On Good Days, I'll Think of Cemeteries as a Love Museum, But On Bad Days, I'll Think of Them as a Mouthful of Cavities: Humanistic Death Rituals in Central Colorado

A SENIOR CAPSTONE PROJECT

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Then Almitra spoke, saying, "We would ask now of Death."

And he said: You would know the secret of death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?

-Khalil Gibran

With medical and technological advancements arising at the turn of the 19th century, the life process has become routinized, essentially allowing each stage of life to become systemized. The demystification of the life stages parallels the systemization and commercialization of death culture. This ethnographic research explores the disconnection from death in modern America, observing how members of the community in central Colorado are returning to familial, pre-industrialized death rituals, and are speaking openly about grief, anxieties and legalities surrounding death. These transitions contribute to the positive death movement that counteracts the commercialization of funerary rites and the medicalization of death processes.

At the end of the 19th century, rapid scientific advances redefined the life process. Pathogenic processes became demystified, infant mortality rates declined, and the prevention of maternal death increased. Americans became enticed by the idea that death could be defied or transcended, and science was

the saving grace. Hearth and home was replaced with the sterile white sheets of the hospital bed. Washing and dressing the body in home was replaced with embalming and refrigerators on trains. The age-old litmus of human progress was invoked: how effectively and efficiently can we invent our way of out of the problem at hand? In a time when scientific processes overhauled and rewrote the process of life, the problem at hand was death.

Americans have a complicated relationship with death. Over the course of the last century, Americans have collectively distanced themselves from the death process. Today, the majority of deaths occur in the hospital, and nearly one fourth of critical patients are treated in an intensive care unit before death.

Through ethnographic analysis, my intention is to answer three main questions: Why have we become distant from the process of death? What are people doing about this? What can the average person gain from consciously acknowledging death? Death is at the core of the mystique of what it means to be human, of the unexplainable mysteries of human nature, at the apex of what the field of anthropology seeks to understand.

Death Cafés are an avenue that formed an access point of interaction for my research. Originating in the UK, the idea of the death café as a gathering space to

learn and express ideas about the end of life has spread internationally to more than 60 countries. Susan Coffey, leading the first Death Café that I visited, at the city-maintained Evergreen Cemetery in Colorado Springs, is a facilitator of the Death Café in Colorado Springs and a death midwife. In traveling to the Death Café in East Boulder, I met Sue Mackey, who is the facilitator of the Death Café in that region as well as the founder of Out of the Box End-of-Life Planning, in which she provides training, consulting and workshops for planning at the end-of-life. A friend of Sue Mackey, Kitty Edwards works with the Living and Dying Consciously Project and provides support and guidance for the emotional and symbolic preparation for the end of life.

After participating in a workshop held by Sue Mackey, she encouraged me to testify at the initial hearing for House Bill 1060, which sought to approve natural organic human reduction technology for use in Colorado funeral homes. As a citizen of Colorado and researcher in humanistic death care practices, I felt that I had something compelling to say to add my voice in hopes that the bill would pass. I was surprised to see that Katrina Spade, the inventor of natural organic human reduction and founder of Recompose (and a resident of Washington state), was in attendance, and she expressed her appreciation of my testimony.

The cohort of death care workers, students, researchers, environmentalists, and citizens who testified were delighted that the bill passed through the house unanimously. After testimonies were presented, Lauren Carroll and Erin Merelli, co-founders of the Deathwives Collective, introduced themselves to me. Lauren is a natural funeral director and is invested in spreading the community and conversation around death by forming Death Cafés in different cities. Erin Merelli is an end of life ceremonialist and Death Doula. Together, Erin and Lauren oversee the Deathwives Collective, a collective of professionals and advocates promoting death education. Through the Deathwives Collective, Erin and Lauren provide workshops and trainings on transformative topics such as home funerals, crafting end of life ceremonies, Death Doula training, community grief, and environmental death practices.

The study of dying is like carving out the minute details of an archetype that has been slowly appearing over the course of our lives. The projected image is not only of us, but of our generation; it gives face to the undercurrent of our particular culture's depiction of death, and the intergenerational influence upon our death practices passed down bioculturally through our ancestral lines. With the study of death, or the study of grief, or the study of the self encountered at

the marriage of death and grief, it is we who pick up the carver's tool, asserting a conscious influence upon the archetype of death that has been following us since our first encounter with mortality.

This research is an attempt to pull back the predominant archetype of Death in American culture, to peer behind the pressed suits and powdered faces of our loved ones resting in their open caskets. It is a hope that with knowledge, with historical and cultural reflection, with discussion of ancestral rituals and modern possibilities, we may be able to pick up the carver's tool ourselves and sculpt a new archetype of Death in America in which we navigate the stories of our own endings.

