Ars moriendi in aetate fori:
Or, The Art of Dying
in the Age of the Marketplace

Ivan Emke
Associate Professor
Social/Cultural Studies
Sir Wilfred Grenfell College
Corner Brook, NL
A2H 6P9

709-637-6200, ext. 6322
iemke@swgc.mun.ca

Abstract

The medieval tradition of <u>ars moriendi</u> (or "the art of dying") provided instructions regarding the appropriate preparations for the devout to follow in their final days. The directives related to the care of the soul, the completion of one's life work and the resolution of unsettled matters. The focus of the tradition was on the relationship of the individual to divine requirements for "living the good death." However, in our modern secular age, our identities (and some say even our purpose) are forged through consumption activities. There is still a need to remember our dead, to ensure that their lives are not forgotten, but this is now done through the purchase of commodities rather than through the imposition of self-discipline, the saying of prayers and the recitation of litanies. Furthermore, the growth of the Funeral Services Industry has augmented this shift toward modes of memorialization which are channeled through the cash nexus.

This paper asks, "what would an appropriate 'ars moriendi' look like for us today?" It would be affected by factors such as secularization, declining social bonds, increasing mobility, the primacy of the marketplace in the construction of identity, altered death trajectories (a shift from mortality due to infectious disease to mortality from chronic disease), and the rise of an industry which focuses on finding ways to commodify emotions and remembering.

> In answering the question, the paper uses data on trends in memorialization and personalization from Funeral Services publications. Throughout, the research shows how businesses within Funeral Services help to construct an "appropriate" response to death and to the remembering of the dead. They do this by presenting specific products as relevant tools in both celebrating the life of the deceased and in quelling the sadness of the breach which death has opened. Indeed, the marketplace attempts to fulfill not only our needs in life, but also in death.

> Dying is the most embarrassing thing that can ever happen to you, because someone's got to take care of all your details.... You'd like to help them, and most of all you'd like to do the whole thing yourself, but you're dead so you can't (Andy Warhol, cited in Quigley, 1996: 311).

As Dr. Johnson once observed, there is nothing quite like death to concentrate the mind. While death is a certainty for all of humanity, there may be a tendency to avoid its discussion rather than to consider how to prepare for the event (Becker, 1973; Gorer, 1955). This has not always been the case, nor is it necessarily the situation at present. Some, such as Walter (1996), point to the rise of the general discussion of death in popular culture, a trend which he refers to (following Lofland) as the "happy death" movement.

Our preparations for death depend, in part, on how we view the death. The body is both a physical and a cultural entity, and bodies may be constructed differently in different cultures. In western discourse, the body is closely related to our individuality as a discrete historical subject. In comparison, Chatterjee (2002) argues that in Indian philosophy, which is reflected in Indian medical practice, the body is seen as being relatively insignificant. Thus, the meanings attached to illness, and even death, are different than in western social and medical thought. The journey to death, when the body is falling apart, may also be seen as different in the two traditions. In the western medical tradition, outside of palliative care, the focus is on maintaining the body, or exacting a cure. The art of dying, as far as western medical science is concerned, involves some rejection of death's creeping hold on the body.

However, death has a history. By this we mean that how we view death has undergone a number of changes. In his classic work, Aries (1974) argues that there are five general patterns in Western attitudes toward death. These are not attitudes toward the dead, or

even necessarily toward dying oneself, but toward death in general. These are presented somewhat chronologically, however all of these may exist at present in our society.

- Tame death, when death is familiar and public. There is no attempt to evade it, but people prepare for it, and welcome it when their time comes, with the community being fully involved in all aspects of the event.

- Death of the self, when the afterlife becomes seen as being frightening, as the site of a final judgement. This accompanied the development of the idea of the self, the individual, and then of individual salvation. The focus moves to the dying person, and death is the final ordeal of our lives, and we must be prepared, as it may lead to heaven or hell. In this approach, there is a rise of the ars moriendi traditions, which relate to the art of dying well.

- Remote and imminent death, when death is seen as a natural event, not a supernatural struggle. Mortality is accepted as inevitable and people will seek a "good" death (imminent), but death is also something to keep at bay for as long as possible, as it is untamed and dangerous (remote).

- Death of the other, which dealt with the separation caused by death, the breaking of social relationships which death causes. The spirit of the dead is seen as still present in this world (maybe near the body for a time). This was accompanied by a rise of spiritualism, in the 19th century, as an attempt to contact the spirits of the dead.

- Death denied, a more modern attitude, where death is a solitary and even "indecent" activity. There is a shift in focus from the dying person to the ones who remain, and the feelings of others take precedence (if they are

uncomfortable with the dying person, the fault is not theirs but that of death itself or the dying person). The dead are prepared by professionals, and funeral rituals are only a brief disruption in everyday routines.

Another important characterization of attitudes toward death comes from Tony Walter (1994), who outlined three "ideal types" of attitudes.

- Traditional (like Aries' "tame death"), wherein religion and social traditions determine the script to be used in dying, disposal and mourning.

- Modern (hidden, or "forbidden death"), where the central character is not the dying person, but the doctor. There is a reliance on drugs and medicine rather than on theology, and knowledge about dying is held by professionals, and slowly given out to the dying individuals.

