trade publications also counsel that it is important to balance selection with the fact that, "too many units not only cause duplication, but can also confuse a family in making its selection."[133] The NFDA offers multiple resources to help funeral directors construct selection rooms that are inviting and not overwhelming. Additionally, they offer assistance regarding how to arrange the caskets to encourage maximum sales.[134] The result is that what seems to be a random assortment to the consumer is in fact a carefully designed layout driven by sales practices. The layout of the caskets intentionally scripts the movement of consumers into a choreographed dance.

While acknowledging the array of resources they offer, the NFDA also explicitly states that "each funeral director is ultimately personally responsible to the community and those he serves to provide a selection room that will meet the needs of each and every family."[135] A comprehensive selection room that offers products and prices to suit all members of a given community therefore is considered a public service. While profits are important, there is an emphasis on service. There must be selections that fit all budgets and all customers, regardless of what they want to spend on a casket, should feel that their needs are being met.

Caskets range in price from $795-$13,995, with the average being $2,000-$4,000.[136] In the same way the funeral industry sometimes reinforces the mentality that the amount a family spends on a funeral demonstrates their love for the deceased, there is a belief (perpetrated by the

[132] Mitford, 39.
[133] Raether, *Successful Funeral Service Practice*, 71.
[134] Mitford, 21.
[135] Raether, 71.
[136] All prices based on current General Price Lists from Lawrence, Kansa funeral homes.

industry) that the price of the casket should be commensurate with the perceived value of the deceased. If a family can only afford a more modest casket, that is generally not seen as acceptable. However, a casket is seen as a status symbol as well as a final tribute. As Pine notes, "Families who are seen as having considerable buying power and who purchased a well-below-average casket are seen as being 'strange' and possibly even 'disrespectful' of the deceased."[137] This practice may be a vestige of the nineteenth century mentality of seeing the funeral as an opportunity to display status.

In Mark Harris' fictionalized account of a funeral arrangement process, funeral director Mr. Fielding explains the different casket materials to a family:

> Wood caskets offer the natural warmth and beauty of fine furniture, though they will decay over time. Metal is more resilient and resistant to the elements. Of the latter, bronze and copper tend to be more expensive because they are semiprecious metals that are virtually indestructible…archeologists have retrieved ancient artifacts from copper coffins in near pristine condition. Stainless steel is less durable, but it's cheaper and won't rust.[138]

Despite being a fictionalized account, this statement is based on multiple sales pitches by funeral homes across the country. The issue is that such claims are misleading at best, and at worse intentionally duplicitous. All caskets will decay, no matter what the material. The Funeral Rule also specifically prohibits suggesting any "funeral goods or services will delay the natural decomposition of human remains for a long term or an indefinite time. Although the Rule flatly prohibits you from making this representation, the Commission recognizes that it is possible for some funeral goods or services to delay decomposition for a short period."[139] Despite these consumer protections, there are multiple accounts of funeral homes, as Harris describes, blurring the line of short vs. long term preservation. Notably, employees of both funeral homes at which I

[137] Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead*, 94.
[138] Harris, 12.
[139] Federal Trade Commission, "Complying With The Funeral Rule," September 2000, 24.

did fieldwork were very aware of the Funeral Rule. They talked of their dedication to complicity with the law, as well as to transparency and to treating customers with respect.

However, there is a loophole in the law that does allow funeral directors to describe a casket as resistant to air, water, and other gravesite substances. To many consumers this seems to imply permanence. Many individuals are fearful about bodily decay and they want to believe a high-quality casket, sealed inside a vault, will protect them from decomposition. The reason casket companies can no longer offer seventy-five year warranties, or even ten-year warranties, as was common practice throughout the twentieth century, is because regardless of how airtight a casket is, it cannot prevent decay.[140] In fact bodies in sealed caskets often decay the fastest because this provides a fertile environment for anerobic bacteria, which are the bacteria primarily responsible for decomposition.[141]

Recently there has been a shift in what characteristics are most desired in a casket. Historically, the "primary selling points of caskets have included such features as durability, resistance to moisture, and air-tightness. In many instances these qualities have declined in significance. Personalization and choice have now become the leading sales characteristics introduced by today's corporate vendors."[142] Modern caskets now often feature a memory shelf where small mementos honoring the deceased can be placed. Additionally, caskets can be customized with medallions which illustrate familial relations, group affiliation, or personal interests.[143] Options also include photographs and religious paraphernalia. These can be placed on the exterior of the casket, or more commonly, on the inside lid. This level of customization

[140] Harris, *Grave Matters*, 2008, 35–36.
[141] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 58.
[142] Sanders, 58.
[143] For example, see the Batesville Casket Company LifeStories collection. Batesville is the largest manufacturer of caskets https://www.batesville.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2019-Batesville-Personalization-Options-Final.pdf.

allows the deceased to in a sense perform their identity by capturing who they were as an individual and how they want to be remembered.

For those selecting cremation instead of burial, there is usually a separate selection room featuring urns. Sometimes this room will also contain models of burial vaults, monuments, and grave markers so that those can be showcased without taking room away from the caskets.[144] Additionally this room can double as a meeting room or place where families make funeral arrangements. Like the casket room, a great deal of planning goes into the overall layout of the space, including attention to lighting and wall color. Urns are functional as well as decorative and can be molded into a limitless array of shapes and designs. While their function is to hold the remains of the deceased, the urn itself is a potent cultural symbol. Pragmatically there is no need for a special, and often expensive, container for storing cremains. George Sanders states that in fact plastic bags could serve the same purpose "just as well (if not better since bags are lighter and, though they can puncture, they will not break)."[145] Yet many would see this as unbefitting their loved one.

In the same manner as a casket, an urn is both a status symbol and a demonstration of the value of the deceased to their family. Sanders continues, "those ashes are typically ascribed a power that borders on agency. Because of the emotionally charged nature of the dead body, the urns that contain the cremains are themselves powerfully symbolic."[146] Since the cremated ashes, called cremains, in some sense preserve the identity of the deceased, they must be treated in a manner reflective of their continued personhood. Furthermore, spending money on a special

[144] This is the case at both Rumsey-Yost and Warren McElwain funeral homes in Lawrence.
[145] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 60.
[146] Sanders, 60.

container that can be displayed, even briefly in the case of urn burial, it is an opportunity to honor the decedent through copious consumption.

The design of the urn can either reflect the deceased or the family member who is selecting it, especially if they plan to display it in their home. Urns are available in a multitude of design styles and range from traditional and decorative to creative and functional. Any object that holds cremains is considered an urn. For those wishing to scatter the remains there are specially designed urns to aid the scattering process. Urns can be part of a matching set so they can be shared among family members, or each family member can choose their own unique urn. Some urns are biodegradable for a more ecologically friendly burial option. For those wishing for a more personal option, urns can be shaped like a locket or other form of jewelry so they can be worn close to the heart. It is even possible to make diamonds directly out of either cremains or hair from the deceased. Cremains can even be placed inside a stuffed animal or stored in container to be shot into space.[147] Whatever the final resting place desired for the cremains, the design of the urn can reflect that choice.

In the same way that funeral consumer advocacy groups emphasize comparing prices and knowing your rights before selecting a funeral home and making funeral arrangements, it is important for consumers to know that caskets and urns do not need to be purchased from the funeral home. Caskets can be purchased from local casket companies or carpenters, Costco, Walmart, Amazon, and other online third-party retailers, usually for hundreds or even thousands less than the price charged by the funeral home. You can also get a casket directly from large-

[147] Miller, Personal Interview, September 5, 2019.

scale manufactures such as Batesville Casket Company.[148] Additionally, those individuals interested in wood working can download directions for how to make one's own casket. Todd Miller shared with me a story about a family who did this and how meaningful it was for them to bond over the process of building the casket.[149] Furthermore, a provision in the Funeral Rule requires that funeral homes accept caskets provided by the family and may not charge a handling fee for receiving them. By the same token, if cremation is selected, the Funeral Rule guarantees the right for families to provide an alternative container both for viewing the body and as an urn to hold cremains.[150]

I'm Ready for My Closeup:

In most cases embalming a body is not required by law, yet this is still a highly common practice. There are debates among death-care workers and psychologists over the importance of having a final death image where the deceased are made up to look like they are peacefully sleeping. Some argue this provides an opportunity for family and friends to both come to terms with the fact that the deceased is really gone, and to have a peaceful final way to remember the individual. Proponents suggest this is beneficial, even necessary, to work through grief. Others argue embalming is expensive, bad for the environment, and that it is unnatural to try to make a corpse look as life-like as possible. This debate echoes larger tensions both within the funeral industry and among critics over the value and practices of American death rituals and costs of a funeral performance.

[148] For discount caskets, often with overnight delivery see bestpricecaskets.com, casketsite.com, and overnightcaskets.com. In some states there are laws restricting the sale of caskets to licensed funeral directors, ostensibly to protect consumers from fraud and to guarantee a sanitary burial. However, the Funeral Consumers Alliance argues this only serves to protect funeral homes from competition. Additionally, many companies get around this by obtaining a permit to be a licensed funeral goods provider.
[149] Miller, Personal Interview, September 5, 2019.
[150] Federal Trade Commission, "The FTC Funeral Rule," July 26, 2012.

