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Six Feet Under: The Historical and Cultural Significance of Embalming in the U.S. and the Public Opinion.

Have you ever thought about what is going to happen to your body after you die? Have you ever thought about how you want your body to be stored or treated – cremation, burial, or embalming- after your life has come to an end?

After you die, your body temperature cools, rigor mortis (the stiffening of the muscles after death) sets in, your blood starts settling and discolors your skin, and your body starts to decompose by various enzymes and bacteria (Edwards). For religious, cultural and sanitary reasons cultures started to try to prevent this process. One method is known as mummification. This is a practice that preserved dead human bodies through the removal of bodily organs, dehydration and then bandaging the body to prepare it for the afterlife (Jordan). The Chinchurro culture in Peru had the oldest system of artificial mummification in the world, dating back to around 3,000 BC. Following them were the Egyptians, who became the most famous for practicing mummification and continued it longer than any other culture (Cockburn 190). Since then, civilizations all over the world such as the Incas, the ancient Chinese, even the British in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries started to view embalming as an important part of a funeral and burial ceremony (Chamberlain 26). The opinions about the procedure and ritual of embalming have changed dramatically over time and are now becoming heavily controversial. Embalming has begun to be classified as a process that chemically treats the dead human

body to delay the process of decay and to restore an acceptable physical appearance to the body so that ceremonies like viewings and funerals can take place without offending the mourning attendees (Jordan). The procedure has also become a necessity for dead bodies to be taken across state and international borders along with the prevention of spreading disease, but an open casket funeral is also an option. In today's world, embalming is outlawed in most countries and unaccepted in most religions for its unnatural and intrusive procedure. The United States is one of the only countries left in the world that practices embalming to its fullest, yet mixed attitudes accompany this procedure. Palermo argues that embalming is an invasion of human privacy, while others just simply find the practice unnecessary and expensive. In contrast, embalmers believe that embalming allows mourners to say a proper goodbye and deal with the grieving process more easily. Others, such as Mary Roach, argue that embalming allows the dead to part take in new scientific advances such as testing for diseases or sending embalmed bodies into space. This allows bodies to not only be active even after their death, but also gives death meaning. Examining the historical and cultural significance of embalming explains current controversial attitudes and reasons for this mortuary practice.

Preserved bodies first emerged because of accidents or environmental conditions, without deliberate human thought. According to Cockburn, the general climate at the time of death can make the tissue of the deceased dehydrated or frozen, inhibiting the biochemical changes that would naturally occur to the dead body. When, however, deliberate efforts were made to ensure that the body would continue to exist, resembling somewhat the appearance of a living person, the questions of why and how it was done varies with each culture. The human race has constantly rebelled against the idea that

everything living must eventually die, attempting to prove that death is not the end and that life, in one form or another, can still continue even after the body has started to decay. The main principle of most religions is that death is not final, that something better comes afterwards. The Vikings believe in Valhalla, the Muslims in Paradise, the Christians in resurrection, and Hindus in Reincarnation, says Cockburn. For the most part, when mummies have been preserved deliberately, the objective seemed to be to keep the body intact and recognizable for the afterlife, even to the point of burying it with food, clothing and utensils for the next life (Cockburn 3-8). The belief about life after death has led to funerary rituals. Burials began with the need to dispose of decaying corpses, but it also was the first sign of spiritual thinking in humans (Sloan 4). Over centuries, cultures began to create and adopt methods of preserving bodies not only for sanitation reasons, but mainly because of their religious beliefs in the afterlife and their desire to live for eternity.

### **Historical Background**

The term “mummy” evokes images of Egypt: the pyramids, the sand, and the bodies wrapped in cloth placed in elaborately decorated coffins. But in fact, the earliest mummies in the world are not from Egypt, as one might think, but instead from the Chinchurro people in Peru some 2,000 years before the Egyptians (Chamberlain 88). Although the Chinchurro people were the first who experimented with mummification, it was the Egyptians who truly mastered the art. The Egyptians preserved their dead, almost only pharaohs and elites, because of their religious belief in the afterlife. The body needed to be intact in order for the soul to have a safe journey into the afterlife and then could be resurrected once again (“Brought to Life”). The Egyptians practiced

