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In the shadow of the traditional grave

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Abstract

This article draws on data from a qualitative study of the destinations of ashes now being removed in increasing numbers from crematoria, the practice of cremation, and particularly the private disposal of ashes outside crematoria.¹ It explores the case that such disposals may frequently be informed by the recollection, or awareness, of practices surrounding whole body burial. These include notions of bodily integrity, the creation and preservation of a clear, bounded space for the deceased, and expectations and negotiations about grave visiting and upkeep. The article therefore seeks to determine whether new ritual practice is being developed, or instead, whether a reformulation of traditional beliefs and practices is taking place. Data are presented which primarily demonstrate either a strong parallel between burial and cremation practice or a serious intention to stand clear of the shadow of the traditional grave. In addition we discuss a smaller body of material which reveals more ambiguous approaches that do not support either argument. By examining data within these categories, the article explores the varying degrees of alignment between traditional burial and cremation practices and asks whether cremation provides scope for a return to positively perceived aspects of burial, while sidestepping its less welcome aspects, such as slow bodily deterioration.

Keywords: *Burial, ashes, new ritual, home, crematoria, vernacular practice*

They were poured into the ground. It seemed more of a natural process—like part of the burial service. We said prayers over it. I can't remember the actual committal . . .

Doris Penny²

Introduction

Doris Penny is describing an ash interment, yet her observation makes an explicit reference to burial and so acts as a reminder of the overlap in the secular use of a term such as “committal” and its original reference to entrusting the body and soul of the deceased to God. This article draws on data from a qualitative study, by the authors, of the destinations of ashes now being removed in increasing numbers from crematoria (see Davies & Guest, 1999). Its findings suggest that many people’s choices for ash-remains, and the way they describe and account for decisions about the disposal of these, draw from a repertoire of ideas and practices associated with burial. In other words, the practice of cremation, and particularly the private disposal of ashes outside crematoria, may frequently be informed by the recollection, or awareness, of practices surrounding whole body burial.

If indeed this is the case, how can we explain it? Does inhumation still represent a culturally dominant mode of disposal in this part of northwest Europe, despite statistics that

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believe this? Is the impulse to “earth” the remains of the body somehow over-riding? Are we only now, because of the large volume of cremated remains, able to detect innovative strategies that may well have been incipient in the early days after the introduction of cremation? (Parsons, 2005) In addressing such questions, this paper seeks to determine whether new ritual practice is being developed, or instead, whether our data describe a reformulation of traditional beliefs and practices.

Ritual has been regarded as a strategy for creating meaning and order (Levi-Strauss, 1967), as well as “rousing, channelling, and domesticating powerful emotions” (Turner, 1969, p. 38). To these ends it often conceals, rather than reveals, realities (Bloch & Parry, 1982), and we might consider whether the rendering of the body to ashes is being subsumed within a more familiar set of practices and imagery for, as Davies points out, any service which takes place at the crematorium involves “hiding the fact of fire in the process” (1997, p. 28). The role of the familiar within new ritual practice is also consistent with Levi-Strauss’ (1967) notion of “bricolage”, that is to say, the fabrication of new cultural items out of the residue of older ones. Equally, we can take note of Gerholm’s (1988) reinterpretation of ritual as a creative arena of competing viewpoints and motives, a perspective which sheds considerable light on the examples to follow.

The inverse of this point is also relevant. Traditional rituals often serve to express values associated with society’s institutions, rather than its individuals, and may therefore fail to speak to more marginal or excluded groups. However, they can still inform the creation of alternative, more individualistic practices, whether through borrowings or bricolage. In other words, they may directly stimulate acts of resistance in the form of inversions of longstanding approaches (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). For example, the potentially transgressive act of retaining the residue of a relative’s body in the private home or garden can generate a special sense of intimacy, one which may partly be intensified as a result of actively inverting the customary practice of locating the remains of the dead in a public space. Drawing on debates within this body of work around ritual, our paper argues that the term *ritualization* (Serematikis, 1991) is a useful resource, one which directs attention to the ritual process, rather than simply its abstracted elements. As the data presented below indicate, individuals who choose to remove ashes from crematoria are setting in train, or possibly extending, an entire trajectory of ritual activities and practices and our discussion of their relationship with traditional forms therefore requires that we consider their interrelationships across time. The particular question we examine here is whether cremation provides scope for a return to positively perceived aspects of burial, while side-stepping its less welcome aspects, such as slow bodily deterioration?

