Grief Mythology and the Invention of a Modern American Tradition

Gary Laderman
Department of Religion
Emory University

During the middle decades of the century, funeral directors began to understand the ceremonies they arranged for their clientele in a new way. Funerals served the public good because they were sanitary, civilized, and religiously sanctified, according to industry commentators and national organizations. In time, morticians realized that in addition to the purely social benefits of embalming, dressing, and presenting a corpse in a home away from home, there were distinctly individual rewards to participating in modern funerary traditions. Drawing from the increasingly dominant therapeutic language in popular psychology and theology, funeral men and women of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, articulated a new way to speak about grief that shaped American sensibilities about responding to death. In this idiom, the funeral was framed as an instrument of psychological and spiritual healing for survivors, and the viewable body as the active agent in the eventual triumph over death. It was a moment to confront the reality of death, by looking in the face of the deceased without seeing the unsettling signs of decomposition, and begin the process of working through grief. Morticians fervently believed the skills of the embalmer, and especially his "artistic" cosmetic touches, could minister to the living, and rescue an individual from a lifetime of psychic damage. According to the logic of the industry, without gazing upon the remains of the deceased, those in grief are subject to experience a range of debilitating psychological aftereffects.

At the very time morticians were propagating this logic–to themselves in industry literature, and to the customers who entered their homes–they were being blamed for producing a psychological and cultural environment that was detrimental to healthy grieving. Critics commonly referred to the undertakers' own words, and particularly the growing reliance on euphemisms when explaining their work, to identify the ways in which people in the undertaking business were distorting the reality of death and preventing people from taking a more civilized, rational approach to overcoming their grief. Elmer Davis pointed out as early as 1927 that the invented professional label, "mortician," is indicative of the perverse cultural influences resulting from changes in language: "Death grins out from the very word, but it seems to be bad form for a bearer of that title to mention death in any other way. This ritual reticence, this indirection, this avoidance of words of ill omen suggests the Neolithic savage; it seems a deliberate revival of primitive tabus."[1] Beyond the evidence from shifting linguistic terminology, numerous commentators focused on the embalmed body to convince the public that a positive psychological response to the loss of a loved one was being thwarted by an industry built on concealing the true realities of death and awakening irrational superstitions in the poorest segments of society. Rather than encouraging healthy grieving, selfish funeral directors really promote the survival of pagan forms of religion, and keep the reality of death hidden behind a grotesque mockery of cheap surgery and cosmetic artifice. What could be more unhealthy for the mourners?

Jessica Mitford correctly identified the prominent role "grief therapy" played in the ongoing efforts to legitimate the form and function of the American funeral by people within the

industry. She also presents a fairly devastating critique of the "patently fraudulent claims of undertakers"[2] who argue that psychological healing will follow a well-executed, traditional funeral ceremony that includes, when appropriate, viewing the embalmed and carefully presented body of the deceased. Although Mitford disregards the "specious claims of those who peddle grief therapy to the grieving,"[3] many inside and outside of the industry contended that funerals can provide psychological relief to mourners, and that as modern ritual specialists who control the final disposition of the body, funeral directors are particularly well-positioned to play an integral role in this relief. At the very least, her analysis revealed the rather peculiar state of grief in American culture at the time, and the confusion around its social value in the lives of busy, hard-working Americans.

In American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style, historian Peter Stearns offers a brief cultural history of grief in the first half of the twentieth century.[4] In effect, modern sensibilities overtook the "rich Victorian grief culture" near the end of the nineteenth century, and transformed the way Americans mourned their dead. No longer an emotional time to wallow in suffering and sorrow, the moment of death should be a time of certitude, self-control, and objective rationality. Before World War I, science authorized new perspectives on death and dying that gradually displaced dominant Christian fears and euphamisms. Scientists promoted the entirely naturalistic process of aging, dying, and decomposing back to the earth, and the reasonable argument that the moment of death, regardless of the condition of the individual, was actually pleasurable rather than painful. With this enlightened knowledge, and a growing faith in the wonders of medical science to unravel all of life's mysteries, including death, Americans were encouraged to let go of grief, and get on with life when death strikes a friend or family member.[5]

