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CHAPTER 1

The Hole

It was Halloween night in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Daniel, my collaborator and codirector, set up his camera on the sidewalk in front of a costume-wig shop, and the sound guy tested the boom mic. The wig shop was open late that night, busy with last-minute customers. As the sun began to set, couples and small groups of adult revelers, not yet drunk, started to stream past us. We were in the early, experimental stages of making a documentary film. We probably looked like a low-budget TV news crew. We were out to do “man in the street” interviews—or maybe witches, fairies, and unicorns in the street. Whomever we could find. I felt like a nervous streetwalker, propositioning strangers. I was dressed as some sort of vaguely gothic lady in a black corset—hardly the strangest person on the street—but some people crossed over and avoided us anyway. I assume the camera and lights were the scary bit. Others were game to talk.

Early in the evening, one young(?) man walking by on his own paused to humor us. He was dressed completely in black—a suit, tie, and matching trench coat. He had a piece of black hosiery pulled over his head, topped by a fedora. The Invisible Man. I have been told I have a habit of looking too intently into people’s eyes when I talk to them. I passed my eyes

like searchlights back and forth over his face, assessing its bumps and dents so I could make a reasonable guess about where his eyes were. Still, as we talked, I couldn't tell if he was looking back at me just as intently or staring off toward a vanishing point just beyond my shoulder.

I warmed up by asking him to tell me his name and where he was from. Trevor talked fast and seemed uncannily prepared for my big question of the evening: "What do you want done with your body when you die?" Without a second's hesitation, he replied, "I would like to figure out a way for me to legally just be put into a bayou. I don't want a grave, I don't want to be cremated. Just put my body in a bayou. Let it go back into the swamp."¹

When it comes to a ceremony, he said he wants to go straight to the wake, and to be present for it. He said that's what they basically did for a friend of his who had recently died of cancer. They all came over to her house on her last weekend and cooked, talked, and played music before she said she was tired and went up to bed. Forever.

His voice cracked as he finished telling me about his friend. I could see wet spots spreading over his form-fitting mask, even darker than the obscuring cloth. Those eyes I couldn't see started to weep. The invisible man was crying visible tears. I was moved to silence. All I could do was respect his sadness. He gathered himself. "But," he said, "that's how it should be." I thanked him and let him go on his way, hoping he was headed for a party with lighter spirits. I didn't get to my second question—"What do you think happens to us after we die?"

This exchange has stayed with me. It represents the task I have set for myself—to ask nearly impossible questions. And the risk. The risk that I will set off a chain of the most delicate reactions. A trauma, an anxiety, an unhealed grief—or that most universal of existential crises: Why are we here and what



are we going to do about it? In that moment, I felt his grief. It echoed my own. We briefly connected in a way that violates the academic conceit that separates researcher and subject.

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Between 2008 and 2013, I lost four people I loved in the span of five years, as if I had drifted too close to a black hole. That was when I started asking people what they thought happened to us after we died. And what they wanted the living to do with their bodies. A lot of them want to be burned, to go out in a glorious blaze. Fire terrifies me, but many people I talk to say that we are just stardust anyway.

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I am not entirely certain that this book will be considered an anthropological one, much less an archaeological one, except

that my profession gave me the arrogance to try to understand human experience by intruding into the private lives of others. But it's the only book I could write. A conventional academic genre about American afterlives in the twenty-first century would not only blur vivid experiences that I am trying to bring into focus but, in the context of the most devastating pandemic to strike in one hundred years, be tactless. I need to honor those moments of connection that I felt with people like the Invisible Man. It would feel dishonest to disappear myself from the emotional events of fieldwork. I hate being photographed, so I do not appear in the camera frame during our interviews, but I will make myself visible here. *I am not invisible.*

It was a couple of years before that Halloween night in 2015 that I started to think about doing a research project on contemporary American death practices. It was my way of dealing with the loss of four loved ones in five years. Each of those deaths was different and felt different. Yet in each case, the body was cremated, and there were decisions made, and ceremonies created, to handle the ashes—scattering, burying, making them into jewelry and birdbaths, placing them in a biodegradable box destined for the river that ran through my childhood. Prior to that, I had never thought much about what happens after life, when the body takes an unrecognizable form as an inert shell, a biological and chemical assemblage on its way to morphing into something else. After the intense phases of grief had passed, I became interested in finding out more about what Americans were doing with the remains of their loved ones, and what this might say about their beliefs about who we are and what happens to us after death. Research for me is a form of emotional processing. I slowly began working on this project, first as a historical investigation and then, after I met filmmaker Daniel Zox, as a documentary

film that would capture and complement what I was trying to get down on paper.

As I got deeper into the research, I realized that I had stumbled into a cultural field that was simultaneously falling apart and blossoming. Funeral director after funeral director that I talked to offered a version of what Stan, an entrepreneur who distributes novelty funeral paraphernalia, said to me in 2017: “There have been more changes in the funeral business in the last ten years than in the last hundred.”

To this day, the most influential book ever written on the American death scene is British journalist Jessica Mitford’s 1963 exposé *The American Way of Death*. Through investigative work in Southern California that retraced some of novelist Evelyn Waugh’s steps in *The Loved One*, Mitford documented the ways in which the American funeral industry had standardized a rite of passage and professionalized what used to be a form of family care. She described, and decried, a distinctly American funeral complex characterized by the popularization of embalming, the open casket, fancy caskets, and expensive vault burials. This “tradition” had developed in the 1880s and spread through diverse urban and rural communities in the United States, becoming fully entrenched by the 1920s. In Mitford’s view, the American death complex that came to dominate the twentieth century amounted to a big con job. Like Waugh, she thought that embalming reflected American optimism gone haywire—that it expressed a denial that death happens at all.² It’s time for an update.

Jessica Mitford still haunts funeral directors today. Poet-mortician Thomas Lynch, in his 1997 memoir *The Undertaking*, felt a need to exorcise her ghost, objecting to her claim that “fussing over the dead body” was “barbaric,” when, in fact, an embalmer could undo some of the psychic damage inflicted by

a more barbaric murderer, citing a horrific case he was called to work on early in his career. As I read his defense of “the dismal trade,” it occurred to me that people in other countries may not be as familiar with death by homicide. Perhaps the repair work of embalming and restoration offers precisely the kind of death ritual that a violent society needs.³

The United States is also a strongly capitalist society. While Mitford seemed to think that no one should ever make a profit from death, she herself viewed death rituals with a cold, calculating instrumentalist logic. She advocated strongly for low-cost “direct cremation,” in which you pick up your loved one’s ashes at the crematory in a cardboard box—eliminating the funeral director, whom she viewed as an unnecessary middleman between life and death. In her strong opinion, fussing over the dead was unseemly. It was as if American death offended her British sense of propriety. In my interviews, I have found that funeral directors are still trying to respond to Mitford’s critique. Many of the nonprofessionals I spoke to uttered some trickle-down version of it. They don’t want any fuss. They don’t want to take up any space. They don’t want to leave a financial burden. Her ideas have seeped through much of American society and encouraged the transition to cremation. That transition, though, was going slowly until about the year 2000, when it began to explode. Between 2000 and 2015, the US cremation rate doubled, and now nearly 60 percent of all Americans choose this “disposition” of the body (as it is called).⁴

Not only are bodies being treated differently, more people are sidestepping the traditional funeral and inventing rituals of their own. Religious traditions long governed the disposition of the dead, but they are losing their monopoly. Most faiths have become more open to variation in funeral rites, while many Americans now define their beliefs about the human

spirit in a highly individualized way, independent of organized religion. In the twenty-first century, death is being reinvented in the United States on three levels simultaneously—the disposition of human remains, new rituals, and ideas about the afterlife.