According to the homepage for the Funeral Directors Association there are three reasons Americans use embalming: "disinfection of the potentially dangerous corpse; preservation to facilitate proper ceremonial steps in the final disposition and to ward off 'odors and other unpleasantness' that accompanies a corpse in decay; and restoration of the body to a semblance of life."[151] There is a common misconception that dead bodies are inherently dangerous. Additionally, even if it is not a public health concern, many people are repulsed by the mere thought of bodily decay, much less by witnessing it. It is my contention that along with cementing its place in the American funeral, proponents of embalming mythologized it as necessary for the therapeutic healing of survivors. It allows for elaborate rituals and for a final memory picture that aids witnesses in accepting the reality of death and remembering the deceased fondly.

At present, embalming remains the central feature of a traditional funeral. Many individuals accept this construct without asking if the procedure really is necessary or what it entails. In fact, embalming and public display of the body became popularized by funeral workers. The procedure provided "the necessary authority, purpose, and values to promote their services to the living in a credible, profitable, and meaningful way."[152] Embalming was a way to construct funeral directors as scientists and artists as well as ritual specialists, thus professionals worthy of respect and of charging fees commensurate with this status. Hence, as previously noted, the public perception of embalming was crafted by the funeral industry for commercial purposes, not as a response to what the public wanted. The fact that it may aid in the grieving process was a secondary concern.

[151] As quoted in Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, xix.
[152] Laderman, xix.

Embalming is an expensive procedure, and there are two main components to the overall cost. The embalming itself costs about $700, plus "the cost of what is generally referred to as 'other preparation of the body,' which includes cosmetics, hairdressing, clothing the body, and placing the body in the casket. These prices are often listed separately on a General Price List, though if you opt for embalming you will generally be charged for both."[153] These "other preparations" total $350.[154] Additionally, American funeral homes promote embalming because it allows them to maximize sales of other services. Often those who choose embalming are worried about bodily decay and as discussed above, are thus inclined to purchase "a more expensive casket with 'protective' features, perhaps a more expensive outer burial container, and a more elaborate series of ceremonies."[155] Thus the prevalence of the practice of embalming, while dwindling, still drives the funeral industry.

The twentieth century was the "embalming century" and the practice was so widespread that it was common for funeral directors in the United States and Canada to embalm bodies without consulting with the family beforehand.[156] However, nowhere else in the world is embalming seen as an integral, or even desirable, component of mortuary rituals. Yet in America embalming was seen as an illustration of technological superiority and a deterrent to the horror of decay. Furthermore, reliance on embalming elevated the funeral worker, making the profession a respected and necessary part of society while simultaneously distancing Americans from dealing with the realities of death.

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[153] "All You Ever Wanted To Know About Embalming," Everplans, accessed January 15, 2020, https://www.everplans.com/articles/all-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-embalming.
[154] Prices are based on Lawrence funeral homes, but also reflect the national average.
[155] "Embalming Explained, Answers to Frequently Asked Questions," Funeral Consumers Alliance, accessed December 7, 2019, https://funerals.org/?consumers=embalming-what-you-should-know.
[156] Funeral Consumers Alliance, "Embalming Explained, Answers to Frequently Asked Questions," Funeral Consumers Alliance, accessed March 11, 2020, https://funerals.org/?consumers=embalming-what-you-should-know.

Fact v. Fiction

The funeral industry perpetuates the narrative "that situates modern embalming practices within an age-old tradition, an art form passed down through the millennium from the ancient Egyptian, original masters of corpse preservation. The present day funeral director acts as the bearer of their ancient wisdom."[157] This narrative is problematic on two counts: first it ignores the gap in the use of embalming from the time of the ancient Egyptians until the 1860s when Americans began embalming, and the fact that the embalming practiced by the ancient Egyptians was different from what is performed today. In 2600 BCE embalming was practiced only by the Egyptian elite, originally reserved solely for pharaohs but slowly expanded to include the nobility. It was an "elaborate process that took months to complete…The Egyptians embalmed for religious reasons, believing every step of their process— from removing the brain through the nose with a long iron hook to placing the internal organs in animal-head vases called Canopic jars to drying the body out for forty days with natron salt— had profound significance."[158] Today embalming has no religious implications and takes only a couple hours; it is also widely accessible.

Embalming practices today have also evolved dramatically from modest and experimental beginnings in America. George Sanders chronicles how, "Since embalming is a technical practice that requires training, the transition from itinerant educators to standalone mortuary colleges in the late nineteenth century provided the impetus for the rise of professional trade associations, regulatory practices, and the like."[159] During this early period the funeral industry justified its services by stressing the need for embalming, the primary role of funeral

[157] Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, 72.
[158] Doughty, 73.
[159] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 50.

directors at the time, by appealing to concerns over public health and safety, especially in the wake of awareness of germ theory. Dead bodies were positioned as dirty and capable of harboring deadly diseases.

Jessica Mitford stresses that "no law requires embalming, no religious doctrine commands it, nor is it dictated by considerations of health sanitation, or even personal daintiness."[160] Embalming has never been required by federal, state, or local laws except under very special circumstances. However, until 1984 when the Funeral Rule outlawed the practice, it was common for funeral directors to imply or even blatantly lie and tell bereaved families it was a requirement. In other cases, a funeral director would just assume that a family using their services was in and of itself implied consent for embalming and would thus conduct it without explicit permission.

Mitford's groundbreaking *The American Way of Death* exposed these practices. It also directly led to the Federal Trade Commission's 1984 Funeral Rule. This protected consumers by mandating that funeral directors do not represent embalming as a legal requirement and must actively disclose that it is not required except in certain special cases. Furthermore, prior approval from a family member became required before embalming could begin. If a funeral home requires embalming for certain funeral arrangements such as a public viewing, the funeral director must explain that those arrangements make embalming a required purchase.[161]

Despite individuals claiming that aspects of traditional funerals are Christian traditions, there is no religious doctrine, from any religion, that mandates embalming. Within Christianity embalming is neither encouraged nor discouraged, although in some denominations a viewing is

[160] Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, 43.
[161] Federal Trade Commission, "The FTC Funeral Rule," Consumer Information, July 26, 2012, https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0300-ftc-funeral-rule.

part of the liturgy, and that may necessitate embalming. On the other side of the spectrum, "Muslim, Baha'i and orthodox Jewish faiths consider embalming to be a desecration of the body and prohibit it."[162] Among Hindus and Buddhists, embalming is not prohibited but as cremation is almost always the chosen mode of disposition, they have no need for embalming. If there is a religious benefit to embalming, it is that it simply gives the bereaved more time to carry out other religious rituals in conjunction with their mortuary practices.

In addition, the U. S Centers for Disease Control and Canadian health authorities have declared there is no public health benefit from embalming. Caitlin Doughty, a funeral director, stresses how "a dead human body poses very little threat to a living one—the bacteria involved in decomposition are not the same bacteria that cause disease."[163] In fact, "Hawaii and Ontario forbid embalming if the person died of certain contagious diseases."[164] In some situations embalming can enhance the spread of contagions. In almost all cases a deceased body poses no health risk at all.

Furthermore, embalming chemicals are highly toxic and pose a much greater health risk to embalmers than a deceased body does. For many embalmers their bodies learn to adapt to the pungent chemicals so they can do their work "without experiencing the typical burning throat and runny, itch eyes. But not without some cost to their health."[165] The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires embalmers to wear a full body covering and to use a respirator while working with these chemicals. They have deemed formaldehyde an occupational carcinogen. Decreased sensitivity to formaldehyde increases the likelihood embalmers will

[162] "Embalming Explained, Answers to Frequently Asked Questions."
[163] Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, 173.
[164] "Embalming Explained, Answers to Frequently Asked Questions."
[165] Harris, *Grave Matters*, 2008, 15.

overexpose themselves to it. Research from the National Cancer Institute demonstrates that funeral embalmers are at "increased risk for myeloid leukemia, abnormal growth in the bone-marrow tissue, and cancer of the blood."[166] There are also elevated rates of brain, colon, kidney, and other cancers among funeral workers.[167] Furthermore, after burial the body will decay and those toxic chemicals leach into the soil.

Operation Theatre

In an effort to further legitimize their profession, the funeral industry sometimes refers to embalmers as "derma—or skin— surgeons." Furthermore, the space in which embalming is done is marked by its "gleaming white tiled floors and walls, well-stocked glass cabinets, porcelain sinks, and metal trays laden with syringes, scalpels, clamps, and other instruments of the medical establishment, such that the workplace closely resembles a hospital operating room. But for the quiet."[168] Commonly the walls and ceilings are lined with soundproofing tile. This provides a quiet work environment but also keeps the sound of the embalming equipment from disturbing the overall tranquility of the funeral home. For privacy's sake (and as mandated by many state laws) the windows are usually replaced with small opaque blocks. Bright white lights make up for the lack of natural sunlight. State law also mandates embalming rooms be secured from public entrance. Even though access to the basement where the embalming room is almost always located is already limited, it is common to have a keypad lock on the door as well.

While the primary goal of embalming is to preserve the body to make it suitable for display during a funeral, there are certain situations that necessitate embalming, including in preparation for long-distance transportation, or to be usable for medical or scientific purposes.

[166] Doughty, 75.
[167] Harris, 15.
[168] Harris, 15.

