Death Positivity and Changing Funerary Customs in America

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The funeral industry is unique in that it is believed to hold the same immortality as the deceased it cares for. For as long as there are humans on this Earth, there will be dead to mourn and bodies to dispose of. Yet no industry is impervious. The rise of a movement based on death positivity is heralding a new age for the industry, one in which the funeral home may soon be obsolete. This paper seeks to explore the ongoing changes within the funeral industry in response to the new death positivity movement.

The Death Positivity Movement

Death positivity is the belief that death is not a bad thing. It is the belief that death is natural, not morbid, and should be embraced rather than shrouded. Those who consider themselves a part of the movement tend to believe in open discussion about death, personal involvement with the dead, and policies which ensure that no harm is done to or by the dead (Order of the Good Death, n.d.). As such, death positivity is more of a lifestyle than a concept. The death positivity movement fights the recently-evolved idea that death is something to be feared, and aims to foster a healthier lifestyle based on *memento mori*, the Greco-Roman concept of improving the lives of the living by reminding them of their own mortality (Del Real, 2020).

The term “death positivity” was officially coined by mortician Cailtin Doughty in 2013, although the push for a positive view towards death began at the turn of the century (Order of the Good Death, n.d.). In 1995, with help from the Tibet House, Ralph White of New York City’s Open Center started the Art of Dying Institute, which hopes to become a hub for all death

positive work (White, 2018). In 2001, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, as part of a project with the NYU Medical Center, began the Doula Program to Accompany and Comfort, which pairs volunteers with terminally ill patients for emotional support (Doula Program, n.d.). This inspired Henry Fersko-Weiss, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, to create the first "end of life doula", or "death doula," program in 2003 based on the work of birth doulas (International End of Life Doula Association, n.d.). Swiss sociologist and anthropologist Bernard Crettaz held the first "death cafe" in Neuchatel, Switzerland in 2004, an idea which web developer Jon Underwood and psychotherapist Sue Barsky Reid adapted and popularized in 2011 (Death Cafe, n.d.).

Also in 2011, Caitlin Doughty, inspired by anthropologist Ernest Becker's 1973 *The Denial of Death*, founded The Order of the Good Death in order to advocate for death acceptance. The Order now serves as the heart of the death positivity movement, hosting international events of all sizes, including the annual Mortal's Market and Death Salon convention. Caitlin's YouTube channel, *Ask A Mortician*, has become an internet sensation with 1.49 million subscribers, and both her channel and The Order serve as treasure troves of information, with resources on the death industry, funeral and burial options, mental health, and anything there is to know about death, dying, and the deceased (Order of the Good Death, n.d.).

Of course, death positive work also continues outside of The Order. Author Michael Hebb started Death Over Dinner in 2013, which quickly became a worldwide project encouraging dinner conversations about death (Death Over Dinner, n.d.). In 2017, Hansa Bergwall and Ian Thomas founded the WeCroak app based on the Bhutanese folk belief in contemplating death five times a day. The app sends notifications to users in order to remind them of their own mortality (WeCroak, n.d.). Also in 2017, Dr. Shoshana R. Ungerleider began

the non-profit organization, End Well, in order to "make the end of life, part of life." The organization holds annual events centered around death and dying (End Well, n.d.).

The Funeral Industry

"Before the late 1800s in the United States, it was almost unthinkable for a man to prepare a body for burial. As death primarily occurred in the home, preparations surrounding the body were designated as a female duty" (Zlomke, 2013, p. viii). This shift could be seen by the 1830s, when men began opening side businesses as professional undertakers. Men may have assisted with funeral preparations before then, typically by handling the finances or the physical labor of the coffin, but it wasn't until the creation of these businesses that death became a male -- and thus, professional -- venture. The funeral director was born out of this new undertaking, a position which handled everything for the family as soon as a person died. Whereas women had previously been in charge of death and held visible leadership roles through the process, they were now forced onto the sidelines as spectators, if they were included at all (Zlomke, 2013).

Simultaneously occurring was a cultural change from viewing death as a natural part of the life cycle to something that required sentimentalization. This transition from practical, personal death to public artform further pushed women out of the sphere of death in a time when men controlled both the public and artistic zones. Death also began to be viewed as benevolent in an era when women were viewed as inherently corrupt; thus, death would need to be handled by men. A second cultural shift occurred during the Civil War, and is often cited as the origin of the commercial funeral industry. Modern embalming techniques were utilized by physicians such as Thomas Holmes, the "Father of American Embalming," in order to transport the bodies of fallen soldiers back to their families before decomposition took hold. Alongside these new preservation

methods, a movement was occurring to alienate death from life, distancing the living from their inevitable mortality by depicting death as no more than a final slumber (Gore, 2005; Zlomke, 2013).

After the war, embalming was popularized by Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession, a 3-week long trip during which his preserved body was shown off to the public. Coupled with the new cultural preference for a life-like corpse, the demand for embalming grew exponentially (Gore, 2005; Zlomke, 2013). Embalming and burial remained the most popular choice for Americans until 2015, when cremation overtook the practice (NFDA, n.d.a).

