

**Why Can't I Be Remembered That Way?**

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**Abstract**

For this capstone project the author looks at different methods of cremation and how those methods are viewed in different areas of society. She was intrigued with the idea of cremation as it is becoming a more and more popular form of memorial and because people are coming up with creative things to do with a person's cremains. The different methods that she examined are incorporating cremains into reef-balls, turning them into diamonds, incorporating them in tattoos, sky burials, living urns, glass marbles, putting cremains in shotgun shells, turning cremains into vinyl records, turning cremains into fireworks, and shooting cremains into space. The author also looks at how people are starting to normalize different memorialization practices in use today.

**Keywords:** remains disposal, cremation, cremains, memorialization

Although death is a natural part of life, it can be hard for people to decide how they want to dispose of their remains or the remains of a loved one. Aside from such open ways of memorialization, like caskets, gravesites, mausoleums, and urns, people have found more intimate ways of remembering their dead and keeping their memorialization from the direct view of the public. People have started to think originally when it comes to the disposal of remains. Many have moved from the traditional caskets and headstones to the method of cremation and the various uses for cremains. For example, 99.73 percent of remains disposal in Japan is cremation (Warpole, 2009). Societies have found new and different ways to memorialize their dead, especially with cremains, the remains left after a person has been cremated. These methods include cremation tattoos, bio-urns, glass marbles, sky burials, reef balls, and even diamonds. It is becoming more common to memorialize the dead in personal and public ways that show how deeply people care about someone who has passed on to another life and the impact that that person had on someone else.

### **Literature Review**

The following section details how the author of this paper started their research on the topic of death and different memorialization techniques and practices for the disposal of remains. The author looked at different articles and websites that talked about what to do with cremains (the remains from someone who has been cremated instead of buried in a casket). The research continued with how people today are typically disposing of their dead and that cremation seems to be the most popular form of disposal, although traditional earth burial is still used. The research will conclude with the cultural acceptance and views on the different practices of remains disposal and memorialization techniques. All of the research was then combined and viewed as a whole to showcase the memorialization techniques found.

## **Death**

The following section is intended as a broad-based review of the disposal of remains. For centuries people have disposed of remains by placing them in graves, typically in caskets. Although this method of disposal is still used today, its popularity is decreasing due to an increase in cremation popularity. There are even variations of cremation between countries that are culturally similar, and even within countries due to cultural and religious traditions (Warpole, 2009).

Cultural practices are a large part of death and how people are remembered after they die. For example, in Ancient Egypt the Osirian myth, the dying and rising of a savior (typically a god), brought on the idea of the afterlife and the soul still living after a person dies (Pallis, 1999). The practices in Ancient Egypt also started the beliefs of the judgement of a person's soul and whether or not their soul would go to a place of prosperity, heaven, or a place of eternal suffering, hell. In Ancient Egypt, the main method of remains disposal was mumification, which was an integral part in the soul's journey to the afterlife. Christianity expanded on the views of the Ancient Egyptians and continued the idea of a soul going to an afterlife where they would either be rewarded for their good deeds in life or punished for their sins. It is believed in Christianity that death is the universal fate because of the sins that Adam and Eve engaged in in the Garden of Eden (Pallis, 1999).

## **Practices**

By memorializing the dead, people have found ways to manage the grief that surrounds death and start breaking the mold that has been placed on personal memorialization techniques. There are several new and unique ways of remembering the deceased and there are websites that detail some of the ways one can be remembered after death. One site gives details on 11 different

ways for a loved one to be buried aside from traditional cremation and being buried in a casket. Some of these unique burials include turning the ashes into loaded ammunition or fireworks, sending them to space, turning them into a vinyl record, or even making them into a cuddly stuffed animal (Savage, 2020). These new methods of memorialization help to alleviate some of the grief that comes with the loss of a loved one and makes the grieving process more personal, as well as giving people new ways to cope with death and grief as a whole as a whole.