According to Stearns, the first world war produced a short-lived flurry of popular commentary reaffirming these modernist views: "This event, which might have prompted a return to older notions of the comfort and bonding qualities of grief . . . , in fact served in most public commentary as yet another sign of grief's misplaced, even offensive qualities."[6] The growing cultural tendency to see expressions of grief as unhealthy symptoms of psychic imbalance dominated most discussions of the topic into the 1920s, when it virtually disappeared from the public eye. From the 20s until the 1950s, Stearns writes, "discussions of death and emotional reactions to it seemed out of bounds, either not worth pen and ink or too risky to evoke. . . . The contrast between the 1890s-World War I decades, when active discussion was almost an essayist's staple, and the subsequent cessation of comment was genuinely striking."[7] One exception to this silence was a pioneering empirical study of grief by psychiatrist Eric Lindemann in 1944. In "Symptomatology [sic] and management of acute grief," Lindemann studied 101 bereaved people, including some close friends and relatives who lost a loved one in the Coconut Grove nightclub fire in Boston, which killed close to 500 after a football game between Harvard and Yale in 1942.[8] While this was one of the first social scientific studies of grief ever produced in the United States, the topic did not strike a chord in the field of psychology until the late 1960s and early 70s.[9]

Stearns identifies an "antigrief regime" operating in middle-class America during the middle decades of the century, and sees its manifestation in a variety of social trends. Although an occasional article reinforcing modernist views appeared in print here and there, the overwhelming silence on the topic soon after the war demonstrated a prevalent aversion to

displaying grief and a tendency to see it as a form of pathology. Additionally, the growing cultural dominance of the therapeutic model, based primarily on Sigmund Freud's theories, championed emotional detachment and overcoming grief as soon as possible. In many ways, Freud instigated the pathologization of grief and popularized the theory that a mourner's ego must become free of its attachment to the deceased to restore psychic balance. And finally, the changing content of advice books written for parents raising children advocated careful avoidance of the subject of death, though if it has to be broached at all, parents were advised to discuss it as emotionlessly as possible.[10]

Stearns briefly mentions how funerals factored into the early arguments against grief, and that economic good sense, minimal ceremonial activity, and emotional restraint were espoused as modern values that should defeat the morbid, exploitative, and heartless maneuvering of funeral men who profit off of excessive, uncivilized emotions.[11] Although Stearns is correct in pointing out the striking public silence about grief in popular magazines and journals after the war, a chorus of voices emanating from within industry literature began to promote their own psychological theories about the funeral and grief, and the steps one can take to experience good grief when faced with the heartbreaking loss of a close friend or relation. These views did not make it into popular media, but internally trickled down and transformed the thinking, language, and postures of America's death specialists. In the early decades of the century, chemical companies began to apply psychological reasons for the value of good embalming fluids–as mentioned earlier, advertisements produced by these companies linked the last look, the memorable image, full apprehension of the reality of death, and meaningful healing. Over time, funeral directors embraced grief as a perfectly natural area of expertise that further legitimated their authority over the final passage and enhanced the ritual value of modern American funeral traditions. If Stearns is correct, they were the only ones who were interested in talking about grief–to themselves and to those struggling with death–until Mitford brought the matter to the American public.

One of the earliest textbooks focused exclusively on psychology and funerals was written by Edward Martin, the Grand Junction, Colorado, mortician discussed in the last chapter. His book, Psychology of Funeral Service, published in 1947, boldly proclaimed in the preface that "Whether he realizes it or not every successful mortician is successful in the application of psychological principles. The foundation of the funeral-service profession is embalming and the basis of financial profit is merchandising. But the entire public relations program upon which every funeral establishment depends for its continued existence rests upon the soundness of the psychological practices of the management and personnel of that mortuary."[12] Chapters cover a range of related topics, including "The Nervous System and Glands," "Learning and Memory," "Adjustment to Mental Conflict," and "Psychology in Action." Without any formal training in psychology, Martin and other writers based their theories on personal, and simultaneously for them, highly professional, experiences with their customers, grieving family members. These work-related experiences with the grief-sticken, which are embedded in the very fabric of a morticians daily life, led Martin to unabashedly declare: "The new funeral director is a Doctor of Grief, or expert in returning abnormal minds to normal in the shortest possible time!"[13]

The appearance of the embalmed body is the cornerstone of Martin's pseudo-psychology, and the impression left by this vision–the "memory picture" promised by chemical companies–will determine whether those affected by the death of loved one can eventually overcome their grief: "We know that people are generally emotionally upset when they call us

for our service. It is our purpose as morticians to give to those we serve a memory picture of their tragic experience that will leave them with comforting thoughts in the years to come."[14] A comforting last look at the body was understood by Martin as psychologically healthy for the individual and, like so much in the funeral industry, ultimately an expression of religious sentiments that have evolved over time. Taking on critics of the traditional funeral and the central role of embalming, Martin explains:

> Our American burial customs were not devised by funeral directors or by anyone else. They grew up over thousands of years, stemming from many different religions, lands and ages. . . . They are deeply rooted and founded on tradition. . . . Even though some such customs may seem pagan or grotesque to an outsider, let him not forget that these customs afford comfort to those persons who are the most concerned directly with the funeral, the heartbroken family of the deceased.
>
> This sentiment as expressed in the reverence shown the dead is the spirit which has brought about present-day American funeral standards.[15]

For Martin and others, psychological comfort resulted from viewing the body and engaging in ceremonial activity in its presence, and these elements of the modern-traditional funeral were securely founded in the religious history of the human species. Many instructional textbooks and articles for morticians aspiring for respectability in communities, as well as financial success in the market, began to include sections on the psychology of grief and some form of "applied" psychology. These sections rehearsed the same basic arguments articulated by Martin, which blended religious language with perspectives on the emerging science of psychology. For example, Anne Franz's manual, Funeral Direction and Management, (1947) informs the reader that "Psychology, a relatively new science, means the way an individual reacts mentally and emotionally to an outside stimulus."[16] Funeral directors must learn the scientific "facts" of emotional stress because they must constantly "minister" to people in the grips of grief, which causes sever emotional imbalance. Franz's then describes the physiology of grief ("Grief and despair cause slow heartbeat [sic], irregular breathing, and depression"), as well as the accompanying mental state ("grief stricken people cannot reason"), and encourages morticians to work with clients on finding appropriate channels for emotional expression–even if that means giving in to their demands for an extravagant funeral when the undertaker knows full well it will create a severe financial burden .[17]

Once again, creating the right impression–through both arranging a suitable service and preparing a suitably presentable body–brings comfort to the living and responds to deep-rooted, though now thoroughly civilized, religious sentiments. For Franz, the mortician "must be a keen analyst of human nature, a psychologist," who can meet the needs of his diverse individual clients and respond accordingly.[18] Part of his psychological expertise is the recognition that grief-stricken family members require the body for the proper ceremonies, and that these very individuals see the funeral director as a religious figure engaged in religious work. After quoting from the industry's favorite English commentator, Sir William Gladstone, who supposedly could "measure with mathematical exactness" the moral worth of a people based on treatment of the dead, Franz writes, "A dead body in itself is worthless; but to a family it is a sacred trust. It is surrounded by sentimental memories and has a value beyond price. This is exemplified by a

family's insisting on the recovery of a drowned body or a charred mass of bones. To be selected by a family as one into whose hands the last remains of a loved one are placed is an act of the greatest confidence the living can bestow. Treat it as a sacred obligation."[19] Increasing efforts to sound even more scientific in the 1950s did not lead to the disappearance of religious logic in industry literature; instead, attending to the psychological dimensions of grief led naturally in this logic to the hallowed, universal, and at this stage of evolutionary development, highly refined religious sentiments about reverence for the dead. Successful grieving depended on understanding the sacred character of mortuary work.

It is this kind of sanctimonious logic, which mixed religious sentiments with the science of psychology, that Mitford challenged in her investigation. In her assessment of the "new mythology," invented and perpetuated by funeral men and women to ensure the ongoing routinization of embalming in American death rituals, Mitford identifies the increasingly popular assertion within "mortuary circles" about "the need for `grief therapy.'"[20] These concocted "myths" about the supposed therapeutic value of viewing the body, and the deep reservoir of religious feelings which most funeral directors claim underpins their understanding of the psychology of grief, are based more on public relations than on any scientific evidence. However, Mitford acknowledges, the mythology struck a chord in the American public that "proved very effective" and, at least at the time of her investigation, has "been safe from authoritative contradiction."[21] According to Mitford, because no one in the industry could satisfactorily ground these theories about grief in any concrete scientific studies within the field of psychology, they were mythological–that is, simply false and made-up–justifications that served one purpose and one purpose only: profit.

