Whatever happened to the American way of death?

RICHARD T. GILL

A FEW decades ago, we knew perfectly well what to make of the American way of death. It was overly sentimentalized, highly commercialized, and, above all, excessively expensive. We knew all this because our British friends, both visitors and expatriates, had told us so. The first major assault was Evelyn Waugh’s 1948 novel, The Loved One. The next was Jessica Mitford’s 1963 best-seller, The American Way of Death (which is now being revised by its author). Mitford, like Waugh, did have some fun with the barbarities of the American funeral establishment, but her tone and purpose were far more serious than his. Her quarry was precisely “the vast majority of ethical undertakers.” And it was the very definition of “ethical” in the undertaking business that she found deeply offensive.

As an important example, Mitford cited the Forest Lawn Memorial Park of Southern California. Forest Lawn was admittedly a somewhat extreme case, but she pointed out that its creator (Hubert Eaton) “has probably had more influence
on trends in the modern cemetery industry than any other human being." A paragraph or two at random easily conveys her view of the ethical product of this "dean of cemetery operators":

Wandering through Whispering Pines, Everlasting Love, Kindly Light and Babyland, with its encircling heart-shaped motor road, I learned that each section of Forest Lawn is zoned and named according to the price of burial plots. Medium-priced graves range from $434.50 in Haven of Peace to $599.50 in Triumphant Faith to $649.50 in Ascension. The cheapest is $308 in Brotherly Love—for even this commodity comes high at Forest Lawn.

Or again:

There are statues, tons of them, some designed to tug at the heartstrings: "Little Duck Mother," "Little Pals," "Look, Mommy!", others with a different appeal, partially draped Venuses, seminude Enchantresses, the reproduction of Michelangelo's David, to which Forest Lawn has affixed a fig leaf, giving it a surprisingly indecent appearance.

How gross it all was! And what was most indecent about this whole tasteless exercise was the amount of money being devoted to it. According to Mitford's calculations, the United States in 1960 was spending more on funerals than on all of higher education; also more than on conservation and the development of natural resources, police protection, fire protection, or even the estimated cost of providing medical care for Americans 65 or older under a (then still-in-the-future) federal medical insurance program. The "American way of death" was an outrage and an obscenity!

**Up in smoke**

Mitford's book—rather like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*—was a shocker and may, indeed, have had some slight influence on subsequent developments. For the pattern of funerary practice in the United States has been changing quite significantly in recent decades. The change over the post-World War II period as a whole suggests that Waugh and Mitford were rather like army generals fighting the last war. The next war in the area of American funeral customs is likely to be the very opposite of the one in which they were so wittily engaged.
Take, for example, the matter of funeral expenses relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Mitford calculated these in 1960 at around $2 billion or roughly 0.4 percent of U.S. national income. Based on figures for Current Consumption Expenditures, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis arrives at a somewhat lower figure for funeral and burial expenses for 1960: $1,494 million in current dollars and $6,943 million in 1987 dollars. In real terms, this represents 0.35 percent of 1960 GDP. Whichever number is more "realistic," the downward trend of the Bureau of Economic Analysis's estimates is so dramatic as to be undeniable. By 1993, funeral and burial expenses as a percentage of GDP had fallen to 0.15 percent, or well under one-half the 1960 number (Figure 1). Similarly, funerary costs per individual death as a percentage of per capita income in 1993 were also less than one-half what they were in 1960.

Most dramatic of all perhaps has been the rapid increase in cremation as compared to earth burial. Mitford was all for cremation, which was well suited to achieve the "objectives of economy and simplicity." It was a strong part of her argument that in the United States this desirable practice was stubbornly resisted by both clergy and profit-hungry funeral directors and was extremely rare (only 3.56 percent of American deaths in 1960).
Table 1
Cremation Rate, United States, 1960-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>17.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>19.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>4.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>20.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>13.81</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>32.5</td>
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Source: Cremation Association of North America (CANA).

