

The American Way of Death Revisited

Delivered as a Mount Holyoke College Back to Class talk on May 17, 2013, by Eva Steiner Moseley '53

Congratulations for being here; most people don't want to hear about anything to do with death. We all know we're going to die, although it's sometimes hard to truly believe it. But you don't have to believe it to think ahead and make some decisions.

First a bit about Jessica Mitford, the 6th of 7 children, all but one girls, of a conservative upper-class family with a large house near Oxford. From an early age she rebelled against her sheltered existence. She was not allowed to go to school. Her "Muv" taught her geography: "See, England and all our Empire possessions are a lovely pink on the map. Germany is a hideous mud-colored brown"; and history: "the poor little princes in the Tower...Charlemagne, claimed by Grandfather as our ancestor...hateful, drab Cromwell...the heroic Empire Builders, bravely quelling the black hordes of Africa for the glory of England...the Americans, who had been expelled from the Empire for causing trouble, and who no longer had the right to be a pretty pink on the map...the Filthy Huns, who killed Uncle Clem in the war...."[p. 9 in the first of two delightful memoirs, *Daughters & Rebels*]. On p. 45, Muv explained a gold vase in the family's London house: "Don't you remember darling, it was given to Great-Great-Grand-father by the Irish; they were so *extremely* grateful to him for helping to put down one of their rebellions."

Mitford's first husband, Esmond Romilly, fought in Spain on the Loyalist side and was killed early in World War II. Her second, Robert Treuhaft, a US lawyer who worked for labor and civil rights, figures prominently in the second memoir, *A Fine Old Conflict*. (The title is due to her mishearing of a line in the *Internationale*, the communist

anthem: "Tis the final conflict....") He and Mitford were for a time members of the Communist Party USA. She wasn't much of a "homemaker" and one day Treuhaft came home and commented on the state of the house. "Woman's work is never done," she said and he replied, "You can say that again; not in this house." Other books include *Kind and Usual Punishment*, an exposé of prisons, and *The American Way of Birth*, about the other end of life.

The American Way of Death was her most influential book. Published in 1963 and in a revised edition in 1998, it is mainly an exposé of the funeral industries, especially undertakers and cemeteries, written with conviction and humor. Many undertakers try to make those already suffering from grief and possibly guilt feel that to honor the dead they have to spend a lot (even money they don't have), for fancy caskets, viewings that call for embalming and makeup, banks of flowers, etc. They make people believe that embalming is required by law, which it rarely is, and promise that the casket, and the concrete vault that most cemeteries now require, preserve the body forever, which is simply untrue. They don't reveal that the fluid used in embalming is mainly formaldehyde, a carcinogen.

Mitford warns squeamish readers to skip her lengthy description of embalming. In a later book, *Grave Matters*, Mark Harris sums up what happens in a casket:

Anaerobic bacteria attack the body's organic matter by putrefying it, turning soft body parts to mush and bloating the corpse with foul-smelling gas. In above-ground mausoleums, the buildup of methane gas has...blown the lid off caskets and marble door panels off crypts.... Even an embalmed corpse will eventually decompose.... The breakdown of an embalmed body...is likely to release combined body fluids, liquefied tissue, formaldehyde, bacteria, and corporeal acids..., [which] may trickle out of a porous wood casket. Metal caskets are more resilient, but the corpse's acids will breach them as well.... Expensive vaults sold as waterproof are often full of water.

When Mitford's book appeared, the US already had a network of groups called Memorial Societies. Like Mitford, they were and are dedicated to protecting consumers from sharp dealings and giving them information so they can choose only the goods and services they really want. There were about 17,000 households in these Memorial Societies in 1963; soon after the book appeared, there were nearly a million. She was indeed a "woman of influence"!

More recently, undertakers started calling themselves Memorial Societies, so the organization is now called Funeral Consumers Alliance, FCA, still concerned with consumer choice and education, so the bereaved can get only what they really want from funeral homes, cemeteries, florists, casket makers, monument companies. For instance, in most states you don't have to hire a funeral director at all. Even where you do have to (as in N.Y. state), or if you want to hire one, as a general rule it's good to "pre-plan" (as it's called, meaning "pre-need," before a death) but it's not smart to pre-pay: a funeral home may go out of business or change owners; it may spend your money rather than holding it in trust; or what you paid no longer covers costs. Many people have been cheated out of the funds they thought would cover their funerals.

A passage from *Mortuary Management* that Mitford quotes shows how the industry sees FCA:

The leaders in these memorial society movements are not necessarily poor folk who cannot afford a standard funeral.... Many are both educated and of substantial means. Their objective is only partly to lower funeral prices. Equally strong is the desire to change established customs. It can be focused on funerals today and on something else tomorrow. The promulgations of these outfits hint at Communism and its brother-in-arms, atheism. [which ignores the fact that among the leaders are many clergy]

In fact the FCA emphasizes informed choice, and simplicity and economy for those who want them. In Mitford's time cremation was considered the progressive,

intelligent, sophisticated choice. She chose it, as many still do, as a simple, inexpensive, dignified way to go, and many people like the ritual of scattering ashes. Mitford's were scattered over the Pacific.