There has been a tendency to view Western death culture as ordinary, shallow, secular. Contemporary funeral practices were presumed by many scholars to be boring and profane, sanitized and standardized. Today these generalizations are untenable. Contemporary American death culture might be confusing in its innovations and pluralism, but it could not be said to be boring. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, death was “having a moment” in the public sphere. You can mix your loved one’s ashes into a vinyl record that plays a recording of their voice. You can live on through a software program timed to send messages to your family from the beyond. You can have your body frozen, incinerated, buried in a redwood grove, plastinated, dissected for science, or dissolved in chemicals. Soon, you can be composted in a steaming pile of wood chips on an urban lot. Your family can take some of your cremated remains and incorporate them into jewelry, artificial reefs, or paperweights. It is increasingly acceptable not only to personally handle the corpse but to continue to live with a piece of it long after the end of biological life. And it’s becoming more acceptable (or once again acceptable) to talk to the dead, to celebrate their birthdays, or to leave a bottle of beer on their grave.⁵

American Afterlives explores rapidly changing death practices in the twenty-first-century United States. It asks: What does the changing face of death tell us about American beliefs and values at this historical juncture? Between 2015 and 2020, I traveled the United States from Vermont to California, Illinois to Alabama, talking to funeral directors, death-care entrepreneurs, designers,

cemetery owners, and death doulas about the changes they are seeing and in many cases promoting. I also spoke to people on the street, like Trevor, who were willing to entertain my almost-taboo questions: *What do you think happens to us after we die? And what do you want done with your body?*

This book's premise derives from a long tradition of mortuary archaeology: material evidence of how a society treats its dead can yield powerful clues about that society's values, beliefs, and day-to-day life.⁶ This reading of material clues represents a grandiose type of forensics, like Sherlock Holmes reading the psychology of criminals in the cigar ashes they accidentally left behind. Unlike Holmes, an archaeologist can never be entirely certain that they have read the evidence correctly. This book makes no claims that the interpretations offered are the only ones, nor does it offer a complete survey of all that is happening in death care. My focus is on human remains—what is being done with them and what people think and feel about them. Another horizon of big change, both in the United States and internationally, is digital death practices, from video-conferenced funerals to online memorials and several forms of virtual afterlife. These developments have been well studied by others, and fall outside my scope.⁷ Rather, I'm interested in *material* afterlives. I take an archaeological approach to contemporary life that uses ethnographic interviews to zero in on the ways in which people relate to objects and landscapes. Traditional archaeologists have to make educated guesses about what artifactual evidence means, but doing a mortuary excavation of the present gives me the advantage of asking people on the ground what *they* think is going on with the changing face of American death. They aren't always real sure either. We fumbled through our questions and answers together. This work is the result of a collaborative dialogue between

me and dozens of interlocutors about still-emerging phenomena. Its findings are necessarily speculative but not unfounded. Only after sifting through our conversations and putting patterns into historical context, did I start to have those “aha!” moments that give me the courage of explanation. The conclusions I have come to, and will share in the pages that follow, are more profound and moving than I ever anticipated.

The five years of research that inform this book involved tracking down people who are innovators in death care, or who had professional opinions about where things are going and why. I followed hunches and word-of-mouth suggestions. In extended interviews, often with the same person over a period of time, I collected stories about the individual’s life and work and sought to understand the contexts and events that informed their death work. I did not gather opinion surveys or statistical data. That type of information doesn’t get you very far in trying to understand *why* people do the things they do. While some readers may find some of the new death options I describe here outlandish, my intent is not to entertain or to shock. My anthropological orientation means that I want to get a sense of collective trends and shared concerns while staying alert for disagreements, diversity, and undercurrents. I could have written a different book focused entirely on the most spectacular, tabloid-worthy death rituals involving celebrities, or John Doe getting buried in his Cadillac (thus making him a posthumous celebrity). But that would give the wrong impression that the new death options I am interested in are eccentricities rather than meaningful cultural practices. I also did not look at medical donation or cryonics, because these represent less than 1 percent of dispositions in the United States. The vast majority of Americans are buried or cremated. Even though I met some colorful characters on this journey, I think of them as

representatives of a larger whole. There is no such thing as a typical, everyday American, but the people I have sought out are not doing what they are doing just to get attention. They are cultural influencers, but not in the superficial sense as hawkers of goods. They are tapped into the undercurrents of a desire for something far more significant—a cosmological readjustment.



People often ask me if I wanted to be an archaeologist when I was a little kid. I didn't. I wanted to be an astronomer. I have thought about this a lot recently because of the number of times people have said to me that we are just stardust returning to stardust. Or something like that. They may not realize that they are paraphrasing Carl Sagan, but maybe he was just paraphrasing common sense. In many cultures, like the Tswana of South Africa or the Onödowa'ga Iroquois, individual stars in the sky are thought to be the souls of the dead.

One of the effects of our bright urban skies is that it makes it hard to see the stars. As if there is a population decline among the dead.

In the summers of my childhood, I went barefoot most of the time. My feet touched the earth. They were often dirty. I made mud pies. My family went camping several times a year. And I slept outside under the stars. We couldn't afford a tent, but I didn't mind and I didn't know any better. Dirt and stars, those were the stuff of the lucky parts of my childhood. Somewhere in there is the firmament of my current path.

My favorite excavation unit is a "1 × 2"—that means it is one meter wide by two meters long. If I'm digging in a public place like the French Quarter in New Orleans, people like to ask: "Are

you digging a grave?” It makes me self-conscious, like maybe I *am* doing something macabre by digging up history, moving the fragments of past lives around and making them into new things. But maybe that’s what all of us are doing, in our way.

You never know how deep an excavation unit will go when you start. We dig down until we find no more traces of human activity. Where I usually dig, that means sometimes three feet, sometimes six. In some parts of the world, you can go dozens of feet and still not run out of traces of people who lived thousands of years ago.

My favorite phase of an archaeological project is when I can tell the crew to go home as we’re coming close to finishing an excavation unit. I get down into the hole, sometimes with my shoes off. I scrape the dirt clean so you can see the different layers of time more clearly. I take photographs and make drawings of what I see—an accumulation of lifetimes. It is dark and cool in the trench. The smell is calming. You can tell that things are simultaneously growing and decaying. And time slows way down.



In the process of researching, filming, and interviewing, I have met some unusual people and many kind ones. They included thoughtful people doing life-affirming things, like surfing or running a marathon, who stopped to talk to us. I encountered born-again entrepreneurs, visionary proselytizers, quirky makers, and staid traditionalists. Perhaps surprisingly, people’s willingness to reinvent death did not skew along the polarized political lines that have defined American public life for the last several years. Some choices might be preferred in blue states more than red ones, but political persuasion did not reliably

predict who was willing to get creative with death and, in this way, to work through what they value in life.

The Covid-19 pandemic hit as I was drafting the last chapters of this book, but I had already become convinced that there is a collective existential crisis going on in the United States. People are struggling to figure out what it means to be American in the twenty-first century. It is a struggle happening simultaneously on the spiritual and political fronts. For some people, it means becoming more individualistic, more entrepreneurial, more materialistic but—perhaps counterintuitively—at the same time more spiritual. They give no signs of worrying about a contradiction. For others, it means a return to older, pre-industrial ways of doing things, when we were less alienated from nature, our bodies, and our communities. And then there are those ready to toss everything out and invent radically new approaches that involve reconfiguring our relationships to the dead and to the planet. They want to tear things down to the rafters, to rethink what death means in both physical and metaphysical terms. Postmortem options are proliferating, sometimes pulling in opposite directions. But there is no question that there is a quiet revolution going on. And its roots go all the way down to who we are and why we are here.

All this ferment is relatively new. Throughout the twentieth century, American death practices were remarkably conservative. And also weird. Mitford was right about that. Embalming, viewing, and a concrete cemetery vault constituted the standard American funeral ritual, often regardless of the religious or ethnic background of the deceased. Until quite recently, embalming was rarely practiced in other countries except in the case of public figures lying in state and bodies needing to be transported across borders. Many observers have interpreted the American tradition as emblematic of a national tendency to

deny the reality of death. Esmerelda, who makes natural fiber shrouds for green burials, told me that in the twenty-first century, we are witnessing “the death of denial . . . people are *craving* authenticity and anything left of artifice is being *blown apart*.” This craving for authenticity suggests that there is a problem, a void begging to be filled.