ROMANCING THE DEAD

"On a good day, I'll call cemeteries a love museum … but on bad days I think of them as a mouthful of cavities," Erin Merelli, death midwife, afterlife ceremonialist and cofounder of the Deathwives Collective, noted in my interview with her. "If you think about decomposition, which one serves in more integrity to the body? A body that you've gone out of your way to preserve that will still decompose … in a really slow unnatural way, or a body that's in a natural casket

… and will just return to the earth."

In the 19th century, death was an integral part of life. It was common to die in home, rather than in an emergency care room at the local hospital; those around the dying and the dead had seen the process unfold and were familiar with the proper social response. Death was almost an ordinary facet of life. The beloved dead were washed and dressed in the family kitchen, usually by the women of the family or local women of the town.

In 1800 Timothy Dwight described the local burial ground as "an unkempt section of the town common where the graves and fallen markers were daily trampled upon by people and cattle" (Slaughter 2018: 27). By the mid 1800s, public health officials began to correlate graveyards with disease. After the Civil War, graveyards became a public health concern and many cities had regulations and prohibitions on burial rites. Around this time, garden cemeteries began to spread from France to America, with the first established in Cambridge, Massachusetts at Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831 (Slaughter 2018: 27). Located on the periphery of the city, it marked a new romantic twist to a cemetery landscape, reflecting the changing views of death at the time, with long, curving paths, forested areas, and an emphasis on pastoral aesthetics. This was an

alternative to the overcrowded churchyard burials, and it spread throughout the country. These were 'domesticated landscapes,' designed to prevent the spread of disease from the dead to the living, and as well as enable citizens to interact with the cemetery in novel ways. The funerary culture of the mid 19th century was ripe with an expansion of ornate funeral rituals, lavish and elaborate cemetery monuments, epitaphs, and architecture. Funeral historians refer to this era as the "Victorian Celebration of Death," in which much of the traditional American rituals of today arose (Slaughter 2018: 33).

In the aftermath of the Civil War, a romantic perspective of death had begun to develop. For the first time, Americans had to conceive of death on the scale of mass casualty, faced with over 50,000 civilian and over 600,000 soldier casualties. "Loss became commonplace; death was no longer encountered individually; death's threat, its proximity, and its actuality became the most widely shared of the war's experiences" (Gilpin Faust 2012: xiii).

In the 20th century, when hospitals, funeral directors, and traditional cemeteries followed uniform practices, much of the extravagance of the earlier era was done away with and replaced with rituals that disconnect the living from the dead. One hundred years ago, science was the panacea that ushered us out of

Victorian death practices and promised safe and sterile final dispositions.

THE PANACEA OF SCIENCE

The medical industrial complex of hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices has changed the way we die at a fundamental level. By World War I, the technologies that had been incited during the Civil War had become honed and began to be instituted into medical practice. Today, there is an often unspoken tension within the hospital setting between sustaining life at all costs and guiding patients through the transition to palliative care, with an implicit paradigm inscribing death as the ultimate medical failure.

In 1919, as the medical field was increasingly overtaking the jurisdiction of death, Max Weber noted:

> The general 'presupposition' of the medical enterprise is stated trivially in the assertion that medical science has the task of maintaining life as such and of diminishing suffering as such to the greatest possible degree. Yet this is problematical. By his means the medical man preserves the life of the mortally ill man, even if the patient implores us to relieve him of life… Yet the

> presuppositions of medicine and the penal code, prevent the physician from relinquishing his therapeutic efforts. Whether life is worthwhile living and when - this question is not asked by medicine (Weber 1968: 303).

As the standard of care became more refined, and as the hospital setting increasingly became the arena in which death took place, death was increasingly understood on the empirical level and decreasingly valued on the personal level.

THE BUSINESS OF DEATH

Political scientist Alev Cinar notes that "the body is one of the most important sites where modernizing interventions take place and the parameters of the public sphere are established" (Cinar 2005: 53). By the mid 20th century, hospitals, traditional cemeteries and funeral parlors had essentially systemized the process of death and dying, and the bodies of the dead were a space for which such 'modernizing interventions' could take hold. Cinar proposes that:

> The physical space of the body itself is one of the spaces where public-private distinctions are established. In other words, the body is metaphorically employed not only as a symbol of the nation and its boundaries, but also as a material space where the boundaries of the public and the private are drawn

> toward the construction of the national public subject. Determination of the parts of the body that are to be open to the public gaze, parts that are to remain hidden, and the manner in which this display is to be carried out is one of the most effective means through which boundaries that mark the public and private are drawn (53-54).

Such distinctions of the symbolic body translate to the dead body as well. The regulations placed on the body after death as well as the collective mental conceptions of the body after death are an intersection point for the public and private relationship to the remains of the departed. As American culture transitioned death from the arena of family care to that of professionalization, the corpse was more often hidden, and the body after death was symbolically transitioned from the hands of family members to the professionalized craft of undertakers and morticians.