State law in Alaska and Alabama mandates the use of embalming if a body crosses state lines. In California, Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota, and New Jersey, embalming is legally required if a body leaves the state by common carrier (plane or train).[169]

Before embalming can begin the body is subjected to a series of preparatory steps to disinfect the body and make it more pliable for embalming. Using a metal device called a trocar which creates suction, the embalmer drains the blood and bodily fluids through an incision in the carotid artery and jugular vein. The fluid is replaced with a solution of formaldehyde and other chemicals that both act as a preservative and prevent rigor mortis. Next all orifices are sealed with plastic caps or cotton balls. The mouth is wired shut and the eyelids are glued closed. Then the body is carefully transferred into the casket and final adjustments are made to position it in a way that will be the most natural and flattering. Once the body has achieved a state where the person looks to be peacefully asleep, makeup is applied, the hair is styled, and lastly the body is dressed.[170] Only then is the body deemed presentable to the public. The entire procedure takes around an hour and a half but can vary widely based on the condition of the body when it arrives at the funeral home, the skill of the embalmer, and how much time they want to devote to each body. There are instances in which an embalming takes less than an hour and those in which it is a four-hour process.[171]

As stated above, in the 1990s the funeral industry underwent a major transformation. The decline of the traditional funeral is directly linked to increasing numbers of individuals who view embalming as expensive and unnecessary. Without having to pay for embalming, people are less

[169] "Embalming Explained, Answers to Frequently Asked Questions."
[170] James W. Green, *Beyond the Good Death: The Anthropology of Modern Dying*, 1st edition (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 75-76; Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2008) 20-26; Caitlin Doughty, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes & Other Lessons From The Crematory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015), 74-75.
[171] Miller, Personal Interview, September 5, 2019.

likely to spend money on an expensive casket and many are forgoing caskets entirely in favor of cremation or other alternative forms of disposition. As discussed in a previous section, historically, the casket had been the primary source of profit for funeral directors. Therefore, as casket sales decreased, funeral directors steeply increased the prices for other funeral goods and services to make up the lost income.[172] This included a spike in casket prices as well as all ancillary goods and services, which all dramatically rose in price. This is a major factor in the exorbitant price of funerals today.

Ironically the work of Jessica Mitford and others who worked to raise awareness of the abuses within the funeral industry, and particularly the embalming process, directly led to increases in prices. Even the protections granted by the Funeral Rule (which was directly inspired by Mitford) could not combat the rising prices of funerals. Additionally, these changes resulted in a cycle "where this new pricing structure unwittingly contributed to the demise of the corpse-focused traditional rituals."[173] As a result, many of the innovative funeral services today are motivated by a desire to cut costs as well as create a more personalized and meaningful ritual.

[172] Crabtree, "The Changing Discourse of Death: A Study of the Evolution of the Contemporary Funeral Industry," 60.
[173] Crabtree, 60.

CHAPTER 3—RITUALIZATION

Following all of the rehearsal and preparation, what are generally thought of as the main components of the ritual are able to commence. These activities include all the public aspects of performance: the viewing of the body, a funeral service, and a reception. In addition to discussing these activities, this chapter includes a discussion of the significance of the corpse in terms of how these public rituals are performed, as well as an analysis of the ways a funeral is judged to be successful or not.

Within the larger production of mortuary rituals, the main event is the funeral or memorial service. While the general public often uses these terms interchangeably, they differ based on whether the body is present (funeral), or not (memorial). The word choice is not related to the tone or the formality of the event. The one major consideration is timing. A funeral is usually held no more than a week after a death occurs. Even with embalming, a body won't keep in a manner fitting for public presentation more than a couple days. Memorials can be held at any time. Many happen immediately following a death, but they can be held weeks or even months later. This flexibility allows time for the family to all gather, especially if people are coming from long distances or juggling busy schedules.

Both funerals or memorials can be totally customized to suit the wishes of whoever is making the arrangement: the deceased, their family, or other individuals. In all cases the first concern of the funeral director is to stage the ritual so that the bodies of participants can move through the space in a way that the ritual is effective in helping them process their loss. Funeral homes increasingly "frame offerings to the public in terms of events, i.e., experiences, environment, atmosphere, and memories, and many in the trade attest to a focus that has shifted

away from the dead body and instead towards representations of the (lived) life of the deceased."[174]

Funerals are meant to be participatory events, so spect-actors are encouraged to lean into the more active participatory acts associated with their attendance. Seeing funerals as a multi-sensory experience allows spect-actors to take a more active role in setting the atmosphere and making the event their own. The efficacious nature of funerals is dependent upon engaging with the ritual. This shift does mean that a funeral director's role has become closer to event manager than the more traditional caretaker of the dead.

Edgar Jackson, in *For the Living*, was one of the first scholars to argue that funerary rituals must focus on the living.[175] Citing Jackson, Lonnie Yoder summarizes the psychological tasks the funerary ritual should fulfill:

> First, it must help those who live face the reality of the death. Second, it must help the living realize both their physical and emotional separation from the deceased. Third, the funerary ritual must point the mourners toward life, not death. It is obvious that these tasks reflect van Gennep's three categories (transition, separation, and in corporation) of a rite of passage.[176]

This assertion recognizes that death is a rite of passage both for the decedent as well as the survivors. The ritual functions to guide individuals through the process of recognizing the finality of the death, having a liminal space where they can grieve, and then being reintegrated into society. Importantly, incorporation after a death is itself a process and happens over time. A funeral helps mitigate grief, but the experience of grief is different for each person.[177]

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[174] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 61.
[175] Edgar Newman Jackson, *For the Living* (Des Moines: Channel Press, 1964), 39–40.
[176] Lonnie Yoder, "The Funeral Meal: A Significant Funerary Ritual," *Journal of Religion and Health* 25, no. 2 (1986): 153.
[177] See Alan Wolfelt, "Why Is the Funeral Ritual Important?" *Center for Loss & Life Transition* (blog), December 16, 2016, https://www.centerforloss.com/2016/12/funeral-ritual-important/.

Setting the Stage:

In conjunction with the rise in funerals being produced as events there has been a decrease in the inclusion of traditional religious practices. Ivan Emke, a Canadian funeral scholar, notes ‘‘In terms of the functions of the funerals, we have seen a slow move from doctrinal and theological purposes such as ‘preaching the gospel’ or ‘proclaiming the promise of the resurrection’ to more psychological purposes.”[178] Funerals are seen as an important component of the healing process both for bereaved individuals as well as the community at large. This is a time to gather, reflect, and reaffirm social ties. Instead of being approached as somber affairs, as is the case among many religious traditions, there has been an increase in celebrations of life and rituals being recast as communal celebrations. The religious doctrine that does remain takes on a softer tone.

Margaret Thomson Drewal argues that ritual is not static and rigid. Nor does it conform to a predetermined script. If something about a ritual is not working or no longer feels pertinent it is changeable.[179] A successful funeral is one that reflects the needs of the participants. One study of funeral satisfaction examined typical behavior at funerals and how participation in various practices affected people’s overall opinion of the event and their healing process. The researchers found, “First, for many attendees, a funeral involves bearing witness, which involves a variety of behaviors associated with observing the event. Second, attendees often engage in participating types of activity, involving explicit yet generally informal forms of communication and expression, such as sharing stories, crying, and emoting.”[180] Some people even have the

[178] As quoted in Sanders, “The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry,” 62.
[179] Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 8.
[180] T. O’Rourke, Brian H. Spitzberg, and Annegret F. Hannawa, “The Good Funeral: Toward an Understanding of Funeral Participation and Satisfaction,” *Death Studies* 35, no. 8 (September 2011): 729–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.553309.

opportunity to engage in more formal types of expression: singing, eulogizing, or performing in some capacity at the service. Especially without the structure provided by religion, people can choose to lean into the elements of the performance that feel more authentic.

At the most engaged level is the family who are responsible for arranging the funeral, paying for it, signing documents, and potentially even washing or dressing the body. The researcher's hypothesis was that engagement with deeper levels of participation would be the strongest indicator of satisfaction. However, what they discovered was that simply being able to share emotions with others was the most beneficial activity for participants.[181] Thus, they concluded that participation in the social aspects of a funeral leads to perceived satisfaction, and consequently, to healing.

While the goal of all contemporary American death rituals is to move the bereaved from grief towards healing, some rituals are more effective than others. Ronald Grimes notes, "A funeral can stifle, amplify, formalize, or facilitate grief. The relation between the ebb and flow of human emotion and the forms and rules of ritual is complex."[182] Thus careful planning on the part of the family and practice for the funeral director is important for the ritual to be most effective. However, part of the drama inherent in live performance is that things don't always go as planned. Furthermore, it can be difficult to predict how people will feel about a particular ritual choice after the fact. Looking back, in some cases people may wish they had done things differently.

[181] O'Rourke, Spitzberg, and Hannawa. 729-30.
[182] Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 230–31.

Dancing with Death

From the perspective of Thing Theory, a corpse is not a meaningless or even neutral object; it is a thing.[183] This theory focuses on human–object interactions in literature and culture. It is based on Martin Heidegger's distinction between objects and things. One way to understand the distinction between the two is that objects are tools used for a specific purpose while things have their own agency. Things have the ability to reach out and interact with other objects and things, and this is called the power to hail. Bernstein describes it as follows: "when we respond obediently and when we resist, when we individually or collectively accept the invitation to dance, refuse it, accept but improvise new steps, or renegotiate, deconstruct, or explode roles of leader and follower. A hail demands a bodily response."[184] Thus a corpse must be presented in a way that is in keeping with its status as a thing. At a funeral the body of the deceased is prominently situated. It becomes the focal point of the space as well as the mechanism for determining how the bodies of participants interact with each other and with the built space of the funeral home.

