

More on Cremation and Other
Alternatives to Traditional Burial

Number 1, January 2, 1978

A few months ago I discussed cremation as a practical alternative to in-ground burial, and I solicited the reactions of *Current Contents*[®] readers to that idea.¹ I was surprised by the number of responses and by their generally positive tone.

My unfortunate experience with funeral directors was not unique. Several of my correspondents confirmed this with examples from their own experiences. Almost all agreed that cremation is preferable to burial and should not be hindered by the burial establishment.

For example, Julian B. Schorr, Director of the Tidewater Regional Red Cross Blood Program in Norfolk, wrote, "The fact that state legislatures have been 'conned' into requiring licensed 'body movers,' mandatory coffins, and the like is in about the same class of legislative activity as that which allocates money each year to tobacco growers so that more of our friends can hack themselves to death.... Taking on the vested interests requires a 'Ralph Nader' approach and per-

haps he...should be enjoined to do so."

P.H.B. Carstens of the University of Louisville Health Sciences Center, whose native country is Denmark, commented, "Most Europeans would be horrified to learn about the American practice of embalmmment and showing off at the funeral homes before the burial."

Speaking from a unique perspective, W. Noel Brown, Staff Chaplain at the University of Michigan Hospitals, said, "I do take some issue with you that scientists as a group are less squeamish than others about the practical side of death. In my experience, which is primarily in university teaching centers, I see scientists as being rather like the general population, i.e., unprepared and ill-at-ease. I should add that medical physicians are often little different."

One possibly valid reservation about cremation was expressed by Joseph L. Kyner of the University of Kansas Medical Center, who asked, "Does not cremation use a signifi-

cant amount of energy, chiefly, I presume, in the form of natural gas or electricity, to accomplish the final ashed product?... Perhaps the amount of energy utilized is not a big item, but if cremation was the norm it could be a significant factor."

Since the number of cremations in the U.S. is still low, the energy used per cremation is relatively high. Greater efficiency could be achieved in a variety of ways. If cremation became a routine matter, people would become less squeamish about multiple cremations. But I must confess that the images that ran through my mind when I visited a crematorium were unpleasant. I could not help recalling a visit 20 years ago to Dachau.

Of course, the energy used for a typical in-ground burial is not trivial either. Most graves are now dug by equipment powered by gasoline engines. And consider the number of automobiles that are used for wakes, funerals, and grave-site visits. Also to be considered is the energy expended in smelting, die cutting, and polishing the metal used in fancier caskets. To come up with a definitive answer to this problem, I suppose we need an operations research expert to develop a proper mathematical model. At present, I doubt that it matters much which form of body disposal is most energy-efficient.

On the subject of grave-site visits, Dr. Gunther E. Molau of Dow

Chemical had this to say: "To leave a grave is, for me, not only superfluous but even somewhat harmful to my family because it ties people down to look after the grave, and today's people are mobile people."

Despite such pragmatic reasons for choosing cremation, the practice has very little acceptance in the United States. According to the 1974 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, only 8% of those who die in the US are cremated. In Japan, where the practice was illegal a century ago, cremation now is almost universal. And in Sweden, Denmark, England and West Germany, more than 50% are cremated.² Telephone checks with various sources indicate that these estimates are still accurate.

Elsewhere, however, cremations sometimes carry unfavorable associations because of the Nazi atrocities in the death camps. In Lithuania, which I recently visited, there are no cremations at all. In Siberia and other parts of the U.S.S.R. that I visited there is no economic incentive to use cremation because land is plentiful. On the other hand, though they are not illegal in Israel, cremations are forbidden by Jewish religious law. Similarly, Moslems never use cremation, according to the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C.

Apparently, my call for the establishment of a cremation society was not particularly original. Several readers informed me that such or-

ganizations are already in existence. For example, I had never heard of the Continental Association of Funeral and Memorial Societies, an affiliation of some 150 local societies located throughout the United States. The individual societies are non-profit organizations that are usually founded by churches or ministerial associations. They assist members in selecting a funeral director and arranging, at the lowest price, either cremation or traditional burial. The one-time membership fees range from \$5 for an individual to \$20 for a family; an additional \$5 charge is made at the time of death to cover record-keeping. At present, the membership of Continental's local societies totals about three-quarters of a million people. Its address and the addresses of other organizations helpful in body disposal are given on page 11.