Susan Coffey, death midwife and the facilitator of the Death Cafe in Colorado Springs, theorizes that death in America transitioned from the sphere of women, into the sphere of men. Coffey noted in our interview, "Historically women have been associated with birth and death… when birth became a business and when death became a business, it took away a lot of the sacredness that women

innately possess and know that both of those times are very sacred." Before the Civil War, the culture surrounding death in America was mostly static; the women of the family and neighboring women would wash and dress the body in the family kitchen, and the body would be buried on the family plot before decay could set in. In many ways, as advances in sterilization and new technology such as embalming enabled a regulation of body care after death, body care did transition from that of a ritual performed by women to that of a business deal performed by men.

Mortician Caitlyn Doughty notes, "In an impressively short time, America's funeral industry has become more expensive, more corporate, and more bureaucratic than any other funeral industry on Earth. If we can be called best at anything, it would be at keeping our grieving families separated from their dead" (Doughty 2017). NPR conducted research on American funeral homes and "found a confusing, unhelpful system that seems designed to be impenetrable by average consumers, who must make costly decisions at a time of grief and financial stress" (Benincasa 2017). An average traditional casket funeral rings between $7,000 and $12,000, including funeral director and cemetery fees, transportation, and planning costs (Lincoln Heritage 2021). Not to mention that

often large funeral corporations attempt to monopolize the industry and instigate their associates to sell high-end caskets and up-scaled funeral packages. Susan Mackey, founder of Out of the Box Funeral Planning and facilitator of the Death Cafe in East Boulder, notes that "With burial, you need the much more fancy casket… And you need a sealed casket to protect the body, and it's just endless what they can do to up-sell you. SEI corporation and the other big corporations that are buying up family funeral homes… they are required to up-sell or they lose their job." Erin Merelli of the Deathwives Collective also has had experience with the profit-driven nature of SEI funeral homes. She recalled her experience working with an SEI funeral home "to do a little bit of snooping," and displayed dismay that she was not allowed to show empathy to the families she worked with. She also noted that pay is commission-based, driving associates to up-sell families the most expensive caskets, viewings, and funeral packages. "I'm not against people making money, but I'm against exploiting grieving families to do that."

Merelli noted in our interview, "The difficulty is that there's an absolute monopoly in the funeral industry in that because we're so disconnected from death when somebody dies there's not like a green X that says start here."

Though, all hope is not lost. Despite the funeral industry becoming increasingly bureaucratic over the course of the 20th century, Doughty notes, "The good news: we are not beholden to our distance from and shame around death" (Doughty 2017). In 1984, the Federal Trade Commission enacted the Funeral Rule, which is a set of guidelines to protect and mediate the financial and legal relations between licensed funeral homes and consumers (Slaughter 2018: 199). The Funeral Rule of the Federal Trade Commission outlines legal rights when interacting with funeral homes, including the right to view price lists of caskets and burial containers, arrange services with untraditional containers and without embalming, and other such jurisdictions that help protect the consumer, who is often a grieving family member (Slaughter 2018: 199). The ideal of advocating for the consumer became reignited as the positive death movement of the early 2000s began to transition the economy of funerary customs back into the hands of the family.

THE RETURN TO NATURE

"There are tremendous similarities between birthing and dying," notes Henry

Fersko-Weiss, a social worker in a New York hospice, who began a program for end-of-life doulas, "There's a great deal unknown, there's a great deal of pain and a need for support for the people around the person who is going through the experience" (Leland 2018). Fersko-Weiss began to question why the dying didn't receive the support that birth doulas and midwives provide to women during childbirth. The creation of Fersko-Weiss's training was one of the origin points for the positive death movement. Lauren Carroll speculated in our interview, "I really do think it is slowly returning back to people becoming more conscious of death. And more people are dying at home and doing hospice care."

As death increasingly became a scalable business, like many other industries it sought to increase profit at the cost of environmental impact. Today, every year upwards of 2 million burials in the US are performed through cremation or conventional embalming practices, consuming land, polluting the air, soil, and water, and contributing to climate change (Recompose 2021). Erin Merelli and Lauren Carroll describe the vast environmental impact of the industry-leading trends of cremation, embalming, and conventional burial, as well as emphasize alternative options for end of life rituals. The processes of embalming, burial, and cremation release toxic chemicals into the air, soil, and water (Recompose 2021).

The yearly material cost of conventional burials amounts to approximately 30 million board feet of hard wood, 90,000 tons of casket steel, 17,000 tons of copper and steel in vaults, and 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete (Funeral Consumers Alliance 2020). The concrete industry is one of the leading producers of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere; approximately one ton of carbon dioxide is emitted into the atmosphere during the production of each ton of cement (Biello 2008). The yearly production of wood caskets amounts to roughly 4 million square acres of forest (Calderone 2015).

