

Alternatives to Mainstream American Death Culture

Our anxiety around death and conformity to money-grubbing practices



By Allie Frankel
October 17, 2017

Death has become a profoundly un-American experience. The US is renowned for its crime shows and cinematic gore. Yet when it comes to death – real death – we’ve fallen deep into an avoidance culture. The deeper we fall, the more we face emotional, economic, and environmental consequences.

We’re at the brink of having to deal with death at unprecedented levels. Baby Boomers, the largest generation yet, are reaching the end of their lifespans. We’re going to be planning a lot more funerals, but we don’t have to conform to mainstream American death culture. There are other options to handle death in a less expensive and more environmentally and emotionally healthy way.

A small, manipulative elite has monopolized the American funeral industry¹, capitalizing on our desire to hide death and have hands-off practices. This exclusive group of professionals is curiously tight-knit and even has a lobbying party operating on their behalf. Their prices are uncomfortably high – and rising. Yet like lemmings we’re conforming to their services and rituals. Even more recently arrived immigrants who have grown up with different customs seem to adopt expensive, unnatural American practices, like injecting chemicals into corpses (embalming) and buying absurdly priced caskets².

Sandy Gibson has veered from mainstream American death culture by founding Better Place Forest. Better Place Forest offers an alternative to cemeteries. Gibson asks, “Why do we need tombstones? Why can’t we have a tree instead?”³ He points out that there are over a million acres of cemetery in America and he speaks openly about the unpleasant experience of visiting his parents’ tombstones. Better Place Forest is a forest conservation effort, which also aims to provide a more beautiful and natural experience for people visiting their deceased loved ones. A family can reserve a tree in the California redwoods where only their ashes will be scattered. His goal for the next hundred years is to protect one million acres of forest instead of taking up another million acres with cemetery space.

¹ Metcalf and Huntington (198)

² Metcalf and Huntington (200)

³ [Better Place Forest](#)