Gender and Death

The death positivity movement has been extremely popular amongst women. The Order of the Good Death has only five staff members, all of whom are women, and there are a total of eight men listed out of the 31 founding members. The Order partners with countless women who are doing thoughtful, creative work in death, and in turn their work predominantly attracts the same gender (Order of the Good Death, n.d.).

Simultaneously, the death industry has seen a significant rise in popularity amongst women. Many are becoming death doulas, or working on groundbreaking green burial projects. Anthropology and forensics, two fields which work closely with death, both see a female majority in students, with forensic science being the only STEM field that can make such a claim (UCLA, 2017; Dawley, Houck, & Gupta, 2014). The funeral industry itself, once a male dominated field, has seen a dramatic shift in gender demographics. More than 60% of mortuary science students today are women, according to the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA, n.d.b). Even in England, where women became excluded from the funeral industry upon

its medicalization in the early 1900s, a notable shift has occurred: as of 2004, 21% of embalmers were women, compared to only .5% in the 1930s (Gore, 2005).

However, this shift comes as little surprise when accounting for the history of death care and the increasing cultural freedom seen by women. Between the feminism movements and the growing number of women in the workforce, it is no wonder that the funeral industry is undergoing a radical transformation. Women are returning to death work as well as the artistic sphere in full force, and the combination of these factors is fueling the death positivity movement.

The Effects of Death Positivity on the Funeral Industry

Preparation

Only 36.7% of adults in the United States complete any sort of advanced directive, with no notable statistical difference between the chronically ill and the healthy (Yadav et. al., 2017). One goal of the death positive movement is to encourage everyone to complete some sort of advanced directive, and to do so early on (Order of the Good Death, n.d.). The goal of an advanced directive, such as a living will or power of attorney, is to ensure that the desires of the person are known and respected in the event of their incapacitation or demise. Some forms of advanced directives even provide an opportunity for the person to describe what they would like done with their body after they die. Not only can an advanced directive aid the funeral home in this way, but someone who has the insight to create an advanced directive may also think to contact a funeral home and make pre-planned arrangements for themselves. As the death

positivity movement grows, it is likely that the number of people taking such measures will increase, alleviating some of the pressure placed on the funeral homes and families. Patients who complete advanced directives are also less likely to die in a hospital (Yadav et. al., 2017), which is significant because while 80% of Americans would prefer to die at home, only 20% have the opportunity to do so (Stanford School of Medicine, n.d.).

Additionally, there is a proven correlation between awareness of mortality and personal health. Adults who are reminded of death make more proactive decisions about their physical health, and may find themselves reassessing their goals and values (Vail et al., 2012). As the death positivity movement continues to promote death awareness, physical and mental health amongst the general population can be expected to increase, hopefully leading to an older clientele population for the funeral industry.

Funeral and Burial

Studies have shown that increased death awareness can lead to greater absorption of other positive concepts, including compassion and environmental-friendliness (Vail et. al., 2012). This may explain the push towards home funerals within the death positivity movement. This practice excludes the funeral home entirely by handling the funeral at home, with the help of friends and family. Home funerals are a safe, inexpensive, and accessible option, and ensure that respect is shown towards the deceased if they were someone who may otherwise have been subject to discrimination (Order of the Good Death, n.d.).

The correlation between death awareness and environmental-friendliness also explains the death

positivity movement's promotion of green, natural burials. The funeral industry is responsible for a significant amount of pollution every year, including 827,060 gallons of formaldehyde-based embalming fluid being buried in the earth (MPCA, n.d.). Cremation is a favorable option compared to the pollution generated by traditional burials, and this is reflected in funerary trends: while only 4% of American corpses were cremated in 1960 (Gallo, 2018), the rate today is close to 60% and expected to rise (NFDA, n.d.a.). Additionally, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 50% of American funeral directors have seen an increase in cremation rates (NFDA, 2020).

Nevertheless, while environmentally-favorable compared to traditional burial, cremation still generates pollution by being energy intensive and releasing toxic emissions into the atmosphere. Alternatives such as alkaline hydrolysis, a style of "water cremation" which uses water to turn a body to ash, are growing in popularity. The most environmentally-friendly options, however, are green burials. In a green burial the corpse is buried, unembalmed, in a natural, biodegradable material such as a linen shroud or woven fiber casket, and a natural marker such as a rock or tree is used instead of a manufactured gravestone (MPCA, n.d.; NFDA, n.d.b.). Creative options also exist for those who would like to fertilize new plants when they die, such as Katrina Spade's Recomposition (Recompose, n.d.), which turns the body into compost, or Jae Rhim Lee's Infinity Burial, which uses a mushroom-based suit to help deliver nutrients from decomposition to the surrounding flora (Coeio, n.d.). The possibilities are endless, and the innovations are growing in number.

Conclusion

The funeral industry will need to undergo significant changes in order to keep up with current and projected trends. Funeral homes offering alternative options are likely to see more demand, while more traditional funeral homes will need to adapt in order to keep up. The necessary changes will almost certainly be brought about by the new wave of women in the industry, resulting in a brand new funeral industry reminiscent of a pre-Victorian culture.

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