The cremation rate began to change in the 1960s, reaching nearly 20 percent by 1993, and is projected to rise above 30 percent by 2010. (See Table 1.) The rapidity of the change in what one would assume to be a very basic social ritual is striking. Whatever the "American way of death" was in 1960, it is obviously becoming something radically different as we head into the twenty-first century.

**Going out of business**

The changing character of American funerary practice is, moreover, noted by increasing numbers of historians and sociologists, as well as by funeral directors, cemetery superintendents, and others with a direct financial stake in burial practices. Already in the 1970s, in his book *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, Charles O. Jackson could speak of the "extreme nature of our withdrawal from the dead" and could assert, as his "central point," that "in the present century, Americans have steadily moved to reduce the degree of time and resources which they must provide the dead."

Similarly, in his 1991 book about the history of American cemeteries (*The Last Great Necessity*), David Charles Sloan could note that "growing numbers of Americans are turning away from the customs of burial and memorialization." He further observed that

as the twenty-first century approaches the cemetery remains in crisis. Americans are more willing to discuss death today than before, but they are also more willing to cremate the dead, scatter their remains, and memorialize them with a poem or tree.... New cemeteries are usually unwelcome in the neighborhoods of
America. In the nineteenth century, residents gathered in the thousands to celebrate the formation of a new cemetery. Today protesters lobby legislators to forbid their creation or expansion.

And if the protesters don’t prevent the establishment of a new cemetery, it is likely very shortly to become the object of vandalism. Sloan admits that such “vandalism has always existed…. The rampage of youngsters through a cemetery was a rare, but not unknown, occurrence in the nineteenth century.” Today, however, such vandalism has become a “major issue”: “The violence to gravestones, mausoleums, flowers, and other objects in today’s cemetery has become endemic.”

Nor are today’s funeral directors, cemeterians, and monument makers unaware of the drastic changes taking place. In a 1995 handout from the death-care industry, one cemeterian notes ruefully that “the average citizen is somehow losing interest in memorialization.” The rich and famous get their memorials all right, but “we are losing the appeal at the everyday level.” For their part, monument makers, writing in their trade publication, *Stone in America*, note the implications of the “dramatic rise in cremation,” which has been “accompanied by a corresponding fall in the popularity of monuments; after all, the very materiality of monuments inherently contradicts the de-materiality of cremation. Left with the ashes, survivors wonder how to dispose of the one who has disappeared.”

Cremation has also obviously affected the funeral directors, usually in a negative way. One New Hampshire funeral director describes what is happening in the industry:

The industry continues to consolidate. As cremation rates rise, many funeral homes are becoming less profitable. To survive, they cut down on staff, quality of services, and [they are] not putting capital back into their business. Many are selling out now while the cremation rate is still low.

Another notes that such issues as “the rise of hybrid, non-traditional funeralization, low-cost cremation, and increased governmental intervention and regulation” clearly “affect profitability.” The challenge is to adjust to these complex and difficult trends.

Reading the literature that emanates from various branches of the death-care industry in the 1990s, one gets little sense
the optimism and ebullience that must have motivated entrepreneurs like Hubert Eaton of Forest Lawn fame to promote the "runaway growth" of the U.S. cemetery business earlier in this century. The mood is now defensive, puzzled, wary of the future. Certainly, there is little if any sense of an industry that has the consumer comfortably and tidily in its pocket. The public has changed. Consumers are beginning to abandon their old ways and to adopt the death-care arrangements favored by Mitford and her fellow critics.

**Reversing the nineteenth-century trend**

But do we ourselves favor these new arrangements? Should we? What is the real significance of this dramatic change in our burial rites and rituals over the past several decades? To understand what is really going on here, one has to have at least some historical appreciation of how funerary practices in the United States have been changing not just over the past few decades but over the last two or three centuries. The important points for our purposes are two: (1) During the nineteenth century, there was a very strong increase in the ceremonies, expenses, and material attentions paid to the dead in the United States. (2) During our present century, at least from World War I on, though with some short-term and local variations, there was a decrease in the amount of attention paid to, and memorialization of, our dead.