- Neo-modern, the third phase where private experience and professional expertise are no longer separated, but come together in palliative and hospice care. The dying person regains control over the process of dying, and makes informed choices about her/his future. Funerals emphasize celebrating the unique life of the deceased, and mourners are free to express grief and sorrow, and talk about the loss. This is not a return to tradition, but an opportunity to pick and choose from traditions. This shows the primacy of the individual over tradition and expertise, and the importance of the client/deceased as a postmodern consumer.

With this historical context in tow, it is useful to ask how our current situation may differ from that of our past. Here in the consumer culture, what is the good death and the good remembrance? In answering these questions, this paper considers social shifts which have influenced funeral rituals, and proposes several characteristics of the

preferred methods of remembrances in this consumer culture. Evidence is taken from social science work on funeral rituals, as well as from the funeral services industry literature itself.

   The paper now moves to the social shifts which have influenced the current <u>ars moriendi</u>, or art of dying.

(i) Rise of the funeral services industry

   One of the significant components of modern funeral practices is the professionalization of those who provide the care, display and disposal of the body. The 20th century saw the rise of an industry which focused on finding ways to commodify emotions and remembering. This is not meant in a pejorative sense, at least toward funeral directors and embalmers, but is more a criticism of the suppliers within the industry. Even a short glance through the extensive and multi-coloured catalogues for remembrance paraphernalia will show the extent of commercialization around death and mourning (even in an age of cremation). Indeed, some funeral directors feel that the commercial aspects of the funeral industry take away from the professional nature of their work. "The question is this: Can we continue one-fourth professional and three-fourths commercial?" (Mitchell, 1936: 52).

   As for the funeral directors themselves, they are clearly involved in the sale of such merchandise, but their central functions relate more to ceremonial or facilitative work. On these functions, Unruh wrote: "It is the funeral director who must guide, manage, and control both the bereaved family and other audience members through the processes of

funeralization" (1976: 11). This task is to arrange the funeral and visitations and the disposal of the remains, to act as the director (in a theatrical sense as well) of these public times, negotiate the interactions among the players, keep in regular phone contact with the family and clergy, continually remind the family of details, watch the family closely and help them to "manage" their emotions. In an earlier account of <u>ars moriendi</u>, it would be religious functionaries who played these roles in facilitating the rituals.

A part of the ceremonial function of funeral directors is to ensure that proper decorum is followed in that relationships to the deceased are respected; for example, that families receive different treatment than other mourners. The organization of who rides in which car and which cars go before others relate to the smooth application of normative rules of kinship. These funeral ceremonies can then take place "<u>without</u> undue participant awareness" (Smale, 1997: 117). For those who have little contact with death and mourning, the advice of a funeral professional becomes crucial in the "proper" administration of funeral ritual.

(ii) The rise of deathcare as a market

The concern over a commercialization of funerals is not a new issue. It pre-dates the arrival of what could be termed the "Funeral Industry" and was around long before funeral directors first advertised their services. Indeed, concern over the ostentation of funerals may be historically parallel with Aries' second and third phases of western attitudes toward death. Harding (2002) notes the concerns of the church with the secularization and commercialization of funerals during the period 1500-1670. During

this time, rituals were used to distinguish the identity and the status of deceased. Through funeral rituals, wealth could be translated into status. "Funerals were becoming a secular, social ritual of consumption" (Harding, 2002: 208). Thus, some of the tensions around funerals which exist today clearly pre-date the rise of the modern funeral services industry. However, if issues of cost become more important, this makes decisions around funerals more one-dimensional.

This said, one needs to acknowledge the primacy of the marketplace in the construction of our identity *throughout life*. Indeed, this is a cultural trend and a mode of expression with which we are generally comfortable. We are familiar with the allotment of money to all manner of ritual events, from birthdays and mother's day to high school proms, first communions and retirement parties. In all of these cases, a significant outpouring of finances may accompany the event, a pattern of spending which is generally considered as legitimate. If we rely on products to commodify and mark the important moments of our life, it would be hypocritical to condemn the same purchasing behaviour in relation to death.

McRae (2003) notes the irony in that our society is very affluent, and has a tendency to purchase items with minimal justification; however, in terms of funeral costs, family members may haggle over prices, and have the feeling that they are not getting value for their money. "Something in our culture is out of alignment. Today, death care is marginal in the lives and thoughts of most Americans, but it was not always so" (McRae, 2003: 8). He decries the loss of the thriving industry of the cemetery, when people spent small fortunes on memorials. "The cemetery, memorial and funeral business thrived in 1900 because it offered rich, exotic and meaningful experiences. It could provide this

because of two vital practices: The best, and most creative artistic talent of the time provided the design and choreography. It was all woven together as an integrated, experiential package aimed at the families' deepest needs and wants" (McRae, 2003: 9).

(iii) Secularization

  A third influence on the modern art of dying relates to secularization. It needs to be recognized, at the outset, that there is a debate about the meaning of secularization, and the nature of indicators which should be used to provide empirical support. For example, if we were to simply look at church attendance figures, there appears to be a marked change in social behaviours. However, if we were to add in all of the other indicators of a continuing spirituality (including the continuing widespread belief in such things as God and heaven), as well as the strong political and cultural currency of religion, then it is not so clear that secularization has occurred. For more information on this debate, see Cox, 1999; Stark, 1999; and Swatos and Christiano, 1999.