Cremation is an option that uses far fewer nonrenewable resources than conventional burial. The mobility of the remains enables creative options for end of life rituals using cremation, and the ease of transporting the remains or dividing the remains between loved ones also accounts for the vast appeal of cremation. Basic cremation is a more economically viable option as compared to casket burials, with basic cremation ranging from roughly $800 USD to $4,000 USD (Cremation Institute 2021). In contrast, the average cost of a funeral is $6,500, which is inclusive of a $2,000 or more conventional casket (Mathisen 2013). Cremation without a funeral service, known as direct cremation, can decrease the price to below $1,000 (Mathisen 2013). However, cremation burns a

significant amount of fossil fuels, and it is averaged that 534.6 pounds of carbon dioxide are produced from one cremation (Little 2021). In some facilities, cremation emits a plethora of heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants. Crematoriums release pollutants including mercury, dioxins, dibenzofurans, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, and hydrogen chloride (Mari 2010). Despite the environmental impact of fire cremation, it is an increasingly popular option with a rate of over 71 percent in Colorado (Cleveland 2020).

Embalming is a technology central to the historical crossroads of death care, uniting scientific innovation with changing morals of the early 20th century. The process also produces an environmental cost: over 800,000 gallons of formaldehyde-based embalming fluids are leaked into soil and waterways each year (TalkDeath 2020). Embalming pumps formaldehyde, methanol, phenol and glycerin into the carotid artery, slowing down the physiological rate of decay (Calderone 2015). This generates an artificial beautification of death, such that one's beloved may be frozen in time, enabling an uncanny moment of pause in which the dead may be memorialized as a static representation of their living form. Funeral director and cofounder of The Deathwives Collective Lauren Carroll recalls, "When I saw my first embalming, and my first cremation, I said,

"that's not how I'd want my mom treated…That body was loved and touched and hugged, and the natural way for that body to go back to the earth just seems like the only right way, to me. And so that's what impassioned me; caring for somebody that is no longer able to make their own choices or to be cared for by the people who did love them. That's a big responsibility." While embalming slows down the decomposition process, it does not stop it.

Opting out of conventional burials, embalming, and cremation is now becoming more common. Natural burial methods, as well as newer technologies such as organic human reduction and alkaline hydrolysis are slowly gaining traction as alternative options for funeral rituals (Chanatry 2021). Erin Merelli and Lauren Carroll note the distinctions between conventional and natural or green burial. In natural burials, the body is placed in a biodegradable container such as a pine box or wrapped in a shroud; there is no embalming, no use of vaults or grave liners, and the body is fully integrated into the earth (Webster 2015). Lauren Carroll notes that, "Shroud burial is the extreme traditional route of burial. That's where it all started." Whereas conventional burials place the casket and concrete vault six feet deep and separate the body from nature, natural or green burials are approximately three and a half feet deep in order for

living organisms and microbes to naturally decompose the body (Webster 2016). Lauren Carroll notes that at six feet under, the process of decomposition is much slower, and the depth and cold temperature is not conducive to microbes and organisms that induce the decaying process. There are no headstones or permanent markers in a natural burial; the principle in a natural burial is to leave the land untouched and to avoid adding elements that are unnatural to the ecosystem. Gravesites may be memorialized with a tree, shrub, wood bench or natural stone, with the principle of remaining "ecologically functional" and coherent with the natural ecosystem (Webster 2015).

Natural Organic Reduction is a method that converts human remains into soil. Human remains are placed into a large vessel with natural materials such as straw and wood chips, stimulating the decomposition process for about four to six weeks (Recompose 2021). Lauren Carroll notes that whereas a natural burial decomposes the body in roughly 2 years, and conventional burial with embalming decomposes the body in roughly 20 years, Natural Organic Reduction offers an accelerated decomposition process. She recalls the ritual potential of this process, noting that Recompose, the inventor company of human natural organic reduction technology, offers space for families to ritualize the

process. Families may enter into the chamber to bathe and wrap the body before the decomposition process begins. Similar to a witness cremation, this enables the families to see their loved one in their human form before the final transition. Contained in a small, insulated chamber, the temperature reaches between 120 and 160 degrees Fahrenheit; the heat is formed by microbes and bacteria that accelerate the decomposition process (Recompose 2021). The final soil product is stabilized with no pathogens, heavy metals, or bacteria. The resulting product can be used ceremoniously in parks and gardens as fertilizing soil (Recompose 2021). Natural Organic Reduction releases miniscule amounts of natural gases, saving a metric ton of carbon dioxide and using one-eighth of the energy as a traditional cremation (Recompose 2021). Wood chips, alfalfa, and straw surround the body in the cradle, which is placed into the vessel. Beneficial microbes decompose the body on the molecular level, and the end product is nutrient-dense soil. The final result can be used to nourish parks, forests, gardens, or conservation lands (Recompose 2021). Through harnessing natural decomposition, Natural Organic Reduction represents the marriage of inventive modern science with an organic concept of dying.