Many historians of religion will argue that myths are effective not because they are true or false, but because they provide a sacred context for meaning and action in everyday life. Even though Mitford disregards this mythology as "based on half-digested psychiatric theories" and concerted strategies by undertakers to legitimate further their claims to professional standing in American society, in the years following the publication of her popular book, the mythology played an increasingly powerful role in how many Americans made sense of, and dealt with, their grief–to some degree, the mythology worked in American lives.[22] Charles McCabe, a correspondent for the San Francisco Chronicle, wrote a Mitfordesque column a few years after the book which recognized this very point: "The grief therapist is undoubtedly a bit ashamed of his job, despite the pay, because fondling stiffs is not a fashionable thing to do. But the customer . . . has his share in all this. The grief therapist conducts his biz [sic] along the time-honored custom of giving the customer what he wants. . . . In the death biz, what the customer/client wants is anything but death."[23] While McCabe argues that grief therapy simply reaffirms the larger cultural tendency to deny the reality of death, morticians, and many others outside the "biz," contend the American funeral offers profound psychological value for coming to grips with grief and facing the truth of death.

For example, one of the most authoritative voices in American popular psychology, Dr. Joyce Brothers, wrote a column on funerals after seeing Mitford on the October, 1963, CBS special report, "The Great American Funeral," in the weeks preceding Kennedy's assassination. In her article, entitled "Why They Behave That Way: Even Bizarre Funeral Serves Good Function," Brothers wastes no time turning the tables on the Englishwoman, and rips her countrymen for their "profoundly unsatisfactory" funeral customs, which, in her estimation, leads "presumably intelligent Englishmen" to irrationally believe in the existence of ghosts.[24]

Why is this?

> Let me explain: When a loved one dies, grief spins a complicated web of emotion, which cannot be brushed aside, but which must be owned up to, endured and gradually untangled skein by skein. If these feelings are denied in their proper season, they will return to haunt the mourner later on. . . . [T]he British play down their agony. They try to resume an appearance of normalcy. Consequently, they may be left with the feeling that a lot of `unfinished business' remains between themselves and the dead . . . [sic] as a countermeasure, the dream up ghosts.[25]

Although at a fairly early stage of her career, and in a time when clinicians and other researchers were only beginning to investigate the psychology of grief, Brothers speaks with professional confidence about the redeeming values behind the modern American funeral. First, she writes, it gives the bereaved an opportunity to confront the reality of their loss. If no funeral is possible–the example she gives is death at sea–mourners may be indefinitely haunted by the dead in their dreams. Second, the funeral served as a moment of clarity about the bereaved's future status; it becomes a moment in time that illuminates the social and emotional relations that will contribute to a speedy recovery and "the establishment of a new equilibrium." Third, despite the critics who ridicule the expenses, and forms of expression, at funerals, Brothers argues that the funeral can be a statement about how much a life mattered and be a show of appreciation for the life lost. Fourth, the funeral can also be a time of absolution–that is, an opportunity which allows "mourners to discharge some of the guilt they inevitably feel." Finally, Brothers writes about the tremendous religious value of funerals, which in her estimation relates solely to the religious sermon that can bring "reassurance and spiritual leadership."[26]

By the end of her short column, Brothers promises that a properly planned funeral can lead to the "fruitful and philosophical resolution" of grief.[27] Unfortunately for an industry reeling from the initial impact of Mitford's book, as psychologists and psychiatrists began turning their attention to grief in the 1960s and 70s, very few spoke about the connection between grief and funerals–and when they did, most had a much less favorable impression of contemporary funeral practices than Brothers, and spoke about how these practices revealed the depth of the American denial of death. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' groundbreaking book on the terminally ill, <u>On Death and Dying</u> (1969), brought medical and cultural weight to the growing arguments about the prevalence of a taboo on death, and that most Americans–including, she emphasizes, many medical professionals–had unhealthy attitudes about mortality. Her work on stages of dying translated into popular discourse about responses to death in general, and reinforced the growing cultural observations about denial. She only briefly alludes to the state of American funerals, when reminiscing about her own experiences with death growing up in a small European village: "In that country today there is still no make-believe slumber room, no embalming, no false makeup to pretend sleep. . . . [In America we] use euphemisms, we make the dead look as if they were asleep."[28] In the wake of Kubler-Ross' profoundly important book, the vocabulary of denial was securely linked to the language of death in American culture, and the funeral industry, with all of its euphemisms and camouflage, was seen as a vital source of psychological dis-ease with human mortality.