### **Tibetan Sky Burials**

One of the ways that cultures have been memorializing their dead is through sky burials. Sky burials are not a new practice, but one that has been done for centuries by many Native American tribes and the people of Tibet (National Geographic, 2016).

A traditional Tibetan sky burial consists of three to five days of prayer with the deceased's family. After the five days of prayer have finished, the villagers and monks (not the family) take the body to the location of the sky burial. Once the body is at the location of the sky burial, the monk proceeds to signal vultures to come to the site and consume the fragments of the deceased (Tibetipedia, 2018).

In a Native American sky burial, the deceased is placed on a scaffold, then the birds and elements are free to take the body and soul to the afterlife (National Geographic, 2016). Traditions such as this have been going on for centuries in these cultures and will continue as they are an important component of the cultures of these groups. However, these traditions are starting to be criticized by people who do not understand the culture because of media and technology (National Geographic, 2016).

In Tibet, Chinese tourists have started showing up to the sacred locations of sky burials and taking pictures with the dead in the background (National Geographic, 2016). Tourists have

been able to find these sacred locations due to the fact that local officials have started placing them on maps. The main reason for this is so that local authorities can make some money for themselves since they are charging fees for tourists to visit these locations (National Geographic, 2016).

The acts of local authorities not only enhance doubts about public memorialization, but also take away the significance of this ritual for the cultures that believe this is giving their deceased a route to the afterlife. Publicizing this makes it harder for people to understand that memorialization is a natural part of the grieving process and that people are allowed to grieve in their own way when a death happens to someone that the person cared about (National Geographic, 2016).

The reason that Tibetan sky burials are still being practiced today is for cultural purposes. The belief around sky burials is that the vultures are acting as angels caring the soul of the deceased up to heaven for a life of enlightenment after death (Carney, 2017). Another reason for the continued tradition of sky burials is more about the resources readily available to the people of Tibet. The ground in Tibet is typically covered in a layer of frost, which makes it harder to dig the soil and create physical grave sites for the dead. Wood is also a hard thing to come by in Tibet because much of Tibet is above the tree line. This also makes cremation a difficult process in Tibet because of the thinner air in the country and the lack of resources needed to complete the process of cremation (Huygen, 2014).

Although the practice of sky burials is still allowed in Tibet it is illegal in the United States (Marsh & Fletcher, 2020). This is because many states have limits on the approved methods of remains disposal and most states criminalize treatments of human remains that do not follow social norms. The criminal nature of these acts is a main reason as to why sky burials are

not allowed in the United States. The “abuse of a corpse” has been added to The Model Penal Code, which makes the treatment of a corpse beyond what is acceptable to “ordinary family sensibilities” illegal. This has become a uniform law in many states, which means that a person from the United States cannot be remembered through a sky burial (Marsh & Fletcher, 2020).

### **Cremation**

Cremation eliminates casket graves, thus allowing grave sites to be smaller. Having more mausoleums means that the earth will not get as polluted from the materials used to make caskets or by the different materials used in different burial techniques.

Cremation is rising in popularity (Warpole, 2009). It is even becoming the most popular form of remains disposal in many developed countries with up to 56 percent of remains disposal in the United States being cremation and 80 percent in Canada (Clohessy, 2018). This is mainly because cremation is seen as a more efficient way to dispose of remains. It also is a form of disposal that can keep up with the everchanging economy, culture, and lifestyles that come with a modern world. Cremation is cheaper than a traditional burial because there are no casket costs, as well as no long-term costs from upkeep and maintenance of the grave site and headstone that are usually associated with traditional burials. Although cemeteries have a significant cultural and symbolic importance many European countries are moving to cremation over traditional casket graves. For example, the United Kingdom has turned to cremation for remains disposal because town planners felt that “cities [should] not be surrounded by a ‘white belt’ of cemetery, [but instead] a greenbelt of natural amenity” (Warpole, 2009, pg. 2).

