

Cremation: A Sensible Alternative

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For many, death and its aftermath is a distasteful subject; a subject to be ignored or avoided until suddenly it demands attention. Those who lose a close relative or friend are often left in a state of shock and grief. They are ill-prepared to handle arrangements for a funeral or burial or cremation—yet they often *must* attend to the myriad social and financial details.

My own mother's death last year was sudden, and—like most optimists who repress or deny even the possibility of a loved one's death—my sister, my brother, and myself were not prepared with a specific plan of action. All we knew was that—in the absence of specific instructions in her will—she had mentioned wanting her body cremated. I hope that recounting my experiences in arranging the cremation will be of some help to CC® readers.

In much of the world cremation is considered the only sensible form of "burial." So it is strange that it is so difficult to arrange a simple cremation in the United States. The laws concerning funeral arrangements are far from uniform in the various states, and sometimes seem to be based more on superstition than on good sense.

For example, it is not generally known that funeral laws in many states mandate that you deal with a funeral director—even though your only objective is disposal of a body through cremation. Even when a body is donated to medical research, the services of a funeral director may be required just to move it.

According to Jessica Mitford, author of *The American Way of Death*, the American funeral industry has steadfastly fought against "direct cremation."<sup>1</sup> This means taking the body directly to the crematorium, bypassing the need for a coffin or even an undertaker. Direct cremation is virtually impossible in the U.S. because most states require caskets for cremation.<sup>2</sup> Even when not required by state law, many funeral homes force those arranging cremations to purchase coffins. In one recent case, the Federal Trade Commission prohibited a funeral home chain from requiring customers to buy a coffin for immediate cremations.<sup>3</sup>

When my mother died, I asked the director of the hospital for the name of a reputable local funeral director. I got the name and checked the yellow pages for the telephone number. A

domineering voice answered my call, and after several minutes of well-modulated condolences and circumlocution, I was told that a simple cremation would cost \$400! Fifteen minutes later, this same funeral director called me back and assured me that he would never refuse to handle a needy case for \$250. His eagerness to assume my burden led me back to the yellow pages, where I found a profusion of advertisements for funeral homes. Under a separate listing were the names of several crematoria. The spokesmen for these organizations were frank. I was told that the actual charge for cremation was \$50 to \$75, but that arrangements for pick-up and transport of the body, as well as the paperwork at the county clerk's office, added to the price.

The director of one crematorium was sympathetic to those families who preferred to conduct their own memorial services, but pointed out to me that the law required that the body be transported by a licensed person. He then gave me the name of a licensed funeral director who specialized in simple arrangements. This fellow told me that he would pick up the body, handle the paperwork, and arrange for the cremation for \$175. We agreed to this. The following morning we met him at the crematorium and were asked to verify that it was indeed my mother's body—as we had done at the time of her death.

It was only at this moment that we were informed that the actual cremation would not take place immediately. The cremation was scheduled for a later time—presumably, because it would cost less

to cremate several bodies at once. A week later, I had to remind the crematorium that the ashes had not been delivered as promised.

My experience with funeral directors was hardly comforting. Some lied. One insisted that a coffin was legally required for a cremation, even though it was not. Others tried to make me feel cheap. Almost all used archaic phrases and euphemisms to describe what is really a series of simple, straightforward procedures.

I am reminded of my mother in many ways—particularly when I look at one of her paintings. At her memorial service my brother read a beautiful eulogy, which her children—and ours—will always be able to read with happy tears. A cemetery plot with an engraved stone tablet would merely be superfluous.

Interestingly, the British funeral industry has not developed in the intensely competitive way that it has in the U.S. However, even in England a coffin is a legal requirement for burial or cremation, and subtle pressure is exerted by funeral directors in order to sell handsome, high-priced coffins out of "respect for the dead." The British crematorium is typically set in extensive grounds and gardens. The minimum charge for a cremation is £ 170, or about 300 dollars. An urn costs extra.