Several readers told me about a *direct* cremation service called Telophase Society of America, which operates mainly on the West Coast. It was founded by Thomas Byrnes Weber, a biochemist, and Tom Sherrard, a lawyer, to simplify the process of direct cremation. Telophase is a for-profit organization. It has its own vehicles, personnel, storage facilities and crematory. It will file the death certificate, pick up the body, arrange the cremation, and scatter or deliver the ashes. In San Diego, where Telophase is based, cremations account for 36% of all dispositions. This rate

has been increasing at the rate of 2% per year, according to Edwin H. Stivers, president of the Telophase Society. Telophase charges \$15 for membership and \$250 at the time of death. The same services are available to non-members for \$300.

Although these amounts are far less than the \$2,000 cost of an average American burial, they still seem a little higher than absolutely necessary. Previously I mentioned the funeral director who initially wanted to charge me \$400 for a simple cremation.¹ Later he called me back to say he would never refuse to handle a needy case for \$250. The funeral director who finally handled the cremation charged only \$175 and never asked about my personal finances. So I began to wonder about the \$250 figure. It was easy to understand when I learned that a Social Security death benefit of \$255 is payable to the person who pays for the funeral arrangements. Most people are not aware that they are entitled to this benefit regardless of the actual cost. Incidentally, in my case, only \$55 to \$75 of the total cost was for the cremation itself.

A few readers urged me to publish information on how to avoid the disposal problem almost entirely by donating one's body to medical research. While many people express a desire to donate their bodies to medical research, a lack of knowledge of the procedure often prevents this wish from being fulfilled. The following explanation may be

number of the coordinating agency for Pennsylvania: The Humanities Gifts Registry.

The medical school or coordinating agency will send you forms to complete and return and a Uniform Donor Card to sign and keep with you. You may specify on the card which medical school is to receive the body.

The procedural steps that occur after death differ according to the state in which you live. To keep the explanation simple, I will discuss what happens in the state of Pennsylvania. It should be noted that the steps are similar in each state, but not identical, and as I will show, the differences can be very important.

When a signed donor from Pennsylvania dies, the Humanities Gifts Registry—HGR—is notified by a family member or some other person. HGR ascertains that a death certificate has been signed and sends a funeral director (paid by HGR) to transport the body—which must be unembalmed and unautopsied—to a designated medical school. The medical school then embalms the body with a special solution and stores it until research is to be performed.

Next, a letter acknowledging the thanks of HGR is sent to the family or friend of the donor. The letter includes an invitation to attend one of two memorial services arranged by HGR each year. The services are conducted in a chapel in Phila-

delphia and are attended by: (1) families and friends of the donors, (2) representative medical and dental school students, and (3) a rabbi, priest, and minister, who collectively officiate the services. Very often, the memorial service takes place before medical research is performed on the donor.

If the donor had specified the taking of only certain organs or parts, a determination is made on their usefulness. (For example, kidneys are generally not taken from donors over 65 years old.) If found medically acceptable, the donated items are excised—in some cases by specially trained funeral directors—and the body is returned to the family or friend for disposal.

In cases where the entire body is donated, those that are badly burned, macerated, or contaminated with a serious communicable disease (such as tuberculosis) may be rejected. It is appropriate here to cite an important difference in the way two states handle body rejections. When HGR in Pennsylvania rejects a body, it assumes all responsibilities for final disposal. However, in the state of New Jersey—where donations are handled directly through medical schools—the final disposition of rejected bodies is left to the family or friends. Last year the Pennsylvania HGR received 527 bodies, accepted 498, rejected 21, and returned 8 to family members or friends after organs or parts were taken.

After medical research is performed on a body—a procedure taking a year or more in some cases—the remains are cremated on the school premises. The “cremains” are then placed in a small corrugated box, where they are kept until burial. HGR arranges for all cremains to be buried together in a single cemetery once a year and maintains a record of where each donor is interred.