When the body of the deceased is displayed it becomes a thing because of its magnetic-like quality to pull other bodies towards it as well as repel bodies. Bernstein notes, "most things imply the human by existing like jigsaw pieces whose outer surfaces have meaning only when it is seen that they are designed to snap into position against the body."[185] The body becomes the focal point where people gather for a final look, to say goodbye, and give condolences to the family.

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[183] For more on Thing Theory see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[184] Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (2009): 73.
[185] Bernstein, 81.

In order to answer the hail from the decedent, spect-actors are choreographed into a receiving line. This may happen naturally as it is tradition and a familiar pattern of behavior for many spect-actors. If not, it will be aided by gentle side-coaching from the funeral director. The receiving line controls the flow of people, so each person gets a few moments with the body, then moves away from the body to greet each family member. After engaging in this ritual of interacting with the body, most individuals congregate in small groups to chat, preferring to be outside of the immediate vicinity of the body. This is partially to make room for others to enter into a dance with the body, and partly because it is uncomfortable to be too close to death.

Funeral management guidebooks note that consideration is given to how far to place the deceased from the entryway.[186] Ideally people should have a chance to enter the space and take a moment without being immediately confronted with the deceased. This allows them the agency to choose how they personally want to interact, and to do it on their own terms. Logistically it also prevents a buildup of people who are blocking the entrance way, which could be a fire hazard. As people approach the space, they should feel welcomed, not overwhelmed by crowds. Especially when already in a potentially emotional and vulnerable state, it is advisable to make guests feel as comfortable as possible. Being in a relaxed state, even if they are grief stricken, helps individuals to engage more fully in the ritual, thus more effectively move towards healing.

Even when the actual body of the deceased is not present, a representation such as a photograph or large flower display often will be present to create a focal point and to ground the ritual.[187] There may also be a memorial altar with pictures and small objects that were meaningful to the deceased or are representative of their interests. People crave a physical

[186] Raether, *Successful Funeral Service Practice*, 117–18.
[187] Jewish and Muslim funeral rituals often prohibit flowers so in those instances a flower display would not be used.

location where they feel they are able to commune and potentially communicate with the deceased. This allows the opportunity to confront the reality of death.

Scene 1- Looking Death in the Eye:

After the funeral arrangements have been made and the body prepared, the first major event of a death ritual is the viewing. This is alternately called a visitation, wake, calling hours, or visiting hours. The particular terminology used is less important than the goal of the ritual- to pay your respects and say goodbye on your own terms.[188] This is an opportunity for friends and family, usually in the presence of the viewable body, to express their feelings about the deceased and to comfort one another.[189] Viewings are usually private events with the close family and selected friends. However, they can also be open to the public so that anyone who knew the deceased and wants to pay their respects may participate. There are also times a viewing is just for the immediate family to have a final moment with the body. However, in this section I focus on a more traditional viewing that may be either private or public but has a larger attendance of spect-actors.

The interior of funeral homes is fairly standardized. Warm florescent lights welcome visitors who enter a comfortable space with plush furniture and tasteful if slightly dated décor. Soft background music is piped in over the speakers. If the family has requested a specific playlist or type of music that will be played on a loop. If not, the funeral home will play their

[188] Sometimes the term wake is used in a very particular way based on cultural context. "Traditionally, the wake is a Catholic ceremony based in part on the Celtic traditions of Ireland. Those traditions dictated that family and close friends should stay awake through the night with the deceased in order to offer protection from evil spirits. Once buried, all was safe." https://www.burialplanning.com/resources/funeral-etiquette-guide/wake-vs-viewing-vs-funeral-whats-the-difference/. A Catholic wake may also feature a short ceremony involving a priest who will recite prayers (usually the rosary) or scriptures. An Irish wake is also known for an emphasis on alcohol consumption.
[189] See also Linnea Crowther, "What Is a Wake?," *Legacy.com* (blog), August 8, 2019, https://www.legacy.com/advice/what-is-a-wake/.

typical musical selections. At this more informal gathering, people are encouraged to mill about and move through the space at will.

This ritual usually commences with a first viewing by the immediate family. For most individuals this is a particularly upsetting time. It is often their first exposure to the deceased since either before, or just after the death occurred. Thus, there is often an outpouring of grief mixed with trepidation over how the body will look. Fortunately this first viewing "allays many of the fears of the bereaved…this first exposure generally produces a positive reaction, with surprise at 'how well he looks,' and relief because 'things aren't as bad as I expected.'"[190] This private moment allows the family to "breakdown openly and to display grief reactions to each other."[191] This overt emotional display aids in the healing process.

This private moment also allows the funeral director to unobtrusively inquire if the family is satisfied with the appearance of the body. If modifications are requested the family is usually asked to leave the room while the funeral director makes an effort to fulfil the family's wishes. However, at this point very little physical change can be made to the body. That is why it is critical to get it right during the embalming and preparation phase. Therefore, a funeral director "might make minor readjustments in the vicinity of the requested change, or as is more common, he does almost nothing at all."[192] Many families are comforted by the mere thought the funeral director is following the directive for a specific change and making their loved one look their best. They may or may not be aware of the level of modification actually made.

However, the situation usually allows the family this private time for a limited period. Before long the rest of the deceased's friends and family arrive so that they too may participate

[190] Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead,* 95.
[191] Pine, 95.
[192] Pine, 96.

in an expunging of emotion and in community solidarity. The importance of sharing grief for healing is stressed by funeral industry literature as well as psychological studies.[193] In the brochure *Someone You Love Has Died*, the National Funeral Directors Association advises the bereaved, "When you are by yourself, you are alone with your grief. When you are with others, one touch of sorrow makes the whole world kin."[194]

This brochure also makes the case for the importance of having the body available for viewing. The majority of viewings are open casket, and the expectation is that attendees will interact with the body, or at least look upon it. Most people, even those attending their first funeral, often instinctively know how to wait to approach the body and then move through a receiving line. Some will be coached beforehand on what to expect and what is expected of them. Others may have a family member whisper the expected stage directions to them during the event. Either way, the funeral director usually has to do very little corralling. Regardless, they are always standing by ready to jump into action if necessary, to keep the show on track.

During this phase, the funeral director serves primarily as an usher. Directors or their assistants are standing by to open the door as participants enter and leave. They welcome people and request that they sign the guest book. They are also available to point out the location of the restrooms and answer questions. There is an assumption that due to their constant exposure to death and bereavement funeral directors are uniquely situated to "provide practical as well as

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[193] Lisa Athan, "Cultures and Grief," Grief Speaks, August 3, 2016, http://www.griefspeaks.com/id90.html; George A. Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness: What The New Science Of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Doughty, *From Here to Eternity*; Garces-Foley and Holcomb, "Contemporary American Funerals: Personalizing Tradition"; National Funeral Directors Association, "Attending a Funeral | Remembering a Life |," accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.rememberingalife.com/honoring-a-life/attending-a-funeral; Thomas O'Rourke, Brian Spitzberg, and Annegret Hannawa, "The Good Funeral: Toward an Understanding of Funeral Participation and Satisfaction," *Death Studies* 35 (September 1, 2011): 729–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.553309; For a sampling of sources that address the nature of grief see, Raether, *Successful Funeral Service Practice*.

[194] As quoted in Raether, *Successful Funeral Service Practice*, 117.

emotional support."[195] This is also the reason many funeral directors see themselves as "grief counselors." However, this term is contentious within the funeral industry because a counselor is usually a trained professional with a degree in psychology or a related field. Some funeral homes have licensed grief therapists on staff, but most do not. Regardless, of the terminology, part of a funeral director's role is to be able to emotionally support grieving families.[196]

Funeral directors also serve as the official timekeepers and will inform guests when there are ten minutes left for the viewing in case everyone one has not yet paid their respects. If the funeral is immediately following, they will guide people into the chapel space or direct them to an offsite location such as a church if the funeral is happening there. If the viewing is being immediately followed by an interment the funeral director is responsible for getting everyone into their vehicles, which are then organized into a funeral procession.

The expected attire at viewings can vary greatly. It is dependent on if the viewing is being held before or in conjunction with the funeral as well as being based upon the preferences of those hosting the event. While basic black will not usually be seen as out of place, unless specifically requested not to be worn, it is no longer considered mandatory. Dress is also becoming increasingly casual. Sometimes this is manifested as the host wanting to encourage the other attendees to be comfortable and more relaxed. Especially for events framed as a celebration of life, spect-actors may be encouraged to wear bright colors. Other times there is a recognition that the deceased didn't enjoy stuffy formal affairs, so a more relaxed atmosphere better honors their memory.

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[195] Fontana and Keene, *Death and Dying in America*, 78.

[196] See Vicki Lensing, "Grief Support: The Role of Funeral Service," *Journal of Loss & Trauma* 6, no. 1 (January 2001): 45–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/108114401753197468. Some funeral homes have licensed grief counselors on staff who are available for those wishing for professional help. Grief support, often called aftercare may also be offered which may include support groups, providing literature on dealing with grief, hosting holiday memorial services, and home visits.