Cremation is a preferred form of remains disposal because it is both more sanitary than earth burials and also cheaper than traditional earth burials (Warpole, 2009). When remains are placed in a traditional grave, there are costs that occur at every step in the process of burying the

dead. For example, the family of the deceased has to buy the casket, pay for the plot where the grave will be, and all of the long-term costs that come with maintaining the plot. This can get quite costly, which is why people are leaning more toward cremation because there are less long-term costs that come with keeping cremains in mausoleums, crematoriums, or even grave sites (Warpole, 2009).

Cremation for many is simply finding an urn that represents the personality of the deceased and making sure that their memory will live on through the urn. However, instead of just finding an urn and doing with the urn as they please, people have found more creative ways to remember their dead (Warpole, 2009).

While cremation is a popular form of remain disposal, it is not culturally accepted by all. Both the Orthodox Jewish and Muslim community forbid cremation, and it was only in the late twentieth century that the Catholic Church gave up its outright opposition to cremation (Warpole, 2009, pg. 3). Culturally homogenous countries such as Finland and Norway have low cremation rates because soil burials are considered patriotic. The perceived patriotism that comes with soil burial is also an indicator as to why the United States has low cremation rates. This is also why the remains of American soldiers killed overseas are brought back to the United States for internment in native soil. There are also many rites and regulations as to where cremains can be placed and how they can be used, especially in many European countries (Warpole, 2009, pg. 3-4).

### **Cremation Tattoos**

Cremation tattoos are different from memorial tattoos because the cremated ashes are actually mixed in with the tattoo ink (Clohessy, 2018). The process of mixing ink and ash itself requires extra care because the ashes could get contaminated through handling and need to be



sterilized again before use in the tattoo ink. With more people getting cremation tattoos it is “reopen[ing] [the] dialogue” that surrounds death and memorialization and making death less “sanitized in our culture” (Clohessy, 2018).

Many people want to be able to physically remember their dead, so by mixing the deceased’s ashes with tattoo ink the individual can quite literally have a physical connection with their dead (Engrave Ink, 2018). Engrave Ink is just one company that has found a way to make the process of mixing ash and ink safer by doing it for people so as to eliminate the risk of infection and contamination (Engrave Ink, 2015). Engrave Ink found uses *pyrolysis*, a form of decomposition using high temperatures, to reheat the ash after it has been filtered into microscopic particles. By reheating the ash, Engrave Ink turns the ash into a carbon pigment which is then mixed with the ink to create a personalized tattoo experience for people who want to be closer to their deceased (Engrave Ink, 2015).

If a person feels that having a physical connection with their dead will help them get over their grief, they will do whatever they need to do to achieve this whether others support it or not (Engrave Ink, 2015). Engrave Ink gives people who want a truly physical connection with their deceased a way to do so in a safe way. By making this process safe, Engrave Ink has created a new way of memorialization that creates a personal connection for people and gives people a permanent way to remember the person that they have lost (Engrave Ink, 2015).

### **Reef Balls**

The expansion of memorialization has created many unique and customizable ways for people to remember their loved ones. Another unique method of memorialization is creating an ecofriendly reef using the cremated remains of an individual. Eternal Reefs, a company that makes reef balls with cremains, found a way to give people who love the ocean a way to always

be a part of it after they have left this world behind (Eternal Reefs, 2014). Eternal Reefs was started when two college roommates noticed that the natural reefs were deteriorating in oceans and that if people were to continue to see natural reefs, then something would need to be done. The duo found a way to do this by creating ecofriendly reef balls that would help to sustain the deteriorating reefs and help to regrow the natural ecosystem in the oceans. Reef balls started out as just a way to regrow the ocean ecosystem but changed into a memorial method when one of the founder's father-in-law said that he wanted to be within all that action after he died. After that, reef balls became a unique way to remember the dead, but also to give back to the delicate ecosystems of the oceans, which are dying off because of human interaction (Eternal Reefs, 2014).

Even in death, people “are comforted by the thought of being surrounded by all that life and action going on around them” (Eternal Reefs, 2014). Giving people another purpose after death means their survivors can take solace knowing their lost loved one is giving new life to something that will help improve the world that they have left behind. Memorialization becomes a cause for celebration when the deceased are remembered in a way that also gives back to the earth and makes a positive impact to the world in which everyone cares about. Eternal Reefs allows the surviving relatives to give back to the oceans, but also to give back to their loved ones (Eternal Reefs, 2014).