Even though the topic of grief was taken over by the field of psychology, in the years

after Mitford's book the industry continued to promote their own arguments about the therapeutic value of the funeral–next to the science of embalming, training in psychology emerged as a crucial dimension of the mortuary college curriculum. In 1970, the National Observer reported in, "The Key is `Managed Grief': How Funeral Directors–and Students–View Their Careers," how integral knowledge of psychology became in the education of funeral men and women: "Today mortuary-science [sic] students concentrate on the mortician's two stocks in trade: funeral psychology and embalming."[29] Morticians generally failed to find many allies in the social sciences–only a few psychologists came out publicly in support of the American funeral. But when they did, the industry made sure to publicize their views. For example, The Director published an article by Dr. Charles W. Wahl, an MD, professor of psychiatry, and practicing psychoanalyst, in 1969. The article, "Human Mortality and Its Role in Human Affairs," includes sections on death in the unconscious, the fear of death among medical doctors, jokes about undertakers, and the fact that in many cultures, death specialists are outcasts. He then turns to his own recent experience accompanying a friend to his mother's funeral. The friend, he writes, "experienced a deep and profound consolation seeing his mother with the lines of suffering erased from her face and lying at peace."[30] Wahl then suggests that, contrary to Mitford's views, the memory image played an important role in his friends psychological response to loss.

For the most part, social scientists studying the dynamics of grief did not explore its religious dimensions, a particularly significant dimension in many works championed by people in the industry. Two authorities who bridged theology and psychology by writing on grief, Christianity, and the healing power of funerals in the 1950s and 60s were Edgar N. Jackson, a Methodist minister, psychotherapist, and popular lecturer on the subject, and Paul E. Irion, a Lutheran minister and professor of pastoral theology. Both provide some criticism of contemporary American funeral practices, but ultimately support these practices by relying on a mixture of Christian teachings and psychological theories about grief. Because of their educational backgrounds, ministerial training, social locations and, most important, their public statements about the integrity of funerals in the United States, the industry energetically publicized the views of Jackson and Irion in its effort to counter Mitford's charges.

In the Dallas convention in October, 1963, the public relations committee recommended that the NFDA purchase 100,000 copies of a soon-to-be released book being written by Edgar Jackson.[31] The book, originally called Death in America, but eventually entitled the brighter, For the Living, came out by the end of the year, and immediately served as an authoritative source of information about the psychological and religious values of current funeral practices. The introduction, written by James Knight, professor psychiatry and director of the program in psychiatry and religion at Union Theological Seminary, notes the blossoming interest in pathological grief by many medical professionals, and warns about the "hazards of unwisely managed grief." He then calls for a "reorientation toward the funeral as a therapeutic ceremony," which can be understood as linking "the sacred, the bereaved, and the community"–in other words, harkening back to the title of the book, the funeral may be a rite for the dead, but it must also be socially and emotionally exercise "for the living." By the end of this short introduction, Knight arrives at the matter at hand, the value of looking upon the physically transformed appearance of the deceased. Although Knight applauds "Dr. Jackson for providing a stable and experience-based approach to one of the most searching psycho-theological problems of our time," the real voice of authority informing Jackson's work is

acknowledged from the outset–and it is not the not-so-distant voice of Edward Martin, the mortician who articulated similar kinds of theories:

> For the purpose of illustrating the importance of the funeral, let us look closely at one part of it–the viewing of the body in the open casket–to show the healthiness of such a rite in meeting conscious and unconscious needs. Dr. Jackson discusses Erich Lindemann's psychiatric research, which has revealed that one of the common denominators in individuals with unresolved grief reactions is their inability to recall a clear picture of the deceased. The viewing of the body at the funeral would greatly aid in this recall.
>
> Another common denominator Lindemann identified is the individual's unwillingness to face the pain of his bereavement. The funeral helps enforce reality, and the communal nature of the ceremony incorporates the community to share the pain with the bereaved.[32]

The book is organized as a series of simple questions, which are answered by Jackson in a straightforward, though erudite manner. Jackson discusses a variety of topics, from the controversy surrounding Mitford's book, the American culture of denial, cross-cultural practices treating the dead body with respect, to contemporary psychiatric theories about grief (primarily Lindemann's theories), the religious dimensions of grief and funerals, and the costs associated with funerals. Of course, much of the time Jackson is answering questions about the embalmed, visible body, and the role the funeral director, who is compared to psychologists, psychiatrists, and clergymen, in "managing" grief. So, when the questioner wonders, "Should a dead body be looked at?" Jackson responds that, except for the case of an abnormal interest aroused by "morbid curiosity," viewing the body begins the process of recognizing a hard reality to accept: "A sorrowing look into the fact of death confirms the truth of what has happened–truth that our minds and hearts desperately wish not to accept. Indeed, this moment often starts the process we call `wise grief management.'"[33] For Jackson, "normal" grief depends in large measure on the work of undertakers, who provide the culturally-appropriate rituals that have transformative powers in individual lives.