Yet another emergent technology is known as alkaline hydrolysis, also

referred to as water cremation or aquamation (Atkin 2018). Erin Merelli distinguishes that water cremation breaks down the body with the element of water rather than the element of fire used in traditional flame cremation, forming a gentler and less energy costly transition. In the process of alkaline hydrolysis, the body is encased in a stainless steel vessel filled with a mixture of 95 percent water and 5 percent alkaline chemicals, which consists of either potassium hydroxide or sodium hydroxide, or a combination of both (Atkin 2018). Erin Merelli describes that water cremation imitates the process of natural decomposition through a controlled, stabilized environment and a greatly accelerated process. This technology uses only 10 percent of the energy of flame cremation and releases zero toxic or harmful emissions (TalkDeath 2021). While this technology is emergent for human application, water cremation has a longer history as a practice utilized by livestock farmers and within veterinary care and was originally patented in 1888 (Atkin 2018). Erin Merelli notes, "It's funny as we learn about death work, all of these things that are in one way the new ways are really also the old ways. And that applies as a truth from ceremony to the way that we're burying bodies… We're just going back to the old ways." Erin describes that the liquid byproduct formed during alkaline hydrolysis can be

recycled back to the earth as a fertilizer. During the procedure, the chamber gently rocks back and forth as the body breaks down. The process generally lasts 6 to 8 hours, enabling time for the soft tissue to break down, which is held in a storage tank (Fraser 2018). Erin Merelli expounds that the resulting product is bioavailable and nutrient-dense, forming an amber-colored iridescent slurry that can be used as fertilizer. When the process of water cremation is finished only the bones remain, which are pulverized into white powdery remains (Fraser 2018). Lauren Carroll notes that with flame cremation, the body must be cut up in order to burn evenly. Water cremation offers a gentler alternative, where the body tissue slowly decomposes inside the chamber and leaves the skeleton fully intact and clean by the end of the process. Lauren Carroll describes that the skeleton is then pulverized into ash, creating an iridescent powder purely made of bone; this is presented to the families as the equivalent of flame cremation ashes, but without toxification by flame and soot. The pulverized ash is finer and lighter than that of fire cremation, and about 30 percent more ash is produced (Kremer 2017). The final product is a neutral liquid consisting of the fats, salts, sugars, amino acids and peptides of the body (Atkin 2018). Lauren Carroll describes that this liquid forms a nutrient-rich fertilizer. Before pulverization, the

bone remains may be placed into an oven to dry. Lauren Carroll also notes that leaving the bones out to dry naturally over the course of a few days with herbs and crystals is offered as an option to fully avoid the element of fire during this process.

Sue Mackey, founder of Out of the Box Funeral Planning and facilitator of the Death Cafe in East Boulder, notes that "I think more and more people … who are going full on natural funeral here, are asking, 'Can I come in and do my mom's makeup and do her hair one more time?' … The natural way, that's the main difference, is that the families are involved, or loved ones … are hands on involved." The transition through grief is both aided and stunted by the familiarizing process of funeral rites. The psychological rendering of grief is such that "we cannot bring ourselves to consider the deceased as dead straight away" (Hertz 1960: 82). Yet it is the return to a natural processing of death that enables a gentle assail of "factual evidence," an accumulation of small moments, such as brushing their hair or holding their hand. Lauren Carroll notes, "Death is not scary. It's a very slow process. After somebody's died, they don't instantly turn blue and zombie. It takes a long time for that to happen, but there are little changes. They'll sink in a little bit; their mouths might open." When a griever

intimately perceives the natural appearance of early decay, and they see the light fall out of their person's eyes, they acknowledge the initial signs of death, and begin to accept that their person is no longer there. Newer environmentally conscious options for end-of-life disposition provide a slower, gentler assail of the decomposition process, enabling grievers the time to gather evidence of their loved one's dying process and to ritualize such decay as a natural cycle. The increase in natural and familial-centered death care practices and technologies provide systematic and tangible opportunity for people to have greater choice at the end of their lives and allow loved ones the potential for more spiritually and psychologically satisfying grieving processes.

THE ART OF GRIEF

Erin Merelli emphasizes the framework that ritual can provide during grief, noting "Ritual is the first form of movement that we can offer people… It's step by step first of all. When people are in a tremendous amount of grief, you can only ask them to move an inch at a time. You can't say like, do this whole thing. So ritual is always a very step by step-by-step thing. It gives the grief a

place to go and it also creates a bond among the people who are doing the ritual together which is really helpful." As a culture-bound species, ritual processes are central to the experience of death across cultures. Death leaves mourners with the raw and tangible material of the corpse from which to draw ritual activity, as the transition of living body into corpse is a defining component of death experiences.