### **Biodegradable Urns**

There are several ways for the deceased to be given, in a manner of speaking, a second chance at life after death by giving their cremated ashes a chance to be something new. One of these is a method that gives back to the land, as well as the water ecosystems, including but not limited to oceans. Biolife, LLC., is one of the many companies that offers a method of

remembering the dead with a biodegradable urn, which they have aptly named The Living Urn (Biolife, LLC., 2021). The Living Urn gives people the opportunity to see the deceased transform into something new and be scattered in a safe and controlled way. The Living Urn uses biodegradable urns made of bamboo and eco-friendly binding agents that create a special way for a person to be buried in the earth or for them to be beautifully remembered in the homes of their loved ones (Biolife, LLC., 2021).

Biolife also makes urns that can be used just as an urn or as a unique way to manually scatter the ashes into a source of water (Biolife, LLC., 2021). The Living Urn allows people to personalize the memorialization of their deceased through the means of incorporating them with the soil of a tree, making them able to eventually become a part of the earth, or by being able to become a source of renewal by being buried in ice urns, which are quite literally a box of ice that the ashes are placed into. Once the ashes are in the box, people can place the urn into their water of choice, preferably one found in nature, and watch as the deceased flow into the currents and become a part of the ecosystem we live in once again (Biolife, LLC., 2021).

By giving families the option to choose how they want their loved ones to go back to the earth, Biolife, LLC. is making a tragic and difficult time a little easier to bare by giving families peace of mind that their loved one can still help keep the earth a wonderful place even though they are no longer physically able to (Biolife, LLC., 2021). Companies such as these help to eliminate the discomfort associated with public memorialization because they are showing that death is not really final, but more a new form of life that can be expressed in many different ways. The companies are also showing that memorialization can be a beautiful thing that gives back (Biolife, LLC., 2021).

The disposal of remains through bio-degradable shrouds or urns is known as a woodland burial but can also be called a green or natural burial (Warpole, 2009). This type of burial has long been advocated for by environmental groups because there is no permanent grave marker associated with the grave, and it replants trees that have been cut down to make room for the ever-growing societies that we live in. The grave sites created from woodland burials are also accessible by the public, which in turn makes the memorial process a more personal and private affair than it has been in the past. The use of cemeteries and their heritage value is decreasing daily, making woodland burials a more popular form of remain disposal (Warpole, 2009).

### **Memorial Glass and Marbles**

With new methods of utilizing a person's cremains, public memorialization is starting to be more understood than it previously was. A newer method of remembering the dead involves the use of art and creativity on a whole other level.

For example, a local glass maker in Laramie, Wyoming, Dillon Ruland, owns a glassworks company called SageGlass Curiosities. Ruland has been working with glass for about eight years now. He started out by just doing "normal" glass pieces, until he was approached by a friend to try his hand at memorial glass (D. Ruland, personal communication, November 2019). Ever since, Ruland has continued to make memorial glass and his works have even gone outside of the United States to countries such as Japan, Canada, and Australia. Ruland wanted to start doing memorial glass to help his friend in her time of grief but also to help others through their difficult time. "She came to me and asked if I could put the rest of her [loved one's] ashes into a marble so that she could have a less spillable way to remember her loved one," Ruland said when asked more about how he got started with memorial glass and marbles (D. Ruland, personal communication, November 2019).

SageGlass is trying to give new life and personality to the people that are lost to us because of death (D. Ruland, personal communication, November 2019). Ruland uses his glassblowing skills to create memorial marbles for anyone who comes to him. To make sure that each marble is truly a representation of the personality of the deceased, Ruland gets an idea of what that person was like. This is so those who have the marble can always remember their loved one was when they were alive. Before making a new memorial marble Ruland sits down with the family of the deceased so that he can get an accurate depiction and understanding of who the person was when they were alive and what kind of life they lived (D. Ruland, personal communication, November 2019).