mummification on a body to preserve it, which took up to almost 70 days. The body was first washed and then its organs were removed, each placed in a jar with a different Egyptian deity as its head. Then they preserved the body with packages of natron (a mixture of sodium carbonate and sodium bicarbonate), which were placed inside the body to absorb its fluids and dry it out. Finally the body was washed once more, packed with wads of linen soaked in resin and then wrapped up to 20 layers of linen before being placed in a wooden sarcophagus (“Brought to Life”). Cockburn states that the exact technique and process of mummification, which was recorded on hieroglyphs was lost when the Greeks conquered Egypt and implemented their superior script. In the eighth century B.C. the Arabs invaded the land of Egypt and determined that this process of preservation was repulsive and therefore put an end to it. But this was not the end of mummification. Mummies resided not only in Egypt, but all around the world such as Alaska, Northern South America, Western Europe, North Africa, Canary Islands, Australia, Japan, China and the arctic. Mummies in these places were a mixture between artificial and natural mummies depending on the climate and sophisticated knowledge of the practice in each region. Graeme Pretty and Angela Calder suspected that the idea of mummification spread through cultural diffusion to different areas along with the desire to live forever (Cockburn 1-3). Other cultures adopted the methods of persevering a body due to religious beliefs as well.

Finally the procedure of human preservation reached Britain and in the twelfth or thirteenth century it was known how to embalm or at least prevent decay of a cadaver. Until the sixteenth century, embalmed royal corpses were displayed throughout lengthy funeral rituals. Chamberlain states that embalming at the time was only allowed for

Saints for the most part, yet kings and queens, bishops and nobles were also allowed to have this royal procedure, especially when the corpse had to travel a long way before burial, for instance being brought back from war. Chamberlain explains that medieval embalmers did their best to embalm the dead: “the deceased’s torso was opened up from the neck to the groin, the viscera were removed, and the cavity was then washed with vinegar and packed with salt and spices”. This process did not differ greatly from the mummification procedure that the ancient Egyptians used on their pharaohs and elites. Chamberlain mentioned that in the thirteenth century, the removal of the organs became a matter of ceremony and spiritual power. A king’s viscera brought a special significance to the place where they were buried, usually in ecclesiastical buildings. Royal funerals became lavish affairs where the corpse was openly displayed at the center of the ceremony. Public display of a royal corpse only lasted briefly and was replaced by royal effigy burials instead. Other cultures began to accept this traditional, religious ceremony of embalming as well, but instead of believing in a Christian God, they believed in deities. About a century later the Incas in Peru embalmed their corpses, wrapped in fine clothes, seated according to rank, and waited on by an attendant to keep the flies off the body. The ancestral mummies were considered to be the messengers between the living and the gods giving strength, bravery and power to the living. The Inca ruler’s preserved body was carried in a parade through the fields in order to ask the gods for rain. Chamberlain states that the preserved bodies “were not only used to manipulate power, but they were also the very basis on which power rested” (Chamberlain 26-30). At that time embalming remained in the hands of the powerful: the Christians and the native rulers. However, techniques for mastering this craft constantly changed with the

development of new technological advances and more people received access to the procedure. This specific history helps researchers to understand the past, but more importantly, it helps them to understand the present: like how modern embalming came to exist and how it became a widespread practice.

### **Embalming in the United States**

Just over two centuries after the Incas and the British, modern technology in embalming began to spread to North America. At the time of the American Civil War in 1861, President Abraham Lincoln ordered new methods of embalming. These techniques allowed the corpses of fallen soldiers to stay fresh so that they could be shipped home from the battlefields and have an appropriate farewell funeral in their hometown (Sloan 43). Dr. Thomas N. Holmes was commissioned from the Red Army Corps to embalm the corpses due to his invention of arterial solution, which was made up of preservatives, dyes and perfumes (Quigley 6). Upon this, he was dubbed the “Father of Embalming”. When the war ended in 1865, President Lincoln was assassinated. He was the first president to be embalmed and helped to popularize the embalming practice in America that still lasts until today. In 1867, two years after the war had ended, German Chemist August Wilhelm von Hofmann discovered Formaldehyde, a sterilizer. This chemical marked the foundation for modern methods of embalming around the world (Edwards). The U.S. was not the only country that adopted the practice of embalming. Other modern day societies used the procedure of embalming only on important and significance corpses such as Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin, Russian dictator Joseph Stalin and Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong (Chamberlain 35). Embalming is not only a manifestation of religious institutions and belief in the afterlife, but it can also be

for immediate and longer-term political and social effect. Lincoln, Lenin, and Mao were almost expected to keep living beyond their death, in order to continue to represent the new political orders they had built while alive (Chamberlain 44).