Core to this paper are questions about how certain features of whole body burial, such as notions of bodily integrity, the creation and preservation of a clear, bounded space for the deceased, and expectations and negotiations about grave visiting and upkeep, may be translated into practices surrounding contemporary ash disposal. A visitor to the garden of remembrance in many crematoria will see elaborate, informal memorialization compressed into the small plots generally offered for ash disposal. Both their density and the ephemeral nature of many of the tributes can confront crematoria and indeed cemetery managers with difficult maintenance problems. Bereaved relatives, perhaps unable to accept the anonymity of ashes strewn in a collective area, frequently strive to establish a cordoned-off territory of their own, in the flowerbeds or around the trees where “their” ashes have been deposited. We might also infer that the miniaturization of the body through cremation requires some kind of compensatory amplification, and this is achieved via collections of memorabilia which strongly resemble those commonly to be found on whole body graves. Elaborate informal memorialization can also be seen in columbaria, where the small space allocated is

often substantially increased by the addition of wind chimes, teddy bears, poems, or plant supports. Among these items, wind chimes and musical greetings cards represent an aural mechanism for expanding and enhancing the space afforded to the deceased. As a result, high winds can quite literally “amplify” the presence of someone whose memorial may otherwise be somewhat diminutive. These practices suggest that the shadow of the grave, as argued in *The secret cemetery* (Francis, Kellaher, & Neophytou, 2005), is strong even within the precincts of the crematorium grounds. What then of those cremated remains that are taken away from the crematoria by, or at the request of, family or friends?

Cremation in the ascendant

Cremation is now the most common form of disposal in the UK. A comparatively new practice, it was only legalized in 1884 following an intense period of campaigning by its supporters, including the Cremation Society of Great Britain. (Cremation Society of Great Britain, 1974; Jupp, 2005; White, 2002). Despite the public promotion of cremation towards the end of the nineteenth century, it did not become a popular alternative for disposal until after the Second World War. Indeed, cremation only surpassed full body burial as the most common preference in the late 1960s. Since the early 1970s, however, two thirds of all annual disposals have been cremations, rising to an average of 71.54% since 2000 (*Pharos International*, 2004, p. 20), making this the customary choice in the UK.

While cremation has now achieved ascendancy over burial, another significant change has been occurring in recent decades as ever more family members and friends choose not to leave cremated remains in the hands of crematoria staff to be interred or scattered within the garden of remembrance. In the 1970s, only around one in 10 sets of ashes were taken away for private disposal; by 2004 this proportion had risen nationally to over 56%, with considerable local variation. This equates to almost a quarter of a million sets of ashes removed annually. Intriguingly, there are only limited statistics, official or otherwise, tracing the eventual fate of most of these ashes, aside from those very few sets that are recorded as openly returned to gardens of remembrance for one or other form of placement, or to cemeteries for ash burial. Even where some official information can be obtained, the picture remains unclear. For instance, applications for burials by the Council in Sunderland show that, between 1999 and 2004, approximately 8% of ashes taken away from its crematorium were placed in family graves in the cemetery. What these statistics do not show however, are the numbers of ashes that were buried or scattered on graves illicitly. This may be in an attempt to avoid paying the costly fees involved; or from ignorance or even distaste that permission is required in the first place. A member of the clergy, who was interviewed for our study, explained that when he is asked to attend ceremonies to scatter ashes in a cemetery where he knows the family will not or cannot pay the fee, he tells them, “Well I won’t come in my best bib and tucker so it won’t attract attention to what we are doing”. Another reason for removing ashes from crematoria is the desire to divide the ashes and dispose of them in different places. A funeral director told us “We have experiences of families wanting to split cremated remains. The problem with that being is that there is only one cremation certificate, so therefore there’s only one official disposal site, or committal site. So you can’t split cremated remains and have one set interred in one cemetery and the other interred in another cemetery, unless it’s done surreptitiously”. We might argue that such covert practices indicate the paucity of choices on the part of providers, who appear to have offered limited forms of memorialization, such as wall plaques and inscription in the book of remembrance, until relatively recently. At the same time, we could acknowledge this

as one facet of the effort to keep costs associated with cremation low, in contrast to what has always been understood as more expensive burial options.