The Value of a Viewing

While funeral directors have long argued for the value of viewing the body of the deceased, there has recently been scientific research that supports this proposition. A study from Oxford University illustrated that while there was a range of responses to viewing the body of a loved one, the majority felt it was a positive experience. Even if the experience was distressing many reported it was still worthwhile to see the body.[197] Notably, because the study was conducted in the U.K., the majority of viewings take place with a body that has been cosmeticized and placed in a casket but had not been embalmed. This implies that seeing an embalmed body laying peacefully would be even less distressing than a body that had a violent death and is presented with visible injuries. However, the study also concludes that it is inadvisable to encourage a recently bereaved person to view a body. It is best to let them make their own decisions.

Noted grief therapist Elisabeth Kubler Ross takes the counter-position, arguing that seeing an embalmed and overly staged body that looks like it is merely sleeping encourages witnesses to deny death has occurred: "I think the elaborate, expensive display of an open casket with all the makeup in the slumber room enforces the belief that the person is only asleep, and in my personal opinion would only help to prolong the stage of denial."[198] While she agrees confronting the reality of death is important, she is concerned with how individuals internalize the experience of attending a viewing.

Regardless of scientific studies or the urging of the funeral industry, attending a viewing is an individual choice: "The decision to view a body of a loved one is a big decision. It results in

[197] A. Chapple and S. Ziebland, "Viewing the Body After Bereavement Due to a Traumatic Death: Qualitative Study in the UK," *British Medical*, 2010.
[198] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying: A Companion Volume to On Death and Dying* (Simon and Schuster, 2011).

a suddenly bereaved person experiencing something that usually creates a strong memory, central to the experience of the bereavement. This can be a memory viewed positively or negatively, or both."[199] Furthermore, personal reactions to this memory can change over time. There are stories of both those who chose to attend a viewing and those who opted out who later regretted their decision.

It is common for individuals to want to deny that a death has occurred. Especially in our modern society where death is not a regular occurrence in people's daily lives, people often have little experience of losing a loved one. In response "some attempt to eliminate a confrontation with death and hope to avoid the pain that loss brings," by refusing to view the body.[200] They hold onto hope that if they don't see it, then it hasn't really happened. Whether an individual chooses to view the body of a loved one or not, the first step toward healing is finding a way to accept that death has occurred.

Scene Two-The Main Event:

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a funeral was almost synonymous with a church service, as it was based on Christian liturgy. While there was an acknowledgement of the deceased, the function of the religious service was more about sharing the word of God. Today there has been a shift in the content of funeral services that are held at places of worship. As Habenstein and Lamars note, "While some clergy may still regard funeral sermons as offering opportunities to evangelize and to make converts—as was almost always the case in the last century—there has been more recently an increasing recognition of the utility of the sermon in

[199] "Sudden Bereavement: Viewing the Body," Sudden, accessed January 13, 2020, https://www.suddendeath.org/uncategorised/79-guidanceviewing.
[200] Raether, *Successful Funeral Service Practice*, 117.

expediating the mourning process."[201] Contemporary American funerals have become more about remembrance and community solidarity.

Performing Professionalism

As stated above, at present most funerals take place at funeral homes. Funerals can also be held at houses of worship, the home of the deceased or another family member, at a public building, or at the cemetery. Regardless of location funeral behavior is fundamentally the same. Even if a clergy member is officiating the service, the funeral director will be present and must constantly be aware of how he or she is performing the role of ritual expert. Several rules of conduct apply. A funeral director "should not strut, nor should he appear mousey. His demeanor should show dignity, concern, and confidence. The funeral director should not talk loud, nor should the whisper secretively. He should speak in a subdued voice…And above all he should not snap his fingers or hiss to get attention."[202] Funeral directors operate within very specifically defined expectations of performance. To act outside these parameters is to risk an unfavorable review of one's performance.

If the funeral is taking place separately from a viewing of the body, the funeral director, and usually his assistants, will be prepared and standing ready to greet guests as they arrive. They serve as doormen and head ushers, directing attendees to the area that will be used for the ritual. At the beginning of the funeral service the funeral director will seat the family in the front of the room. Customarily they are ushered into position "in a slow and deliberate fashion."[203] Being seated in this manner is a sign of respect, as is their reserved placement in the front row.

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[201] Robert Wesley Habenstein and William Lamars, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 5th edition (Brookfield, WI: National Funeral Directors Association, 2001), 572.
[202] Raether, *Successful Funeral Service Practice*, 121.
[203] Pine, *Caretaker of the Dead*, 98.

Pine notes that on the few occasions where bereaved families "seated themselves elsewhere, the funeral directors made certain that they moved to the front."[204] This echoes behavior at a wedding where the family is expected to take the place of honor in the front, and if they don't instinctively do so are encouraged to move. However, if a family declines to move, they would not be forced to do so. More important than the appearance of respect is capitulating to the whims of the grieving family.

During the service, part of the funeral director's role involves constantly observing the crowd and looking for signs someone might have an emotional outburst and need to be comforted or otherwise engaged. While these emotional displays can be disruptive, part of why a funeral is an effective mourning ritual is "it allows the bereaved to behave in a death-appropriate mask."[205] This means spect-actors are not just allowed but encouraged to act in ways that would not be considered acceptable under normal circumstances. Hence it is appropriate for spect-actors to cry or display their emotions and to appear disheveled or otherwise affected by the death. Yet even within a funeral context there are limits to what is considered appropriate behavior. While there is often an acknowledgment that some people grieve differently, those who exhibit emotional outbursts are often gently guided out of the main ritual space and separated from the group until they have calmed down a bit.

Bringing it all Together

During the ritual performance, the funeral director is responsible for helping to "stage" the appropriate atmosphere and to bring together all of the technical elements to create the best overall experience for the spect-actors. A flawless performance does not just happen; it is dependent on the prior rehearsal work of the funeral director who has memorized notes about the

[204] Pine, 99.
[205] Pine, 99.

family's wishes and has built a relationship with the family. Furthermore, funeral directors need to tap into their training and experience to foresee any potential pitfalls in the performance and address them before such matters become noticeable to attendees.

One of the most important aspects of an effective funeral is setting a proper tone. Traditionally the funeral is the most formal part of the overall ritual. While at present there is increasing resistance to formality, sociologist Everette Hughes advocates maintaining formality when dealing with death. He bemoans the fact that people "got it into their heads that anything formal is cold—not sensing that ceremonial may be the cloak that warms the freezing heart, that a formula may be the firm stick upon which the trembling limbs may lean; that it may be a house in which one may decently hide himself until he has the strength and courage to face the world again."[206] Thus a certain level of formality helps to set the ritual outside of normal space and time, creating a liminal space for the healing process to begin. Like most aspects of the larger death ritual, the goal is to balance competing objectives to create an optimal performance.

One of the most vital mediums for creating the desired atmosphere is music. Music serves to delineate each part of the funeral ritual. Turner and Edgley describe how, "In counsel with the family, the musical selections are planned to set the mood for serenity, beauty, respect, or whatever values are desired."[207] If the family prefers live music the funeral home is usually able to provide contact information for local musicians. Some funeral homes even have their own musicians on staff who are available for hire. Not only does music set the mood, careful consideration of the tone, volume, and timing of the music helps "provide cues for the series of events or acts presented."[208]

[206] Everett Cherrington Hughes, *The Sociological Eye: Book 2* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971), 128.
[207] Turner and Edgley, "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral," 294.
[208] Turner and Edgley, 294.

Within the funeral service, one of the major actions is the reading of the eulogy. This is a chance to remember the deceased and what they meant to their community. These short speeches will, "ordinarily contain references to [the decedent's] community service, character, righteousness, and approved identities. Certain behaviors are validated as noble, while others are by implication denounced. The audience is thereby advised to take note, for they too will someday be reviewed in such a public ceremony."[209] While a eulogy is billed as an accounting of the deceased, for the most part they give the deceased the benefit of the doubt and work hard to paint individuals in a favorable light. Sometimes this requires "considerable juggling of the facts of a person's life, especially when dealing with those whose lives have been less than sterling."[210]

In contemporary American funerals the eulogy is often accompanied by new rituals that "increasingly engage with technology to literally project backwards, constructing meaning for death through a careful assemblage of biographical details of the deceased while still living. Be it through slide shows, streaming audio, or video, effectively the funeral home becomes a theatre, wherein the life of the deceased is re-performed through images and sound."[211] This helps to personalize the memorial. Additionally, it is another opportunity to set the mood; the projected images can be sweet, humorous, cute, or sentimental. Those who select the images for such slide shows determine how the deceased will be remembered. Furthermore, most funeral homes are now equipped to live stream the entire service. This allows those who could not be physically present to still partake in the ritual. A live streamed service can be shared with just select individuals or made publicly available. It also allows funeral homes to have a recording of the

[209] Turner and Edgley, 295.
[210] Turner and Edgley, 295.
[211] Isaac, "Theories of Death, Ritual and Space," 58-59.

service that can be sold as a DVD. Technology encourages increased personalization as well as participation.

Putting the Fun into Funerals

The traditional funeral was a somber affair, featuring a cast clad in formal black mourning wear engaged in a respectful (and controlled) outpouring of grief. Such events may be described as beautiful and cathartic, but not as fun. One of the first major shifts within the traditional funeral that helped usher in the contemporary funeral of today was re-framing funerals from solemn memorials to celebrations of life. Simultaneously the decline in religious affiliation created a void in ritual structure. This encouraged the creation of rituals that emphasized the life of the individual. As each individual is unique, death rituals needed to mark and honor individuals in a manner that reflected their lives and personalities.