But I never wanted to be cremated. When my mother died, in 1971, among the coffins my brother and I were shown was a plain pine box. I wanted it but the Jewish undertaker said it was only for the Orthodox. (No doubt his rule: the Orthodox require it but can they forbid it for others?) We're Jewish but secular, so she was cremated in a more expensive box. That plain wooden box started me thinking about what I want, and a few years ago I learned that others in the FCA of Eastern Massachusetts are also interested in simple, natural burial. As with natural childbirth, the latest trend turns out to be the traditional way.

Why not cremation? It uses a lot of energy and so adds to global warming. It pollutes the air, especially with vaporized mercury, which settles in lakes and streams and is taken up by fish. But for me the main argument focuses on the natural cycles that keep life on Earth going: put simply, plants feed animals, and animals—with their wastes and their bodies—feed plants. When our bodies decompose in a healthy way, they enrich the soil. Cremation is wasteful; you're burning up matter that could replenish the soil. If you care about the environment, cremation is not the best choice. For me the main thing is becoming part of the Earth, an idea as satisfying, intellectually and emotionally, as thoughts of death can be.

What is Green Burial?

What is natural or green burial, and why is it better than conventional burial? Green cemeteries permit no embalming or other extraneous chemicals. In a natural burial, aerobic bacteria and creatures that live in the soil gradually turn the body and the

shroud or coffin into more soil. It's recycling, composting, part of the natural cycle that makes life possible.

Most conventional cemeteries require vaults or grave liners to keep graves from subsiding, to make cemetery upkeep, especially mowing, easier. Everything buried in green cemeteries must be biodegradable. The soil dug up to make the grave is mounded; then, as the body and the container decompose, the mound settles to ground level.

Instead of the usual elaborate headstones, green cemeteries generally permit only flat, unpolished stone or wood markers level with the ground. Some don't allow any markers; particular graves are located using GPS. A field of graves is a field. You can walk there, watch birds or butterflies, even picnic. Most permit only native plants and ban artificial flowers, flowerpots, plastic decorations, etc. Green burial is usually more economical and uses fewer resources, and it adds good stuff to the land, rather than bad stuff. According to the Green Burial Council, each year the US funeral industry buries

- more than enough metal to rebuild the Golden Gate Bridge
- more than enough embalming fluid to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool (> 800,000 gallons)
- more than 1.5 million tons of concrete (enough to build a highway from New York to Detroit)
- more than 30 million board feet of wood
- plastic, vinyl, fiberglass, adhesives

And cremation consumes natural gas and electricity for a process that would happen naturally; 80% of crematories don't filter emissions.

This is why one FCA colleague considers all conventional cemeteries toxic-waste dumps.

There are more than 200 green cemeteries in the UK. The first in the US is Ramsey Creek in South Carolina. There is one, Greensprings, near Ithaca, N.Y., at least one each in California, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, and there are two in Maine, but so far none in Massachusetts.

Today's standard funeral is not traditional; it has become conventional. Mitford made this point:

...the salient features of the contemporary American funeral (beautification of the corpse, metal casket and vault, banks of store-bought flowers, the ubiquitous offices of the "funeral director") are all of very recent vintage..., and each has been methodically designed and tailored to extract maximum profit for the trade. [p. 141 of *The American Way of Death Revisited*]

And on p. 64:

John Kroshus, teacher of mortuary science: "If embalming is taken out of the funeral, then viewing the body will be lost. If viewing is lost, then the body itself will not be central to the funeral. If the body is taken out of the funeral, then what does the funeral director have to sell?"

Mitford added: "I could not have put it better."

In a truly traditional funeral and burial, the *family* collects, washes, and dresses the body, and lays it in a coffin of wood, wicker, or cardboard, or just in a shroud, with ice packs or dry ice that will keep it presentable for 2-3 days or even longer. Visitors come to the house rather than a funeral home. If you prefer to use a funeral director, you might find one who will agree to omit the "services" that you don't want: perhaps no hearse, or no flowers. (Traditional funerals didn't include flowers.) Some funeral directors are catching on that green burial is a growing trend, even if it's growing slowly.

Mitford, who died in 1996, didn't mention natural burial, which is fairly new, part of the environmental movement. But she showed the way and I think would approve of what

one environmentalist called “eco-friendly death.” Mark Harris sums it up well in *Grave Matters*:

Our best last act may...be the simple act of using what remains of our physical existence to fertilize depleted soil, push up a tree, preserve a bit of wild from development and in the process perpetuate the natural cycle of life that supports those we leave behind. All the better that such basic, earth-friendly send-offs are sparing of resources, driven by families, and easy on the pocketbook



Resources on Green Burial and related matters

Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (1998), is an enlightening, at times scathing, look at the funeral industry and its various practices, not least embalming. She does not discuss natural burial, however. The original 1963 edition inspired tremendous growth in the FCA movement (then called Memorial Societies).

Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (2007), discusses the various issues of after-death care, including green, and even backyard, burial, with many anecdotes and examples of good and bad practices.

Joshua Slocum and Lisa Carlson, *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death* (2011), summarizes the issues and provides information on funeral rules, laws, and problems in each of the 50 states. Slocum is executive director of the national FCA, Carlson holds the same position in the Funeral Ethics Organization.

- Funeral Consumers Alliance (national, and regional affiliates)
- Green Burial Council (which lists existing green cemeteries)
- search for green burial videos
- Mourning Dove Studio (Arlington, Mass.) sells biodegradable coffins and shrouds.