The study

As noted, the data that inform this paper come from a wider study of interim and final destinations of ashes in the UK. Here, however, we are asking how the choices of people who dispose of ashes away from the cemetery are shaped or affected by established practices originating in the traditional rituals which surround full body burial. We consider the attractions of the traditional family grave for those having to make ash disposal decisions and negotiate conflicting preferences within and among families, and between survivors and the dead themselves. Interviews have been carried out with professionals, and with bereaved people who have disposed of ashes removed from crematoria, within the four sites already documented in Davies and Shaw's earlier study (1995): Barking and Dagenham, Nottingham, Sunderland, and Glasgow. The data presented here can be classified into three broad categories which reflect different responses to the concerns traditionally accommodated through whole body burial: for example, bodily integrity, protected and defined space, and ownership and visiting. Our question as to whether the removal of ash-remains from crematoria leads to final disposals which reflect traditional ritual practices, or whether this occasions profoundly new and creative practices, is addressed through these examples and we consider evidence for both perspectives. The majority of the examples we present here suggest either a strong parallel between burial and cremation practice or a serious intention to stand clear of the shadow of the traditional grave. A third category encompasses a smaller range of material that demonstrates ambiguous approaches which cannot support argument either way. In addition to these three categories, it also needs to be borne in mind that ashes may be left with crematoria managers and funeral directors, sometimes never to be claimed by survivors. Professionals we interviewed explained that elderly survivors in particular might be either moved into residential care or indeed die, and the ashes are then forgotten about. Through our three categories we now explore the varying degrees of alignment between traditional burial and cremation practices, and draw examples from both from our localized datasets and from government policy at the national level.

Strong parallels between burial and cremation practice

At the level of policy, the exhumation of human ashes continues to be premised upon Home Office legislation originally established for whole body burial. Once interred underground, ashes cannot be "disturbed" unless licensed by a Home Office exhumation order. Above ground however they can, for example, be placed within a stand-alone, earth-free monument, generally providing spaces for two sets of ashes. This has been called a "sanctum" by at least one supplier, a term which seems increasingly to be applied more generally. Columbarium niches represent another above ground alternative which has been available in various forms since the legalisation of cremation. Ashes can now be held in these kinds of memorials for varying rental periods, often 10, 15, or 25 years, with options for renewal. Legislation has been interpreted to indicate that removal by the family, or when the agreed rental period expires, by the authority, does not require a licence. The distinction being made in practice between above and below ground does however reflect the difficulty of interpreting legislation developed and implemented in order to protect both the corpse and the peace of mind of those surviving the deceased. This was particularly at issue during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when bodies were being "snatched" for sale to

medical practitioners, eager to develop diagnostic techniques through dissection. The extension of this legislation to include cremated remains may represent concern to maintain the sanctity of the notion of the grave, rather than to protect the ashes themselves. There is little legislation determining the handling or treatment of ashes before their legal status is transformed by being placed within the bounded “sacred” space of the grave. Having said this, codes of practice are now increasingly being promoted and followed, as legislative gaps in relation to disposal become more widely acknowledged. Indeed, the Environment Agency of England and Wales is currently appraising its policies regarding funeral practices and their impact upon the environment. However, the document being developed plainly states that, with certain key exceptions, such as scattering ashes near a drinking water supply or from a bridge over a busy waterway, there is no wish to interfere with the choices currently being made (Environment Agency of England and Wales, 2005).

This unwillingness to legislate for ashes that have been moved from the public arena into the ambit of familial or personal control appears to parallel attitudes towards the splitting or division of cremated remains. Despite the view expressed by the funeral director previously, the UK does not explicitly legislate against this practice, as is the case in some European countries where strict rules about the disposal of ashes are imposed. For instance, in Germany ashes can only be buried in a sealed container by an undertaker or cemetery officiant, so making division virtually impossible. A similar situation exists in Italy, where it is still a penal crime to open the container and disperse ashes anywhere other than the destination cited in the document of transportation, normally a cemetery. The Netherlands, on the other hand, changed its regulations in 1995 to permit the division of ashes, a form of disposal against which it had previously regulated (Arber, 2000).

The UK is therefore exceptionally free of legislation or regulations, yet, as we have seen, many crematorium staff and some funeral directors adhere to codes of practice that frown upon splitting the ashes. The coordination of one set of ashes with one cremation certificate provides a strong justification for this. Nonetheless, our data suggest that the practice of splitting is not uncommon, especially once ashes have been removed from the public control of the crematorium. At the same time, some interviewees expressed an instinctive objection, or even revulsion, when asked to consider this practice. In some cases this reaction implies a conceptual alignment of the ashes with whole body disposal. The following case study of Doris Penny, a middle-aged administrator in the public sector, shows how such parallels may be constructed and enacted.