  For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that secularization (whatever its level of influence) has involved a change in who has liturgical control over the events around funeral, an increasing emphasis on individuality, a tendency toward memorial services (held outside church auspices), and the rise of funeral directors as the promoters and protectors of funeral rituals (taking over this function from the clergy). This role for funeral directors goes beyond their work with individual families, and takes on a more public and educational role, one which is more commonly undertaken by associations, where they attempt to advise the public on the importance of funeral ritual and the variety

of ways to remember the deceased. In their defence, there is some evidence that symbolic actions and ceremonies are useful to people in facilitating their griefwork (cf., Doka, 1984; Bolton and Camp, 1987; Irion, 1991). Indeed, with increasing secularization and the decline in the importance of institutionalized religion, funeral services workers are increasingly the ones who are upholding the importance of funeral rituals. As Paul noted, funeral directors help people to "ritualize" a loved one's death and thus they serve an important function (Paul, 1997; see also Wolfelt, 1994). This may put them in a conflict of interest, but no moreso than professions such as dentistry (which promotes regular dental checkups) or law (which informs us of our legal rights, options and responsibilities on a regular basis) or even university academics (who regularly pronounce on the value of education for its own sake). It may be a characteristic of professions that, to some extent, they create their own demand.

  To illustrate the effects of secularization, in the middle ages one of the focuses of the <u>ars moriendi</u> was on the decaying body. This was concretized by tombs with effigies of decaying bodies, depicted with worms and insects. "Their purpose was to remind all of the process taking place below. In Christendom these images provided people with a constant reminder that they should not become too attached to this life as all their worldly possessions, including their own bodies, would eventually corrupt and decay" (Hallam et al., 1999: 127). With secularization, this has changed. The body is not simply the repository of the soul, but the very seat of subjectivity itself. "In the current system, the dead body is the signifier of the loss of self and the loss of individuality – the material reality of death" Hallam et al., 1999: 127).

Fulton (1965) argued that funeral directors are engaged in two types of work, profane (disposing of the corpse) and sacred (ministering to the social and spiritual needs of the living). It is widely accepted that in our time funerals tend to focus on the living. The care of the soul of the person who died is no longer the primary concern of funerals. This is not to suggest that funerals no longer have a function for the deceased. For example, <u>American Funeral Director</u> has a regular feature called "Funerals of the Famous," which outlines the death and memorialization of an important public figure. They go into some detail in terms of processions, flowers, ceremony, public responses, and so on. (This segment has spawned four books thus far, which are collections of these columns.) As the stories indicate, the function of these funerals is to confirm the identity and social position of the individual who has died (in a similar way to Harding's observations, mentioned above, regarding the period of 1500-1670). In a postmodern age, identity is both malleable and significant. The rituals which remain are used to confirm identity and "a life well lived," rather than to confirm a faith and a future of "eternal assurance." In this light, funeral ritual is generally presented as being of more value to the living than it is to the dead, accompanied by research findings which show that participation in funeral and burial rituals "is important to the affective adjustment of mourners grieving the loss of a loved one" (Gamino et al., 2000: 88).

The issue of the function of a funeral relates to the anthropological concern over rituals as rites of passage. One of the prominent authors on the topic of rites of passage was Van Gennep, who saw the purpose of funeral ritual as a physical and symbolic method of incorporating the deceased into the "world of the dead" (Van Gennep, 1961). For example, the travel to the cemetery for the commital is when the living and the dead both

leave the land of the living to go to the land of the dead (assuming that there is a strong distinction between these two places). Then, after interment, the living leave the land of the dead to return to the land of the living. This is a ritual which confirms the rite of passage, the voyage of the now-dead person. Through the funeral rituals, "the deceased is symbolically transferred from his or her social community to the 'afterlife'" (Canine, 1999: 105). It may be that, in our rush to talk about how funerals are for the living these days, we have forgotten the function of the funeral for the deceased. It is their rite of passage as well.

(iv) The body and subjectivity

Our identity, and subjectivity, is tied to our body, in some way; it is a part of our physical presence. After death, we may try to find ways to reassert the identity of the person who has died (through the use of ritual such as eulogies and memorial services). As mentioned above, with reference to van Gennep, the period of time which surrounds funeral ritual, in our culture as well as in others, is one where the body of the deceased is moving from the world of physicality to the world of memory. The physical body is slowly, very gradually, losing its importance and it is being replaced by memory. Increasingly, in our world of wires, there are opportunities to locate this memory not only in our own minds, but on the internet as well (for a price, of course). The relevant services come with names such as "Memorials Online" and "LifeFiles." There is also "Funeral-Cast" a company which will webcast funerals (for a fee), which mourners who

are not able to be physically present can click on and watch from their desktops elsewhere. (You can watch funerals from across North America on their site, at http://www.funeral-cast.com/.) This is a peculiarly modern transition for the dead. Where did they go? They're on the net.