In one of Irion's book, The Funeral: Vestige or Value? (1966), similar themes are discussed, though often within a more specific religious context. The funeral service is understood as a moment to realistically confront death, an essential component in the movement from grieving to healing, and an occasion that can lead to true insight about the human condition.[34] Turning to the theological value of funerals, Irion begins by claiming that ceremonial practices surrounding the dead have always been religious. In contemporary America, he writes, the funeral "represents a theological understanding of the body of the deceased."[35] Although he expresses caution about placing too much emphasis on the body, Irion argues that it should not be ignored or despised–indeed, much of the book focuses on the necessity of keeping the body present in Christian funerals. He relies on the New Testament to explain to fellow Christians that the body must be seen as part of God's created order, and therefore as part of the whole person–even at death.[36] It also becomes, for Irion, a symbol of the resurrection: "But in spite of its transient nature, even its temporary presence after death can symbolize the conviction that somatic identity is reestablished and that there is a sense in which

the continuity of personhood pertains to the resurrection."[37] For Irion, Jackson, and many others commenting on American funerals, the visible body plays a crucial role in healthy psychological and religious reactions to death.

Many articles pertaining to the religious psychology of funerals appearing in funeral industry publications after Mitford were written by religious leaders standing up and supporting the American way of death as an antidote to a culture of denial and a way to reinvigorate the perceived decline of religious commitments in modern society. The Reverend James L. Kidd, pastor of the Wellington Avenue Congregational Church in Chicago, Illinois, wrote about the deaths of his son and father-in-law in his 1969 article, "An Ecumenical Funeral Service for the `New' Church." He stated in unequivocal terms that the presence of the dead body was critical for mourners to face the fact of death, conquer their denial, and allow for "creative grief" to assist in the transcendence of the emotional pain associated with losing a loved one.[38] Discussing the death of his son, Bruce, Kidd explains that he and his wife were present with him in the hospital at the time of death. He continues:

> His fragile, broken body was almost unclothed and we watched helplessly as he struggled and gasped for breath until no more breath would come. It was a pathetic and tragic scene and it burned itself into our minds and forced us to relive those moments time and time again. . . . It seemed to us, on a deep emotional level, that he continued to suffer that agony. It was not until we viewed his body after the embalming and preparation that we knew any peace in this regard. At that point he looked like the boy we had known and loved, and we saw for ourselves that he experienced that agony no more. He was, as the Scripture says, `asleep.' Seeing him this way provided us with a positive, healing image we could substitute for the image of his agonizing death.[39]

At the end of the ecumenical service for his son, which included leaders from other churches in the neighborhood, Kidd describes the "most meaningful" ritual for everyone attending: the "Blessing of the Body," by a Roman Catholic priest who was a close friend and neighbor.[40]

The valuable presence of the body at the funeral, and the opportunity to see the deceased one last time before final disposition, was front and center in many commentaries written by supportive clergymen. Most attempted to identify both the Christian and psychological benefits of funeral services–services that generally included viewing the remains–and therefore repudiate the continued popular attacks on the industry. Reverend R. Earl Allen, a Baptist pastor in Fort Worth, Texas, explained in the <u>Baptist Standard</u> that "funeral functions have some very definite values, both therapeutic and theological."[41] In addition to being a time to comfort mourners with praise for God, the promise of heaven, and the certainty of resurrection, funerals bring dignity to the deceased, and enable mourners to experience "normal grief release." Allen informs his readers that "when normal grief release is denied, delayed reaction problems may arise to cause unhappiness and despair."[42] In these and other commentaries, money was not the real issue consumers should consider when planning funeral ceremonies–nothing less than their spiritual and mental stability was at stake. As far as the industry was concerned, keeping the body present and visible in modern ceremonies was tied to the maintenance of sacred religious traditions as well as the possibility for healthy psychological recovery.