“The Denial of Death” is a key theme in existential philosophy. Ernest Becker was a remarkable anthropologist, philosopher, and scholar of psychiatry who published a book by the same title in 1974. Becker argues that Freud was correct that a good bit of human character develops through denial, repression, and transference but that he was wrong about which animal fact of our being is the source of the problem. It is not sexuality but mortality that makes us all a little crazy. Having the conscious capacity to predict our own deaths, we go through all sorts of mental and cultural contortions to act as if it isn’t going to happen. We struggle to control our terror of it. Becker points to death denial as the source of many human problems—from anxiety disorders to the compulsion to make war. Coming at it from a neo-Freudian angle, he arrives at the same conclusion as existential philosopher Martin Heidegger did in his magnum opus *Being and Time*: accepting the inevitability of death will make us free.⁸

Becker’s thesis about the denial of death is a sweeping, universal one for all of humankind. From an anthropological point of view, that might be its chief weakness. But social critics who were already pointing to some strangeness about American death rituals in the twentieth century took it up as validation. If humans in general tended toward unhealthy habits of denying death, then Americans were overachievers. Jessica Mitford had already made this point in 1963. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross tackled the problem as a clinical one affecting terminally ill patients in

her highly influential 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. It was she who gave us the “stages of grief” model that has become a mainstay of pop psychology. “Denial” is stage one. If Americans have been especially prone to denial, the implication was that they were stuck in a kind of arrested development when it came to death.⁹

Eminent scholars concurred. In the 1970s, French historian Philippe Ariès published his own magnum opus on attitudes toward death in the Western world that has become a model for analyzing death through the lens of cultural history. He divided Christian European death into five phases. “The Tame Death” of the early medieval period was one in which death was considered natural, reflecting “the conviction that the life of a man is not an individual destiny but a link in an unbroken chain, the biological continuation of a family or a line that begins with Adam and includes the whole human race.”¹⁰ The second phase, the “Death of the Self,” marks the beginnings of a more pronounced individualism in the late medieval period, continuing through the Renaissance and the Reformation. The moment of death became a dramatic and anxious rehearsal for the Day of Judgment. People believed they were going somewhere in the afterlife but worried about which destination. “Remote and Imminent Death” characterizes the Enlightenment of the early eighteenth century. With the foundations of Christianity shaken by secular rationalism, the forecast of an afterlife became uncertain and death more frightening for its potential finality.

However, beginning in the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century, Ariès says that some amelioration of this collective existential crisis appeared in the form of a new focus on enduring love between the living and the dead: “The next world becomes the scene of the reunion of those whom death

has separated. . . . It is the paradise of Christians or the astral world of spiritualists and psychics. But it is also the world of the memories of nonbelievers and freethinkers who deny the reality of a life after death. In the piety of their love, they preserve the memories of their departed.”¹¹ This phase came to full fruition in the Victorian death cult, with its almost obsessive preoccupation with memorialization through mourning clothes and jewelry, fancy cemeteries, the invention of the obituary, and postmortem photography.

Finally, Ariès identified “Invisible Death,” marking the colonization of death by science and industry. By the early twentieth century, family members were no longer the primary caregivers of the dying and the dead. More and more deaths occurred in a hospital setting, and professional funeral directors took over all manner of death arrangements, from collecting the body to erecting a gravestone. In Ariès’s view, the new Western faith in scientific medicine’s ability to repair the body meant that death came to represent a public failure as much as a private grief. Death became dirty and embarrassing. Outside the professional sanctuaries of funeral homes, communal rituals started to break down. In the United States, embalming rapidly took over as standard practice, and the corpse was sequestered in morgues, funeral homes, and suburban cemeteries. Ariès viewed twentieth-century American funeral practices that he observed in his own lifetime as an extreme case of this phase, calling it a society that behaved “as if death did not exist.”¹² Americans were the supreme deniers.

But Ariès was a historian, not an anthropologist. He didn’t actually watch people as they went about performing death work or mourning, nor (as far as I can tell) did he talk to anyone about it except other experts. He observed from his writing desk. That kind of distance can introduce distortions. But it is



certainly true that over his lifetime, fewer and fewer people witnessed loved ones in the dying process. And fewer still, outside war veterans and those in certain professions, ever saw a corpse until it magically appeared in an open casket, the picture of sleepy peace. It is also true that even though medicalized death was growing throughout the Western world, embalming and viewing made the United States stand out as a bit odd.

In the popular imagination, the idea of American death denial has recently become a kind of self-critique, inspiring new efforts to overturn this supposedly unhealthy state of affairs in the twenty-first century through what has been christened the “death-positive movement.” Caitlin Doughty, perhaps the movement’s most prominent spokesperson, created the popular YouTube channel *Ask a Mortician* in 2011 and established the advocacy and thanatology group Order of the Good Death. Doughty has published two popular books in which she contrasts the dysfunctional American way of death in its dominant form to more positive funeral practices in other cultural

traditions that she sees as better at confronting the truth and messiness of death. Many of the practitioners and entrepreneurs I sought out consider themselves members of the death-positive movement or early pioneers who made it possible. And almost everyone I interviewed is grateful for its educational work, even if not enthusiastic about all of its tenets. While the death-positive movement is an important side story to what I relate here, for a couple of quite different reasons, it fell outside the center of my focal lens.¹³

First, the more I have delved into the history and practices of American death rituals, the more I have come to question the death denial thesis. I don't think Americans have ever denied death more than anyone else. In some ways, in fact, they have confronted it in bold ways, including through their death rituals. The confusion may derive from the ways in which Americans have long dealt with death that blur the lines between materiality and spirituality. Just because profits and commodities are involved doesn't mean that a funeral rite is soulless. Nor does professionalization necessarily lead to estrangement. Dead bodies around the world are often taken out of the hands of family members and turned over to ritual specialists—that doesn't mean that the fact of death is being covered up in these belief systems. It means that some expertise may be needed to ease the transition between life and death. Somewhere along the line, these errors in logic crept into narratives about American death, and they have been hard to shake. I posit that once we stop leaping to judge practices as “death denying” and stop assuming that capitalism disenchant everything—even the afterlife—then things start to look a little different. And super interesting.

The second reason the death-positive movement is not at the center of this story is because it was late to the party. Many of the practices promoted by death-positive advocates were

emerging a couple of decades before the first social media platforms introduced them to a broader public. The death-positive movement is finding a ready audience. It is answering, and amplifying, a cry for change that was already rising. A major source for that cry is the hospice movement. Modern hospice practice started in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and quickly expanded to the United States. In the 1980s, end-of-life care had become so accepted that it was added to Medicare benefits. The original aim of hospice was to provide medical and emotional care for the terminally ill. It has expanded to help dying individuals understand their options and take control over major decisions that affect quality of life for both themselves and their loved ones. As a result, hospice has moved increasingly from hospitals and long-term-care facilities to the home, and the dying often take an active role in planning their own memorials. With home hospice, the dying and the dead are returning to the family. The re-homing of death has become so important to American family life that one of the most painful aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic covered by the media in 2020 was the isolation of dying patients in nursing homes and sterile hospital wards. This recent negative experience is likely to boost the home hospice movement, which has already played a major role in making death visible and intimate again, reversing the cultural shift that Ariès observed for the mid-twentieth century. The hospice movement has reinforced the idea that one has options when it comes to death care. *What* people opt for and *why* is a whole other story. That's the one I'm going to try to tell.¹⁴



In 1979, anthropologists Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington published a book that compared death rituals from around the

world. In their final essay, they turned the ethnographic lens on their own social setting, a move more anthropologists are making today. They noted that the American funeral exhibited a number of paradoxes. The custom of viewing an embalmed body prior to a casket burial was remarkably consistent throughout the twentieth century, despite a continuing influx of immigrants and religious influences. Such assimilation on the part of new arrivals and conservatism on the part of mainstream culture was all the more remarkable, they said, given that the traditional American funeral is fairly “exotic” compared to the other case studies in their book, which ranged from the Nyakyusa in East Africa to the Berawan people of Malaysia. Their intriguing hypothesis was that the American death ritual developed as a component of an American “civil religion” that helped to unify a diverse society. They didn’t write it off as just a symptom of denial or as a ritual without meaning. Metcalf and Huntington’s conclusions were consciously speculative; they advocated further ethnographic study. Unfortunately, few took them up on it. Forty years later, the unique American death ritual they puzzled over is now dying its own rapid death and so, perhaps, is the nation’s civil religion.¹⁵



Unexpectedly, this project has meant a homecoming, and a homegoing. I haven’t lived in Northern California since my early twenties, but when I started looking for death-care innovators, the quest led me back to a formative landscape. Northern California has the highest rate of cremation in the United States (nearly 90 percent). It is home to one of the largest and best-known “green” cemeteries in the country. And it is the epicenter of the home-funeral movement. Artists, artisans, and

gallerists involved in creative memorialization also make the region their home.