  Underlying this question of the art of dying are fundamental quandaries such as: How important is our uniqueness, our individuality? How closely is this linked to our body? Are we a body, or do we simply have a body? When my body stops functioning, what will happen to *me*? The terms we use for different manifestations of ourselves might help to mark our transition from a unique subject to dispersed memory. But this leaves open the question of what or who is the deceased? An object of manipulation and in need of care, or still a subject? What would make it a subject? Having a subjectivity intact? (Now, if only we could agree on what subjectivity was; even for people who are alive). Seale wrote that "the material end of the body is only roughly congruent with the end of the social self" (1998: 34). There are people, such as those who are extremely old, who are socially isolated but physically alive. They are objects, but not subjects. On the other hand, sometimes there is a social presence which can outlast the body, as in the case of memories and ancestor worship. These would be subjects, but not objects. Or, if we were to consider the case of infants, do they ever attain a subjectivity? How do we remember a life that was not lived? In the past, in many cases stillbirths were not treated as subjects, but they were removed from the parents' view as soon as possible and were disposed of as medical waste. Currently, stillbirths are increasingly being given a subjectivity (of sorts) before they are cremated or buried. The parents are urged to name the child, to

photograph it, to spend time with it, to mourn it and to talk about the experience (even if few wish to listen to them).

Furthermore, if our identity and subjectivity were not tied to our physical presence, then why, after death, do we try to find ways to reassert the identity of the person who died? That is how we may make sense of their life, to reconfirm their identity, and thus (for one last time) celebrate them as a subject (even though the body may not be present).

Shaping an <u>ars moriendi</u> for the age of the marketplace

Given these challenges, and others, funeral services has been able to respond through the provision of products and services designed to help mark the life and death of the deceased. Some of these products may be prompted by consumers, and some by retailers, but it is sometimes hard to separate these out.

The core item in funeral ritual is still the body. Without a body, well-prepared, there is less chance to offer the wide variety of products and services which can be purchased. As one embalmer noted, years ago: "Were it not for the embalmers' ability to preserve, sterilize and render beautiful the bodies of the dead, the casket, as it has been perfected for use on this continent, would unquestionably never have come into being" (Mitchell, 1936: 52). Some years earlier, Puckle asked: "What is there to be said for or against embalming? From the point of view of the trade it has no doubt very much to commend it, for you can sell your richest, most beautiful casket and obtain in addition a liberal fee for embalming" (Puckle, 1990: 231). Originally written in 1926, Puckle already understood the economic value of embalming and the fussing over the person who has

died. In an article on the need to people to spend more time in their embalming: "if you

are an embalmer, it just makes perfect sense to do the very best you possibly can. Why?

Well, one reason is job security. If you perform your job well, more people will select a

viewing, which means more profit for the company and therefore job security"

(McDaniel, 2000).

However, the trends toward fewer visitations, direct cremation and closed casket

services represent challenges to the industry. This may be met by increased rhetoric

regarding the importance of the body as a therapeutic intervention for mourners, or by the

provision of products which can "stand in" for the body (such as mourning jewellery).

The preparation of remains through embalming and restorative arts is an important part of

the role of funeral workers. This was called "humanization" by Howarth (1996), and she

saw it as one of the major elements of the undertaking profession. During my visits to

funeral homes, I was often regaled with stories from embalmers about classic cases they

had handled, usually involving some dramatic transformation, through stitching and

reconstruction, of an accident victim. All of them showed a great pride in being able to

offer the family an open casket visitation, so that their last "memory picture" would be

positive. Some also spoke with derision about "method embalmers," who will use the

very same mix of fluids and method of preparation, no matter what the deceased died

from or what physical shape they were in.

What follows are several constituent elements in the <u>ars moriendi</u> in the age of the

marketplace.

(i) Personalization

The focus on "personalization" these days indicates a trend within our consumer culture, whereby things or symbols speak for us. In the case of funerals, the body cannot speak. And so it speaks through the family's choice of casket, the memorial plaques and pictures, and the burial vault.   When the person is silent, the merchandise steps in. Merchandise can help to confirm a deceased person's identity (for example, if they were a veteran). Caskets, photographic displays and grave vaults can all be ordered to confirm an identity (including caskets with one's University seal on them). This use of funeral products as a source of memory and meaning is not new, as the Victorian funerals had a number of such forms of ostentation. And Harding (2002: 190) refers to the "personalization" of the funeral ceremony, in relation to changes in the Elizabethan prayerbook in the mid-1600s.

In some ways, the person who died has disappeared, and the products come to stand in for the dead. This often occurs in the industry literature. The signifier is the casket, and the signified is the person who died. Ironically, this could also be seen as a process of de-personalization, or a situation where the subjectivity of the individual is replaced by the representation of an object. Of course, our culture is full of this connection between goods and people. "You are what you buy/eat/wear," we are told. In the case of funerals, maybe "you were what they buy for you?"

There is a significant qualitative difference between exhibiting some of the deceased's own items at the wake, or a body clothed in its own clothing, and the purchasing of some new item which is meant to symbolize the life of the deceased (and the relationship between the living and the dead). Personalization may involve bringing in the favourite

hats of the deceased, for example. This is a form of remembrance. But it would be different to buy new hats, which bear some relationship to the deceased, and then display them. In the latter case, the consumption occurs after the death. This is not a displaying of one's worldly goods, but a continued accumulation (albeit briefly) of these goods. The sale of funeral clothing or of certain types of memorial jewelry would be examples of the latter.

Another part of the personalization of funeral ceremonies involves the sharing of eulogies, as a part of the art of being remembered This is resisted by some churches, where eulogies are seen as getting "out of hand," and are considered to be outside traditional burial and funeral rites. Indeed, some religious officials have even banned funeral eulogies (cf., Associated Press, 2003).

