Introduction and Thesis

An average of 55.3 million people die each year, 2.3 million of those in the US alone (Banks, 2010). With a continually aging baby boomer population, those rates are predicted to increase over the coming years (Banks, 2010). There are several factors that come into play when it comes to death: age, income, such as finances, environmental impact, cultural norms and personal preferences. Eco-friendly alternatives to traditional burial methods are steadily on the rise (Coulls et al., 2018). These methods provide cheaper options that take a significantly lighter toll on the environment, and can even positively affect the planet. These methods also tend to be more personal and nurture America's damaged relationship with death, another cultural issue that separates the nation from the rest of the western world (Hannig, 2017). The American funeral industry can help the environment, reduce astronomical costs for families, and being to mend America’s relationship with death by switching over to practicing alternative burial methods, specifically natural burial.

Financial Aspects of American Funeral Industry

• The average funeral home handles a reported 113 calls per year and employees 3 full-time and 4 part-time employees (NFDA, 2017). Since these laws are left up to the states, grassroots advocacy is important. Each year, Americans bury approximately 73,000 km of wood, 58,500 metric tons of steel, 1.5 million metric tons of concrete, and 16.3 million liters of embalming fluid (Coulls et al., 2018). That is enough casket wood to build 4.5 million homes and enough embalming fluid to fill eight Olympic-sized swimming pools every year (Calderone, 2015). Lawn park cemeteries currently take up about 1 million acres of land (Calderone, 2015).
• Typical maintenance requires plenty of water, chemical fertilizers and pesticides to keep the lawns looking pristine. These chemicals seep back into local water supplies and harm wildlife.
• Embalming fluid is made of a chemical mix of formaldehyde, phenol, methanol, and glycerin (Calderone, 2015).
• The chemicals in the fluid are known by the CDC to be potential human carcinogens, yet they are still used in almost every funeral home (Calderone, 2015).
• Embalming is not required by federal law, and it is perfectly legal to bury an unembalmed body (Corley, 2007).
• It is the funeral industry that has perpetuated the myth that embalming is practiced to prevent the spread of disease, but this has been proven false a year ago (Calderone, 2015).

Culture of Death in US & Legislation

• It was not until Lincoln's assassination in 1865 that the public took notice of embalming. His body was embalmed so it could be viewed on a funeral train back to his hometown in Illinois (Walsh, 2017).
• Embalming became a national sensation, making its way from the highest-class homes down until it is the commonplace practice known today (Walsh, 2017).
• It is a common misconception that bodies must be embalmed in order to be buried in America, and families are often unaware they can request for forgoing the embalming process at any funeral home.
• It is only in Western cultures that death has become over-medicalized and is seen as an enemy to be defeated (Hannig, 2017).
• Body disposition control generally falls to individual states, which is where most of the problems come in. Each state varies on how bodies can be legally disposed of, and it can get confusing when trying to plan one’s own disposition.
• Since these laws are left up to the states, grassroots advocacy becomes the main proponent of the green burial movement.

Environmental Aspects of American Funeral Industry

• cemeteries are not environmentally sustainable. They rely on single-use land, significant resource consumption, and leach toxic by-products into the land (Coulls et al., 2018).
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Cremation: Not the Best Answer

• It is not a perfect alternative and poses its own unique environmental issues. Many cremation services take place after an embalmed viewing, so the body is still being filled with the dangerous embalming chemicals (Coulls et al., 2018).
• Instead of those chemicals seeping into the ground after burial, the fumes are released into the air during the burning process.
• Each cremation uses the natural gas equivalent of a 500-mile car trip in addition to giving off toxic gases (Doughty, 2017).
• cremated ashes form a thick chalky layer in the ground and are toxic by-products into the land (Coutts et al., 2018).
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Cremation: Not the Best Answer

• Natural burial is defined as “burial of an unembalmed body in a biodegradable casket or shroud with no vault” (Coulls et al., 2018).
• three main categories of natural burial cemeteries
• Conservation burial grounds only allow naturally buried bodies and their methodology focuses on commitment to ecological conservation (Coulls et al., 2018). They do this by using burials to restore landscapes, enhance plant and wildlife growth, and preserve land (Coulls et al., 2018).
• A conservation burial ground has a unique purpose - once bodies are buried there, the land cannot be developed on (Doughty, 2017)
• family and friends can come and plant their loved ones favorite flowers and plants over their grave site and are comforted by the idea of their loved one helping nourish the greenery (Vatzomsky, 2018).
• even a more expensive green burial would rarely cost over $5,000 - half the price of the average traditional funeral!

Conclusion

It is a fact that every human being will one day die - that is something no one has control over. What they do have control over is how they would like their body to be disposed of. For many Americans, embalming and cremation is the only method they will ever consider. However, a growing population of Americans are turning to alternative methods for both environmental and cultural reasons. The environmental benefits of the various options mentioned previously are undeniable, and will likely make more financial sense to many. In order for future generations to accept these greener methods, opening up the conversation about death must be death. Death must be taught as a natural part of life from a young age. Although it can be frightening at first, allowing people to explore their relationship with death will make it easier to feel comfortable prearranging. By thinking critically about the various interrelated options and openly exploring this topic, Americans will be a better informed and better equipped population. It is obvious that the current funeral industry is broken. It does not meet the financial needs of most Americans and its worsening havoc on a dying planet. It is time that the United States open their eyes to this issue and make bold steps in getting back to a simpler, humbler death.

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