So it is not that surprising, I suppose, that I was first buried in Northern California. Fernwood Cemetery is in Marin County, just one county over from where I grew up. Marin is notoriously wealthy, white, and privileged. It serves as a garden community for the elite of San Francisco or their descendants. But the landscape doesn't care—it manifests the same variegated map of yellow-brown hills with oaks shifting into fog-drenched redwood canyons that make up my own home county. Vineyards and aromatic eucalyptus groves crop up in the sunnier patches.

Several years ago, Fernwood Cemetery was a relatively forgotten space tucked amid some expensive real estate. More than a hundred years old (which *is* old by California standards), it safeguarded the bones of Portuguese fishermen and Hispano ranchers. Tyler, who calls himself a cemetery entrepreneur, saw opportunity in Marin County. The region has long been a bastion of left-leaning politics and, despite a hypocritical dependence on the automobile, green consumerism. Nationally, de facto green burials have long been allowed in order to accommodate Orthodox Jewish and Islamic burial customs, in which embalming is prohibited and a simple cotton shroud or wooden coffin prescribed. Now a broader movement toward natural burial has branched out into the general population, from the Carolinas to New England and up and down the West Coast. But it is not yet widely available. Fernwood Cemetery is trying to set a standard and an example. In the green-burial section of the cemetery, bodies must be interred “naturally”—which means chemical-free, without embalming—so that they can contribute their nutrients to a modest landscape of native trees and plants. The “green” section doesn't really look like a

cemetery, and it isn't actually all that green. It's more gold and brown, the dominant colors of the native ecosystem for most of the year. It even smells different, with scents of sunburned oak and bay laurel. The natural, low-key aesthetic that Fernwood cultivates in its green-burial section extends to its service style. The staff at Fernwood help make death seem natural with a low-drama vibe. They didn't bat an eye when we asked if it might be possible to film a grave being dug. Sure, they said. If their grounds crew didn't have anything else to do, they could excavate a demonstration grave for us. Emboldened, we asked if we could also film a shrouded body being lowered into the ground to show how it is done. No problem.

Our original idea was to hire an actor. We found a young man from San Francisco willing to do it. But Esmerelda, who was loaning us one of her shrouds, was worried because no one had ever wrapped a *living* person in one. I was worried too. Would he be able to breathe? Would he overheat in the late July warmth? Would this stranger have a panic attack? Would the psychological trip of rehearsing this final part, which we will all eventually have to play, be too much to maintain the divide between reality and make-believe?

The next day, a Fernwood staff member called me to say, "Actually, how about filming the digging of a *real* grave?" A client named Anne had preplanned her arrangements. After a brief illness, she had passed away last night. Her instructions specified no ceremony. There would be no family coming to the grave site. Her executor didn't think she would mind if we borrowed her grave for an afternoon before she was ready for it. Upon hearing all this, which made it all so real, I suddenly knew that *I* had to be the one in the shroud, in the grave. We couldn't risk the young actor. I had to take responsibility for this experiment. If I couldn't breathe, it would be on me. We didn't know

how it would all go down, but at least I had never had a panic attack. In fact, I am quite familiar with a one-by-two-meter pit about six feet deep. A grave is nearly the exact dimensions of the many excavation units I have spent quiet time in. Besides, I was at least thirty pounds lighter than the actor, so it would be a little easier on the gravediggers-cum-pallbearers. Later, I realized that I wanted to be the demonstration corpse because I felt a personal responsibility toward Anne. I needed to make sure we were respectful. On some level, this meant no playacting. I'm not a natural-born actor. In fact, I have a hard time faking feelings or hiding real ones. I was going to be as sincerely dead as I could be without pulling the plug. I was going to put myself not only in her space but in her place.

While filming the scene, the biggest challenge was trying to figure out how rigid or soft to hold my body. If I tried to be stiff, it would be easier on the pallbearers. But I had learned in my research that rigor mortis is a relatively short-lived phase of decomposition that has usually passed by the time of burial. I didn't want to overplay it.

Being dead was an oddly relaxing experience. Once I was wrapped in the shroud, I became an invisible woman. No one was looking at me or evaluating me. All they could see were the contours of my body outlined by creamy muslin. I was carried by four strong Guatemalan men. Their shy murmurs in Spanish to one another made it clear that they took this exercise seriously and wanted to respect me. They worried about me a little. They were gentlemen. I got the feeling that they would have acted the same way if I were really dead. Somehow that was reassuring. They carried me over the rough, sloping ground on a hospital stretcher. I felt swayed like a blind baby in a sling.

The staff had explained the process ahead of time, so I knew they had already laid winch straps out on the grass next to the

grave. When we arrived graveside, they transferred me from the stretcher to the ground beside the grave, gently laying my body down on top of three horizontal straps crossing below my shoulders, my hips, and my calves. Then they lifted me with the straps and moved my body over the hole, two men on each side. Once they had my body centered, they gradually began to let out the slack. With each hand-span of length they let go, I descended a little deeper. I started to feel the coolness of the earth envelop me. The sounds of voices, birds, and overhead planes already muffled by the shroud gradually became even more distant, part of a separate world. Ever so gently, my back started to contact the hard-packed dry clay at the bottom of the grave. Then my head. Then my legs. When my weight was finally resting fully on the ground, they slowly pulled the straps out from underneath me. So delicately, it tickled.

And then, I rested. I knew that I would be down there awhile. Daniel was doing a pull-away shot with a drone, and he would do more than one take to make sure we got it right. My face was hot from my own breathing. I don't think I was running out of oxygen, but the air I had was a little stuffy. I wiggled my hand up to my face inside the shroud and opened up a little vent that I would seal again for the close-up.

Daniel wasn't thrilled about me doing this. I had had to put my foot down to make it happen. But he went with it. He and his brother Andrew had to stand with the equipment fifty feet away so they couldn't be seen by the drone's camera. We had tried to rig a system where I could hear him through my cell phone, tucked into the shroud with me. But cell service is lousy six feet under. So we couldn't communicate for that hour. Or was it two? Talking later, we realized that we had experienced completely different sensations of time duration. He was rushing to make sure I wasn't down there too long, and rushing

against the setting sun. Time flew by. I was losing track of time in another way. It just seemed to stop. The muffled sounds, the cool air, the lack of light, my immovable body. The best way I can describe it is as suspended animation for long-distance space travel. Or at least what I imagine suspended animation might feel like.

I stayed awake though. While down there, I realized I had the easy part. In my mind, I thanked Anne. I talked to her, told her this was a good place to be. It was peaceful and comfortable. In between the first and second takes, Daniel came to check on me, and I reminded him to please throw the flowers in on top of my body. Earlier that day, I had gone into town at lunchtime to look for flowers that were cheerful and not too cliché. I found some Gerber daisies.

Daniel finished getting what he could before the sunlight and the drone's batteries completely died. It felt like I had been down there a long time, but I also wasn't ready for it to end. I was feeling the most relaxed I had been in a hectic couple of weeks of filming and family visits. Daniel came to tell me that they were done, the shaky timbre of his voice suggesting that maybe he was worried he had taken too long. "Shannon?" I lay still and quiet for a few long seconds, not responding. "Shannon??" He sounded a little worried. I lurched my torso forward, sitting up like a stiff mummy from the movies for a little comic relief. I laughed and got my head free, then unwrapped myself. Before I climbed out of the grave, I asked for a piece of paper and a pen. I wrote a little note to Anne. Then I folded it up tight and put it under a rock that no one would notice. The next day she was to be buried in the same hole. I arranged the flowers across the floor of the grave so they would make a pretty bed for her when she arrived.