Hertz's research on the relationship between the survivors and the corpse can be further developed through embodiment theory, wherein bodily processes are associated with social values. The framework presented by Cinar which establishes that modernizing interventions manifest upon the body fails to acknowledge the body as a space in which manifest the lived experience of such modernizing interventions. Therefore, the framework which positions the body as a landscape upon which cultural and political ideation manifest may be more deeply explored through embodiment. "The approach to embodiment begins from the methodological postulate that the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture" (Csordas 1990: 5). As such, the body is not only perceived upon but is the *source* of perception. Hence, the body is not

merely claimed by renderings of the political sphere and modernity. Implications of this upon the body that is in the process of dying, the body that has deceased, and the embodied nature of grief are significant. Csordas establishes that "the paradigm of embodiment means not that cultures have the same structure as bodily experience, but that embodied experience is the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world" (Csordas 1993: 135).

The embodied nature of death, therefore, is often a starting point for transitioning through the grieving process. Erin Merelli recalls:

> The first time I was in tremendous grief, I kept hearing myself [say] 'What can I do?'… 'What should I do?' …grief wants to be active... you can give people things to do, like you can paint her nails, you can brush her hair, you can make food for the family, you can put a playlist together for the ceremony. It gives them something to do with their grief.

During the ritual experience, space, time, actions, and materials that may be mundane and ordinary in another context take on an altered meaning. Behaviors and declarations that may, in the absence of ritual, be perceived as ordinary now adopt a sacral symbolism under the jurisdiction of the ritual experience. Sue Mackey states, "Around death I think ritual is really grounding and important.

I've shied away from it myself only because it feels daunting, like I have to create some ornate or elaborate ceremony or something. It's as simple as lighting a candle in honor of someone on their death day or birthday after they've passed."

Ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep developed significant work on rites of passage, incorporating three phases into its framework: the stage of separation, the stage of segregation, and the stage of incorporation (Gennep 1960). End of life ceremonies and funerals enact such transition rites, providing a framework for those transitioning through the grieving process. Erin Merelli notes, "I think that we're starving for culture; we don't have a lot of our own rites of passage and traditions... they help us identify who we are, and people individually and collectively… I think that we're hungry for that. I think that we're hungry for ritual in general. And so we start with the basics right? Let's make birth better, let's make death better and then maybe we'll get to some point where we actually celebrate adolescence." Kitty Edwards as well addresses the lack of rites of passage in American culture. "Things that are new beginnings we do tend to celebrate somewhat, but we never celebrate endings… and if we did more of that celebration of rites of passage then we could step more clearly into our becoming… and if we have that process going when we're ready to die, we

step into that new beginning."

Those rituals that deal with death and crises have been coined "rites of affliction" by anthropologist Victor Turner (Green 2008: 31). The purpose of rites of affliction is to repair ruptures in social order; to rectify, heal, purify, and protect communal conditions that may have been interrupted or disturbed. Lauren Carroll emphasizes the healing potential of ritual through contact with the human story of death rites that she perceives in her work as a funeral director:

> When people start doing those rituals again, it's almost like it connects them to their ancestors. And when we do things that we've always done. And I say always done, but it's like your great great great great great grandma did. There's that lineage, and there's this reconnection. And so something as deep and heavy as death work, and then connecting those rituals from the past back to now… It unifies your human experience and every person that's come before you. It's bringing those rituals back to life, and I think rituals have always been a human experience. We've always had rituals… and when we try to cut those out… there's a thirst. And I see people so empty. Like ten years ago, when I'd do funerals and I'd see those families again, there's just

this void. And when you do the rituals, it gets filled up, that void.

LANDSCAPES OF THE SOUL

The ritualizing described thus far provides a blueprint for navigating the relationship between the dead and the living. In the early 20th century, the French anthropologist Robert Hertz proposed the existence of three vital elements in any death practice: the corpse, the survivors, and the sphere of postmortem experience (Green 2008: 87). This model provides a framework for the transitory state of self and the upheaval of communal order instigated by death, which Hertz interprets as the period of transmutation in which "death destroys the social being grafted upon the physical individual" (Hertz 1960: 77). The three components of death – corpse, soul, and mourners – existent within a singular cultural system will "express the same idea of transition" (Hertz 1960: 15).

The element which connects the survivors to the sphere of postmortem experience incites reflections upon one's own mortality, and the "survival and transmutation" of the self into an afterlife (Green 2008: 88). For most Americans, the long-term experience of death is that of a memory, or as a succinct and

practical ritual that rarely has connection to the supernatural. However, when cosmic blueprints of the afterlife are orchestrated as central to the collective response to death, ritual is re-centered and the relationship between corpse and mourners may be reanimated. Reynold and Waugh illustrate the cosmic implications of animations of the afterlife and the sacred purpose of ritual in the cosmic reordering of a death experience, noting, "Death rites not only transform the dead to their proper levels in the world beyond but transform the living into creators of the order in which everyone may find a place. The ritual participants operate at a level of cosmic significance far beyond their role in the ordinary scheme of things" (Green 2008: 87). Therefore, emphasizing such spiritual blueprints, or landscapes of the soul, provides mourners a construct through which to navigate their grief, while continuing to stabilize the relationships between the corpse, mourners, and the soul.