Essentially, American cemeteries have gone through a complex evolution over time from frontier and domestic homestead graves, to the rural cemeteries of the nineteenth century, to the lawn park cemeteries of the late nineteenth century, to the memorial park cemeteries beginning around the time of the First World War and continuing on to the present. Needless to say, all these different practices overlap to a greater or lesser degree, and today, of course, we would have to make room for various styles of crematoria.

Now, it was in nineteenth-century America, particularly with the rural cemetery movement, that memorialization of the dead in a this-worldly context took on truly robust proportions. In the earlier Puritan world, physical death meant impermanence and decay. The majority of graves had no permanent markers. What was truly important, the immortality of the soul, was not
of this world. It was thus only in the nineteenth century that we began to get the elaborate, Victorian funeral, and this, in fact, began to fade in the World War I era.

Interestingly, the example chosen by Waugh, and underlined by Mitford, to prove excessive American attention to the dead—Eaton's Forest Lawn—can actually be used to exemplify the beginnings of the American withdrawal from the nineteenth-century commitment to the dead. Forest Lawn was the prototype of the memorial park cemetery, and, although Eaton's stated aim was to celebrate the memorialization of the dead (as, indeed, the name of the park suggested), it was done in such a way as to rob death of any particular individuality. Thus, while statuary and art work were to be abundant, individual and family memorials were to be flush against the ground.

This practice of minimizing the attention given to individual and family graves has increased over the years. During very recent decades, the withdrawal of interest in memorializing the dead through elaborate funeral services, tombs, statuary, and the like has only intensified. We have noted the decline in funeral expenses relative to GDP and per capita incomes. Cremation is notable not only because it is a less expensive way of disposing of the dead but also because it conveys a sense of the impermanence of the deceased and, indeed, by implication, of memories of the deceased.

Since both Waugh and Mitford gave California a certain pride of place in their discussion of American funerary mores, it is interesting to observe that California now ranks among the top states in the percent of cremations. In fact, the Pacific coast states as a group in 1993 had more than double the overall U.S. ratio of cremations to deaths (41.78 percent versus 19.78 percent), and their projected percentage for the year 2010 is a dramatic 58.52 percent. In Hawaii, uncasketed deaths, which are particularly inexpensive and may involve no funeral service whatsoever, already account for nearly one-half of all deaths statewide.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the public insisted on memorializing the individual deceased, sometimes over the opposition of cemetery directors. Today, the more common battle is over how to get the funeral industry to provide ever cheaper means of disposing of one's loved ones.
In short, the public attitude to the memorialization of the dead in America has changed radically. Rewritten today, *The American Way of Death* would, one would have to expect, be a totally different book.

**The Idea of Progress**

What are the reasons for the growing reversal of what we now might well think of not as the "American" but as the "Victorian" way of death?

One general hypothesis frequently advanced to explain America’s current turn away from elaborate funeral rites and memorials is the increasing secularization of modern society. There are many ways in which the growing secularity of our interests and concerns might affect our attitudes toward the dead. Various commentators have suggested that, as our faith in an afterlife has begun to diminish, our fear of death has grown. Consequently, we tend to avoid death, turn it over to funeral directors, prettify the corpse, leave the maintenance of the grave to an impersonal "perpetual care" arrangement, and so on. Also, it could be argued that our increasing involvement in things of this world has lowered the priority given to caring for the dead, making it compete, as one funeral analyst suggested, with "trips to France" or other consumer goodies.

Again, there is almost certainly some truth in such explanations, but definitely not the whole truth. For while these explanations may have something to say about the retreat from death and dying during the past 75 years, they fail rather badly with respect to what happened in the previous hundred years, from say, 1820 to 1920. In the nineteenth century, we became a much more secular society than we had been a century or two before, but this development, far from lessening our interest in the memorialization of the dead, led to a general increase in the time, attention, and money spent on funerals, graves, and monuments. Why secularization should produce this result in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the exact opposite result in the present era is a question that must be answered before we can even hope to evaluate today’s "American way of death."