When I climbed out of the grave, I was satisfied, but also a little sad that it was all over. It felt like the end of an archaeological

dig, when all that is left is the cathartic and satisfying hard labor of backfilling. I yearned to help the crew bury Anne the next day, but we had to move on to other locations and interviews.

I think able-bodied family members should be encouraged to take a hand to the shovel, even if they don't have the experience of a gravedigger, or an archaeologist. With practice, you learn how to pile dirt loosely on the shovel, how to throw it into the pit evenly, and how you need to pack it down every half foot or so with your boots or you'll have too much dirt left over at the end.

At Fernwood, they don't make graves artificially flat like they do at prim and proper suburban cemeteries, or archaeological sites. They let a fresh burial have its natural mound of dirt. The body displaces the dirt. If within a casket or coffin it displaces even more. The newly dead take up volume. The disturbed soil is left ruffled and loose, with pockets of air. But with time, rain, and decay, the grave will eventually settle, healing over and melting into the landscape.



In my small hometown in Northern California, the community cemetery is tucked away high up on a hill, hidden by redwoods on a dead-end road. You really have to know where it is. Growing up, I was an oddball, but I was not an especially goth teenager. I did, though, spend a lot of time at that cemetery. It was peaceful, and it was a place that stimulated my imagination. Cowboys, Swiss ranchers, and White Russian immigrants are buried there. And I know where to find the empty grave of Ambrose Bierce (an unmarked plot next to his brother's). It lies empty because the master American horror writer made a cliffhanger out of his own life by disappearing in Mexico sometime

around 1914. According to his Wikipedia page, Ambrose Bierce's first job was as a "printer's devil," and in the last letter he sent from Mexico he allegedly wrote, "As to me, I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination." Pretty devilish. It may appear that I diverge here, but historical tendrils that resonate between the past and the present have always mattered to me. And they matter to the American story I am telling here. If you go back just a little way in any account of history, you quickly end up in the territory of the dead. The past is their domain.

I recently learned that scientists have discovered that most of the earth's forests have as much life belowground as above, much of it consisting of a tiny white fungal neural network that connects the entire system. I am not sure why this fact captivates me so much, but I am starting to think that is how we should imagine relations between the past and the present, between the living and the dead.

I started going back to the Guerneville cemetery when family members began dying, though none are buried there. The ramshackle property I called home for most of my late childhood and adolescence had been foreclosed on, so there was no going back there, except for peering through the fence from the road. The cemetery felt like a kind of home, a place I still had access to, that would always welcome me. It encapsulated both my past and the present. And it was a place just quiet enough for feelings to be heard.

In reality, the cemetery has changed as much as I have in the passing decades. The graves and grounds seem less neglected and forgotten now. The space now strikes me as curiously quirky and expressive, like the small town it hovers above. It is the closest thing to a public park that this unincorporated and chronically underfunded community has. Nowadays, many of

the graves are decorated with lawn ornaments, homemade markers, grave offerings, and mementos. These votive objects litter many of the fresher grave plots, creating a mosaic of improvised shrines. Pebbles and coins are common (following Jewish tradition) but also seashells, handwritten notes, beer bottles, and toys. This type of artifact scatter is something I have been seeing on the rise all over the United States, but I was startled to see the practice at its most exuberant in Guerneville. Visitors are leaving signs, saying “I was here.” People are coming back to cemeteries.

Teenagers may have never left, though. The last time I was at the Guerneville cemetery was when Daniel and I went to film some of these votive offerings. We weren’t alone. People came and went, walking their dogs, getting some exercise. One carful of folks arrived to look for an old family grave. Another small group of four young men stayed throughout the afternoon, moving between the protective shade of nearby trees and a sunny plot in the newer section of the cemetery. The grave they kept coming back to was bursting with a miniature garden of herbs and flowers planted on its surface. The grave-tenders were dressed in dark, casual clothes. A little on the long-haired and disheveled side, but you could tell they had homes. Just maybe not jobs. When they came out to the garden grave for the third time, I got brave enough to talk to them. Two of them, Eric and Dakota, agreed to be interviewed. The other two stayed in the woods, perhaps naturally shy or a little wide-eyed from the weed they had been smoking. Dakota was dressed in simple dark colors and kept his sunglasses on for the interview. Eric had a few tattoos and some beginning earplugs. He was wearing a T-shirt with an image representing Mac Dre, a rapper murdered in 2004. It depicts Dre as a skull with dreadlocks, a memorial object of sorts.

Daniel set up the camera, and I grabbed the boom mic, doubling as the sound person that day. Without much of a warm-up, I asked Eric, “What do you think happens to us after we die?” He was ready with an answer, faster than most older people I have prodded with the same question.

I believe in a weird version of reincarnation where if you keep messing up in life, like, not being a good person or doing good acts, you’re doomed to repeat life over and over again until you figure it out and you actually *do* good deeds and *are* a good person and then you ascend to a higher level and you become one with the universe. And you’re everyone and everything and then nothing at the same time. So that’s—like—my take on what happens when we die.

I asked him where he thinks he is on that cycle. “I think I’m on the better end of that cycle, to be honest. I really try my best to be the best human being I can be—trying to do things for other people without reward. Just doing it because it needs to be done. And treating people with kindness and love because there’s just not enough of it in this world right now.”

Eric had even given some thought to what he wanted done with his body.

I’ve actually thought this out really well. I’m half Swedish so I’m really into Viking lore. I want to go and build my own Viking ship and then have them put me on the ship clenching a sword. And then have them push me out into a lake, or the ocean, and then have someone send a flaming arrow, hit the boat and burn me on the ocean or open water. . . . I think that would be *awesome*. And then everyone needs to party afterwards and celebrate my life.

His friend Dakota pipes in, smiling: “That *would* be pretty awesome.”

On the subject of the afterlife, Dakota had a simpler, open-ended answer: “I truly don’t know, but I do hold the law of thermodynamics to be very true—that energy cannot be created nor destroyed, so our energy—our entity—itself lives forever after death.”

I then asked them why they were there, at the cemetery. “We come out here ’cause my friend’s uncle is buried here, and we like to water his plants,” explained Eric. He nodded to one of his friends in the trees, who emerged from the shadows once in a while to call his wandering dog back. “And we just kind of hang out. It’s good shade on a hot day, so you just hang out and listen to music. You know, send good vibes to his uncle. Enjoy the day. And it’s beautiful out here too.”

Dakota adds: “I believe this is one of the most peaceful graveyards I’ve been to. It’s not morbid. It’s nice just to experience Guerneville here and hang out and enjoy your company. That’s pretty much it.”

I was moved. On that California trip, I thought these thoughtful young dudes might be anomalies in the national landscape. But the more I have talked to people, the more I have found kindred spirits, though few so young. Maybe the West Coast makes people spiritually precocious, racing ahead. But I have come to believe that Eric and Dakota are an index of things to come. Their worldview does not suggest an abandonment of religious ideas. And they are ritually tending to that grave with more devotion than their parents’ or grandparents’ generations have probably shown the dead. For them, the afterlife is not a *nothing*. Rather, they give themselves permission to fill in the unknown with their own imagination. Anything goes. It is not uncool to think in spiritual, ethical terms.



There are other ways in which the filming trip to California felt like an unexpected family reunion. Particularly with mother figures. Two women I met are leaders in different aspects of the natural-death movement. Many would classify them as ex-hippies, although the “ex” part is questionable. During our long interviews and less formal interactions over several days, I got a strong sense not only of them as individuals but of their well-developed philosophies toward life and death. They might fuss about day-to-day matters, but when it comes to the big questions, they exude a sense of existential peace.