But what are the effects of relying on merchandise to tell people's stories? McDougald (2001) writes about his experience in wandering through the exhibits at the annual conference of the National Funeral Directors Association. He wrote: "I could not help but feel overwhelmed by the products available and their personalization options. At the same time, I felt amazed at how few offerings there were for creating meaningful services. Is our product knowledge the driving force of our wisdom?... Are we letting the manufacturers of funeral products tell us what is meaningful?" (McDougald, 2001: 52).

(ii) The body of the deceased as the centrepiece of remembrance: the precious body

> When funeral directors and consumers alike begin viewing deceased loved
> ones as inconveniences, to be "dealt with" in the most efficient, least time-

> consuming manner possible, lumped in with repairing the BMW and
> hauling out the trash, heaven help us all. Maybe we will end up getting
> exactly what we deserve (Raymond, 2000).

There are critics who maintain a dim view of the embalmed body as the centrepiece of

the American funeral. Ariès felt that the restoration of the body was a way to downplay

the fact that a death had occurred, and he linked it to Western society's inability to

acknowledge mortality. He wrote, in that classic dismissive style of some "old world"

theorists: "The idea of turning a deceased person into a living one in order to pay tribute

to him one last time may seem to us to be childish and ridiculous, intertwined, as it often

is in America, with commercial concerns and advertising jargon.... It is the first time that

a society has in a general way honored its dead while refusing them the status of death"

(Ariès, 1975: 156).

  In the same spirit, Davies (1996) sees an avoidance of death in the practice of

embalming the body. There is a process of distancing the living from the dead in both the

US and the UK; while the purpose is the same, the process is different in the two

countries: "..with the Americans choosing to *deny* death, decay and dissolution through

the disguise of embalming, while the British *avoid* them by means of cremation" (Davies,

1996: 60).

  However, these views are clearly not held by those in funeral services. "I heard for

years how 'funerals are for the living,' and while it may be true, the star of the show is

still the deceased" (Defort, 2001). Indeed, the appearance of the deceased is a "kingpin

issue" because if the family are not happy with the appearance, then they will find fault

with everything else. As one funeral director noted: "the 'main party' is not ready until

they look 'A&W' (Alive and Well) ... When you think about it, everything else we do

plays to that one issue" (McCormick, 2001: 105). The "main party" is a reference to the person who died. One of the "moments of truth" in funeral services is the moment when the family/friends first view the body of the deceased after its preparation (Wolfelt, 2001: 17).

Certain bodies clearly become highly valued. Prior (1989) points out how bodies, including dead bodies, can be politicized. The discussion of the funerals of the famous, or the funerals of police officers, show how those bodies, although no longer physically viable, become important political symbols. In the case of a police officer killed in "the line of duty" (while they were in uniform), the body takes on a new identity after death (or as a result of the death). The body of a police officer who dies from blocked arteries will be treated very differently from the body of a police officer who dies while attempting to apprehend a suspect. The facts of the death provide a new lens through which to view the value of the life which preceded it.

(iii) Bodies in need of protection: the vulnerable body

One of the enduring themes in funeral industry periodicals is the theme of preservation, that the body of the person who has died has a need for protection. Of course, a critic might quickly point out that, especially for those companies who make and sell grave vaults, this is simply a marketing strategy. Marshall McLuhan pointed out, in his interpretation of an ad for grave vaults, that the company relies on the need of the living to ensure that the bodies of the dead are protected. The ad in question has a visual of a woman (a widow?) looking outside her window at the rain, extending her hand to feel the

19

raindrops. The copy for the ad reads: "**There's deep consolation**... serene through shower or heavy rain... for those who know the casket of a dear one is protected against **water** in the ground by a Clark <u>Metal</u> Grave Vault" (cited in McLuhan, 1951: 15, emphases in original).

  Fifty years later, another advertisement for grave vaults plays on a similar set of desires of the living. An ad for a casket/vault combination for children contains the text: "The measure of a parent's love for their child cannot be measured. But what can be measured is how to ease their sorrow when that child is lost" (<u>Canadian Funeral News</u>, March 2001, p. 17). Likewise, a series of vaults for veterans emphasize the fact that they once protected us, and now it is our turn to reciprocate by purchasing metal grave vaults for their bodies.

(iv) The Need for Respect: the dignified body

> Reverent care for the dead is one of the things that makes us human
> (Peterson, 2001: 23).

  Another theme related to the <u>ars moriendi</u> in the age of the marketplace relates to the need to respect the body of the deceased. For some, the body deserves respect due to its being made in the image of God. As a statement on the funeral from the United Church of Canada noted: "The body, which has been the temple of the spirit through life in this world, is worthy of respect, and should be so treated after death ... Elaborate and costly devices to restore a life-like appearance to the body have no place in Christian practice" (United Church of Canada, 1950: 6-7). (In this view, embalming can obscure the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead.) A popular column from a funeral services publication made reference to three incidences of embalming in the Old

Testament, and asserts that the intent of the practice is: "to reverently care for the dead, regardless of the materials at hand" (Van Beck, 2000: 26). The author ends the article with a quote from Ecclesiastes: "A man may have a hundred children and live a long time, but no matter how long he lives, if he does not get his share of happiness, and does not receive a decent burial, then I say that a baby born dead is better off" (Van Beck, 2000: 26). Thus a good and reverent burial can give continuing meaning to a life.

