

English-born author and investigative journalist Jessica Mitford was born the daughter of an English aristocrat, Baron Redesdale. Rebellious against her family's support of Hitler, in 1944 she became an American citizen. An activist in the civil rights movement, Mitford was a harsh critic of both the American prison system and the funeral industry. Her 1963 book, *The American Way of Death*, prompted congressional hearings into the funeral industry. She died in 1998 and her funeral is reported to have cost a mere \$533.31.

excerpt from

THE AMERICAN WAY OF DEATH, REVISITED

BY JESSICA MITFORD

How long, I would ask, are we to be subjected to the tyranny of custom and undertakers? Truly, it is all vanity and vexation of spirit—a mere mockery of woe, costly to all, far, far beyond its value; and ruinous to many; hateful, and an abomination to all; yet submitted to by all, because none have the moral courage to speak against it and act in defiance of it.

—Lord Essex

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Where, indeed. Many a badly stung survivor, faced with the aftermath of some relative's funeral, has ruefully concluded that the victory has been won hands down by a funeral establishment—in a disastrously unequal battle.

Much fun has been poked at some of the irrational “status symbols” set out like golden snares to trap the unwary consumer at every turn. Until recently, little has been said about the most irrational and weirdest of the lot, lying in ambush for all of us at the end of the road—the modern American funeral.

If the Dismal Traders (as an eighteenth-century English writer calls them) have traditionally been cast in a comic role in literature, a universally recognized symbol of humor from Shakespeare to Dickens to Evelyn Waugh, they have successfully turned the tables in recent years to perpetrate a huge, macabre,

and expensive practical joke on the American public. It is not consciously conceived of as a joke, of course; on the contrary, it is hedged with admirably contrived rationalizations.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, over the years the funeral men have constructed their own grotesque cloud-cuckoo-land where the trappings of Gracious Living are transformed, as in a nightmare, into the trappings of Gracious Dying. The same familiar Madison Avenue language, with its peculiar adjectival range designed to anesthetize sales resistance to all sorts of products, has seeped into the funeral industry in a new and bizarre guise. The emphasis is on the same desirable qualities that we have been schooled to look for in our daily search for excellence: comfort, durability, beauty, craftsmanship. The attuned ear will recognize, too, the convincing quasi-scientific language, so reassuring even if unintelligible.

So that this too too solid flesh might not melt, we are offered "solid copper—a quality casket which offers superb value to the client seeking long-lasting protection," or "the Colonial Classic beauty—18 gauge lead coated steel, seamless top, lap-jointed welded body construction." Some are equipped with foam rubber, some with innerspring mattresses. Batesville offers "beds that lift and tilt." Not every casket need have a silver lining, for one may choose among a rich assortment of "color-matched shades" in nonabrasive fabrics. Shrouds no longer exist. Instead, you may patronize a grave-wear couturiere who promises "handmade original fashions—styles from the best in life for the last memory-dresses, men's suits, negligees, accessories." For the final, perfect grooming: "Nature-Glo—the ultimate in cosmetic embalming." And where have we heard that phrase "peace-of-mind protection" before? No matter. In funeral advertising, it is applied to the Wilbert Burial Vault, with its 3/8-inch precast asphalt inner liner plus extra-thick, reinforced concrete—all this "guaranteed by Good Housekeeping." Here again the Cadillac, status symbol par excellence, appears in all its gleaming glory, this time transformed into a sleek funeral hearse. Although lesser vehicles are now used to collect the body and the permits, the Cad is still the conveyance of choice for the Loved One's last excursion to the grave.

You, the potential customer for all this luxury, are unlikely to read the lyrical descriptions quoted above, for they are culled from *Mortuary Management* and other trade magazines of the industry. For you there are the ads in your daily newspaper, generally found on the obituary page, stressing dignity,

refinement, high-caliber professional service, and that intangible quality, sincerity. The trade advertisements are, however, instructive, because they furnish an important clue to the frame of mind into which the funeral industry has hypnotized itself.

A new mythology, essential to the twentieth-century American funeral rite, has grown up—or rather has been built up step-by-step—to justify the peculiar customs surrounding the disposal of our dead. And just as the witch doctor must be convinced of his own infallibility in order to maintain a hold over his clientele, so the funeral industry has had to "sell itself" on its articles of faith in the course of passing them along to the public.