Esmerelda can be a little overwhelming. But in a good way. There was a moment in a conversation with her when I discovered that my interview “subjects” were not only teaching me but examining me. We were chatting over tea while Daniel set up his lights in her sitting room, which with its faux animal prints and tropical palms looked a bit like a miniature brothel. We had

the talk about where we grew up. I have found that it usually helps to make yourself a little less of a stranger with people if you want them to relax and enjoy the interview. If possible, you share something that might connect your experiences. With Esmerelda, the common thread was being a local and another punk girl. After I explained that I was from Guerneville, she got quiet for a long, awkward moment. In that pause, she must have been imagining what it was like to be me in my present life. Because then, sounding genuinely shocked by whatever sensation this mind experiment was causing, she blurted out: “But how does a California girl *deal* with *Chicago*??!?” I was taken aback. Her dramatic emphasis on the word “Chicago” and her tone of voice expressing dismay, if not horror, had put into words things I could not. I have no right to complain about the extraordinarily privileged life that I have fallen into. But it isn’t me. Or at least there’s a pretty wide gap between where I am most comfortable and where I have ended up. I teared up inside. Luckily, Daniel was ready, and we moved into the living room before I exposed how much this moment of recognition had unsettled me.

Jerrigrace is a kinetic flow of color and emotion. She wears bright fabrics of greens, reds, and blues that accent her dance-like movements, alternating between busy and serene. She is well suited to her calling, with an ability to find solace in situations that others would find grim. She has a soothing laugh and often expresses a childlike sense of wonder about it all. Jerrigrace helped start the at-home funeral movement in the United States after a close friend and Reiki teacher passed away suddenly in the 1990s. To everyone’s surprise, Carolyn had left behind instructions for her friends in the event of her death. On the surface, her request seemed simple—she wanted *them* to care for her body. I’ll tell that story (or rather, Jerrigrace will)

later. Here I want to skip ahead to Carolyn's cremated remains, which had been distributed among her friends. For a year, Jerrigrace kept a portion of them in a small, Ziploc baggie, unsure about what to do with it. When an opportunity came up to go on a whitewater-rafting trip, she decided to bring the ashes along. As the raft floated in a pool of calm water between cascades, she pulled the baggie out of her backpack. At that very moment, a dragonfly landed on her wet hand. It refused to leave until she had streamed all of Carolyn's remains into the water. In our interview, Jerrigrace told me that in Native American cultures, when a dragonfly lands on you, it means a loved one is visiting you. It doesn't matter whether this tidbit of cultural appropriation is ethnographically correct. It is true enough for Jerrigrace. She sees lots of spirit mediums in the insects and animals who make appearances near a death. For her, these are not coincidences. Listening to her dragonfly story was the only time in the course of this project that I have ever gotten goose bumps. And I had seen my fill of nighttime cemeteries and bright-lit embalming rooms.

Perhaps that tingle down my spine was the trace of a story jumping a circuit—an electric charge conducted through me, traveling from Jerrigrace's patio in Sebastopol back to a tattoo parlor in New Orleans, where a few months earlier we had interviewed Juju, the shop's proprietor. He too had surprised me with his faith in a kind of tribalism. It was one of those interviews that exceeded expectations, but I wasn't sure what to do with it at first. The reason we decided to go in and talk to someone about tattoos was because we were following a hunch that changing attitudes toward death were somehow connected to changing attitudes toward the body, expressed in the piercings and tattoos that have become an unremarkable fashion statement for Eric's generation, or anyone of a bohemian persuasion.

I was not expecting to learn just how much tattoos are about death.

Juju's body is a walking advertisement for his trade. Actually, more like a walking scrapbook, an artful one. He obliges me and goes through his major tattoos, telling the story of each one, where it comes from, what it means. He has a raccoon because he's a "coon ass." He has a Japanese-style tattoo of a mop sweeper, a symbol of the novice in martial arts, representing his apprenticeship as a young tattoo artist. A blue crab symbolizes Louisiana and his time in culinary school. And then: "I have the memorial that I've got for my mother on my hand. It's a compass that points to Mississippi, where we had laid her to rest."

Then he opens an actual book, a large photo album of tattoos he has given people. The tattoos are not arranged in any particular order, but I am surprised to find that around one-third of them are memorial tattoos. Some of them are symbolic, like the one for Juju's mother. Others are portraits—of pets, of babies, of loved ones. He explains: "Getting tattooed for someone who is lost is, you know, accepting the loss and being able to move to the next step afterwards in the grieving process." He helps people with that. He talks about friends torn up by the loss of pets and children especially—the death of innocents is so much harder for us to process. Juju comes across as a care provider. Many people in the funeral industry have been adopting the term "deathcare." A significant portion of Juju's practice could fit under that heading.

Juju calls tattooing a form of therapy—a combination of massage, acupuncture, and the spiritual/psychological type. Soldiers in the Gulf Wars and first responders to Katrina who had seen horrific things—classic tough guys—have been among Juju's most faithful clients. It is how they deal with trauma. Juju's revelations have made me look at heavily

tattooed, masculine men in a totally new way. Now I wonder: Are their tattoos emblems of toughness and valor, like medals on a general, or are they really declared scars, admissions of vulnerability? A piercing of the skin that lets you see the pain inside? Juju says, “The difference between being a tattooer—just somebody putting an image down, no meaning to it—and being a tattoo artist is being able to interpret the human struggle and what somebody’s dealing with, and being able to translate that into art. *It’s going to put somebody where they are.*”

In Western tattooing, death motifs are enduring classics. Juju’s own teacher told him that if you couldn’t draw a skull with roses, you’re in the wrong business. The steady clientele of older generations of sailors, soldiers, and bikers often favored memento mori designs. Now these themes are for women and civilians too. He has developed a local variant that depicts one of New Orleans’s iconic aboveground tombs. Juju is as much a philosopher-anthropologist as the rest of us. He says of the popularity of death motifs: “Some folks do it so it reminds them to live every day, I would say, on the good foot—do right and everything. You know, reminding oneself of their own mortality. I think that does put you in a different perspective—a daily appreciation of life.”

Juju wishes he could go further as a medicine man, but he’s constrained by modern health rules about cleanliness and the boundaries of the body. “Quite often they’ll try and bring their loved one’s remains to request that we put it in the tattoo ink, but the sanitary and sterile factor comes in. There’s almost a tribalist feel to it when people ask.” He adds, “I definitely believe on a spiritual level, it’s pretty fascinating. It’s nice to be able to think about putting a loved one *into* you. It’s actually a pretty cool concept.”

I had to think about that one. To me, mixing cremation ash with tattoo ink is not as hard to swallow as cannibalism, or eating cremation remains, which is also apparently a thing. In the few years since Juju and I talked, the word at tattoo conventions is that cremation tattoos are becoming more common, if still a little on the down-low. The more I worked on this project, the more I realized that, for a growing number of Americans, honoring the dead means deliberately breaking taboos. It's as if it is a necessary step in redefining the realm of the sacred. And what is becoming sacred are tiny fragments of the body, down to its chemical essence.¹⁶

Toward the end of our interview, Juju reflects: "I was always telling everybody, you know, tattoos are one of the only things—guaranteed—you are going to take to the grave. I actually had a client whose father had passed. His father's last wish was to save his skin for his family and turn it into a lampshade [*not laughing*]. But due to state regulations, the family wasn't allowed to save his skin. Unfortunately, it didn't happen for them." The US legal landscape when it comes to death care varies widely state by state. In Ohio, there is now a start-up company established by a couple of embalmers that will preserve tattooed human skin and return it to the family as a keepsake.¹⁷ Such objects made with human body parts have powerful effects that go beyond just triggering memories. They are closer to the old Catholic relics, only your uncle wasn't a saint. Other old words for them are fetishes, talismans, *jujus*. Anthropologists have spilled a lot of ink writing about these sorts of magical objects in non-Western cultures. But really, we don't have to go far away to find things interesting.

Nine months after we filmed Juju, I returned to his shop. This time, for a little therapy. I wanted a dragonfly wing on my hand to remind me of those fluttering nearby in another realm.