Funerals have long been mass-produced, but in the last twenty-five years there has been a growing trend of funerals featuring "customizable ceremonies that resemble polished productions sometimes bordering on forms of entertainment. Indeed, 'fun' funerals are rising in popularity, as are funeral products emblazoned with widely recognizable brands and logos, and more consumers are opting for 'themed' funerals with recurring motifs."[212] This can range from a few small touches to a fully realized theatrical event. Furthermore, the variety of possible themes and motifs is endless. While sports themes and superheroes are the most common, other themes include Christmas, movies, gardening, motorcycles, and even breakfast.[213]

This trend is transforming funerals in the U.S. as well as the U.K. A study conducted by the *British Funeral Service Journal* in 2011 reported that almost half of funeral consumers across

[212] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 155.
[213] Eric Alt, "'Theme Funerals' Exist And They Can Be A Bit Unusual," Everplans, accessed March 28, 2020, https://www.everplans.com/articles/theme-funerals-exist-and-they-can-be-a-bit-unusual.

the U.K "are keen for their funeral to reflect their favourite hobby, colour, football team, or music."[214] Themes can easily be incorporated into the décor, music, and food served during a funeral.[215] However they can also invite guests to take a more participatory role by dressing in costume. Themes have even been incorporated into funeral processions such as processions of Harley Davidsons and even garbage trucks to commemorate a local sanitation worker.[216] Another element of the themed ritual that is sometimes included is the creative staging of the body of the deceased. This can range from decorating the casket to look like a car and having the decedent sitting up as if driving, to posing the body in a manner reflective of their interests without using a casket.[217] When it comes to staging a funeral service creatively, there are endless possibilities. While not all funeral homes will accommodate such requests, like the gradual acceptance of cremation, this practice is only growing in popularity. It seems that to remain financially viable in the future, funeral directors need to be willing to help the bereaved create a ritual that is personally meaningful.

Individuals, especially those lacking a strong religious tradition, often gravitate towards themed funerals because they can "provide a sociality for consumers who might feel alienated either as a consequence of disembeddedness or because former rituals no longer hold any kind of currency of meaning for them (i.e. one is merely 'going through the motions')."[218] Perhaps such

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[214] As quoted in Sanders, "Branding in the American Funeral Industry," 266.
[215] Alt, "'Theme Funerals' Exist And They Can Be A Bit Unusual"; Denise Carson, *Parting Ways: New Rituals and Celebrations of Life's Passing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Dignity Memorial, "Life Well Celebrated® | Personalized Funeral & Memorial Service," Dignity Memorial, accessed March 28, 2020, https://www.dignitymemorial.com/plan-funeral-cremation/life-well-celebrated; Ashitha Nagesh, "Would You Want a Themed Funeral After You Die?," Metro UK, *News But Not As You Know It* (blog), May 8, 2107, https://metro.co.uk/2017/05/08/would-you-want-a-themed-funeral-after-you-die-6622359/.
[216] Justin Nobel, "A Garbage Truck Funeral Procession, And Other Great Marches of the Dead," Digital Dying, April 15, 2019, https://www.funeralwise.com/digital-dying/a-garbage-truck-funeral-procession-and-other-great-marches-of-the-dead/.
[217] Alyssa Newcomb, "Dead People Get Life-Like Poses at Their Funerals," ABC News, June 13, 2014, https://abcnews.go.com/US/dead-people-life-poses-funerals/story?id=23456853.
[218] Sanders, "Branding in the American Funeral Industry," 277.

rituals never held meaning for these individuals. The term ritual is often colloquially invoked to describe an activity done repeatedly. However, simply doing something out of habit without intentionality does not give it the transformative power of ritual.

There is debate among scholars regarding how to define ritual. Robert Grimes gives an overview of some of the definitions suggested by leading scholars before offering his own, which I take to be the best definition available: "Ritual is embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment."[219] Rituals are transformative as well as improvisational. Contemporary American funerals that employ themes intentionally avoid repetition and behaviors that feel stale and unauthentic to the participants.[220] They focus on new ways of constructing meaning which they find in personalization. Bereaved families use themes to insert themselves into a larger narrative that feels authentic to the deceased but is also communally driven by creating a shared experience.

While the use of themes encourages what Ron Hast calls "audience driven funerals," this is also an intentional marketing strategy used by funeral director to maximize profits.[221] George Sanders describes how, "The funeral industry's adoption of theming borrows heavily from branding strategies, thereby transforming personal rituals into promotional tools."[222] Sanders argues that brands bring a sense of comfort and normalcy. This allow mourners to displace their grief onto an object thus creating a critical distance that is beneficial to moving towards healing. Concurrently, with this sense of comfort people's associations of brands with consumerism

[219] *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2013), 185-197.
[220] Additionally, this reflects the theories of Margaret Drewal who argues ritual is generative and actually creates culture, it does not just reaffirm the existing structures. Repetition is synonymous with re-presentation which is inherently a creative act. Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 1-11.
[221] Ron Hast, "Audience Generated Funerals and More," *Mortuary Management*, March 2005. 4.
[222] Sanders, "Branding in the American Funeral Industry," 276.

motivates them to spend more money. Themed funerals can be commodified while still maintaining their status as effective social rituals.[223] These new funerals are redefining the American funeral and while there is no reliable data yet, it seems this trend will only continue to increase.

After Party:

Following the funeral service, it is customary (but not required) to have a funeral reception. This is also known as a repast, which literally means "to eat." Originally this was a common Latin word for mealtimes but has evolved to be associated with funerals.[224] This event presents another opportunity for friends and family to gather to share memories and celebrate the life of the deceased while sharing food. These events can range from a simple potluck to a sit-down meal at a restaurant or banquet hall, but they revolve around food. Whatever the setting or format the goal remains the same—to extend the ritual performance so that assembled friends and family have the time and space to mark the occasion.[225]

Mirroring the trend of funerals being more individualized, there is a growing trend for funeral receptions to be unique and reflective of the decedent. This can be achieved through eating a favorite dish of the deceased, personalized music selections, or the continuation of a theme that helped frame the funeral service. A reception often features family speeches, storytelling, and other forms of celebration and may also feature religious elements such as prayers and candle lighting."[226] They can be open to all individuals on the funeral guest list or be

[223] Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 48.
[224] Sam Tetrault, "Repast After a Funeral: Definition, Etiquette & Customs," *Cake* (blog), accessed April 3, 2020, https://www.joincake.com/blog/repast/.
[225] Almost all rituals across cultures feature food. It is seen either as an integrated aspect of the ritual or as a way of thanking individuals for attending and participating in the ritual. It is often considered poor etiquette to ask guests to attend an event and not offer them food.
[226] Tetrault, "Repast After a Funeral."

smaller, more family centered affairs. There are no set rules or structure for how this element of the performance plays out.

Many houses of worship have a fellowship hall that can accommodate this type of post-funeral gathering, and funeral homes also may have a space on site used for this purpose. At a funeral home this is often achieved by repurposing the main parlor and viewing rooms to support a separate ritual event. In some families it is customary for the reception to be held in the home of the deceased, and in others a family member (but not a member of the immediate family) takes on the task of hosting it at their residence. Ideally, the immediate family should not feel like this is an additional burden that they must undertake but rather something that can be enjoyed.[227]

Like the location, the timing can also vary. Most often receptions are held immediately following the service but could be later in the day or even a few days afterward. If attendees have traveled from a distance a reception will be held while they are still in town. In many instances out of town guests arrive just before the funeral so this also gives them time to be together as a family. In some instances, this meal occurs prior to the funeral. Sometimes a pre-funeral meal is called a wake, but usually that term is synonymous with the viewing of the body which may or may not be held in conjunction with a ritual gathering to share food.[228]

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[227] Caitlin Doughty, "Death Positive," The Order of the Good Death, accessed March 24, 2018, http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/death-positive; FuneralWise, "Funeral Reception Planning: Tips, Advice, and How Tos," Funeralwise, accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.funeralwise.com/plan/celebration-of-life/reception/; Debby Mayne, "Learn How to Plan and Host a Post Funeral Reception," *The Spruce* (blog), accessed April 5, 2020, https://www.thespruce.com/hosting-post-funeral-receptions-4172344; "How to Plan the Perfect Post Funeral Reception," Safe Passage Urns, accessed April 5, 2020, https://safepassageurns.com/blogs/blog/should-i-have-food-at-the-funeral-or-post-funeral-reception.

[228] For Jews the ritual immediately following a burial, is less celebratory and more focused on extended communal mourning. This is a seven-day period known as sitting Shiva. For more information see "Learn about Jewish Mourning, Shiva Traditions, Customs and More.," Shiva.com, accessed April 16, 2020, https://www.shiva.com/.

While the funeral is more focused on honoring the deceased, at a reception the focus shifts to offering condolences to the family and sharing in grief. It is a way for a family to support each other and to find comfort in community. Even if the mood of the funeral service is more somber, the reception takes on a more celebratory tone. It is seen as a way to transition from an emphasis on death, back to life.[229] The funeral reception serves a variety of purposes in service of this goal. Joycelyn Therese Helen Drozd describes how:

> The "repast" component functions to refresh and nourish those who have participated in the ritual. Second, the "repast" serves to reaffirm the importance of continuing life. Third, the "repast" component shares the functional characteristics of the entire ritual, such as reinforcement of communal solidarity, and the public recognition of new roles within the family structure. Finally, perhaps, a new function of the "repast" (and the entire ritual) is to counteract alienation.[230]

Following the loss of a loved one, it is necessary to carve out space for adjusting to the boundaries of a new normal. Although often those who are grieving do not want to eat right away, having some food helps given them strength to get through the performance. Eating helps to transition individuals back into a focus on the continuity and continuation of life.