With the development of new techniques and chemicals such as arsenic solutions and formaldehyde, the dead could now be artificially preserved in many ways by injecting chemicals into the body (Quigley 5). Although techniques and methods of embalming have changed, the four main purposes have not, says Mayer. Embalming “provides time for friends and family to gather with the body, permits the body to be shipped back to its hometown or country for viewing and /or burial, means of sanitation, and improved appearance of the deceased” (Mayer xvii). Reverence for the dead is the basic ethical reason for embalming: it fulfills the ancient belief and emotional instinct to care for the dead (Mayer 4). In Western culture there is an attitude of denial towards death. Some people regard death in the same way as going to sleep (Palermo 404). Chamberlain explains that “the metaphorical associations of sleeping in a cozy casket and the euphemisms of undertakers’ discourse - dearly beloved, gone to sleep, resting in the funeral parlour’s slumber room, ‘interred’ rather than buried - all serve to present a negation or denial of death” (173). Modern attitudes show that death has become a social taboo in our society. Death is what every person and culture attempts to avoid and therefore, with this mentality, the value of a human corpse is degraded (Mayer 4). A conflict between logic and emotion occurs because of this. The mind regards the cadaver as a mass of dead tissue, while our emotions tie us to the importance of the body. Our emotions tell us that to dispose of a body without a proper funeral or farewell ceremony

is morally wrong (Mayer 5). Some believe that in order for our society to stop degrading the body, embalming is a way to gain respect back and view it as a sacred object.

Today, embalming is a widespread practice in the United States. At the 73<sup>rd</sup> Annual Program Meeting of the Cremation Association of North America, held in Canada in 1991, it was recorded that only 16% of deaths in the United States involved cremation, while the remaining 84% involved embalming and viewing the body (Palermo 399). In American culture, people still embalm their dead for the sake of sanitation, travel, or for an open casket funeral. Viewing the body, mostly in the twentieth century, became a necessary social element of American funerary rites. Funeral parlors provided whole wardrobes of burial outfits and make up for the dead (Chamberlain 172). Yet because of this, burials, especially if embalming is involved, have become commercialized through clothes and make up allowing funeral homes to profit tremendously off this procedure. Even the space on which a cemetery or grave is placed is still viewed as a commercial space, a space that is easily sold to the highest bidder no matter what social or cultural significance it possesses. Chamberlain explains the situation perfectly when he says,

“Most people like to think that they treat corpses with dignity and respect, that the dead are allowed to ‘rest in peace’. Anyone who has witnessed the commercial clearance of a graveyard knows that this is not the case. Coffins, corpses and skeletons are bulldozed and bucketed out of their graves in ways that are anything but respectful in order to make way for sale of Church land, retail development, and extensions or repairs to Church buildings” (180).

The commercialization of death is linked to the expanding nature of capitalism, taking something abnormal, such as putting fluids in a dead body, and turning it into an industry (Palermo 400). As long as this commercialization with funerals continues with bulldozing graves, burials will no longer be the traditional practice and cremation could becoming the leading way of treatment after death.

### **Arguments Against Embalming**

Although embalming has been practiced in many cultures for thousands of years, modern society shows us that certain people today are outraged or disgusted by the shocking image of a dead human. Some feel that embalming should be outlawed because it treats the dead with disrespect by displaying, storing or interfering with corpses.

George Palermo, author of The Last Invasion of Human Privacy and Its Psychological Consequences on Survivors: A Critique of the Practice of Embalming, distinctly argues that embalming is an ultimate invasion of human privacy because it does not value the sacredness of the human body. He believes that society is psychologically immature and unprepared to confront the reality of death. In accordance with this view, society completely lacks any form of religious belief, making embalming a secular practice. He also feels that in order for the grieving process to be most effective, a person should face the true demise of a loved one in the decaying form. It is also the memory of the dead that should help the living cope and not the artificially enhanced body (Palermo 400). Lamm, author of The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning, firmly states,

“There it [the body] is embalmed and restored by manipulating it, injecting it with chemicals, covering it with cosmetics, dressing it neatly and supporting it with mechanical devices. It is then displayed... it must be perfumed, restored to a look

of perfect health... It shows no respect for the deceased and provides questionable therapy for the bereaved... Religiously it expresses disregard for the rights of the dead and a perversion of the religious significance of life and death.

