

Funeral Practices in the United States

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Perhaps the most salient feature of funeral practices in the United States is American society's denial of death. Indeed, the word death is scrupulously avoided, with terms such as "passed on," "deceased," or "expired" used in its place. The family typically seeks to detach itself from the funeral process, and so all details and arrangements are left to paid funeral professionals. In fact, the detachment process begins well before death. When family members begin to show indications of potentially fatal aging or illness they are relegated to nursing homes or hospitals to die, far from family and friends, out of sight out of mind.

When death does occur, the funeral home is notified and its agents transport the body from the nursing home or hospital directly to the funeral home. There it is embalmed, dressed, makeup is applied, and it is placed in an expensive casket, which is then located in a flower-filled salon with appropriate décor, lighting and music. Once all this is arranged, a brief window of time, two or three hours, is allowed for what is termed "the viewing." This is when family members drop by to pay last respects and demonstrate their social

responsibility by their very presence in this uncomfortable situation.

Additionally, the family demonstrates its economic stature by means of the lavishness of the funeral arrangements. Viewings were formerly held in private residences and termed wakes, but this is no longer the case, given the limitations on private space caused by urbanization, and the concomitant professionalization of the funeral process. If the body can be restored to a life-like appearance the casket is left open during the viewing in order to reinforce the denial of death. The most effusive compliment one can offer at this point is the now cliché "He (or she) looks so life-like!" This is, of course, not true, as the defunct typically look much better than they ever did in life, and certainly better than they did during their last years in a nursing home, hospice, or hospital, thanks to the magic of funereal makeup, perfumes, and lighting. If a life-like effect cannot be achieved, the casket is left closed so as not to remind the living of the rigors of death.

The following day the casket is loaded into a hearse and driven to the grave site where, after a few well-chosen words on the part of a religious dignitary it is



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placed six feet underground and covered with earth. By law, the funeral director must be present. From that point on, care of the grave site is left to the funeral professionals that own the cemetery, and who take responsibility for upkeep of the site. It should be noted that unlike some countries, Germany for example, where the grave plot is only rented, in the United States plots of land in a cemetery are sold outright, generally far in advance of the demise of the future occupant. Often the casket is placed in a sealed vault which preserves it and its tenant from the ravages of time, given the long-term nature of the land use in question. These cemeteries must be licensed, and are the only areas in which a body may be legally interred. In addition, the local medical examiner must provide a death certificate, stipulating time and cause of death, before one can be buried. If the cause of death is suspicious, an autopsy can be ordered by the legal authorities, with or without the consent of the still-living family members. Once buried, a body cannot be exhumed without legal permission and documentation.

All of these preparations and assistance by trained and licensed funeral professionals do not come cheap. According to Jared Jenkins of Fred Jenkins Funeral Home in Morgantown West Virginia, the average cost of a funeral in the United States is approximately \$6000, and can easily reach a much higher figure. The casket alone can cost up to \$6000, vaults range in price from \$400 to \$8000, and if one wishes to be buried in a crypt, he or she can expect to pay a minimum of \$12,000 for the privilege. The prices of burial plots extend into the thousands of dollars, as do the services provided by the funeral director and the funeral home.

Given the costs involved, cremation is becoming an ever more popular alternative to burial. According to Jenkins, cremation is the preferred end in twenty-five percent of urban funeral rites in the United States, but is still practically unknown amongst the rural population of America, which tends to be very much more traditional and conservative in all their ritual practices. While the above attitudes and practices are typical in the United States, there is some variation due to the cultural practices of the many minority groups populating the country. These cultural differences tend to ameliorate with time as native-born generations assimilate and inter-marry with mainstream U.S. populations, but even so some differences persist, as we shall now see.

By way of example, we can point to Jewish-American, African-American, Native-American and Mexican-American cultures as typical of those groups which derive great comfort from the maintenance of certain heritage cultural rites within their North American funeral practices. The Jewish religion emphasizes both the obligation to honor the dead, *kavod hamet*, and the need to comfort the mourners, *nichum avelim*. Cultural assimilation has professionalized Jewish rituals as well, and funeral preparations formerly done by a group of laypeople, *cheura kadisha*, are now done by professionals. These preparations include the *tahara* or preparation of the body, and the dressing of it in a linen cloth, the *tachrikin*. Usually the service is held at the funeral home or synagogue, and includes an "official mourner," a handful of earth from Israel to be tossed on the coffin, and a seven day mourning period, or *shivah*, following the burial. Cremation is rare as it evokes memories of the Holocaust. There are, of course, denominational variants.



African-American funeral rituals trace their roots to Africa, especially gospel music, which is an integral part of these rituals, as is a social participation which goes beyond family members to embrace, and strengthen, the community at large, and especially the church community. Native Americans, in contrast, exhibit far from homogeneous practices. Each tribal group observes different traditions. The Apache, for example, believe the dead body to be an empty receptacle, while the Dakota consider it sacred, with a soul that will live on in the spirit land of Wagagi McKece. In contrast, the Navaho simply do not believe in an afterlife. Mexican-American funeral rituals tend to follow a pattern based on the generation of immigration to the United States. The first-generation members follow luto or mourning rituals much more rigidly than succeeding generations, which tend to assimilate with time, turning to standardized US professional funeral services as a function of time in the US and increased educational and economic levels. Some traditions remain, however, partly due to the continuous involvement of the Catholic church, and here we may point to novenas which are prayers said during the nine-day mourning period, along with attendant parochial candle display, as well as increased icon worship both in the church and in the home during this period.

Finally, we may observe that although the mourning and grief processes are both varied and at the same time fundamentally homogenous in their ultimate philosophical take on death in the United States, they ultimately serve the same function as funeral rituals in all cultures, which is to maintain social cohesion and function through time in the face of certain death and inevitable dissolution of both the social and human body.

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