In 1907, French anthropologist Robert Hertz published an enduring comparative study of death rituals around the world. He argued that one universal feature they share is that they are designed to “conquer death” by preventing the social fabric from being torn apart by loss. They work to mend the hole that a death leaves. For many Americans, neither organized religion nor the national tradition with an embalmed body is doing a great job at healing the hole anymore.¹⁸

This book is about changing practices in American death care and what these tell us about American society—how death care reflects beliefs and values concerning the body, the person, and the way the universe works. I focus on material practices in particular, and what people say about them, to provide an account of the emerging popular philosophies that are both metaphysical and ethical. While in some places I will make a strong case for American exceptionalism, some trends

are global in nature, particularly in cosmopolitan centers with an increasingly agnostic middle class. Overall, these material practices relate to a shift in ritual practice away from religious funeral rites. This does not mean that death is unmarked by ritual. Rather a space has opened up where people are experimenting and inventing their own meaningful practices that heal the hole.

My process has been to follow new artifacts and emerging practices to see where they lead. Sometimes they lead to subplots about religious minorities, the cultural influences of immigrants, and enduring racial inequality, but I did not set out to try to create a family photo album of American death diversity. Perhaps it sounds strange coming from an anthropologist, but I wasn't all that interested in tradition. I was interested in change. One of the most significant dynamics occurring today among US residents is an openness to ritual suggestion. Mexican Day of the Dead altars, African American grave-tending, Jewish "green" burial, Hindu cremation, the legacy of AIDS, Muslim shrouding, Indigenous healing ceremonies, and Mahayana Buddhism are all making their way into a heterogeneous mix of new death practices. It is impossible to accurately trace and fully credit the influences of these traditions. But they're there. I beg the reader's indulgence as I use the oversimplification of "American" in order to try to grasp what is happening on the national level. My primary sources were not the bereaved or the dying but death-care professionals and entrepreneurs. The latter skewed white and male, consistent with a system that favors them with investment capital. But their clientele could be as diverse as the crowds at Disney World. What could be more *American* than Disney?



Daniel and I conducted our first set of interviews at the 2015 meeting of the National Funeral Directors Association in Indianapolis. We wanted to get oriented to the death-care scene by learning from conventional funeral directors. As it turns out, most of the people we talked to that weekend were anything but conventional. I will introduce several of them in the pages that follow, but one in particular stands out as a spokesperson for how death care relates to a new American existentialism.

Brad is a tall, balding man in his late forties or early fifties with kind eyes and a kinder voice. He does not have a long history in the death-care industry, but his demeanor seems well suited to it. It is actually harder to imagine him in his earlier careers as a nuclear submarine officer in the US Navy and then a top-level executive for the Walt Disney Company. Brad was with Disney for twelve years before coming to death care, five of those at Epcot Center: “My first day was the day of 9/11. I had never run a Disney theme park before, so quite a challenging time, but we got through it.”

We missed Brad’s conference seminar on the future of the funeral business, but he was generous with his time afterward and allowed us an extended interview. Brad now works for a company that owns thirty-six funeral homes and six cemeteries in thirteen states. When Brad is speaking, his explanations are so natural and sincere that I only realized later, when going over the footage, that in the early part of the interview he was delivering verbatim, carefully crafted mission statements. He says, for example, that his company’s vision “is to capture, acknowledge, and share life’s purpose, and we believe that every loved one has a story that needs to be told. Hans Christian Andersen had the quote: ‘A human life is a story told by God.’ And we believe that very strongly—that that story should be told creatively, uniquely, and in a very personal way. Using technology is a part of that.”

When I got him to talk about his background, he cautiously started to go off script: “If you think about it, a funeral is an experience. So, my background from Disney was creating experiences, and what I wanted to do was essentially reinvent the funeral experience.” Funerals as entertainment? Or akin to entertainment? I was intrigued but puzzled. Though it makes a kind of virtual sense. “One of the key elements we use is our multisensory experience room.” I’m not sure about my transcription. Maybe he meant that to be capitalized—Multisensory Experience Room? Do they call it “the MER”? He says Disney taught him that for a directed experience to be memorable, you need to engage all the senses. In the Multisensory Experience Room they use high-definition projectors and screens, surround sound—and a scent generator. I didn’t even know this technology existed. With a little online research, I found that a scent generator is a piece of optional equipment for virtual reality setups. According to Brad, the purpose is, “so that we can take you to different locations for your service. And locations that were particularly meaningful to the loved one.” The way he says it, *The Loved One* should definitely be capitalized.

At that moment, I suddenly became worried that we were making an accidental mockumentary. Echoes of *The Loved One*, Evelyn Waugh’s satire about the intersection of Hollywood and the Los Angeles funeral industry, were almost too rich to be real. Later, following one of those fungal roots of history, I looked into Waugh. Sure enough, during a visit to the United States that inspired the novel, the haughty Brit *did* hang out with Walt Disney. Going down that rabbit hole was my way of trying to account for the uncanny impression left by this tour guide through the new American afterlife. Brad was like the Willy Wonka of death. I pictured the Multisensory Experience Room as a Wonkavision transporter. In the most soothing bedtime

voice, he said, “For example, we can take you to the beach, to the golf course, to the mountains, to a Zen garden. We can re-create the kitchen where the person maybe baked cookies.” These special rooms are in the funeral home. What the rooms are intended to do—and the scent generator, especially—is trigger memories. When he asks people what they remember about *The Loved One*, he says they often reminisce about smells—perfume, cigar smoke, the old-timey scent of a grandparent’s house.

I guess my dad would have smelled liked baloney and Pall Mall Reds. I’m not sure I want to relive that. Especially since that unfiltered smoke contributed to his kidney cancer.

I asked Brad about language. I noticed that he was carefully consistent with the term “deathcare” (a neologism). He said Disney World had taught him the importance of language—they talk about cast members and costumes, not employees and uniforms. In reinventing deathcare, his company has changed other terminology as well. What is sometimes called a “rental casket,” used for a viewing before cremation, they now call a “ceremonial casket.” And instead of calling memorial events “services,” which has religious overtones, they call them “gatherings.” He and his associates are not “funeral directors,” they are “arrangers.” He said people don’t want to be directed, they just want someone to help make their wishes come true.

After we finished talking to Brad in the convention’s stuffy pressroom, Daniel and I took a walk on the exhibit floor. Among the more attention-grabbing products are a stack of personalized caskets. I don’t mean cheaply customized with a Marine Corps appliqué or a Patriots cloth liner, the kind of standard “personalization” options that have become available in casket catalogs. I mean that the caskets themselves have a personality. One is a faithful replica of Thomas the Tank engine; another is a pint-size model painted hot pink for a Disney princess. These

are tearjerkers, but also cute. Then there is a large black casket sporting a silk-screen image of Louis Armstrong, the words “jazz club” outlined in colored LED lights, and an ornamental trumpet attached to the lid. For the hunter in the family, another casket is lined with camouflage cloth and sports a glued-on rack of antlers. These are one-of-a-kind pieces, reminiscent of the fantasy coffins created by Ghanaian craftsmen.¹⁹

The couple who run this boutique casket company are almost as colorful as their products. The wife (and business manager) is hard to miss with her bright pink hair and go-go boots, especially in the sea of dark suits on the showroom floor. She reminds me of a younger Sharon Osbourne. The husband (I’ll call him “Mr. O”) is the craftsman. He has a big beard and walks with a friendly cowboy swagger. I can’t use their real names because a big bouncer dude working for a reality television producer interrupted us and wouldn’t let me film an interview—they had signed an exclusive contract. Off camera, we talked enough for me to gather that they got into this business after Mr. O lost a close friend and fellow hunter twenty-five years ago. He was dismayed by the generic funeral service that followed. Its trappings left him cold. The blandness of it all seemed to erase the uniqueness of his friend. He wanted to remember his buddy as he was in life. Mr. O thought he could do better. Personalized caskets became his calling, adapting skills he had developed customizing cars and making musical instruments. He says that in his line of work, it helps to be an artist. While working on a piece, “I get in touch with my soul, to the people that passed. It’s a passion for me.”

This passion to make death better through a material practice is shared by a growing number of Americans. In remaking death, they are giving new meaning to their lives. This book is about them.