Vignette of Doris Penny. Doris had created a small plot for the ashes of three family members who died at intervals over the previous 15 years: her father, mother, and an aunt. The father died first. In his will he requested cremation, for as Doris said, he had always “been a bit against burial”. However, as in many other cases, he did not specify what he wanted doing with the ashes. In contrast, Doris had always considered herself to be somewhat “anti-cremation” because she felt that “you are just burned and there is nothing there and there is nowhere to visit”. This perception of cremation arose from the belief that, as in the 1970s and 1980s, there were few options available for the disposal of ashes. Speaking of her abhorrence of the placelessness which she felt accompanied the dispersal of ashes, she commented:

Where would I go talk to them? Where would I relate to them? How would I know who I was talking to? My husband’s dad died and was scattered in the crematorium garden of remembrance and Tony said “I have nowhere to relate to”. I think it would have been better for him had he been able to. My mother always said “I don’t want to be buried as

they forget you and then there's no flowers on the grave". Well that may be true, but there might be another generation who wants to come and visit you and see where your last resting place was.

For Doris Penny, like many other interviewees, the availability of a "focus" seemed essential; a permanent place to visit where she felt that her parents somehow lingered, their presence symbolized by the ashes. When asked if she had considered splitting the ashes and disposing of them in several locations, she reacted with horror, declaring "I wouldn't chop my dad in half would I? He's a whole isn't he . . . it would be like chopping his legs off". When asked if she had mingled her parents' ashes together in one container, she replied that she preferred to keep the sets of ashes separated. Her own husband had recently suggested the possibility of mixing their own ashes after their deaths but, though she humoured his romantic inclination, she secretly disliked the idea.

It was not until after her father's death in 1990 that Doris Penny discovered to her surprise that it was possible to bury ashes. As a result, the family discussed how they felt about it. None of them knew much about the practice and so they approached a funeral director to find out more. They were shown a cemetery and told they could buy a plot which would hold three caskets. The potential for reuniting family members through sharing grave space decided the matter, particularly for Doris Penny's disabled mother who changed her views as result and said "Yes let's do it, as I'd like to be with Dad when something happens to me". It was agreed at the same meeting that her father's sister, who for many years had lived with her brother and his wife in the capacity as carer, would take the third space in the plot once the time came. For Doris, this ashes' plot had taken on the significance of a family grave. The urns of her father and mother were now buried together at the centre of the plot, and those of the aunt were placed at one side. Her mother had reportedly been quite pleased to think that when she died, her family would be able to visit them all together.

Doris Penny's views on visiting match very closely with the views of informants who contributed to *The secret cemetery* by Francis, Kellaheer and Neophytou (2005), where the focus is the grave established for whole body burial. Family members, or others who were close in life, frequently expressed wishes to be buried in the same grave, the same section, or at least in the same cemetery. This emerged as significant for people with a range of ideas about reunion in an afterlife. Proximity was as urgent for those with secular views as for those with either firm or uncertain beliefs about a form of resurrection. Comfort appeared to be drawn from the prospect of "company", when faced with the dissolution of death, as did a notion of security in numbers, not least for those from immigrant groups such as Greek Cypriot Orthodox, more recent Bangladeshi Muslims, or longer established Irish catholic families and communities. The possibility of family and community remembrance was also seen as more likely where the dead had been placed in close proximity.

The reaction of the Penny family seems to reflect these more widely held preferences for a grave or area where visiting and tending a plot allows for meaningful engagement, including conversation. For instance, Doris Penny visited regularly, particularly on anniversaries. Initially she had found herself drawn to the grave at surprising times of the day. This intense compulsion had lessened by the time of the interview, but she still could not ignore the urge to visit. At the site of ash interment, Doris Penny talked to her deceased family about her daily life and brought them flowers, because that is what she had done when they were alive. She hated to see dead flowers on a grave, or items such as plastic flowers, figurines, or wind chimes, arguing that it was a question of respect. In her view cemeteries were "sacred places, though I'm not a believer. And that one has to resist making them like a decorated house outside at Christmas with glitter and lights on off, on off, on off". The only exceptions she

made to this were children's graves. Photographs, she believed, should be kept away from the public arena of the cemetery as they were too intimate, even though she had many images around her house that often brought her warmth, a sense of closeness, memories, and, at times, sanity. She felt these were very personal and should be kept private. The fresh flowers she took to the plot, however, were important as gifts which demonstrated that she remembered. She felt that her habits or rituals of visiting had helped with her grieving process by giving her a defined space that in turn both offered and demanded a time to think. In her refusal of the placelessness of scattered ashes, Doris Penny therefore turned to more traditional ritual practices, and her dislike of the newer practice of extending the domestic sphere into the site of disposal through fairy lights and photographs also indicates that for her the removal of ashes from the crematoria was not viewed as an opportunity to innovate.

