

Making Space for Death

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Death in urban spaces is inevitable, unavoidable, and universal. This is an obvious yet necessary statement. Clear factors such as high density and an aging baby-boomer population contribute to high death tolls in cities throughout the world. However, deaths related to escalating gun violence are unique to the United States and because of this deserve specific attention. Social customs around death in the United States have gone relatively unchanged since embalming gained popularity around the time of the Civil War. An alternative death care community is emerging in the US, offering new ways to think about and deal with death. Considering both naturally occurring and gun related deaths complicates the question of how to adapt our death practices to our contemporary situation. I use “naturally occurring” to refer to deaths related to aging and illness and to differentiate them from both accidental and intentional deaths due to gun violence. Addressing the question of how to respond to death requires multiple approaches, yet the typical response to death is one of emergency. In light of gun related deaths, this response is understandable and appropriate. Gun related deaths must be addressed and discussed with more nuance than the bipartisan approach that is currently dominating public discourse. However, natural deaths are more numerous and do not necessarily require this response of emergency.

Given that natural deaths are more common and don't require investigation as do gun deaths, it is necessary to address them in a different way. Caitlin Doughty blames this homogenous response to all forms of death on the funeral industry. “The conventional funeral industry has given people the impression that death is an emergency. ‘But death is *not* an emergency,’ Doughty said. ‘Death is the opposite of an emergency. Look at the person who died—all that stress and pain is gone from them. And now that stress and pain can be gone from you’” (Mead 2015). In the case of violent death or death that can be prevented through medical intervention, the events prior to death are indeed a state of emergency. Responding quickly to a person having a stroke or heart attack can prevent their death. This state of high anxiety and need for rapid response often continues into responses to death itself. But when we are faced with death, the period of emergency has passed and the need to create space for acknowledging, honoring, and processing death arises. How can space be created for social acceptance and open processing of the trauma of death be made without sensationalizing and perpetuating the state of emergency?

Any discussion of contemporary concerns around death must include insights from the innovative thinkers Katrina Spade and Caitlin Doughty. As I began to reflect on how urban America deals with death, Spade's work as founder of The Urban Death Project immediately came to mind. Through this project, Spade offers a simple, beautiful solution to the practical question of what to do with the body of a deceased loved one. The projects website states,

“Because death is momentous, miraculous, and mysterious/Because the cycles of nature help us grieve and heal/Because our bodies are full of life-giving potential/We propose a new option for laying our loved ones to rest” (Spade 2015). Briefly, this new option Spade is developing is a way to process our bodies without embalming, allowing us to become part of the soil, and in turn, fuel the earth. Raising awareness of alternative death practices in a different way, Doughty is a multifaceted mortician and author of *Smoke Gets in your Eyes*. She provides a means to examine death in contemporary society in an open way, using humor and humanity to get us through the very real sadness that death brings. I look to these contemporary figures to scrutinize issues of sustainability, which Spade’s project addresses directly, and the need to consider loss of urban space as cities continue to grow and become denser. The loss of space likewise contributes to the loss of places to contemplate and reflect upon death, which prohibits a more meaningful awareness of death. The recent mass shooting in San Bernardino comes to mind when contemplating the complexities of death culture. Here, I will seek to present a response to the continuous escalation of death tolls from gun violence, while maintaining my argument in favor of increasing awareness and conversation of death in our urban spaces.

With over 2.5 million deaths across the nation annually (CDC 2015), death rates in American cities are variable. These deaths result from so called natural causes, as defined above, but as this last year has demonstrated, a disturbing number of deaths are the result of violence. Looking only at gun violence, at the time of this article, 315 people have been murdered in mass shootings in the year 2015. A total of 12,533 deaths have resulted from all categories of gun violence this year (Gun Violence Archive 2015). As a result of our unregulated gun laws, our annual death rates increase. And while far more people die of natural causes, the responsibility for deaths by gun violence lie in the hands of our entire society. Of course the responsibility lies with the perpetrators of violence, especially those enacting terror within their own nation. But it does not end there. Responsibility also rests in those legislators and civil servants whose inaction continues to endanger the citizens they profess to protect. There is also an amount of responsibility resting in the hands of the citizens. We cannot simply point fingers of blame. This is more than a mental health problem (Metzl, MacLeish 2015), more than a bipartisan political problem, more than a problem of specific cities stigmatized as dangerous. This is a national problem and one in which every level of society; citizens, politicians, Republicans, Democrats, and unaffiliated alike must act to change.

