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Anthropology of Death and Dying

Death Ritual Assignment

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 What actually happens to our bodies after we die is a reality we personally will never have to face. We can have a say as long as we are alive and we can sign documents detailing what we want to happen, but when the moment of our death arrives the rituals or services that occur after we die are handled by our families and the people in the death industry. The people in the death industry often have stigmatized jobs. They are sometimes seen as morbid and depressing jobs, but as I have learned, both funeral providers and spiritual leaders find their occupations very rewarding.

When we were first given this assignment, I was incredibly intrigued and excited for all the creative possibilities that were being opened. I immediately started to think about all the people who I could contact for an interview. The opportunities were numerous, but my enthusiasm about the project made the decision process easier.

At first, I debated between choosing a mortician and a coroner. Interviewing a coroner who dealt with bodies that were involved in police investigations would be so fascinating. I could learn so much about forensic examination and the legal issues involved with those bodies. In the end, however, I decided to contact a funeral home simply because I thought that a funeral home would be more willing to talk to me. At the time, forensic examiners seemed to have a more unpredictable job that was far more involved with the legal system and therefore more high-stress. However, after making my decision I came to realize that the life of a funeral director is also incredibly demanding. Setting up a meeting with the owner of DiCicco & Sons Funeral Homes was far more difficult than I had originally planned for. I never thought about how busy the life of a funeral director could be. After several phone calls and cancelled meetings, I finally got the chance to speak with Anthony DiCicco Jr. Despite feeling like I had greatly inconvenienced him, he was very welcoming and happy to take my questions. Anthony is the middle-aged grandson of Nick and Jessie DiCicco, the founders of the funeral home. I chose his funeral home over others because it is a family practice and he has a lot emotional ties to the establishment himself; it is not just the place where he works. Our interaction was short because he had other appointments to take, but he was definitely cooperative and understanding of my assignment. I think because of the line of work he is in, Anthony came off as professional and also incredibly empathetic. The spiritual leader I chose was also very much like this.

Choosing a spiritual leader who dealt with death ritual was the more difficult decision. The possibilities were endless but I was mostly debating between researching death in the Hindu, Christian, and Muslim faiths. I know very little about the rituals of Hindu death, but being a Hindu I thought I would be able to understand the process more easily. However, I wanted to and was encouraged to step outside my comfort zone. The reason I chose the Muslim death ritual was because I am interested in Islam as a whole. I am currently enrolled in Arabic and I plan on studying in the Middle East in the future. The more I know about the Islamic faith, the more prepared I will be to live there. I looked up mosques in the Cleveland area and chose the Islamic Center of Cleveland, which seemed to be the largest. I had to drive to Parma to get there but the beauty of the mosque made up for the somewhat long drive. I drove into a promenade between two rows of trees. At the end of the road was a magnificent building1. The minarets gleamed white and the gold of the dome shone brightly in the light. I walked inside, took off my shoes and placed them in the designated areas. I met with the community outreach coordinator named Suna Aziz. She was very warm and welcoming. Her office was cluttered and very homey; she seemed to live in her office. She was eager to talk to me and my interview with her was very conversational and natural. She used hand gestures and even sang a part of the ritual to me. Overall, I found both my interviewees to be very helpful and willing to talk to me. They had an answer to all my questions and my interviews were very informative.

Anthony DiCicco Jr. continued the family business along with his brother Nicholas; he was “born into this line of work”, as he put it, and he enjoys it a lot. He sees his job as helping people through rough part of life and that is very satisfying. He wants the business to always stay in his family and it was very clear that the funeral home meant a lot to him. DiCicco & Sons Funeral Homes is affiliated with Dignity Memorial in order to provide the necessary services of a funeral home.

When someone comes to the funeral home to plan a funeral they go through Anthony in order to make the process easier for them and the family. First they have to select a package plan, which can be preselected before death. The plans outlined by Dignity Memorial are the Tribute Plan, the Honor Plan, and the Heritage Plan. Anthony said that the prices2 for the plans can change on a daily basis. All the package plans for burial include services such as basic services of funeral director and staff, flowers, hearse, dressing and casketing of deceased, embalming, visitation services in the funeral home, clergy honorarium, and cemetery services. The package plans for cremation include less, but the main services are transportation to crematory and third party cremation. People can also use a custom planning feature as well. They mainly pay for the basic services of funeral director and staff and then select what specific options they want. These options include cemetery plot, grave liners and headstones for burial, and container for body, container for ashes, and disposition of ashes for cremation.