Simultaneously it is a reminder of the value of community in helping create that continuity. The value of having a planned funeral reception as part of the larger ritual is seen in the fact that, “The frequent spontaneous activity of relatives, friends and neighbors in providing food, and an informal social atmosphere at the home testifies to the need for a gathering after the funeral.”[231] In the face of tragedy people instinctively want to gather and sharing food is an essential aspect of communal solidarity. However, having a planned event can limit stress and make the ritual more effective for all involved.

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[229] Yoder, “The Funeral Meal,” 149.
[230] Joycelyn Therese Helen Drozd, “An Investigation of the Significance of the Repast Component in American Funeral Ritual” (Northern Illinois University, 1980), 1, https://commons.lib.niu.edu/handle/10843/18057.
[231] LeRoy Bowman, *The American Funeral; A Study in Guilt, Extravagance, and Sublimity* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 148–49, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001277653.

Beyond the immediate value of a funeral meal, it can also serve as a way to participate in an extended performance of mourning. Having some critical distance from the act of grief directed at the body presents "the supportive community an opportunity to make plans to meet with the bereaved at a later time, for example, the next day or during the next week. This initial contact and communication at the funeral meal will probably make the future contact less awkward and more likely actually to occur."[232] The bodies of the bereaved will be in a state of mourning for a considerable time and will continue to need support and care from their family and friends who are likely also in mourning.

For individuals who are not comfortable taking a more active part in the funeral service, such as by speaking in front of a large crowd, they may feel more at ease sharing memories amongst a smaller group and in a more informal setting. Again, ritual elements that promote active participation amongst the spect-actors helps overall satisfaction with the performance and thus the participants' ability to process their grief.[233] Especially if there was no viewing, it is beneficial for spect-actors to have a less formal occasion for communal mourning.

[232] Yoder, "The Funeral Meal," 156.
[233] See O'Rourke, Spitzberg, and Hannawa, "The Good Funeral," September 1, 2011.

CONCLUSION

The Final Act:

Average Americans do not experience death in their daily lives. People are usually only confronted with the death of a loved one a handful of times throughout their lives. Even less frequently are people in a position to be responsible for the staging of the ritual performance of a loved one. This separation from death leads to lack of awareness of the process and performance involved as well as to fear. Caitlin Doughty, founder of the Death Positive movement, laments how, "corpses motor down highways and interstates in unmarked white vans…Bodies crisscross the globe in the cargo hold of planes while vacationing passengers travel above. We have put the dead beneath. Not just underground, but under the tops of fake hospital stretchers, within the bellies of aircraft, and in the recesses of our consciousness."[234] Dead bodies are all around us, and yet we choose to keep them hidden. We are blindly ignorant, preferring to believe if we don't see death it won't happen to us. The movement specifically seeks to address ears about death by making it physically more visible and more openly discussed.

According to Trevino Morales, a funeral director from Houston Texas, the changes in the funeral industry are the direct result of large corporations buying up small local funeral homes. It is not consumers who have changed the industry but rather corporations. Morales declares:

> You get personal service at the family-owned funeral homes. Corporations are an assembly line…The interest of the sole proprietor is providing good service, helping a family through tough times. They do get paid but it is not as demanding as corporate-owned funeral homes because you've got to answer to your stockholders. A sole proprietor only answers to himself and his conscious.[235]

[234] Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, 49. See also Caitlin Doughty, "Death Positive," The Order of the Good Death, accessed March 24, 2018, http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/death-positive.
[235] Trevino Morales as quoted in Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, 189.

Nationally about 10% of funeral homes are corporately owned, and in some areas the percentage is much higher. Additionally, corporate funeral home ownership is on the rise. As the funeral industry has gone through major shifts in recent years, it is increasingly difficult for small family operations to remain financially viable. There also has been an explosion in the rise of new funeral homes. Across the county there are more funeral homes than can be supported by the communities they serve. This has led to stiff competition and steep prices. In response many individuals are now beginning to gravitate toward alternative mortuary rituals, often ones that are more economical as well as environmentally conscious. Additionally, people are questioning if there is a need for funeral homes at all.

Alternate Endings:

Even with an increased desire for "audience generated funerals" the funeral industry still maintains that funeral directors are essential players in the performance. Funeral Director Ron Hast writes, "This sort of memorial occasion does not just happen. There must be an effective and supportive beginning and end. It takes a self-confident leader like a funeral director to 'open' and 'close' this occasion effectively."[236] By casting funeral directors as ritual experts, Hast argues that for the performance to run smoothly and be an effective tool for mitigating grief, it requires the structure and formality provided by those with specific training and skill in conducting death rituals.

Despite these industry claims, the home funeral movement is gaining in popularity. Home funerals are conducted with minimal to no involvement from the funeral home. This is a return to the funeral practices of the eighteenth century when bodies were cared for at the family home and attended over by family and members of the community. Audrey Bell discussed how the

[236] Ron Hast, "Audience-Generated Funerals, And More," *Mortuary Management*, March 2005, 4.

funeral profession is currently changing. She told me that recently a large proportion of calls the funeral home receives are from people who want to have help with the basic and legal services of receiving the body and filing paperwork but not with hosting a ritual service: "Maybe they do their own funeral maybe they don't but they're not involving the church or the funeral home. That's becoming more common."[237]

It has always been legal for families to maintain control over the decedent, however with the rise of the funeral industry people no longer wanted to take on this responsibility, and eventually it became such common practice that many individuals are no longer aware that taking control of the body is their right. Changes to this trend include the beginning of the home funeral movement in the 1960s as a response to critiques of the funeral industry. The movement has been a small but pervasive force since its inception and recently has seen a surge in popularity. In 2010 the National Home Funeral Alliance was founded to give the public the tools and resources to conduct their own home funerals.[238]

Today there are multiple non-profits and local organizations that operate as part of the NHFA. Crossings, an organization based in Takoma Park Maryland, teaches workshops across the country informing people of their rights, assisting with understanding the legal forms, and guiding them through how to carry out the care and display of the deceased.[239] In most cases the rituals can be completed without any aid from the funeral industry. However, in Connecticut,

[237] Bell, Personal Interview.
[238] Terry Skovronek, "Home Funeral History: From Family Tradition and Back Again," NATIONAL HOME FUNERAL ALLIANCE (NHFA), accessed April 18, 2020, https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/home-funeral-history.html.
[239] See http://www.crossings.net/index.html, and in particular their resource guide, Elizabeth Knox et al., *Resource Guide: A Manual for Home Funeral Care*, 2009, http://www.crossings.net/. For more information see Libby Copeland, "Who Owns the Dead?," *The New Republic*, June 24, 2015, https://newrepublic.com/article/122130/who-owns-dead; Denise Carson, *Parting Ways: New Rituals and Celebrations of Life's Passing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); and Lucinda Herring, *Reimagining Death: Stories and Practical Wisdom for Home Funerals and Green Burials* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2019).

Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Your, and Utah state law requires that a funeral home must be hired to supervise the process, even though the ritual may not take place at the funeral home.[240]

Alexa Hagerty explains that while home funerals can be performed by anyone there is a demographic where it is most common: "The home funeral movement is largely composed of 'hippie types', particularly among its core leadership. That is to say, most of the people I have encountered in the movement are white, middle class, politically progressive and embrace an eclectic mix of progressive mainline Protestantism and Eastern-influenced spiritual practices."[241] Such individuals are more open to seeing death not as a medical moment but a multi-day process. It is seen as a spiritual event in which personally interacting with the decedent is both a way to honor their life and to connect with something beyond. Hagerty continues, "Many in the movement understand the 'spirit', 'soul' or 'life-force' of the person to remain in the body for several days after death and think that it takes time for the dead to 'get used to being dead.'"[242]

For others, while they may also believe the dead need time to recognize their new state of being, the emphasis is on helping the living have the time to let go. Beth Knox, the founder of Crossings states, "there's comfort and healing that comes from physically caring for the dead and from spending quiet, private time in the presence of death. It's a tremendous help in the bereavement process, and helps you see death as a natural part of the cycle of life."[243] Having three days with the body provides the time and space to say goodbye.

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[240] Harris, *Grave Matters*, 2008, 118.
[241] Alexa Hagerty, "Speak Softly to the Dead: The Uses of Enchantment in American Home Funerals," *Social Anthropology* 22, no. 4 (November 1, 2014): 429, https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12087.
[242] Hagerty, 433.
[243] As quoted in Harris, *Grave Matters*, 2008, 105.