By doing this Ruland can create a personalized marble for each person that accurately depicts them and gives their loved ones something to hold on to forever (D. Ruland, personal communication, November 2019). Before he starts work with new remains, Ruland cleanses his workshop (and even observers) with sage so that the soul of each person has a fresh space to be memorialized in. By cleansing his workshop with sage Ruland is creating a new environment for each person and giving them the respect that they deserve. It has been said that burning sage helps purify the air. Burning sage in a room is also good for improving intuition of the people in the room when the sage is burned, purifying specific objects, in this case the cremains, and improving the mood of the room (Cuncic, 2020). The hardest part of making memorial glass is not working with human remains for Ruland, but rather talking with the families to figure out what kind of marble to make for each person. Ruland talks with the family to figure out what kind of marble to make, but this can be hard because “it is hard shit that they are dealing with,” but also because sometimes Ruland knows the person that he is making into a marble (D. Ruland, personal communication, November 2019).

One piece he was working on in the Fall of 2019, was of a child that he knew, so when talking with the family Ruland became emotional because he knew what kind of person the child was (D. Ruland, personal communication, November 2019). Ruland said that he really only gets sad when he talks with the family because when he is working, he is concentrating on his work and on his duty to make sure the marble has a “personality of its own.” Even though there are emotional challenges to this kind of work, Ruland still enjoys it because he is able to “help people in a tough time” and “create something out of something for something.”

People like Ruland are breaking the tradition surrounding memorialization because they are willing to come up with new and creative ways that show that although death is sad, it does not have to be horrible, that it can be something beautiful and wonderful for anyone and everyone. Memorialization can be personal, public, or even a combination of both. SageGlass Curiosities is creating a way for people to remember their dead that can be shared with many people or kept private and used as a grieving tool for the loved ones left behind (D. Ruland, personal communication, November 2019).

### **Human Diamonds**

One of the most unique transformations of human cremains is quite costly but ends up paying for itself through pricelessness and monetary value once it is created. Eterneva is a company that has found a way to turn cremated remains into pure carbon which can then be turned into a diamond. This company was founded when the founder’s mentor died, and she wanted a way to remember this remarkable woman (Eterneva, 2021). The company ensures that each diamond is unique and that each diamond goes to the correct family. Eterneva gives each set of remains a unique number to ensure that the remains are never mixed up and so that the family has peace of mind that they are getting their loved one back. The company also films the

entire process step by step and gives these videos to the families so that they know exactly which stage their loved one is in and so that they can be a part of this process even though they are not personally there (Eterneva, 2021).

When the process of making the diamond is complete, the company sends a representative to accompany the diamond to its final destination so that the families can see all of the work put into their diamond and so that their loved one is never alone on their new and final journey (Eterneva, 2021). Death is something that haunts the thoughts of many because of terrifying and final it is. Companies like Eterneva make death into something beautiful which can give people a sense of peace and calm and makes death seem less final and terrifying (Eterneva, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

From a traditional grave burial to being turned into a priceless and valuable diamond, a person can choose how they want to be remembered in death by the people who knew them and by those who did not. For the most part a person really can be remembered any way that they want once they die. However, when choosing a method of memorialization, a person needs to look at the different factors that go into each specific type of memorialization. For traditional grave burial, a person has to consider the upfront and long-term costs associated with this type of memorial and whether or not their successors can afford the maintenance costs. A person can only receive a sky burial in Tibet due to laws and regulations in the United States that prevent the abuse of a human corpse. Anyone can be cremated, pretty much anywhere in the world, but they need to keep in mind their religious beliefs as well as cultural norms where they want their cremains to be interred or scattered. The cremains of a person can be memorialized in cremation tattoos, reef balls, living urns, glass marbles, human diamonds, shotgun shells, vinyl records,

fireworks, or shot into space. A person just has to consider the costs surrounding their preferred method of memorialization as well as the cultural and legal regulations that are in place where they wish to be remembered.



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