Psychologically it may serve to short circuit the slow therapy of nature's grief process that begins from the moment of the awareness of death... If man is fashioned after his creator how can we allow the stapling and nailing, the molding and the smearing, literally the manhandling of that which was created in the image of God?" (Palermo 403).

Religion still remains an important aspect of embalming. The most common reason for refusing embalming is based on religious beliefs, the belief that it is disrespectful. Yet, all major branches of Christianity allow embalming, including Catholic rites since the thirteenth century, while other religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism completely outlaw it ("What You Should Know"). Religiously speaking, an individual should not dishonor a corpse by invading its privacy. During the past century, in society one has witnessed an absence of the respect for the deceased and instead an increase in the aggressive invasion of the privacy of human remains. According to Palermo, a person's last right on earth should be utter privacy, to be untampered with after death. Lamm believes that "it is only the acceptance of the reality of death that enables man to overcome the trauma of death" (Palermo 406). Lamm and Palermo both agree that it is unhealthy and morally wrong for mourners to view the dead body, while others believe that it is exactly the viewing of the body that allows the mourners say a proper goodbye and remember their loved one in a peaceful way.

## Arguments for Embalming

Embalming in contemporary society should not necessarily be viewed as wrong. Instead it should be recognized as a cultural style, “as a way of doing things” says Chamberlain, “which relates to people’s often unformed notions about keeping the corpse intact for as long as possible in denying that ‘the end’ has come” (176). People are scared of death, of dying, of what happens after death; they almost want to be immortal. Yet, death and the option of preservation should not be feared. Death is an important aspect of life on earth. Chamberlain argues that, “Preserved bodies help us to understand our origins and our past in both biological, and social and cultural terms. They provide a unique insight into ancient lives, creating direct connections with the past that ordinary artifacts can never make. We learn from the post-mortems of the ancients as well as the newly dead” (187). Through deaths archaeologists are able to find out about our past and link it to our present.

Robert Mayer, author of Embalming: History, Theory, and Practice, argues the opinion of the embalmer himself who cares for the living by caring for the dead. It is an honorable practice where grieving families entrust embalmers with the remnants of a treasured person; they do something for people that no other human could. Egyptian tomb priests are the role models for contemporary embalmers who view the procedure as a sacred ritual. Their motivation is foremost the restoration of the body and secondly sanitation, disinfection, and preservation. Jacqueline Taylor, President of the American Board of Funeral Service Education in 2005, said embalmers do their job because “people care about each other and want to remember their loved one clean, whole, and at peace”. Mayer states that viewing the body is an integral part of the grieving process,

which many people disagree with and find even more disturbing. Thomas Lynch says, “Remembering him the way he was begins by dealing with the way he *is*”. He also says that “After years and years of directing funerals, [he has] come to the conclusion that seeing is the hardest and most helpful part” and leads to closure (Mayer xv-xviii). This is the main controversial option about embalming- the viewing aspect and how it contributes, good or bad, to a person’s psychological experience of embalming. Others that also support the practice of embalming, view its reasons for importance from a different angle.

Mary Roach, in her renowned book, Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers, also views embalming as a positive event, it just depends on how one views life after death. Embalming allows a body to be transferred to a place where it can become active. She asks her readers, “Why lie around on your back [when you’re dead] when you can do something interesting and new, something *useful*?” For thousands of years cadavers have been involved in science’s most daring advances. Embalming has helped test France’s first guillotine, helped to make the case for mandatory seat belts at Congressional hearings, rode in space shuttles to test for safety, etc. Although these cadavers have been exposed to much gore, they don’t really endure anything. In fact, they are our “superheroes”. Roach says, “They brave fire without flinching, withstand falls from tall buildings and head on car crashes into walls... They can be in six places at once. I take the superman point of view: what a shame to waste these powers, to not use them for the betterment of humankind”. Of course Roach has a valid point, yet if you think about these bodies that she describes as being your best friend or your mother, her arguments are pretty tough and almost unbearable. One must remember, though, that Roach refers to

her cadavers as the already, anonymous dead, not recently deceased loved ones. There are people who have long been forgotten, while some remain immortalized in the pages of a book or a science experiment. She has nothing against lying on your back for hundreds of years as you decay. She just thinks there are better ways to spend your time being dead. Roach says, "Get involved with science. Be an art exhibit. Become part of a tree...Death. It doesn't have to be boring" (9-11). She definitely makes death much more glamorous and adventurous than most of us would see it. She puts a revolutionary and humorous spin on death. She realizes that many find her opinions about the dead absurd and disrespectful, yet she finds that death is the silliest situation you would ever be in if you view it in the correct light.