Anthony said that, especially because the economy is down, people have been opting for cremation. People generally choose one of the package plans in order to take the stress of planning off of them. According to Anthony, people do not usually request burials on their property, but even if they did burial of a body has a lot more regulations than one would imagine. There are burial permits that must be acquired before a body is interred. The burial can happen as soon as the cemetery is ready. The cemetery must be an approved municipal or private cemetery. As far as cremation goes, there are not many regulations on where the ashes can be spread. However, if the family wants the ashes to be buried in a cemetery, a burial permit must be provided to the cemetery and they must also buy a plot. If the death is violent or unexplained, the body is first given to a medical examiner or coroner and may be kept several days. The family is allowed to transport the body themselves, although transportation can be provided through the funeral home. The local requirements governing disposition of human remains are defined by the “Ohio Appointment of Representative for Disposition of Bodily Remains, Funeral Arrangements, and Burial or Cremation Goods and Services”3. This document essentially is a way for a living person to appoint a representative for them in the case of their death. The document details what the person would want done to their body after death.

 **Anthony is well prepared for handling all of the above services. In Ohio, embalmers and funeral directors require a Bachelor’s degree and attend mortuary school. He is educated and has been doing his job for many years. Some of the dissatisfactions are being on call at all time and working long hours. However, Anthony reiterated that** the best part of his job is helping people through rough part of life and people really appreciate that. He strongly believes that funerals are for the living. They reinforce, for the family’s sake, that “this person lived their life”. A funeral is a tribute and it acknowledges their existence, but it is done for the sake of the loved ones.

 As a transition from the interview with Anthony to the one with Suna, I picked up on an interesting similarity between the two. Both my interviewees answered one question in the same way. When I asked what the most difficult service was to manage they both expressed the sadness they felt when a child had died. This is something that I believe anyone can understand, and even professionals in the business find it hard to accept. It is hard to accept because no parent should have to bury their child and no one so young should be denied the right to live. For Anthony, he said that he once planned the funeral service for his best friend’s six-year old son. Suna described a time when a girl died in the community and the girl’s mother came to clean the body (a ritual that will be discussed later). The mother was completely devastated. It was incredibly moving for Suna because she herself has daughters.

 One of the first things that Suna Aziz said to me was that she loved her job. She was hired shortly after September 11th, because the mosque needed help. She and the Imam are the only employees of the mosque; it is otherwise run by volunteers from the community. As outreach coordinator, she meets with people who visit the mosque and she also travels around to schools and other religious institutions to give talks on the Islamic faith. The dissatisfactions of her job are that the mosque relies heavily on volunteers and she finds it hard to keep up with all the work. Muslims are very young in this country and it is hard for them to realize what their religious institutions need to do. The congregation is the largest in the Cleveland area and is growing continually. Up to 1,500 people will come to the church on Fridays, and on holidays 4,000 people may be in the mosque.

As far as her role in death ritual, Suna essentially helps the Imam with all parts of the ceremony, especially if the deceased is a woman. Suna stressed the importance of simplicity in the ceremony. Once the person dies, or is on his or her death bed, the family will call up the mosque and will work with a funeral home to make arrangements for the deceased. If the person dies earlier in the day, they will try to bury them that day itself. If they cannot bury the first day, they bury the person the second day, unless of course the coroner’s office is still keeping the body.

 The body is treated as if it is still alive, with dignity and respect. They keep the body clothed and begin the ritual with a cleansing of the body. They wash the body the same way they would wash themselves before they pray; a primary washing and then a more advanced washing of the nose, hands, mouth, face, arms, feet, and then the entire body. The right side of the body is cleansed, followed by left side. The deceased person is always washed by someone of the same gender, usually the family members. However, if the family is having a hard time with the death, Suna or another member of the mosque will step in and cleanse the body. Suna said that she has cleansed many bodies and she finds it to be a very peaceful thing; “It’s a sad thing when people die, but it’s a reality. And it’s one more thing I can do for somebody,” she reiterated.