One interesting difference between Great Britain and the United States is in the treatment of the remains of cremation. A cremated body is reduced not just to fine ashes, but to ashes and recognizable bone fragments of various sizes. It is even possible to obtain medical information from the remains

of cremated bones.<sup>4</sup> In Great Britain the remains are usually pulverized to facilitate scattering the ashes in gardens or elsewhere. About 25% of the dead are cremated, and about 90% of the cremated remains are scattered in Britain.<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, however, some states prohibit scattering, and pulverizing is rare or non-existent. The reason for this cultural difference may be economic—scattering interferes with the sale of urns.

In the Soviet Union and certain Eastern European countries, cremation marks the end of a distinguished career for high-ranking government officials and other notable individuals. However, the bodies of the very highest-ranking officials are buried! There are several categories of interment, each denoting the prestige accorded to the deceased. The bodies of the most well-known and respected Soviet officials, such as Lenin, are placed in mausoleums. The next most prestigious officials are buried in the ground near the Kremlin wall. This includes foreigners such as the American John Reed, author of *Ten Days That Shook The World*.<sup>5</sup> Lower-ranking individuals are cremated, and their remains are placed in niches in the Kremlin wall covered by a marking plate. Ordinary citizens may opt for cremation, but there is a shortage of crematoria time due to the high demand. Getting a place in a cemetery near any large city is difficult, but it is equally difficult in the United States and elsewhere.

In the large Russian cities about 20% of bodies are cremated. The number is limited only by available

capacity in the crematoria. In order to be cremated the relatives of the deceased must present letters or testimony verifying that the person deserves cremation, even though cremation costs considerably less than burial.

According to one report, the proportion of bodies cremated in the U.S. has in the last few years risen to about one in twenty.<sup>6</sup> In California the proportion is about one in six.<sup>1</sup> But even though the practice is increasing in this country it is still unusual and often complicated. What continues to puzzle me is the non-existence, to the best of my knowledge, of some organization in the U.S. that could help make cremation a simple and inexpensive procedure.

Someone should make it easier for cremations to be arranged, and it seems appropriate that scientists take the lead in this area. In Great Britain, for example, the cremation "movement" was initiated in the 1870s mainly by physicians, scientists, and other intellectuals. Even with that kind of support, it was not until 1884 that cremation became legal in England.

There are several reasons why today's scientists should be concerned. For one thing, scientists as a group are less squeamish than others about the practical side of death. Physicians, for example, routinely deal with the realities of life and death. Life scientists of all types are intimately familiar with the processes by which we live and die, and are acutely aware of the temporary nature of all living things. Physicists and astronomers realize that our whole planet is merely a speck in

Nature's scheme, a particle of dust in the vast reaches of the Universe. Chemists know that all substances, even living bodies, are composed of parts which can be recombined in infinite variety. And engineers are trained to be pragmatic realists. For such individuals, all of whom are professional rationalists, cremation is a sensible concern.

Of course, cremation is only one option, and I would not suggest that it is appropriate for everyone. Some religions or sects forbid it, and some people, particularly in Western countries, are repelled by the idea of burning the body. Personal tastes and religious beliefs must certainly be respected.

But those of us who view cremation as a practical, sensible, dignified practice should not be forced to go through so much adversity. A cremation should be as easily arranged as a burial. A large part of the world's population accepts cremation as a commonplace, and we should do likewise.

It is a bitter and tragic irony that I discussed this very essay with my close friend and colleague, Robert L. Hayne, before his recent death. Bob

had strong feelings on the subject, and it is indicative of his character that when the time came, he wanted to donate his body to medicine, to be followed by cremation.

For many people, cremation is a dignified and sensible act. It eliminates the need for many of the trappings of conventional funerals and burials, and helps to emphasize the spiritual values of life and death over the physical.

A solution to the problem of arranging cremations would have both spiritual and economical benefits. Why don't the professional societies of scientists create a Cremation Society that can deal with this problem in an intelligent fashion and set examples for the rest of society to follow? Although there is a Cremation Association of America, its members are mostly cemetery operators, so it represents the interests of those in the cremation business.<sup>1</sup> Most professional societies have "life" insurance plans, a euphemism if ever there was one. Why not "death" insurance plans which include a provision for simple, low-cost cremation? Your reaction to this proposal would be of interest to me.

#### REFERENCES

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