 This respect for the body of the person who died extends throughout the funeralization process. In the Funeral Ethics Association's "Manual of Professional Practice,"under a section on professional conduct titled "Respect for the deceased," the association states: "In the preparation of the deceased, a good general rule to follow is to show the same care and consideration that would be given to a member of the embalmer's or funeral director's own family. The body entrusted to the care of the funeral firm represents the cherished remains of a person who, in life, held the love and esteem of a family and friends" (Funeral Ethics Association, 2000: 31). Klicker (2001) suggests that there is a range of behaviours which are not appropriate (or ethical) in the embalming room, for example swearing, smoking, listening to music, watching TV, telling jokes and even laughing. When bodies are shipped, they are to be clothed (otherwise this would show a sign of disrespect). During embalming, the genital area of the body is generally covered with a small cloth (cf., Klicker, 2001). At one time, in a number of states there were laws "requiring that a woman be in attendance when a female's remains are embalmed" (Bowman, 1959: 75).

 Furthermore, there is a great deal of respect, dignity and maintenance of decorum in funeral ceremony, as illustrated by the types of cars that funeral directors are implored to

21

purchase in the industry literature. The models have sleek lines, comfortable interiors,

numerous signifiers of class and privilege. But are they also signifiers of respect and

dignity? If so, then how is it that wealth comes to stand for dignity and respect? For

example, an ad for Cadillac states: "Dignity without compromise. Virtually every life

enriches us all. And when we honor that life, it should be with the highest dignity and

respect. This is why Cadillac DeVille has held such a prominent role in the funeral

profession for so long. And why the technology and amenities of DeVille 2000 will

continue that tradition into the new millennium. With renewed dignity, poise and

reverence for those who deserve the best" (American Funeral Director, November 2000,

p. 29).

(v) Deep comfort: the reassuring body

> Viewing the body is the first confirmation of death. This confrontation
> serves a necessary purpose in rudely awakening the griever to the finality
> of the loss. Viewing the body allows the griever to solidify pleasant
> memories of the deceased's physical wholeness, particularly in cases of
> bodily disfigurement due to accident or violence (Canine, 1999: 105).

> You must express your grief at the death of a loved one. The eyes of the
> dead must be gently closed and the eyes of the living must be gently
> opened (Jan Brugler, cited in McCormick, 2001b: 73).

 One of the standard litanies about the deceased, within the funeral industry literature, is

the importance to mourners to **see** the body. A note on the death of an industry leader

who set a high standard for body preparation states: "Years before a long list of 'grief

psychologists' existed, Edward Johnson truly knew that his work as an embalmer and

22

restorative practitioner helped survivors of loss to take the first steps toward healing" (McCormick, 2001b: 73).

In a profile of the Kreamer Funeral Home in Pennsylvania, the owner provides some advice on the importance of proper embalming technique, arguing that "How the deceased looks at a visitation is often a source of comfort to the family... They may have seen the person lying in the hospital with tubes, or looking emaciated after fighting cancer for six months. A proper memory picture gives the family a feeling of relief, of peace" (McCormick, 2001a: 61). In a similar argument (and it is sometimes remarkable how standard the rhetoric within funeral services is, despite the number of different speakers and authors), another funeral director notes: "For them [the family] to get one last opportunity to see mom or dad without a nursing home setting, or without esophageal tubes - and have mom or dad look presentable, it makes the grieving process easier for them" (McCormick, 2000: 86).

Not only is the properly-prepared body a source of reassurance for the family, the ability to make a body look "at rest" is a fountain of pride for embalmers as well. "One of the finest tributes that can be paid a funeral director and one of the tributes which he cherishes most is the oft-heard comment that the deceased looks so natural, so peaceful, as though he or she were merely asleep" (Smith, 1963: 31). They take pride in this work, but in so doing they also draw attention to the body itself, making it a central object within the funeral process and an appropriate focus for attention (cf., Quigley, 1996: 306).

(vi) Just a Song Before I Go: the body speaks

Thomas Lynch, in one of his short stories, refers to the work of a colleague, Wesley

Rice, who once spent a day and night piecing together the parts of a schoolgirl who had

been killed, in an attempt to give the body back to the family - to recover her identity. It

would not bring her back, but it would remove the sad evidence of the form of her death.

Lynch writes:

> Most embalmers, faced with what Wesley Rice was faced with after he'd
> opened the pouch from the morgue, would have simply said "closed
> casket," treated the remains enough to control the odor, zipped the pouch,
> and gone home for cocktails. It would have been easier. The pay was the
> same. Instead, he started working. Eighteen hours later the girl's mother,
> who had pleaded to see her saw her. She was dead, to be sure, and
> damaged; but her face was hers again, not the madman's version. The hair
> was hers, not his. The body was hers, not his. Wesley Rice had not raised
> her from the dead nor hidden the hard facts, but he had retrieved her death
> from the one who had killed her... Wesley had given them the body back
> (Lynch, 1997: 84).