The answer is to be found in the two ways in which secu-
larization expressed itself in the nineteenth century. The dominant secular notion of this period was the Idea of Progress. This notion was secular, first, in that it emphasized earthly concerns rather than the life to come. But it was also secular in another sense of that term. And here we have to note that the word “secular” has, in fact, two quite different meanings. So far, we have used the word to emphasize a this-worldly, as opposed to other-worldly, focus. But it can also be used to denote periods of time and, in particular, to suggest very long periods of time. As a dictionary definition (fourth meaning) reads: “lasting for an age or ages; continuing for a long time or from age to age.” Economists regularly use the word in this sense to distinguish long-run trends from, say, business cycles or other short-run phenomena. At the end of the Great Depression, for example, some economists worried about the possibility of “secular stagnation,” meaning that the long-run drift of the economy over time might be in the direction of increasing unemployment, excess capacity, and so on.

Now, the key from our point of view is that the late-nineteenth-century Idea of Progress was secular in both senses. It dealt with this world, and it dealt with it in terms of very extensive, long-run future time. It was, to play with words a bit, a secular secular idea. This is to be distinguished from a short-run secular idea or what might be called a myopic secular idea. The latter would involve an emphasis on things of this world but only with respect to immediate or relatively near-occurring developments.

Time-horizons can be long or short. In the nineteenth-century Idea of Progress, they were very long. Today, they have become notably shorter. Thus, in the past 75 years or so, our society, while becoming increasingly secular in a this-worldly sense, has become very unsecular in terms of time-horizons. The near-term dominates in a way that would hardly have been imaginable at the turn of the century.

**Generational solipsism**

This growing temporal myopia of contemporary American society has, in fact, been noted elsewhere: in books about business behavior; in discussions of the national debt; in comments about the decline in personal savings; in analyses of the
breakdown of the family, the growth of crime, the increasing incidence of illegitimacy; and, of course, in general comments about the “now” generation and about our apparent need for “immediate gratification” in all aspects of life.

These developments are very basic, and could hardly fail to affect our attitudes to the dead and especially to the memorialization of the dead. At the deepest level, and in terms of psychological motivation, nineteenth-century believers in the Idea of Progress envisioned the future (posterity) as giving meaning and vindication to the present. These believers could take satisfaction—in some cases, their greatest satisfaction—in the thought that their children and heirs would live richer, better, and happier lives than they themselves had. These same individuals would also certainly imagine their children and heirs as thinking of them and remembering them, perhaps even being a little grateful to them, for having helped bring about this beneficial outcome. Their stake in the future was real and important and essentially took the form of being remembered—i.e., memorialized in one way or another.

Neither the rotting graves of the Puritans nor the disposable ashes of today’s crematoria would have satisfied those in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who were in important respects living for the future. As they passed the torch on to their children and heirs, they wanted to be remembered—remembered in this world and, ideally, for generations to come.

Today, however, we no longer actually pass the torch to our children in the way it was done in earlier eras. We live too long for that. By the time we get ready to pass the torch, our children are middle-aged or, in some cases, already elderly themselves. The number of Americans 85 and older is increasing at an astonishing rate, exceeded only by the rate of increase of our centenarians. In this sense, our own individual lives are extending further and further into the future. This means that, other things being equal, when we today think of the future, it often tends to be in terms of what our own personal needs are likely to be—social security, Medicare, nursing homes, and the like. Meanwhile, the priority given children in our national life, as measured by everything from poverty rates to broken homes to latchkey children to illegiti-
macy, has fallen drastically in recent decades.

In other words, our ability to envision the future beyond our own personal lives is shrinking rapidly. Here is where we come to the particularly short-term, myopic thinking so characteristic of today's American society and, in many respects, intrinsic to any highly technological, complex, and rapidly changing society. It is hard enough to see what will be happening to the world (and to us personally) a few years down the road; to try to imagine what the world will be like long after we have departed the scene is futile. Who can possibly imagine what America will be like in 50 or 100 years, let alone the vast stretches of future posterity that were the source of pleasure and comfort to the great Progress dreamers of the nineteenth century?