Although everyone has their own personal opinions about embalming, whether good or bad, the Board of Health and Board of Embalmers and Funerary Directors enforce the laws, rules, and regulations (Mayer 4). Each state has its own laws regarding embalming. If a body is transported internationally it must, no matter one's religious belief, be embalmed. If a body is moved between states then it will also most likely be embalmed, yet it differs in each state ("What You Should Know"). Another law that disregards religious belief is when a person dies with a disease such as Tuberculosis. In such a case, a state will most likely insist on embalming in order to prevent the spread of the disease ("What You Should Know"). Usually, when there is a prolonged period of time between the death and funeral of a person, the body will have to be embalmed as well, mainly for sanitary reasons. These restrictions are the law, but still families decide to embalm their loved one.

## Concluding Thoughts

In any case, even if you are embalmed, eventually, although it may take a hundred years, you *will* decompose. Mortuary embalming is a temporary procedure to make the cadaver look fresh and presentable. Funeral homes sell sealed vaults designed to keep air and water out so if you're lucky the body will remain intact for years. Still, eventually no matter what you do, it will not prevent you from becoming a "Halloween ghoul" (Roach 81). If you wish to donate your body to science though, you should not be discouraged by images or thoughts of dissection. Although no matter how you see it or even what you choose to do with your body, it will not be appealing at the least. Even cremation is not a pleasant event. You pretty much burn slowly to death as your abdomen splits, the brain becomes a sticky consistency and as your bones glow whitely in the flames, your skeleton falls apart (Roach 82). We are very fortunate that we have the freedom to decide how we want to be buried. In Denmark embalming is against the law because the country is short on cemetery space (Sloan 43). This problem eliminates not only the option of embalming, but traditional burial as well. It can be problematic because embalming also sanitizes the body and disinfects it. Because embalming is against the law, the most obvious form of disposal in Denmark after death is cremation. This also affects Denmark's society in the future. What will archeologists dig up about Denmark's society and way of life?

In a recent survey that I conducted of 35 college students in a Writing 50 class at UCSB, I wanted to learn what my generation thought about embalming. I soon realized that this was the first time that the majority had even heard about this subject and hardly anyone had a distinct opinion about it. My results therefore showed that 48% wanted to

be cremated when they die, while 31% wanted to be traditionally buried. No one said they wanted to be embalmed. In a nationwide survey the results were relatively opposite: 16% of deaths involved cremation, while 84% involved embalming. Either students do not know enough about embalming to personally consider it or the practice is slowly becoming less popular because more people find it disturbing or just too expensive. The way society treats the body reflects on our culture. Does it mean that cremation is becoming more preferred and therefore there will be fewer traces of our bodies for archaeologists years from now to find? Current society still has records of today's deaths, much more than the ancient Egyptians had. We only have knowledge and proof of their lifestyle because archaeologists found their preserved bodies and lavish tombs. Modern society will not only have traces of the physical dead, but records will show future archaeologists what our lifestyle and culture was like. We should not worry that our remains will be lost and forgotten forever, but slowly as time and centuries pass, our bodily remains will be unified with nature. In any case, no matter how one chooses how his or her body should be disposed of, "If you get right down to it, there is no dignified way to go, be it decomposition, incineration, dissection, tissue digestion, or compositing. They're all, bottom line, a little disagreeable," says Roach (275). Chamberlain adds "Decisions about treatment of the corpse are made at many levels - political, social, economic, religious - even after a particular rite has long become accepted"(44). Yet, it takes "the careful application of a well considered euphemism - burial, cremation, anatomical gift giving, water reduction, ecological funeral - to bring it to the point of acceptance" (Roach 275). Irrespective of how different cultures have dealt with the dearly departed, the ones left behind are in dire need to achieve closure so that their lives

can continue peacefully, knowing that they have done their best with sending off a beloved.

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