Other informants made comments which resonate with Doris Penny's views. One interviewee who talked about her deceased husband and his ashes did not understand what "splitting" ashes meant. After the practice had been explained, she immediately decided: "Splitting? No, it's not the right thing to do, not for me—I still want to feel he is an entity in himself". A crematorium manager expressed this more strongly, recalling how he had refused a request to allow half a set of ashes to be placed in the garden of remembrance after the first half had already been scattered on a local river. The family was advised to reunite the remaining half with the rest on the river. Indignant at the presumption, he exclaimed "It's illegal! I mean, it's like cutting an arm or leg off". Of course, as already noted, this is not illegal in the UK, though it is likely to be discouraged under the practitioner guidelines that most crematoria now follow. The Federation of British Cremation Authorities' *Code of cremation practice* assumes an entity when it instructs: "On completion, the whole of the Cremated Remains shall be collected and, following their reduction, shall be disposed of in accordance with the instructions received" (FBCA, 1999). Also given priority in these guidelines is the need to ensure that the remains are "kept separate and suitably identified".

Other strong parallels between burial practice and decisions surrounding the disposal of ashes were repeatedly voiced by our interviewees. One informant, Maria Warburton, spoke repeatedly of her mother's ashes being "laid to rest". Describing her repatriation of the ashes to Ireland, she recalled; "People said 'You've brought her home'. It was very important that she should come home, to be laid out in her own house in Ireland". Maria recounted how she had placed the ashes on the windowsill the night before a ceremony which involved scattering them on the sea nearby. This echoes an Irish wake with a candle in the window and people visiting. Traditionally, repatriation to Ireland would be of the body for burial, and the appearance of a container with ashes would not generally be expected in a country where the cremation rate is still around 2%. Maria, however, constructed an account that fits with bodily repatriation and all its beneficial possibilities for remembrance fixed in time and place. Indeed she argued that burial per se had a problematic finality: "A funeral is over, but if you are so inclined you can visit (the grave). With cremation it is not (a case of) 'the lid's closed and that's that'". In carrying out this process of ritualization, Maria has overcome reservations about cremation which were expressed by some of the people we interviewed in their "professional" capacity. For example, a representative of the Compassionate Friends in Glasgow said that whereas people whose children have been buried "go up once a week, but people that have scattered ashes don't have that, and they all regret it, most of them do". With regard to her own son whose body was buried rather than cremated, she said "I just feel he's still there, there's part of him still there, if I'd got him cremated I think it'd have been, that would have been finished if you know what I mean". Similarly a Nottingham

outreach nurse said “when people are cremated it’s almost as if they’re wiped off the face of the earth, I mean I know they are anyway when they die but it’s more of a really, more as if they never existed than if you’ve got a grave to visit”. Maria, however, had ensured that her mother’s expressed wish to be cremated and then repatriated for scattering on the sea still provided opportunities for memorialization at a pace that she herself could set, and which, in her view, greatly eased her feelings of grief. At the same time, and more publicly, the idiom of burial was brought into play.

For other informants the choice between burial and cremation, and then between scattering or burying ashes, seemed to reflect the relationship with the deceased. Several informants, both professional and bereaved, noted the demand for a firmly marked disposal location made by those who have lost children. For instance, Marcus and Elizabeth Tomlinson, the parents of a 29-year-old man who died very suddenly, explained that they had intended to bury him until his brother argued that cremation would be more in keeping with the son’s life and aspirations. Though burial arrangements had already been made, they switched to cremation not long before the funeral. Yet despite the decision to change to cremation, Elizabeth was very clear that there was no question of scattering the ashes. Instead they were buried with her son’s maternal grandparents because as she explained: “We didn’t want him to be on his own”. Although they had strewn the ashes of an aunt near her parents’ grave in another cemetery, she said: “It wouldn’t have been right . . . to scatter . . . not for (our son). She is all over the place, he is in one place, you know, his ashes are there. Certainly with a child, you need somewhere to go—especially the woman who carries the child . . .”.

The echoes of burial are strongly present throughout Elizabeth Tomlinson’s account and are reinforced when she said that she had placed a rose-amethyst crystal in her son’s coffin and assumed that it would have been in the urn (possibly intact) along with his ashes. Although she and her husband had removed the ashes from the crematoria and kept them overnight in their home, they said that they did not look at them, shuddering as they reflected, “it would be like digging up a grave to look at the bones”. Asked about the splitting of ashes, both Elizabeth and Marcus said they had never thought about it and again, with a reference to mutilation they claimed, “No, it would be like cutting an arm or leg off of someone—a bit of a desecration”.