The triad relationship between the corpse, the mourners, and the postmortem experience is presented in a funeral rite described to me by Kitty Edwards. Kitty Edwards of Living and Dying Consciously Project noted in our interview, "Our work is taking people to the *threshold*, and helping them across." The threshold is the space in which death begins to dismantle "the social being," as the identity

of the dying person transcends beyond that which is, in Hertz words, "grafted upon the physical" (Hertz 1960: 77). Kitty continues:

> And what we did at the funeral was we asked the people who were there to imagine they were in the Village of the Living, on the side of a lake, but if they looked through the fog, on the other side of the lake or they listened through the fog, they would hear the Village of the Dead, calling their beloved. But it was required of the people in the village of the living to build a spirit canoe, and put that body in the canoe. And at this funeral, the body was in the middle, it was covered under a shroud, but the participants encircled it, and it became their job to rock the canoe across the lake, to the village of the dead. So we spent quite a bit of time rocking and grieving, weeping, in order for *this* soul to cross the lake into the Village of the Dead. And it was a Catholic family. And you know afterwards they were like 'we've never seen anything like this, or participated but it really helped, at least get that grief, out of my throat, and down into my heart.' And I said, just keep rocking. Keep rocking and grieving. Because in the process of your rocking is you're actually accepting the death. Viscerally. Energetically. Without words.

The use of metaphor and symbolism in this ritual is used to both galvanize

communal grieving in the mourners and to provide a blueprint through which to navigate the transitory nature of death and grief. Somatic grief, using movement to stimulate grief to transition through the body, is also a vital element in this ritual practice. The spirit canoe in this story told by Kitty is evocative of the threshold, the liminal stage within a rite of passage journey, in which spatial transformation is linked to the integral transformation of status. As such, rites of passage denote a journey in which crossing the threshold may be represented both metaphorically and physically; in this ritual the physical rocking and grieving is aided through the metaphorical rocking of the spirit canoe.

Hertz proposes that in "establishing a society for the dead, the society of the living regularly recreates itself' (Hertz 1960: 72). As Kitty's anecdote indicates, a spatial representation of the afterlife through the Village of the Dead has a direct implication upon the grieving process, providing the "society of the living" a cosmic landscape through which to position themselves and their grief in relation to the uncertainty of death. As Kitty observes, the journey of the honored soul parallels that of the mourners' journey through grief; as the spirit canoe rocks the soul across the lake into the Village of the Dead, the physical rocking of the participants moves them into a state of acceptance.

In the actual death process, the relationship between the dying, the survivors, and the postmortem experience coalesce. As Erin Merelli notes:

> And there was one, one story I'll tell you that I think answers the question pretty well. Is this woman who I'd worked with for several weeks, she had a very loving family, who came to visit her all the time. She was dying in a facility, and I was there with her at the very end. They call it 11th hour care in the hospice world, and I've done psychedelic drugs before and that's what I can most relate the experience I had with her to. Obviously we were all stone cold sober. But the vibration in the room just like elevated so high that I was seeing spirals and colors and my whole body was covered in *chills*, but like warm chills like amazing like euphoric chills almost. I'm holding her hands as she passed away and we're looking at each other's eyes as she's *going*, as she's going. And I felt like I got, I felt like I got to see a glimpse of it through her eyes. I got to experience this euphoric, it was like everybody, I'm getting chills thinking about it, like everybody who had ever loved her in her life was energetically present in that space just pouring this love on her and God was welcoming her home, and our human interpretation of that is just this like spirals of beautiful love. And I

got to hold her hand in that space, and then she passed away. And then that whole environment like *slowly* diminished and became normal again. That was a good one (laughs). That's what happens in the room sometimes when a person dies.

THE WISDOM OF DEATH

Aversion to death is characteristic of American culture, yet it is also arguably a more widespread phenomenon with physiological roots. Neuroscientist Yair Dor-Ziderman and team researched the neurological firing of the brain when confronted with images of death, finding that the predictive mechanism of the brain deactivates when confronted with the association between oneself and the concept of death (Dor-Ziderman 2019). Dor-Ziderman describes this as an unconscious mechanism wherein the brain registers associations and images of death as something that happens to *others*, not to oneself. While the denial of one's own mortality may be exacerbated in cultures where there is a systemic disconnect from the death and grieving process, it may be rooted in a psychological adaptation of evolution that seeks to protect the brain from awareness of its own demise. Kitty Edwards often asks her students

at the Living and Dying Consciously Project to confront this very mortality aversion through blunt recognition. She notes that "Life feels like it's gonna be really long but it might not be. I usually start my classes off by saying, 'Is this a good day to die? How would you make it a good day to die?' People freak out. Well, there's never a good day to die. Well, what if you didn't have a choice?"

As neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris stated in his interview about death and dying with Frank Ostaseski, "The truth is none of us know how much time we have in this life. And taking that fact to heart brings a kind of moral and emotional clarity to the present… Whatever you do, however seemingly ordinary, you can feel the preciousness of life. And an awareness of death is the doorway into that way of being in the world" (Harris 2017).

Sue Mackey speaks of this intentional awareness of death, noting the benefits of clarity, acceptance, and even courage that a practice of death reflection can stimulate:

> Imagining yourself on your deathbed, and what your regrets might be, how you maybe would wish your life would have gone, and being able to reconcile those things, because we can't go backwards. Being able to make peace with things that have happened earlier in life or have an opportunity to

> live life differently from now until then… That's really the biggest thing, is that you'll be able to die peacefully. More peacefully, or less agonizing, or less suffering, or however you want to put it… The forgiveness, the 'thank yous,' the 'I love yous,' that need to be said, and making peace with what the meaning of your life was… Either make peace with what is or make some changes…Knowing that you've got a finite amount of time can really help you to appreciate every little moment or nuance or bits of nature, or relationships, make you really appreciate what you've got right now.

FINDINGS

Recurring themes and principles presented in my ethnographic research center upon death practices that diverge from traditional American funerals. The values displayed in my interviews and ethnographic observations reposition death as a more present entity within daily life.

As with traditional death rituals, reliance on community and communal shared grief is a prominent value present in my research. However, the community in the space of the positive death movement is present whether a death has occurred or not. The importance of continued conversations and

reflections on death are present in this space, such as in Death Café's, which meet not as support groups but as spaces to reconnect to conversations about death.

Another recurring sentiment is that outsourcing of care is not necessary. The positive death movement is part and parcel with the embracement of family involvement in the death process. Through practices such as home funerals and natural burials, and through education of family's legal rights at the time of death, the autonomy for families to have the time and space to grieve and ritualize their loved one on their own terms becomes a more prominent value in death care practices.

Somatic grief that induces movement in the body is another recurring sentiment. Traditional funeral processions and embalming are often physically static processes, both for the family, who are often poised on display, greeting guests at the visitation, and for the deceased, who is often poised on display as well, wearing their fanciest clothing while their body's natural decaying processes have been unnaturally curtailed by embalming fluids. Conscious modes of grief, on the other hand, including active somatic grieving and rituals that induce grief to move through the body, are present in many of the anecdotes recalled by death care workers I spoke with. Such conscious and physically

stimulating grieving rituals may be present at home funeral ceremonies and vigils in which family members perform rituals such as washing, dressing, covering the body in a shroud, or styling their loved one's hair for the last time.

The positive death movement tends to coincide with an environmental awareness and transition to more natural death rituals. There tends to be an inclination away from embalming and cremation, which are perceived as "violent" by some of the death care workers that I spoke with, and towards more natural and less environmentally costly burial methods. With a combination of simple burial techniques and new technology, the community I entered into advocated for final disposition rituals that allow for a gentle return to the earth.

The death care workers that I interviewed emphasized the importance of individual meaning-making in death rituals, often through metaphor or symbol. Reconnecting Americans to rites of passage was another recurring theme in the research; some of the death care workers I interviewed sought to redefine death as a rite of passage in the human life history as well as emphasize the transitory nature of dying and the liminal space which death holds.

CONCLUSION

The culture surrounding death in America is transforming, as evinced by my field research conducted in central Colorado. Implementing the schemas outlined in this research displays how workers in the field of death care have transitioned to a more humanistic relationship with the dying and their loved ones. Central to these shifts are conversations, community, familial care, active grief, individual meaning-making, liminality, and eco-conscious death rituals. As expressed by the communities I entered into, the implementation of these actions on a personal level provides one clarity and peace through the return to consciously acknowledging death.

We can begin having conversations about death, and be active not only in grief, but in times of existential anxiety and reflections on one's own mortality. These principles don't have to be isolated to times of immense grief. As Erin Merelli, a co-founder of The Deathwives Collective noted, "Talking about death doesn't make you die faster, but it can help you die better… The reason that the conversation is so scary is because we're so far removed from it, so let's start having the conversation."

As the communities I entered gave evidence to, we could learn considerably

about processing death from stories of the past. As death and dying move closer to home, and more within the jurisdiction of the family, death becomes preceded by care and autonomy rather than separation and affliction, and succeeded by greater connection and reconciliation with grief. When we can speak of death in cafés and classrooms, at bonfires and at the dinner table; when we can wonder about it amongst friends and ask pointed questions to our healthcare providers, our collective relationship to death may become a more realized aspect of life, and we may begin to access the grace and autonomy that death practices once provided us.

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