In the midst of a stinging critique of the Canadian funeral industry, Coriolis (1967) notes

that the ability of the embalmer to reverse the ravages of disease on a body is "the only

genuine and certain achievement of the funeral business that I feel I can endorse without

hypocrisy" (Coriolis, 1967: 119). He states: "the comfort which is drawn by a family

from once more seeing a loved one at peace and free of the strictures of pain is

immeasurable" (Coriolis, 1967: 119). This respect is made more profound as it comes in

a book which is generally quite critical of the motives and behaviours of most of the

funeral operators of that time (the 1960s) who the author (a funeral director himself) had

worked with. Indeed, the author points out, earlier in the book, that embalming is usually

seen within the funeral industry as "the basis for the sale of profitable merchandise"

(1967: 38), and so he well understands the conflict of interest which occurs in the funeral

director's promotion of embalming technology. An embalmed body requires merchandise to be viewed, such as a casket, flowers, ancillary products such as picture boards, and so on, all of which come at a fee. But despite this, Coriolis argues that the body, restored to its former identity, regains its previous subjectivity in order to give family and friends one last chance to remember.

Conclusions: Deathcare in the age of the market

Some might say that even though the body is often at the centre of the funeral, the event is not really about the deceased, but about the family and friends who remain. They are the ones, after all, who are able to spread a positive word-of-mouth regarding the "meaning" of the funeral rituals and the quality of the service provided. Industry literature thus focusses on this aspect of the industry, and how to appeal to the new consumers with new ideas of ritual and value; to compete in what is called the "experience economy" (Wolfelt, 2000: 25).

But sometimes the interest in the therapeutic value of deathcare-related products does not fit with the rest of the content. Take the example of a homeopathic "remedy" for grief, called "Grief Formula." It is announced with a one-page article, written by a "master herbalist," who has an interest in the product, which appears in both the June 2001 edition (p. 25) and the October 2001 edition (p. 32) of Canadian Funeral Director. In both cases, it is in a section titled "Innovative Products." As for the product itself, the author of the advertorial states: "The homeopathic remedies that create the Grief Formula

are reported to have brought calming and comfort to those who have experienced serious and dramatic circumstances such as loss of a loved one, severe upset, divorce and other trauma which could lead to a numbed and dazed state of mind" (Hammoud, 2001). What can we make of such a "remedy" for grief, allowed to advertise in a funeral publication, covering an industry which is allegedly becoming more sensitive and savvy regarding grief and bereavement?

In his critique of the modern funeral industry, Flynn (1993) suggests that the funeral business has changed, with profitability becoming the major concern of the industry. "The funeral homes discovered the accountant, and service gave way to "profitability" ... accountants turned funeral homes into funeral businesses" (Flynn, 1993: 3). This is not to disparage the funeral directors and embalmers who work with grieving families every day. Their sensitivity is well-established and they work in a difficult environment. Of that there is no question. But like all occupations, there is a wide variation in the standards of behaviour across the occupation. These critical observations are more related to the industry itself, to the myriad of producers, sellers, consultants and so on who make their living in the deathcare field, and whose success is reliant upon the extent to which they can present their own product or service as one of the "essential ingredients" for effective grieving. This is a part of a rather extended historical process which Howarth (1997) refers to as the "commercialisation of death." The need to recognize the death of a person is clearly important. As the playwright Arthur Miller wrote in "Death of a Salesman," "attention must be paid..." However, the implication that this "attention" to the dead is somehow made more respectful and profound by the purchase of this year's crop of mortuary-related products should be treated as necessarily

suspect. Maybe some products will help, but that is not self-evident. This is, rather, a

symptom of our consumer society, of the belief that feelings are best expressed through

purchasing behaviours. In the end, the art of dying in the age of the marketplace bears a

great deal of resemblance to the art of living in a consumer culture.

References

Ariès, Philippe. 1974. <u>Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present</u>. (Translated by Patricia M. Ranum) The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Ariès, Philippe. 1975. "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies." In David E. Stannard (ed.), <u>Death in America</u>. University of Pennsylvania Press, 134-158.

Associated Press. 2003. "N.J. Catholic Church Leader Bars Eulogies." Press release, January 22.

Becker, Ernest. 1973. <u>The Denial of Death</u>. Free Press, New York.

Bolton, Christopher and Delpha J. Camp. 1987. "Funeral Rituals and the Facilitation of Grief Work." <u>Omega</u> 17 (4): 343-352.

Bowman, Leroy. 1959. <u>The American Funeral: A Study in Guilt, Extravagance, and Sublimity</u>. Public Affairs Press: Washington.

Canine, John D. 1999. <u>What am I Going to Do With Myself When I Die?</u>. Appleton and Lange: Stamford.

Chatterjee, Suhita Chopra. 2002. "Death and the Discourse of the Body." <u>Omega</u> 45(4): 321-330.

Coriolis. 1967. <u>Death, Here is Thy Sting</u>. McClelland and Stewart: Toronto.

Cox, H. 1999. "The myth of the twentieth century: the rise and fall of 'secularization'." In G. Baum (ed.), <u>The twentieth century: a theological overview</u>. Orbis, Maryknoll, pp. 135-143.

Davies, Christie. 1996. "Dirt, Death, Decay and Dissolution: American Denial and British Avoidance." In Glennys Howarth and Peter C. Jupp (eds.), <u>Contemporary Issues in the Sociology of Death, Dying and Disposal</u>. St. Martin's Press: New York, 60-71.

Defort, Edward J. 2001. "'Don't Let me Die in Rented Shoes'" (editorial). <u>American Funeral Director</u> 124 (3): 3.

Doka, Kenneth J. 1984. "Expectation of Death, Participation in Funeral Arrangements, and Grief Adjustment." <u>Omega</u> 15 (2): 119-129.