Their account of choices, decisions, and their disposition towards these, demonstrated an inconsistent process in that they had started by planning burial, switched to cremation, and then buried the ashes in order to have a fixed focus and to provide their son with the guardianship and company of his grandparents in a place he had known and loved. They then suggested that the interment of ashes in a family grave was a far better solution than whole body burial: “Each time I would visit, I would think about decay in the grave, what’s happening there. Cremation—burning is clean—done with”. Elizabeth and Marcus Tomlinson intended to have their own ashes buried in this grave, with their son and the maternal grandparents, a similar strategy to that desired by Doris Penny above.

In each of these instances, the placing of cremated remains in a public place, or, in the case of Maria Warburton, arranging for a series of traditional, public and religious ceremonies, may be the link that connects ash disposal with the grave and burial. The insistence on not splitting ashes, indeed on portraying the practice as a form of desecration, also seems to reflect the law and custom about not disturbing human remains. Though there are some ambiguities in such cases, these bereaved people acted and thought within frames that seem to lie deep in the shadow of traditional burial, not least because the disposal of the ashes entailed strong elements of placement in a public arena. In the next section we examine several cases where, by contrast, the intention has been to ensure that the final

destinations of the ashes are clear of the public domain, as represented by the cemetery or the crematorium garden of remembrance.

Of wind and tide: Resisting the shadow of the traditional grave

During many of our interviews, it immediately became clear that the choice of cremation was heavily influenced by a dislike of the idea of burial in the earth. As an interviewee with a terminal illness said, just 3 days before his death, he had decided on the “oven” instead of the grave because it would be “bloody freezing down there”. Other frequent comments reflect those gathered in Davies and Shaw’s (1995) study in revealing the desire to avoid slow decay, the fear of being “buried alive” or “being eaten by worms”, or simply a concern to eliminate the effort and trouble descendants would incur in attending to a grave. It is noteworthy that these views are commonly cited as the wishes of the deceased, or articulated by those contemplating their own deaths; among those attempting to plan a relative’s disposal without instructions, they are far less evident. The inter-related themes of confinement and release are particularly significant here. As indicated in the previous section, for many of those seeking the focus and protection of a carefully defined, bounded, and permanent burial or scattering place, the notion of keeping the ashes together, or at least distributed within a readily identifiable area, such as around the base of a favourite tree, was important. What then of people who chose to scatter to the winds or to the tides, often citing the aim of “freeing” the deceased? Do their choices reflect a desire to escape the shadow of the grave?

This was certainly the case for Daniel McGough, a plasterer from Glasgow. He argued that the grave is “confinement to you as a person cos you’re there for all time, or until the council wants to build houses then relocate you . . . confining to the people who only think they’re with you when they go to your grave”. For himself, Daniel claimed: “if they just take my ashes up the hill and let them blow away in the wind, I’ll be quite happy. I like the idea of the freedom”.

A significant number of other interviewees would agree. Bill Oswald, a 90-year-old interviewee, still had his wife’s ashes on his bedside table, despite having been a widower for a decade. He had plans for their mingled ash-remains to be scattered, by friends from their rambling club, from the top of a favourite peak in Derbyshire, a place of fond memory. For him this would signify an ending, but one which embraced his wife, in a non-confined and starkly beautiful place with fine views. Asked about cemetery interment he replied:

Well, I think cemeteries are depressing places. I have the deeds for the grave where my mother and father are buried, but I think all this remembrance and crosses and these things are not necessary. I mean, I was religious when I was young—’til I was around 14 and then I thought “I’ve started to think for myself”. I won’t say that I’m an atheist but I did not—well I didn’t have a service for the cremation, because I do not believe in using the church just for marriages, deaths, and christenings.

His intentions were clear but, in the meantime, his wife’s ashes had been “disposed of” in a way which is private and intimate. Every night before he went to sleep, he sat in bed talking to the ashes of his wife, telling her about his day. He said he could only talk to the ashes as these alone were the material remains of his wife; for him a photograph was no substitute (see Gibson, 2004).

Different rationales for escaping the shadow of the grave emerged with a married couple living in an affluent area of Nottingham. Neither disliked or rejected the idea of the cemetery per se. Indeed, Alan, the husband, had scattered a portion of his mother’s ashes at a cemetery

local to where she had lived all her life in order to provide a public focus for other members of his wider kin group. In general, however, the cemetery held little significance for this couple, as a primary focus. In fact, aversion to the idea of fixity, in a public place, was a central reason leading to their on-going search for creative and meaningful locations in which to deposit the ashes of relatives who were important to them. In this quest they have scattered the remains of significant others in a wide range of places—the seat of a car, inside favourite pubs, holiday destinations, in the ocean, and on moors. According to Alan’s wife, Amanda, this broad distribution of ashes allowed her father and grandfather to travel widely and, as the data below indicate, for her travel meant encounters with other people, rather than the boredom and loneliness which disposal in a single site would precipitate. In her view, the small deposits of ashes constituted anchor points for the spirits of her dead relatives. She said:

It did frighten me at first about actually splitting or losing a bit of the ashes, cos it’d be like not a complete person then. But then I had to think “well it’s not the person is it, it’s just the ashes, the last thing that they can give me, you know and there’s bound to be a bit that dropped out at the crem and a bit that got blown off somewhere else”. But yeah, you’ve got to be all over otherwise you can’t move about, cos if you’re stuck in one place—oh God I couldn’t be wandering round the moors by myself all day, on my own, no. God that’d be so boring, with lots of other lost people because well that’s my thought, I don’t want to be one of them lost wandering souls, I want to be able to move all over and see people.

This example appears to provide evidence of a desire to escape the fixity of the cemetery or the dissolution entailed in disposal in the collectivity, as represented by gardens of remembrance. Even here, however, we found lingering evidence of the grave’s shadow. It became clear that, for both members of this couple, the most important location for ashes was the plant pot in their back garden. This was the hub of all their dispersals. Among all the options they had considered, this satisfied their need for a fixed, private spot. Its existence gave them freedom to scatter elsewhere, but remained the place where they felt closest to their relatives. Thus it appears to serve many of the memorializing roles of a grave in a cemetery, though in a private space, deemed safe and exclusive. Only favoured relatives had their ashes placed in the pot, while some did not qualify, unlike at the cemetery where such fine differentiation and control is not always possible or achievable. Indeed, for Amanda the idea of placing her mother’s ashes in the pot with her father’s ashes was discomfiting and would “spoil things”; at present the relatives whose ashes are in the plant pot all got on well together during their lives. While in her view her father was now free and happy, reuniting him with her mother would again “put him under her thumb”. Thus the ashes of her mother would eventually go in the garden of the house where her mother currently lived.

Alan and Amanda’s distributive approach to dispersal involved the use of both land and water. The latter site, however, might seem to move us even further from the shadow of the traditional grave and the idea of enabling ashes to find “release” in water is particularly interesting and complex. Though it is common to hear people explain that they see the pouring of the ashes into a river or a tide as an expression of finality after a long, often painful journey for themselves, only occasionally might this signify a belief in final dissolution. For some, discharging ashes into a current of water gives the impression of movement, of animation. Statements such as “Well he’s free to see the world now” or “Our ashes will meet up on our travels” were overheard during participation in a sea burial which has formed part of our study.

However, for Maria Warburton, described above, scattering her mother’s ashes in the Atlantic’s morning tide did *not* imply dispersal. Indeed, for her, the opposite was construed

as she described a convergence of essence: “I don’t see her as ashes scattered. She’ll be coming together again, in the water”. This view needs to be located within the context of her broader vision of ash disposal and its associations with traditional burial. Her view is far from uncommon, as evidenced in a unique survey of ashes scattered by the Royal Navy and recorded by Reverend Simon Springett, the long-serving Naval Chaplain. His 1990s postal survey asked 300 relatives of those whose ashes had had a sea disposal, how and where they now imagined the cremated remains to be. Only one in five (19%) said they felt the ashes were now spread across the oceans. Most (72%) reported believing that the ashes remained “buried” at the spot where they were dropped into the sea, even though the casket sinks because of the holes which then allow the ashes and the sea water to mingle (Springett, 1994). The Royal Navy now provides bereaved people attending the sea burial with a commemorative map that clearly indicates the disposal location. Nearly all (87%) of those answering the questionnaire said that they had kept this map long after the ceremony itself, a practice clearly paralleled by filing the grave deed with family documents.

It is evident, therefore, that even in cases which appear to demonstrate an escape from the shadow of the grave, rituals and meanings associated with burials can continue to exert a powerful influence. Our final group of interviewees were more ambivalent towards the ideas of a public grave, regulated by municipal or ecclesiastic institutions. In these instances, the placing of ashes tends to take place away from public areas, usually in more private and personally meaningful sites. While we might here include the media-attractive strategies of rocket despatch and transformation into gems (diamonds especially), our informants described more modest domestic and familial approaches. While less dramatic, these may be no less challenging to tradition and to institutions that have hitherto determined and controlled the manner of disposal after death.