To put the difference in a nutshell: In the nineteenth century, and perhaps up to World War I or so, Americans thought that they knew the general shape of things to come. Therefore, they could live imaginatively in the world that would exist after they themselves were dead. In the twentieth century, or at least during the past 60 or 70 years, Americans find it more and more difficult to envision what life will be like after they have departed from the scene. This is because their departures are coming later and later in life, and, at the same time, their ability to imagine, figure out, and in any way take comfort from the distant future has been steadily diminishing.

The result today is that: (a) each generation tends to think more of itself than of other generations, previous or subsequent; and (b) individuals increasingly care very little about what happens to their bodies after they have shuffled off this mortal coil. Or to phrase it a bit more carefully: What difference does it make what happens to your remains in this earthly context? For as faith in a long-run terrestrial future is diminishing steadily, so now many Americans are turning to what is essentially a pre-modern approach (i.e., evangelical religion). And this approach, should it become more and more widespread, could easily represent a rejection of the whole Progress enterprise. For then, as in our earlier history, the only thing that would really matter would be the immortality of the soul. Markers and monuments would, once again, become irrelevant.
After we’re gone

Presumably, by the standards of our earlier post-war critics, all the recent changes in our funerary rituals should be considered improvements. We are now being much more prudent, sensible, and modest, much more like our Anglo-Saxon cousins. And we are certainly now spending far, far more on federal medical care for the elderly than on burying (or cremating) the dead. Very good news, apparently.

I myself am much less sure about all of this. Or, at least, I would argue that the current movement toward lessening, or even abandoning, the memorialization of our dead is a reflection of deeper forces in society, and that these deeper forces, far from being uniformly healthy and benign, may well pose a serious threat to our future national well-being.

Of course, it is very nice that we are all, or most of us, living longer. Despite the horror stories we hear of nursing-home debilitation, incontinence, paralysis, wheelchairs, tubes, respirators, and so on, most of us, given the choice, prefer to live longer rather than shorter lives, and most of us, furthermore, enjoy reasonably good health until near the end.

It is a rather different matter, however, when we come to consider our increasingly shorter time-horizons. I believe that our current lack of interest in the dead is related to our increasing lack of interest in the welfare of children. That is, both reflect a given generation’s interest in its own well-being over the course of its own life-span, and a general lack of interest in the future that will be inherited by one’s children. Temporal myopia is almost certainly responsible for many social pathologies—increased crime, illegitimacy, failing school performance, and, very probably, the increasing breakdown of the traditional American family. It is, in fact, almost surely no accident that an unprecedented celebration of the American family and a very much increased emphasis on memorialization of the dead occurred together during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Arguably, both can be regarded as incidental to the morality embodied in the Idea of Progress.

Thus our new funeral practices indicate that our priorities have changed not only with respect to the dead but also with respect to the children and grandchildren who will live after
us. Apparently, the only thing that matters is what happens in this world and in this world now. The future after we are gone is a blank. Forget about it. Live your life for yourself. All the rest is basically incomprehensible.

This new approach is not, of course, universal. Two recent examples of memorialization that quickly come to mind are the Vietnam Memorial and the quilt dedicated to those who have died of AIDS. Still, the general drift of things is quite clear, and the point to be stressed is that our newly limited time-horizons seem to fail most seriously when it comes to our children. These, more than the dead, appear to be the real sacrificial lambs of late-twentieth-century America.

So, before we congratulate ourselves too much on the increased rationality of the now emerging "American way of death," perhaps we should wonder whether there are any steps that might be taken to modify the underlying conditions that have made this approach seem so attractive. A renewed interest in what happens to this physical and material world of ours after we have departed the scene may be crucial. If this renewal leads to the occasional funeral procession or even monument, perhaps that would not be too great a price to pay for the ancillary benefits that might well accrue.