There was some disagreement in my correspondence about whether or not there is now a shortage of cadavers. A survey of medical schools conducted in 1976 by the Continental Association of Funeral and Memorial Societies showed that there was a surplus of cadavers in some areas of the U.S., and a shortage in other areas. In general, however, more bodies are needed. In 1976, 36 schools reported an urgent need, compared to 34 in 1974 and 30 in 1972. The survey concluded that more bequeathals are needed, as well as more sharing between areas of surplus and shortage.³

In reflecting on my original diffi-

culties in arranging for my mother's cremation and the responses I have received from readers, two things have become clear.

The first is that part of my original problem was caused by lack of preparation and information. At the time I needed them, I was not able to locate the Telophase Society or the Continental Association of Funeral and Memorial Societies. Certainly the phone book wouldn't have led me to them unless I already knew their names. An entry in the classified telephone directory (yellow pages) would be relevant and helpful. I could have relied more on my friends to get the information, but in a time of personal crisis, one's normal instincts are blunted. I suppose the only solution to this problem is education and promotion. I hope that future generations will not put up with the kind of nonsense I encountered.

The second point that became clear to me—and which I hope is now clear to others—is that there are indeed alternatives to “The American Way of Death.”⁴

REFERENCES

1. **Garfield E.** *Cremation: a sensible alternative.* *Current Contents* No. 36, 5 September 1977, p. 5-8.
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* (15th edition, 1974)
Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. Vol. 6, p. 740.
3. **Morgan E.** *A manual of simple burial.* (8th edition)
Burnsville, N.C.: The Celo Press, 1977. 64 pp.
4. **Mitford J.** *The American way of death.*
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963. 333 pp.

For further information, readers may contact the following organizations:

Continental Association of Funeral & Memorial Societies, Inc.

Suite 1100
1828 L Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 293-4821

The umbrella organization for United States memorial societies. The Association will provide you with the address of the nearest memorial society. Information on simplicity in funeral arrangements and on bequeathing your body or organs, and directories of local societies are included in the booklet, A Manual of Simple Burial by Ernest Morgan, which is available from the Society for \$2.00, postpaid.

Memorial Society Association of Canada

P.O. Box 96
Western, Ontario, Canada M9N 3M6
(416) 241-6274

For residents of Canada, provides information similar to that available through the Continental Association of Funeral & Memorial Societies, Inc.

The St. Francis Burial & Counseling Society

Friendship Heights Station
P.O. Box 9727
Washington, D.C. 20060
(202) 332-3797

This organization is centered in Washington D.C. but has members throughout the United States. Membership costs \$12.00 yearly and includes a subscription to the St. Francis Quarterly, which publishes articles on all aspects of death and dying, burial planning, and cremation. The Society also supplies pine coffins at low cost [\$160-185], and supplies designs for using coffins as bookshelves, chests, or coffee tables until needed.

The Telophase Society

200 W. Thomas St.
Seattle, WA 98119
(206) 282-1444

P.O. Box 33208
San Diego, CA 92105
(714) 299-0805

P.O. Box 4664
Portland, OR 97208
(503) 233-6852

1201 East Ball Road, Suite V
Anahelm, CA 92805
(714) 956-8340

1543 W. Olympic Blvd., Suite 529,
Los Angeles, CA 90015
(213) 384-2043

A group of direct cremation service societies (not associated with the Continental Association of Funeral & Memorial Societies, Inc.) serving Pacific coastal states at the locations listed above. Membership fees are \$5 for individuals, \$20 for families. At the time of death, the Society will provide low-cost cremation and associated services.

The American Association of Tissue Banks

c/o Dr. Kenneth W. Sell
Scientific Director
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, MD 20014

A new, non-government-sponsored group including physicians, nurses, lawyers, technicians, and the general public. Long-range goals include setting up standards for tissue banking and establishing regional tissue banks.

National Eye Bank Association of America

3195 Maplewood Ave.
Winston-Salem, NC 27103

The governing eye bank for the United States. Local eye banks are members. The Association can provide information on eye donations, and will put you in touch with your local eye bank.

National Kidney Foundation

116 East 27th St.,
New York, NY 10016
(212) 889-2210

Provides help to kidney sufferers through research, professional education, and public information on organ donations, and by distributing the Uniform Donor Card.