The first of these is the tenet that today's funeral procedures are founded in "American tradition." The story comes to mind of a sign on the freshly sown lawn of a brand-new Midwestern college: "There is a tradition on this campus that students never walk on this strip of grass. This tradition goes into effect next Tuesday." The most cursory look at American funerals of past times will establish the parallel. Simplicity to the point of starkness, the plain pine box, the laying out of the dead by friends and family who also bore the coffin to the grave—these were the hallmarks of the traditional American funeral until the end of the nineteenth century.

Secondly, there is the myth that the American public is only being given what it wants—an opportunity to keep up with the Jonèses to the end. "In keeping with our high standard of living, there should be an equally high standard of dying," says an industry leader. "The cost of a funeral varies according to individual taste and the niceties of living the family has been accustomed to." Actually, choice doesn't enter the picture for average individuals faced, generally for the first time, with the necessity of buying a product of which they are totally ignorant, at a moment when they are least in a position to quibble. In point of fact, the cost of a funeral almost always varies, not "according to individual taste" but according to what the traffic will bear.

Thirdly, there is an assortment of myths based on half-digested psychiatric theories. The importance of the "memory picture" is stressed—meaning the last glimpse of the deceased in an open casket, done up with the latest in embalming techniques and finished off with a dusting of makeup. Another, impressively authentic-sounding, is the need for "grief therapy," which is big now in mortuary circles. A historian of American funeral directing hints at

the grief-therapist idea when speaking of the new role of the undertaker—"the dramaturgic role, in which the undertaker becomes a stage manager to create an appropriate atmosphere and to move the funeral party through a drama in which social relationships are stressed and an emotional catharsis or release is provided through ceremony."

Lastly, a whole new terminology, as ornately shoddy as the rayon satin casket liner, has been invented by the funeral industry to replace the direct and serviceable vocabulary of former times. "Undertaker" has been supplanted by "funeral director" or "mortician." (Even the classified section of the telephone directory gives recognition to this; in its pages you will find "Undertakers—see Funeral Directors.") Coffins are "caskets"; hearses are "coaches" or "professional cars"; flowers are "floral tributes"; corpses generally are "loved ones," but mortuary etiquette dictates that a specific corpse be referred to by name only—as "Mr. Jones"; cremated ashes are "cremains." Euphemisms such as "slumber room," "reposing room," and "calcination—the kindlier heat" abound in the funeral business.

If the undertaker is the stage manager of the fabulous production that is the modern American funeral, the stellar role is reserved for the occupant of the open casket. The decor, the stagehands, the supporting cast are all arranged for the most advantageous display of the deceased, without which the rest of the paraphernalia would lose its point—Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. It is to this end that a fantastic array of costly merchandise and services is pyramided to dazzle the mourners and facilitate the plunder of the next of kin.

Grief therapy, anyone? But it's going to come high. According to the funeral industry's own figures, the average undertaker's bill—\$750 in 1961 for casket and "services"—is now \$4,700, to which must be added the cost of a burial vault, flowers, clothing, clergy and musician's honorarium, and cemetery charges. When these costs are added to the undertaker's bill, the total cost for an adult's funeral today is \$7,800.

The question naturally arises, is this what most people want for themselves and their families? For several reasons, this has been a hard one to answer until recently. It is a subject seldom discussed. Those who have never had to arrange for a funeral frequently shy away from its implications, preferring to take comfort in the thought that sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Those who have acquired personal and painful knowledge of the subject would often rather forget about it. Pioneering "funeral societies" or "memorial associations" dedicated to the principle of funerals at reasonable cost do exist in a number of communities throughout the country, but until recently their membership was limited to the more sophisticated element in the population—university people, liberal intellectuals—and those who, like doctors and lawyers, come up against problems in arranging funerals for their clients.

Some indication of the pent-up resentment felt by vast numbers of people against the funeral interests was furnished by the astonishing response to Roul Tunley's 1961 *Saturday Evening Post* article. As though a dike had burst, letters poured in from every part of the country to the funeral societies, to local newspapers. They came from clergymen, professional people, old-age pensioners, trade unionists. Three months after the article appeared, an estimated six thousand had taken pen in hand to comment on some phase of the high cost of dying. Many recounted their own bitter experiences at the hands of funeral directors; hundreds asked for advice on how to establish a consumer organization in communities where none exists; others sought information about prepayment plans. Thirty years later, the situation seems worse. In 1993 I wrote a letter encouraging funeral simplicity which appeared in a "Dear Abby" column. More than thirty thousand people wrote asking for information about funeral-planning societies. The funeral industry, finding itself in the glare of the public spotlight, continues to engage in serious debate about its own future course—as well it might.