As I will argue in the chapters that follow, Americans began radically reinventing death with new rituals after 9/11. The Covid-19 pandemic may open a whole new chapter, yet to be written. Major catastrophes with high fatalities have a way of reconfiguring our relationship to death. President-Elect Joe Biden noted in his November 2020 acceptance speech that American history has been shaped by “inflection points.” There have been several important inflection points in American death culture. The roots of the embalming ritual lie in the disaster of the Civil War, in which at least 750,000 Americans died. The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918–20 took nearly the same number of American lives. Extending a panicked medical logic, embalming came to be seen as a necessary sanitation measure, codifying a practice that became the dominant custom of the twentieth century.

With rising life expectancies in the twentieth century, death became a stranger. Americans told one another to “move on” after the body was in the ground. Funeral directors came to see the embalming and viewing ritual as a way to psychologically speed things up. I argue that what had developed by mid-century was not so much a denial of death as a suppression of grief. Pausing too long on loss was a threat to a social system based on optimism and economic productivity. At a Covid-19 press conference in March 2020, President Donald Trump stated that death is a “terrible concept”—a pithy summation of Cold War America’s thoughts on mortality.

But for many Americans, something changed after 9/11. It is as if the televised mass trauma of the collapsing Twin Towers jolted us away from our attachment to the beautiful corpse, to once again embrace the principle of “dust to dust.” We had no

other choice. So many victims were already dust. And perhaps more importantly, for several weeks, time stood still. Within that pause, as the rubble and dust plumes came tumbling down, something germinated. The spontaneous fence memorials at Ground Zero made it permissible to publicly mourn in a way that had not been permissible since the Victorian era. And as the search for identifiable remains stretched from weeks to months, and then years, the socially acceptable timeline for grief also shifted. And the US cremation rate started to soar.

After 9/11, popular culture experienced an explosion of forensic television shows in which the exquisite details of the corpse were confronted in high definition, from *Bones* to the *CSI* franchise. Searching for answers, Americans engaged visually with the corpse—needing to confront it, to understand its secrets. The tiniest bits of body matter seem to hold clues to difficult questions. Not least, “Why did this happen?” and “Where did they go?” And then there were zombies. Lots of zombies. From the *Walking Dead* to spontaneous zombie apocalypse parties in the streets. Of all the zombie movies in existence, more than half date to the early 2000s. Americans became glued to the spectacle of decay. Perhaps it signals an acceptance that rot happens, and will happen to each of us, unless we opt for the sooty cleanse of cremation.

People love to point out that cremation is simply cheaper and account for its growing popularity that way. But this form of disposition has been available since the 1880s, yet it did not take off with earlier economic downturns. Besides, this is a bizarre argument. In most cultures, funerals are among the most important (and therefore expensive) rituals of community life. With embalming and a vault, in 2019 the average American funeral cost around \$10,000, while the average American wedding cost more than \$30,000. And you only die once. Embalming,

viewing, and fancy funerals are still highly valued in Black communities in the United States. As one urban funeral director put it to me, you have to show respect for the person in death because they didn't get it in life. Her statement is all the more poignant in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. The question is not why Americans pay so much for funerals but rather why anyone would think that death care is a "waste"—of money, of space, of time. Applying such economic thinking to an event meant to recognize the value of an individual is really kind of mind-blowing. Carried to its logical conclusion, it implies that the person has no social value. That's a spectacular internal contradiction for a society built on the cult of individualism.

An attempt to resolve this contradiction may be the major driver behind some of the new death practices I describe in this book. Cremation is double-edged. It can mean a pale reduction of meaning, down to a mere transaction. But it is also igniting a ritual revival for those who want it, allowing everyday citizens to become their own shamans and mediums. Cremation has been good for the dead too, nurturing a new kind of material afterlife.

The slow disaster of the climate emergency is also having a direct impact on contemporary American death practices. Green burials of an unembalmed corpse with a simple shroud or biodegradable coffin are hot. Demand exceeds supply, as local governments and cemetery operators have been slow to respond.

Nine months into the pandemic, I checked in with several of the people and businesses that appear in the book. I needed to know how they were doing. And I needed to know if I had to scrap what I had written because the death world had been turned upside down. Instead, from traditional funeral directors to those purveying some of the more unusual mortuary objects,

I heard the same two things: business was (sadly) up, and the trends that we had discussed in pre-pandemic times were only accelerating, not changing course. Most of the practices I describe in the pages that follow are not only still valid for Covid times but strong indicators of where things are going. The exceptions are practices like DIY (do-it-yourself) home funerals and extreme embalming, which have been put on hold for the same reason that conventional funerals have been—the social-distancing measures needed to keep funerals safe for the living. During peaks, gatherings were limited to ten people, regardless of family ties. One funeral director told me that at those times she felt a tension in the air of the funeral home, where instead of guiding people through a difficult time, she had to police their grief so they didn't slip up and take off their masks or start hugging across family pods. A friend who is an Anglican priest told me it is hard to provide comfort under these conditions. She noticed longer graveside services taking the place of church rituals, and little hospitality afterward. She missed funeral sandwiches. One of the common pandemic accommodations that funeral directors and clergy have made is to offer Zoom and Facebook Live participation for guests who cannot be present. But technical glitches are common, and there are always guests who aren't tech savvy, don't have a reliable connection, or just don't find it a satisfying experience.

In terms of disposition choices, there are some early indications that the cremation rate has sped up in hard-hit places like New York, and among Blacks and Hispanics, who earlier had been slow to adopt it. One funeral director told me that he thinks more of his clientele of color are selecting cremation because they don't see the point of a small funeral—the idea is a big send-off. Another told me that there is such job precarity, that many simply can't do for their loved ones what they want.

It's hard to say whether these particular trends will stick, but people appear to be compensating for the lack of comforting get-togethers and ritual displays by embracing memorial objects they might not have considered previously. Nick, owner of Memory Glass (featured in chapter 3), told me that he thinks his business is up for this reason, even beyond the rising death rate. When each person can have and hold a similar object made with the remains of their loved one, he said, "it brings people together." Funeral directors have noticed that orders for items like memorial T-shirts and blankets blazoned with portraits of the deceased have also gone up.

Cremation may be growing faster at the expense of conventional burial, but not at the expense of green burial. Janeth, the manager of Fernwood Cemetery, told me that at the beginning of the pandemic they had braced themselves for a rise in cremation, but it just didn't happen. She said a couple of other interesting things. "I have seen more people coming in and questioning their own mortality." Younger people are preplanning, an effect of the pandemic that has been noted nationally. In her area, these clients lean heavily toward green burial. She was particularly moved by a nurse who came in on a day off from the front lines. She told Janeth, "I don't think I'm going to make it. I think I need to prepare for myself." The reality checks of 2020 were harsh, but Janeth also noticed families putting more effort into working out the details of arrangements. Anguished by the separation from loved ones (a pandemic restriction regardless of the cause of death), "there's such a loss of control, not to be with them in the hospital, and I think the living feel this need to reconcile—a need to offer some care." The pandemic may be teaching Americans to care for their own dead again.

My hope is that this book will help people face their own mortality so they can embrace life more fully when it's good,

and that it might help them find new ways to communicate with those who have crossed over.



In the chapters that follow, I will take the reader through a process of decomposition. We begin with the whole corpse (chapter 2, “Flesh”) and learn about the peculiar history of American embalming, the current transition to DIY funerals and green burial, and the new practice of extreme embalming. The continuity that shines through these variations is the magical, healing properties of the corpse in American practice. In chapter 3, “Bones,” I look at the rise of industrial cremation and its impact. I focus particularly on the artists and creative entrepreneurs who are making art, jewelry, and other objects with pulverized human bone. I take a close look at the objects they are making and how they challenge our conventional understandings of what a “person” is. From there, we move down the scale of particulate matter to “Dirt” (chapter 4), to contemplate the changing American deathscape, or where and how the dead are being returned to the earth through practices such as ash scattering, human composting, and conservation cemeteries. Many people I interviewed expressed their desire to “become a tree,” and there are several new ways to do this. An interest in the regenerative potential of our corpses reflects a growing material ethics. In chapter 5, we arrive at the level of the spirit, where I introduce some Americans who are intent on finding new ways to disappear into the air. I ask others what they think happens to us after we die. And I take a stab at the big questions: What is happening to the American death ritual? What does the American afterlife look like in the twenty-first century? And what does all this say about who we are becoming?

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