One Baptist pastor writing about the value of cooperation between the minister and the mortician in a 1971 issue of <u>Casket & Sunnyside</u> argues that the dead body deserves proper care

and admiration, irrespective of cost. After all, the pastor explains, "The ancient Egyptians placed emphasis on respect for the body at the time of death. There are several references in the Bible that let us know of the concern people, including Jesus, had for the body at death. Lazarus, as well as Jesus, had special preparation for burial."[43] More than maintaining sacred traditions that treat the body with respect and reverence, the funeral director is potentially the best-suited professional to assist the living in their time of sorrow. Why? The pastor concludes his article with the following: "More than most other men [the funeral director] lives with grief. Therefore I feel that the funeral director who is truly a religious man and takes part in the activities of his church is better prepared to give the kind of help which is really needed when death comes."[44] As many funeral directors, clergymen, and other supporters of American practices began to emphasize into the 1970s, funerals are "for the living"–both the mental and spiritual stability of survivors were at risk if people continued to turn away from modern traditions.

Managing grief through some form of therapy, support groups, or crisis counseling has become common practice both inside and outside of funeral homes. While many more empirical studies appeared in the decades after Mitford, and many more psychologists and clinicians became experts in this now legitimate, and highly popular, form of therapy, funeral directors continued to believe their work contributed to the healthy resolution of grief and produced healthier individuals who would cope better with the experience of death than those growing number of renegades choosing alternative, highly nontraditional plans for the disposal of the dead. One of many NFDA brochures created in the aftermath of Mitford's book to inform the public about the real value of American funerals posed the question, "Should the body be present at the funeral?" The brochure begins with the now-familiar assertion: public viewing of dead bodies has been an historically common practice in a variety of cultures. It then explains to the reader that the body is a meaningful symbol, a testament to the life of the person who has died. Viewing it bestows a dose of reality at the time of death, and survivors are emotionally better off with this intimate encounter with the face of death. Cosmetics and other restorative techniques are not employed to make the dead look alive, but to "provide an acceptable image for recalling the deceased." In a word, the brochure makes clear, viewing has therapeutic value, for children as well as adults. Finally, the brochure concludes with the words of Lindemann, identified as "a Professor at Harvard Medical School, [who] did pioneering and significant work on wise ways of coping with grief."

> When asked, "What do you consider to be the most useful part of the whole funeral process?" he responded, "The moment of truth comes when living persons confront the fact of death by looking at the body."
>
> When questioned further why he thought this was true, he said, "People tend to deny painful reality. . . . But when they experience that moment of truth that comes when they stand before the dead body, their denials collapse. They are facing reality and that is the first important step toward managing their grief. . . . Grief is a feeling. If you deny it you have difficulty coping with it, but if you face it you start the process of healthful mourning. . . . "
>
> From all this, one inescapable conclusion can be drawn–*the funeral with the body present for most people becomes an experience of value as*

they work through the sociological, psychological and, where desired, the religious needs that are a part of the grief experience.[45]

The slight hesitation over religious needs here signals the dawn of yet another cultural adaptation of modern funeral traditions to the dramatically changing landscape in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s: funeral directors must accommodate the increasingly public, and pluralistic, religious cultures in the United States while maintaining their authoritative position over the dead body. Even in cases where religion does not seem to play a role in the funeral, the visible body had some value to the individual, according to the brocher. The emerging grief mythology emanating from the mouths of undertakers as well as real psychologists certainly reinforced a widespread cultural tendency that assumed grief could be healthy or unhealthy, resolved or unresolved, transcended or forever present. As a mythology that provided viable forms of meaning, linked to specific, fairly uniform rituals that produced order in the midst of chaos, it appealed to undeniable religious sensibilities that sought to make sense of death and the dead body. While there may or may not be references to specific religious traditions by grief authorities, the dominant language used to describe and dissect the psychological state resonated with the public rhetoric of funeral men and women in the "sacred" business of death.