Some entrepreneurs are already testing the waters with stripped-down, low-cost operations. One, calling itself "Church and Chapel Funeral Service," contracts with conventional funeral homes to lower costs by doing the unthinkable—moving the service out of the mortuary to a church, a cemetery chapel, even a nursing home.

In 1994 Russ Harman launched Affordable Funeral Service in a Washington, D.C., suburb. Taking the low-cost approach to the extreme, he operates with no facilities outside his own home. He uses private residences, churches, or, if viewing the deceased is desired, a rented mortuary. The basic strategy, according to Ron Hast's *Funeral Monitor*, is to keep overhead low. A white, unmarked van is used instead of a hearse. There are no limos. Business is booming, with three vans patrolling the nation's capital and lone vans in five other cities. Harman's next project is to take the operation nationwide. Will

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Affordable Funeral Service be able to do it? It seems likely, since late word is that it has been swooped into the net of SCI.

Is the funeral inflation bubble ripe for bursting? Back in the sixties, the American public suddenly rebelled against the trend in the auto industry towards ever more showy cars, with their ostentatious and nonfunctional fins, and a demand was created for compact cars patterned after European models. The all-powerful U.S. auto industry, accustomed to telling customers what sort of car they wanted, was suddenly forced to listen for a change. Overnight, the little cars became for millions a new kind of status symbol. Could it be that the same cycle is working itself out in the attitude towards the final return of dust to dust, that the American public is becoming sickened by ever more ornate and costly funerals, and that a status symbol of the future may indeed be the simplest kind of “funeral without fins”?



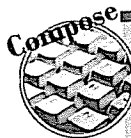
According to Mitford, before the end of the nineteenth century, American funerals were simple and inexpensive. What is the average cost of a funeral today? How have funerals changed? Explain.



Using Google or another search engine, search the web for the cost of buying a casket online, starting with <http://www.walmart.com>. How much of a mark-up do some of these sites claim is added when buying a casket from a funeral home?



Working together in groups, using the resources of your campus library and/or the Internet, research the ways other cultures, both past and present, have honored their dead. What happens to the bodies? How do friends and families respond? What kinds of rituals are practiced? Is there a belief in an afterlife? Explain.



Mitford's article exposes some of the more outrageous and costly practices done for funerals, such as caskets with “inner-spring mattresses” and “handmade original fashions” to dress the dead body. What do you think is important for a funeral? Write a short essay—3 to 5 paragraphs—outlining how you would like your own funeral to be planned, especially in terms of cost.

Former video journalist and radio producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Tom Jokinen quit at age forty-four to become an apprentice undertaker at a family-run funeral home in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The excerpt below is from the book *Curtains: Adventures of an Undertaker-in-Training* that resulted from his experience learning to care for the dead.

excerpt from

CURTAINS: ADVENTURES OF AN UNDERTAKER-IN-TRAINING

BY TOM JOKINEN

LOVE YOUR HAIR, WHO'S YOUR EMBALMER?

To get to the Silver Doors at St. Boniface General Hospital I rattle the stretcher down a long corridor, always empty of people but full of discarded hospital gear: iron bed frames, armless armchairs, IV racks. At St. B the Silver Doors can handle a dozen or more plastic-wrapped corpses comfortably. The security guard has waxy yellow smoker's hair and a lot of questions about working in a crematorium.

“The teeth,” he says. “What do you do with them?”

“What do you mean?” I say, checking name tags.

“The *teeth*,” he says, and then taps his own in case I'm fuzzy on the concept. “Gold teeth, You pull them out, no?”

“Why would we do that?”

“For the gold.”

My corpse is tall, his feet hanging past the end of the gurney. I rip a hole in the plastic sheet and check for jewelry.

“We don't pull out any teeth,” I say, but the guard smiles and winks, picturing me, I can tell, with a pair of pliers and my foot on someone's jaw. This is how