

The Principle Value of the EmbalmerDominick J. Astorino

The reverent care and preparation of the dead is an ancient rite and the preservation of the dead for social, cultural, or religious reasons has been a practice of multiple societies for more than 6000 years. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus noted the work of the embalmer in 45 B.C. when he wrote "...but those who are called embalmers are worthy of honor and respect; for they are familiar with your priests and go into the temples as holy men without any prohibition." The use of embalming in American funeral customs dates back approximately 160 years and has remained a constant in our society. The work of the American funeral director is inevitably linked to the care and preparation of the dead human body; this is the fundamental purpose of the funeral director whether or not the deceased is embalmed. Multiple studies done in a variety of countries consistently reveals that approximately 95% of bereaved family members that choose to view the body of their loved one are happy with that choice and have benefitted from it, with only less than 5% of respondents reporting regret in their choice (Chapple & Ziebland, 2010; Mowll et al., 2022). Furthermore, of those groups that elect to view their dead the percentage of respondents that feel the task should be carried out by professionals instead of themselves or other family is also 95% (Mowll et al., 2022). Despite this and the clinically documented benefits of viewing the dead there remains a small percentage of society that is opposed to traditional American funeral practices, those that are proponents of the public carrying out the preparation of the dead themselves, and those that vehemently oppose the practice of embalming. It is of noteworthy interest that most opponents of embalming uniquely solely oppose the use of embalming for *funeralization* and not for anatomical or academic

purposes such as classroom education, specimen preservation, medical training, or histology. It is of further interest that opponents of the American custom of embalming for funeralization usually do not have complaints about embalming or mummification customs observed in Egypt, Ethiopia, Peru, China, Tibet, Australia, New Zealand, Trinidad & Tobago, The Canary Islands, Mexico, Ireland, Argentina, Jamaica, Belgium, South Africa, Kenya and Columbia. Specifically, mainstream oppositions to embalming are oppositions to the American funeral practice of embalming.

Unfortunately, the common response of the American funeral director to critics of their practices can be dismissive and uneducated, often resulting in character attacks of the person offering the criticism or differing opinion. Caitlin Doughty is a successful author, business owner, and social media personality that offers candid thoughts on the American funeral industry. A recent piece aired on April 16, 2023 by CBS Morning News featured Doughty, who said that Americans should “reconsider the funeral...and when you take away the embalming and you take away the casket, it's kind of like, what is the role of the funeral director?” (CBS News, 2023). Although Doughty elicits a visceral response amongst many in the American funeral profession, that response is often not substantial or based on any data or fact. Doughty’s comment is correct because the primary functions of the American funeral director are to reverently care for the dead and to provide a service that is requested by the bereaved survivors. Lacking the need of the American funeral director to prepare or handle the dead there is no purpose of the funeral director other than to serve as an event planner. The focus of a critique on practice or customs should not be rooted in personal attack towards the critic but rather, it should be based on objective data.

The reason the American funeral director embalms the dead is because the public we serve requests it. A common misconception portrayed in the media is that the rise of cremation rates in the United States is somehow linked to the practice of embalming. The implication that those who are cremated are not embalmed is seen in all types of media and is often used as an argument against the relevance of embalming. However, there currently exists no report or scientific study that accurately tracks the rate at which Americans are embalmed; the only reports and data that exist are related to the method of disposition that is chosen. This is because death certificates across the United States do not track or account for embalming, only the method of disposition. The link of the cremation rate to the embalming rate by opponents to the practice is erroneous and not based on objective data points. It is true that the rate of cremation as a form of disposition has steadily increased in the United States over time but it is also true that in most regions of the country the majority of those who are cremated are still viewed or have a funeral service prior to disposition.

American funeral directors strive to meet the requests of the communities they serve. The viewing of the dead is overwhelmingly requested by surviving relatives (Mowll et al., 2022) and the need to see the dead is described as “intrinsic” by researchers (Harrington & Sprowl, 2011). Viewing the dead body of a loved one is documented to provide a sense of reality amongst the bereaved (Mowll et al., 2016), and fulfill other psychological needs such as visibly seeing that a dead loved one is being properly cared for, and physically touching the body (Chapple & Ziebland, 2010). It is further documented that the viewing of the dead carries with it different meanings and values to individuals, and those meanings and values are beneficial in grief recovery and psychological processing of death (Mathijssen, 2021). This mentality that the viewing of the dead is an individual choice with individual meaning is one that is embraced and

endorsed by the American funeral director, and is evidenced by the wide variety of service options offered. The small percentage of those opposed to embalming or the viewing of the dead in American society represent individuals who are equally entitled to their own opinions and needs related to death care. An undocumented yet observable phenomenon amongst this group is the plea for the American funeral director to allow the bereaved personal choice and self involvement, while at the same time rejecting the fact that 95% of those same bereaved wish to see their dead and wish for a professional to take on that responsibility (Chapple & Ziebland, 2010; Mowll et al., 2022). Individualized benefits for viewing the dead should not be denied or restricted by personal oppositions to embalming or traditional practices. Viewing the dead “evokes memories of life” of the deceased and highlights positive memories as well as causes beneficial self reflection on one’s own mortality (Mathijssen, 2021). Additionally, viewing the dead allows for the identity of one ravaged by disease or illness to be restored (Mathijssen, 2021), brings a sense of reality after a traumatic or disfiguring death (Chapple & Ziebland, 2010), and allows closure and inner peace for those bereaved who were not able to be present at the time of death or see the deceased prior to their removal from the home or institution (Mathijssen, 2021). The choice to not view the dead, especially in cases of prolonged illness or traumatic event, is linked to negative psychological and social consequences rooted in the continual imagination of the death and the perceived suffering of the deceased (Mowll et al., 2016). Lastly, it is documented that the viewing of the dead body helps people cope as well as helps them process and accept the degradative changes of disease that they witnessed at the end of their loved one’s life (Mathijssen, 2021).

The American funeral director directly responds to the needs of the public they serve, and it is recognized that in most cases the intrinsic need of the bereaved is to see the dead. The

reason the American funeral director embalms is because embalming allows the viewing of the dead to occur under the most ideal conditions. These ideal conditions are directly beneficial to the bereaved and include the sanitary cleaning and presentation of the dead, the removal of offensive odors, the repair, elimination, or masking of signs of disease or trauma, and the temporary halt of the natural decomposition process. Furthermore, embalming allows time for the bereaved to communicate with family, to plan a meaningful service, to transport the deceased, to allow for travel of others who will attend the service or support the bereaved, and for the ability to make financial arrangements and decisions.

The responsibility of the American funeral director to directly benefit the bereaved and to offer professional guidance is one that can not be taken for granted. However, funeral directors are not exclusive in their ability to care for the dead and the grieving. Death doulas and individual family members are legally able to fulfill most of the functions of the American funeral director and in Europe and Asia nurses, palliative care workers, and physicians are often charged with the cleaning and presentation of the dead to the bereaved. The primary difference observed in the professional funeral director and embalmer is the education and the required licensure to practice, and this education and licensure is primarily linked to the care of the dead human body. The work of the American funeral director, especially embalmers, is reverent, meaningful, and necessary in society and inducts all who practice it into an ancient caste who seek to honor the dead and help the bereaved.

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