Although familiar and demeaning stereotypes continued to appear in popular culture, and a flurry of governmental investigations added to the growing public discontent with the industry, funeral directors continued to manage every detail of disposition, and responded to a fairly stable base of consumers who turned to the local funeral home at the time of death, and were pleased with the work provided by the owner and employees of this establishment. In addition to the triumph of grief therapy, the industry ultimately benefitted from another post-Mitford development: the routinization of business and ritual practices that overtook the industry in the 1970s and 80s in many ways solidified the social power of funeral directors at the time of death and reaffirmed the cultural force of a truly "American" way of death. During a period of increasing social diversification, and therefore diversifying interpretations of the meaning of death and funerals, the industry achieved an even greater degree of uniformity and structural consistency across ethnic, racial, and religious communities. Funeral directors simultaneously changed with the times and, as far as their bread and butter, made sure time stood still.

Notes

---

1. Elmer Davis, “The Mortician.” The American Mercury Reader. New York: The American Mercury, Inc., 1943. 59. Originally published in May, 1927.

2. Mitford, 95.

3. Ibid.

4. Peter N. Stearns. American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style. New York: New York UP.

5. Ibid., 148-154.

6. Ibid., 154.

7. Ibid., 156.

8. Eric Lindemann. “Symptomatology [sic] and management of acute grief.” American Journal of Psychiatry. Vol. 101. 1944. 141-148. Lindemann, it should be noted, was a featured speaker at the seventy-ninth annual NFDA conference in 1960.

9. For some discussion of the historical background to the study of grief in the modern period, see John Archer. The Nature of Grief: The Evolution and Psychology of Reactions to Loss.

London: Routledge, 1999. 12-26. [p. 17, Thomas D. Eliot, sociologist, "wrote that family research on widows and orphans had centered around their economic adjustment, neglecting the psychological impact of bereavement. . . . Eliot (1930) pleaded: `Is there not room for a mental hygiene of grief?'"]

10. Ibid., 156-161.

11. Ibid., 152.

12. Edward A. Martin. Psychology of Funeral Service. No publisher. 1947. From the preface, v.

13. Quoted in Mitford, 153, revised. Na, "Functions of the Modern Mortician." American Funeral Director, 55, 12 (December, 1932.

14. Ibid., v.

15. Ibid., 121.

16. Anne Hamilton Franz. Funeral Direction and Management. Jacksonville, Florida: State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers for Florida. 1951 [1947]. 12.

17. Anne Hamilton Franz. Funeral Direction and Management. Jacksonville, Florida: State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers for Florida. 1951 [1947]. 13-14.

18. Ibid., 13.

19. Ibid., 16-17. See Mitford, 153, on questionable authenticity of Gladstone's words (revised ed.).

20. Mitford, 17-18.

21. Mitford, 95.

22. Mitford, 18.

23. Charles McCabe. "Grief Therapists." San Francisco Chronicle. December 8, 1965. 2B.

24. Dr. Joyce Brothers. "Whey They Behave That Way: Even Bizarre Funeral Serves Good Function." In The Milwaukee Journal. November 2, 1963. Get rest of citation. Reprinted in The Director. November, 1963. 8.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. On Death and Dying. New York: Macmillan, 1969. 6-7.

29.Theodore W. Landphair. “The Key is `Managed Grief’: How Funeral Directors–and Students–View Their Career.” National Observer. June 8, 1970.

30. Charles W. Wahl. “Human Mortality and Its Role in Human Affairs.” The Director. Vol. 39. N. 8. August, 1969. 7.

31. William M. Lamers. A Centurama of Conventions: A Review of all the Conventions of NFDA Focusing on the Words and Deeds of Funeral Service Practitioners. No publishing info. But came from NFDA, Milwaukee.

32. Edgar N. Jackson. For the Living. Des Moines, Iowa: Channel Press, 1963. 9-11.

33. Ibid., 53.

34. Paul E. Irion. The Funeral: Vestige or Value? Nashville: Abingdon, 1966. 100-103.

35. Ibid., 106.

36. Ibid., 107.

37. Ibid., 166.

38. Rev. James L. Kidd. “An Ecumenical Funeral Service for the `New’ Church.” The Director. Vol. 39. No. 3. March, 1969. 3.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Rev. R. Earl Allen. "A Pastor's View of Funerals." Baptist Standard. April 21, 1971. Reprinted in The Director. Vol. 41. No. 7. July, 1971. 10.

42. Ibid., 11.

43. Jack P. Lowndes. "How can the minister and the mortician work together for the benefit of the bereaved?" Casket & Sunnyside. Vol. 101, n. 8. August 1971. 16.

44. Ibid., 48.

45. "Should the Body be Present at the Funeral?" Brochure. From the Gupton Mortuary College Library. No date, no author, no publishing information.