Mass shooting events are highly publicized, so how can conversations about death be extended without oversaturating a public that is constantly exposed to violent imagery? Of course the media reports on violent deaths and social media responds to these deaths in vehement outrage. But the discourse quickly fades, which is demonstrated through the abhorrent lack of legislative reform in response to the murder of hundreds of American citizens *by* American citizens every year. This examination of murder makes it difficult to propose methods for dealing with death in a more open, accepting manner. Looking into the face of death is difficult when death is accidental and therefore blameless, or expected, as in the case of old age. Even more painful are those deaths that are sudden, violent, and unjust. How can I argue in favor of examining death? In order to do this, I want to depart from the causes of death and deal with the reality of the dead body, which is increasingly losing its right to urban space.

Reduction of life's complexities to the binary trope of good and evil pushes death outside of urban society. To be alive, better yet, to be young, thin, and attractive are coveted in many cultural settings, perhaps especially so in the United States. Social theorist Zygmunt Bauman "uniquely illustrates how we survive death-anxieties today; contemporary, liquid modern culture has engaged us in ceaseless pursuit of the unattainable consumer sensation of bodily fitness as a way to suppress and thus survive our death-anxieties in a self-propelling manner" (Higo 2011). Death is posed in opposition to the youthful body coveted in contemporary US culture. As such, it has been relegated to the margins, exiled from our urban living spaces. With such focus on youth and beauty in urban American settings, how can space be reserved for death? I certainly do not imply that the needs of the dead equate to the needs of the living. And yet, the needs of the living and the dead are inextricable. Everything that lives now will one-day die. We know this, but we do everything in our power to repress this truth. We seek to postpone death, whether through healthy living or medical interventions. When death inevitably comes knocking and we can no longer avoid facing it, we behave as ostriches. With our heads hidden, we expect someone else to take death away, clean it up and make it presentable for an open casket viewing or render it unrecognizable through cremation before we briefly acknowledge that death has passed through our lives. But we do not allow death to stay long in our cities. Those who argue against the repression of death are seen as macabre, morbid, even perverse. Unwillingness to examine death only serves to perpetuate practices that are no longer sustainable. Our cities have finite space for cemeteries, embalming fluid leaks into ground water, poisoning the environment and the alternative mode of cremation reduces bodies to inorganic ash, offering no nutrients to the soil where they are often scattered. By analyzing the interconnection and interdependence between the living and the dead, we can find solutions to the question of what to do with death in our cities.

One method of addressing death in urban spaces is to encourage the survivors to care for the body of their deceased loved one. Caitlin Doughty uses this approach and states a goal to "end our deliberate estrangement from the dead body" (Mead 2015). There is a growing alternative death care movement in the United States. Families are learning to care for the body of their deceased loved one by washing, dressing, and preparing the body for its final resting place. Increasingly, Americans are choosing cremation, a dramatic shift away from burials with their corresponding costly and unnecessary embalming, caskets and professional preparation of the body for an open-casket funeral. This open-casket tradition is encouraged as a way to say a final goodbye to the deceased and the preservation of the body to remain as it was in life has built a multibillion dollar funeral industry. I and other proponents of alternative death care argue, rather than seeking to preserve our deceased to appear as they did in life, let us task ourselves to sit with the face of death and learn to view it for all of its unknowable beauty.

As more and more families choose cremation, space has been created for further evolution in our understandings and practices surrounding death. Another alternative approach in addressing death can be found in Katrina Spade's Urban Death Project. This project serves to change the way the living deal with death by providing an architecturally intelligent and aesthetically pleasing urban building that will host memorial services and process the bodies of the deceased. This process occurs through decomposition and is founded on years of cross-

disciplinary research including sociocultural anthropology, architecture, sustainability, urban planning and death care, to name only a few. The Urban Death Project is increasing death discourse and placing the solution to urban death within the boundaries of our cities. Already, we can find representations of death within our cities through memorials and statues commemorating and honoring those long deceased. These sites also serve as gathering places to honor those who have died in more recent years. By incorporating urban architecture that invites and allows us to remember the lives of those we love, the presence of death can be woven into the fabric of urban society in a manner that is respectful while challenging the monolithic conception of death as inherently evil.

Death will continue to be portrayed on the news as violent crimes continue to be committed within our cities. And while it is vital to be aware of these deaths so that we can challenge our nation's gun laws, it is equally crucial to acknowledge those deaths occurring simply as a natural cycle of life. For it is the latter that are greater in number and more often unremarkable except to the immediate family and surviving loved ones. Death is a daily reality; nearly 107 people die per minute globally (Medindia Network for Health 2015). This cold, unfathomable statistic returns our attention to the intractable relationship between the living and dead. Eventually, we are all touched by death. Rather than hiding away, pursuing eternal youth and forcing our dead outside of urban settings, let's gather around our dead, care for them in a sustainable manner and keep their memories alive through the creation of urban spaces, allowing the interaction between the living and dead to continue in a cycle of healing.

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