Flynn, Donald. 1993. The Truth About Funerals. Funeral Consultants International: Burlington.

Fulton, Robert. 1965. Death and Identity. Wiley: New York.

Funeral Ethics Association. 2000. "The Ethics Handbook." The Director 72(12): 28-33.

Gamino, Louis, Larry Easterling, Linda Stirman and Kenneth Sewell. 2000. "Grief Adjustment as Influenced by Funeral Participation and Occurrence of Adverse Funeral Events." Omega 41(2): 79-92.

Gorer, Geoffrey. 1955. "The pornography of death." Encounter 5: 49-53.

Hallam, Elizabeth, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth. 1999. Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity. Routledge: London.

Hammoud, Chakib. 2001. "Help Calm the Emotional and Physical Distress... Grief Formula." Canadian Funeral Director 78(10): 32.

Harding, Vanessa. 2002. The Dead and the Living in Paris and London, 1500-1670. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Howarth, Glennys. 1996. Last Rites: The Work of the Modern Funeral Director. Baywood, Amityville.

Howarth, Glennys. 1997. "Professionalising the Funeral Industry in England 1700-1960." In Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth (eds.), The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal. St. Martin's Press: London, pp. 120-134.

Irion, Paul E. 1991. "Changing Patterns of Ritual Response to Death." Omega 22 (3): 159-172.

Klicker, Ralph. 2001. "Ethics & Embalming." The Director 73(6): 32-34.

Lynch, Thomas. 1997. The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade. W.W. Norton: New York.

McCormick, Mac. 2000. "All the Elements Involved: The Hetrick Funeral Home." American Funeral Director 123(12): 20-21, 86-87.

McCormick, Mac. 2001. "The Kreamer Funeral Home." American Funeral Director 124(2): 60-61.

McCormick, Mac. 2001a. "The Horan & McConaty Funeral Homes." American Funeral Director 124(3): 60-64.

McCormick, Mac. 2001b. "Passing into History." <u>American Funeral Director</u> 124(2): 73.
McDaniel, James. 2000. "Look Around! Bettering the profession may be as simple as getting back to the basics." <u>The Director</u> 72(12): 46.

McDougald, Beacham. 2001. "Wisdom and Knowledge." <u>The Director</u> 73(1): 50-52.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1951. <u>The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man</u>. Beacon Press, Boston.

McRae, Oliver. 2003. "Building a Renaissance for the Death Care Industry." <u>International Cemetery and Funeral Management</u> (January): 8-13.

Mitchell, P.J. 1936. "Fear Complex…" (letter to the editor). <u>The Embalmers' Monthly</u> 50(2): 52, 54.

Paul, R.J. 1997. "Funerals and funeral directors: rituals and resources for grief management." In J.D. Morgan (ed.), <u>Readings in Thanatology</u>, Baywood: Amityville, pp. 255-273.

Peterson, Julie. 2001. "I Miss You: A First Look at Death." <u>Canadian Funeral News</u> 29(5): 96.

Prior, Lindsay. 1989. <u>The Social Organisation of Death</u>. Macmillan: London.
Puckle, Bertram S. 1990 (originally published in 1926). <u>Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development</u>. Omnigraphics: Detroit.

Quigley, Christine. 1996. <u>The Corpse: A History</u>. McFarland and Company: Jefferson.
Raymond, Chris. 2000. "The Efficient Funeral." <u>The Director</u> 72(12): 6.

Seale, Clive. 1998. <u>Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement</u>. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Smale, Bernard. 1997. "The Social Construction of Funerals in Britain." In Kathy Charmaz, Glennys Howarth and Allan Kellehear (eds), <u>The Unknown Country: Death in Australia, Britain and the USA</u>. Macmillan, London, pp. 113-126.

Smith, W.L. 1963. <u>A Manual on Funeral Service: Interesting Now Invaluable in Time of Need</u>. W.L. Smith: Ajax.

Stark, R. 1999. "Secularization, RIP." <u>Sociology of Religion</u> 60: 249-273.

Swatos, W.H. and K.J. Christiano. 1999. "Secularization theory." In W.H. Swatos and D. Olson (eds.), <u>The Secularization Debate</u>. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, pp. 1-20.

United Church of Canada. 1950. <u>Christian Burial</u>. The Board of Evangelism and Social Service (United Church of Canada): Toronto.

Unruh, David R. 1976. "The Funeralization Process: Toward a Model of Social Time." <u>Mid-American Review of Sociology</u> 1 (1): 9-25.

Van Beck, 2000

Van Gennep, A. 1961. <u>The Rites of Passage</u> (trans. M.B. Vizedom and G.L. Caffee). University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Walter, Tony. 1994. <u>The Revival of death</u>. Routledge, London.

Walter, Tony. 1996. <u>The Eclipse of Eternity: A Sociology of the Afterlife</u>. St. Martin's Press, New York.

Wolfelt, Alan D. 1994. <u>Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies: A Guide for Caregivers</u>. Companion Press, Fort Collins.

Wolfelt, Alan D. 2001. "It's the Experience That Counts: Funeral Home Customer Service for Today's Families." <u>Canadian Funeral News</u> 29(1): 17-18.

Wolfelt, Alan. 2000. "When Goods and Services Are No Longer Enough: It's the Experience that Counts." <u>Canadian Funeral News</u> 28(10): 25-26.