Home funerals do require extensive preparation and can be labor intensive. If a family is acting in lieu of a funeral director, they have ten days to fill out fill out the death certificate and file it with the vital records office. Additionally, a "report of death form" must be filed. If the body will be cremated there is "burial transport permit" that allows the body to be transported from the home to the crematorium. In some states this is also needed to transport a body for burial or if the death occurred outside the home to bring the body from the site of death to the home.[244]

Besides the paperwork, the first step in caring for a body is to wash it. Most often this is more of a spiritual ritual intended to purify the body more than a practical need to cleanse it. This reflects many religious traditions which traditionally wash the body of the deceased to remove spiritual impurities. Washing can be done with wet sponges or hand towels. Absorbent pads should be placed under the deceased and the abdomen gently pressed down upon to "release any waste that might otherwise appear later when the muscles in the bladder and bowel relax."[245] After the washing the decedent is wrapped in a clean sheet and moved to either the casket or wherever they will be laid out. It is recommended that transferring the body requires at least four to six people as it gets increasingly difficult after rigor mortis has set in. The final preparatory step is to dress the body either in an outfit or simply wrap it in a shroud.

Most states require that if a body is going to be left out and not embalmed within twenty-four hours it needs to be cooled to a temperature between thirty-four and forty degrees. This can be achieved using a variety of methods: frozen gel packs, bags filled with ice cubes, or the easiest method, dry ice. Dry ice is advantageous because it is colder and does not melt. However instead of melting into liquid it evaporates and releases carbon dioxide gas, so it is important to

[244] For an overview of relevant laws by state see Slocum and Carlson, *Final Rights.*
[245] Harris, *Grave Matters*, 2008, 109.

open a window. Dry ice can also burn your skin so people who are going to be in contact with it should always wear gloves. [246] Ice is placed underneath the body, in the armpits, and on the abdomen. The ice needs to be changes multiple times a day. The amount of ice necessary varies based on outside temperature, whether there is air conditioning, cause of death, and the condition of the body. Forty to fifty pounds of ice that lasts for three days is usually required.

Once the body is prepared, guests can be invited for a viewing. Some families choose to have at least one person keep a constant vigil of sitting beside the decedent. Sometimes a clergy member comes to lead a prayer service, other times the family hosts their own ceremony. Activities may include readings, music, and sharing memories. Part of the appeal of home funeral to many people is the ability to customize it in a way that is meaningful for them.[247] While a home funeral can also be themed, they are usually more simple affairs where the emphasis is on being present with the body and playing an active role in helping the spirit transition.

Death in a Time of Corona Virus

While writing this thesis, the world has been irrevocably changed by the global pandemic COVID-19. For multiple sectors of the economy we do not yet know how industries will be affected. Yet the funeral industry has already been transformed. Rising death tools have stretched limited resources making it difficult to process the volume of bodies. Lack of knowledge about the virus resulted in the CDC scrambling to determine the health effects of being exposed to a body that had died as a result of COVID-19. Furthermore, shelter-in-place orders nationally

[246] Elizabeth Knox et al., *Resource Guide: A Manual for Home Funeral Care*, 2009, 18, http://www.crossings.net/.
[247] See Carson, *Parting Ways*; Herring, *Reimagining Death*.

prevented gatherings of more than 10 people, making it impossible to hold funeral services with more than immediate family, and often negating the possibility of even a small gathering.

The CDC has been working with the National Funeral Directors Association to offer new guidelines on how to be able to mark death without endangering the health of those participating.[248] They have stated, "There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of COVID-19…[However] people should consider not touching the body of someone who has died of COVID-19."[249] Due to still not knowing exactly how the virus is transmitted, they are erring on the side of caution. While both burial and cremation continue to be allowed, the NFDA does caution that this is a rapidly evolving situation and individuals should be mindful of any state or local regulations that may further restrict interactions with bodies of COVID-19 victims.

Additionally, as of April 5, 2020 the NFDA had begun to collect the contact information and areas of specialty for funeral directors who were willing to volunteer to "travel to COVID-19 'hot spots' experiencing high death rates in order to lend on-the-ground assistance."[250] Within two days, hundreds of funeral directors volunteered to be sent to New York and other cities that were struggling to cope with the death toll. However, before volunteers could be mobilized, licensure reciprocity agreements would need to be worked out. At the time this thesis was written, the NFDA had sent proposals to governors of targeted cities and was awaiting approval.[251]

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[248] The CDC is also working with the smaller National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association.
[249] National Funeral Directors Association, "Situation Update: Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)," accessed April 6, 2020, https://www.nfda.org/covid-19.
[250] National Funeral Directors Association.
[251] For an example of how the overflow of unclaimed dead is being handled in New York see, Molly Gorny, "Hart Island Back in the News," Digital Dying, April 10, 2020, https://www.funeralwise.com/digital-dying/hart-island-back-in-the-news/.

Funerals that are occurring during this time continue to reflect a desire for personalization and communal participation, even when that participation has to be mediated by the internet. Not only has there been an increase in funeral services being livestreamed, many funeral homes are holding arrangement interviews over Zoom and other videoconferencing platforms. If burial is selected, gravesite ceremonies are being encouraged instead of gatherings indoors at the funeral home. When this is not possible, chairs are set up in accordance with social distancing guidelines.[252]

Lianna Champ, a funeral director and grief counselor in the U.K. reported to the BBC,

> I think physical distance from the actual funeral service could actually become quite normal for us moving forward. We've got to adjust to this new way of thinking and being. The world has changed, society has changed – and we need to realize that when something like the coronavirus hits the world, we need to change not just our everyday lives, but how we die as well.[253]

This pandemic has forced society to reconsider both how we conceptualize death and the role of the funeral industry. It has reaffirmed our need for community. Despite the difficulty in maintaining the communal value of funeral in a time of isolation, Lianna Champ urges those who are unable to attend the funeral of a loved one in person, "to reach out to people and be honest in your communication, in sharing with people how you feel. As human beings we need intimacy…And if the coronavirus forces us onto our phones and emails then that's how it will have to be – but we need to reach out to others and be there for each other."[254]

While this pandemic has put unprecedented strain on the funeral industry, it has also brought out a sense of service and compassion. There is an underlying belief that all deceased

[252] Justin Nobel, "Coronavirus Sweeps The World, And Even The Funeral Is Transformed," Digital Dying, March 19, 2020, https://www.funeralwise.com/digital-dying/coronavirus-sweeps-the-world-and-even-the-funeral-is-transformed/.
[253] As quoted in Nobel.
[254] As quoted in Nobel.

bodies deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. As part of their press statement, the NFDA quoted statesman William Ewart Gladstone. Sharing a sentiment reminiscent of that expressed in Emile Durkheim's quote with which I began this thesis, Gladstone declares, "Show me the manner in which a nation or a community cares for its dead. I will measure exactly the sympathies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals."[255] There is still a desire for a communal marking of a death. However, people are respecting state mandates to stay at home and only gather when it is legal and safe to do so. If this is not possible technology can be used to reach out to those who cannot be physically present. In the face of tragedy and fear, Americans continue to find ways to commemorate the deceased.

Closing the Curtain

Despite the myriad of changes to the contemporary American funeral and to the death care industry, and even with the increased popularity of home funerals, it is likely that funeral directors will continue to be necessary to the process of American death rituals. LaVone Hazell, a funeral director and head of the A.L.L. Bereavement Center in New York writes, "There are cultural universals that have remained consistent in funeral service: announcing the death; care for the deceased; a method of disposition; a possible ceremony or ritual; and some form of memorialization."[256] Regardless of our fears regarding death, culturally we feel compelled to mark it with ritual and ceremony. Between the legal, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of funeral directors' role, it is likely that amid the changes to the funeral industry, funeral directors will continue to serve as expert ritual specialists. However, we will likely also continue to see increased participation by families in both the crafting and enactment of the ritual.

[255] National Funeral Directors Association, "Situation Update: Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)."
[256] As quoted in Laderman, *Rest in Peace*, 167.

Despite the recent changes to funeral practices, at its core the goal of the funeral has remained constant-to provide a meaningful performance that allows for the expression of shared grief and the beginning of the healing process. Whether this process is simple or elaborate, guided by a funeral director or supported by the participants in a home funeral, people have an innate desire to ritualize the passing of a loved one. I conclude with a reflection on the state of the modern funeral:

> A "meaningful" service has remained the funereal focus; what has evolved is the American understanding of the concept. In the perpetuation of modern death rituals, meaning is equated to creativity. Modernity strives for ritual and ceremony embedded in uniqueness. Individualizing one's own funeral or the funeral of a loved one has become the new norm. In the majority of cases, however, clients are choosing their unique "one-of-a-kind" memorial service from an industry-devised list of possible components. In other words, this supposed individualization is not truly individualized, but in most cases corporately molded.[257]

As contemporary American funerals illustrate, one of our strongest cultural values is individualization. Stewart Ewen, a sociologist of advertising, remarks, '"mass pseudo-demassification,' the selling of individuality on a wide-scale basis, has a history almost as long as the marketing industry itself."[258] Regardless of being mass produced, people find individualized meaning in funeral goods. In the end what is most important in terms of the overall success of the ritual is that the participants feel like the event was meaningful to them.

I argue that embracing death not only alleviates some of our cultural fears, it helps people to process their grief after the loss of a loved one. Viewing death rituals as a performative event illuminates how these rituals are constructed and the embodied experience of participating in them. I hope that it also makes the topic more approachable and relatable to other life events and

[257] Crabtree, "The Changing Discourse of Death: A Study of the Evolution of the Contemporary Funeral Industry," 54.
[258] As quoted in Sanders, "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry," 61.

ritual performances. Furthermore, I hope this thesis inspires further research regarding specifically American death rituals as well as ritual performance more broadly.

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