After the cleansing, they shroud the body in white cotton cloth. For both men and women, the first piece of cloth is one rectangular cloth that is wrapped around the full body, under the arms and to the legs. The second piece, for women, is a covering called the *kamis* is like a long shirt that will come down to the thigh. The third piece of clothing is a longer cloth than the first layer that extends to the feet. The last piece of clothing is a large sheet that wraps the entire body that is tied under the feet and on top on the head. The arms are placed in the way they are placed when praying; right arm over left arm. Women will also wear a head scarf. The white cloth will be very simple, no stitching or embroidery.

The body is then brought to mosque and community comes together to support the family for the *janaza* prayer, or the funeral prayer. It is a standing only prayer and they ask god to forgive the person’s sins, to accept them into heaven, and to make the life of the grave easier (they believe that the spirit does return to the body in the grave for a period of time). Muslims believe they are questioned in the grave by angels before they can enter heaven, so the Imam will talk to the body reminding them who was their lord and prophet and that they were a Muslim.

The body is then buried, without a casket. The body is also not embalmed so that decomposition can occur more rapidly. It is transported in a coffin, but it is buried without one, facing the kaba (the first house of worship built by humanity). Muslims all around the world are buried facing the same direction. The person is placed on the right side and a mound of dirt is put under their head and then they are covered. Most Muslims in the community are buried in a Muslim section (called the Muslim garden) of a large cemetery that the mosque bought for the proper burial of Muslims. There is not really eulogy said during the funeral, it is more of a prayer. People will gather for three days after the *janaza* prayer to support the family. During these three days they will continually read the Qur’an and take turns praying for the deceased.

According to Suna, the service is for the benefit of both the mourners and the deceased, both need support in the eyes of a Muslim. The community will support the family through monetary costs or will cook food for them for a few days. Suna was unaware of the funeral costs because that is handled mostly by the funeral home. However, she said it does not vary too much because all the ceremonies are essentially the same and very simple. Though the community will support the mourners, Muslims believe that extreme grief is bad. People who grieve excessively do not accept that God loves the deceased more than they do; it is seen as almost a challenge to the greatness of God. To Muslims, death is seen as a joining of the deceased with God. All the rituals that immediately succeed death are performed in order to ensure that the body does indeed make it to heaven, its final resting place.

This assignment was definitely unlike anything I had done before for any class. I had not really thought about funeral services before this assignment, but I now realize that it is something that everyone will probably deal with at some point in their life. I am blessed to have never been to funeral; no one close enough to me has died. However, after conducting these interviews I am starting to think about what I would want at my funeral. It is a morbid, but interesting thought. I feel motivated now to go learn about Hindu death ritual, since that is what my grandparents, parents, and I will all go through some day. I feel more comfortable knowing that people who deal with death on a daily basis are very much aware that it is a natural thing. These people are not morbid nor do they lead depressing lives. They understand that death is a constant in life and they are there to support the families of the deceased. I firmly believe that funeral services are for the benefit of mourners. Now I have a comprehensive understanding of the processes that go into planning a funeral and performing the rituals of one.

Before conducting the interviews I would be a little nervous. I was not sure if my interviewees would be receptive to the questions. I was looking for more than one sentence responses and I was afraid that was what I was going to receive. My concerns ended up not being a problem at all, fortunately. After meeting with Suna I felt that we had touched on a lot of important matters and she made me feel completely comfortable calling her back if I needed any more answers. I felt especially relieved after meeting with Anthony just because it was so hard to get in touch with him in the first place; I thought I was being such a big burden (of course, he did not make me feel that way). Because my interview with Anthony was rushed, I feel that my interview with him was less thorough. However, it was still a good experience.

I appreciated this assignment for many reasons but the main one is this: what we have done for this project is training for conducting anthropological research. I have always thought that anthropology is difficult to teach in a classroom. I want to become an anthropologist who does fieldwork and I cannot receive fieldwork training unless I have research to gather and gain the experience from that research. Anthropology is about participant-observation and interviews, such as the ones we conducted. Unlike in other classes, where academic research projects are the primary way to supplement the course material, this assignment gave us hands on experience while still keeping the course topic in focus. After this experience, I truly feel that I am one step closer to becoming an anthropologist.