Ambiguous or liminal? The interim and the domestic

Alice Robson’s mother had died several years previously and, at the insistence of her sister, the ashes had been divided. Some were taken to New Zealand, a place that had been a favourite holiday destination, and the rest had been kept at the sister’s house. Alice did not think it right that the ashes had been split, so had nothing to do with the remaining ashes. She believed that her mother was not at peace because of this division. Last year, Fred, Alice’s husband, also died and was cremated. When it came to choosing a final destination for his ashes, her decision was informed by both her dislike of how her mother had been treated and her observations of other ashes being left at impersonal, distant and unwelcoming gardens of remembrance. After a discussion with her son and his wife, they decided to keep the ashes close by, burying them in the son’s garden in a Chinese vase which Fred had always been fond of. He had loved the son’s garden and spent much of his retirement sitting there, so they felt this was a safe and suitable location. Being so close also meant that Alice did not have to get three buses to the cemetery, and they could always feel Fred was with them.

They buried him in the garden in a post-funeral ceremony for family and close friends, marking the spot by placing a birdbath over the ashes, and surrounding it with his favourite flowers. A small brass plaque bearing Fred’s name was attached to the birdbath. This arrangement can be seen as a compromise between a range of choices. The ashes were buried underground with a formal monument marking them. Though not countenanced by the current regulations about exhumation, these ashes were considered portable by the family, should they ever move house. This can be seen to reflect their location (fixed within the private domain by the family) and not officially recognized or recorded within the public domain. The potential informal removal of interred ashes is of course much more

problematic within a cemetery, a space where official regulations about exhumation can more easily be enforced.

Another interviewee, Carole Devon, who buried her father's ashes in a family garden, echoed many of these explanations and rationales. Of a neighbour who had left her husband's ashes to be scattered at the crematorium, she said that it was a disgrace that so little regard had been shown for him, even the neighbour's dog's ashes had been placed on the mantelpiece. Carole Devon, like Alice Robson, stressed the pressures associated with cemetery visiting and added that she wanted to avoid passing such a responsibility to her children. Instead, by having the father's ashes buried in her daughter's garden, she felt they were safe and well looked after, in a pleasant, lively garden with children running around.

In general, keeping ashes within the garden, whether irretrievably scattered or buried whole in a polytainer, is usually seen as a more final destination than those kept inside the house. Retention in the house usually seems to be chosen as an interim holding strategy, even if for a prolonged period. In such cases, interviewees described a planned reunion when they themselves died. For some this entailed placing the ashes in their coffin, prior to burial; for others the ashes were to be mingled, for joint burial or scattering. Others had requested that their ash containers be buried side by side, or perhaps placed together in an above ground sanctum. Cremated remains can also be kept in commercially produced containers, ranging from coloured glass dolphin statuettes to carved hard-wood boxes that one widow said reminded her of a coffin. This diversity is matched by the variety of locations in which ashes are placed within the household. Frequently taking up initial residence to the forefront of social life, perhaps on the mantelpiece or under the television set, they often retreat over time, migrating to "back-stage" regions, such as under the stairs, in the garage, or the attic, or indeed into very private space such as the bedroom. Here the permanency of the grave or indeed of dispersal, of a *final* decision, is often fended off as unwelcome. At this point, the ashes can be seen as liminal, imbued with a social life and identity, yet reserved in a cupboard.

Conclusions

We have suggested that in choosing ash disposal strategies, people can be influenced by traditions that accompany inhumation of the whole body. This we argue on the basis of data derived from interviews with people who have been responsible for arranging a cremation and making decisions in its aftermath, and with professionals associated with this process. We began by raising questions which might help explain the persistent shadow cast over ash disposals by the traditional grave. We conclude with some partial answers. While cremation is statistically dominant, as a practice it is often made to resemble the less prevalent option of traditional burial in a more or less public grave. This relatively recent development may however be undergoing further change as we note at several of the gardens of remembrance in our study areas, an accelerating popularity for above ground vaults or "sanctums" in gardens of remembrance. These chambers with their spaces for two sets of ashes are relatively costly to acquire with their limited though renewable leases, when compared to the lower costs associated with cremation in the past (a sanctum can cost between £800 and £1000). Nonetheless, crematoria managers have reported difficulty in keeping pace with demand and our research has shown that clusters of 30 sanctums installed early on in our study are now almost all filled or reserved.

Much of our data, therefore, suggest a leaning towards traditional burial, detectable in beliefs about containment and notions of an entity (beyond the embodied person) surviving the transformation to cremated remains. Though the interpretations we present here are part

of an ongoing analysis of our data, evidence *does* suggest that innovative strategies for disposal engendered by the reduction of the body to ashes, are only now emerging in concentrations sufficient to be called “trends”. This is just a century after cremation was introduced and only three decades, a single generation, since it became widespread. A recent paper by Brian Parsons (2005) shows that as early as 1905 innovation was occurring as scattering at secular sites. He nonetheless, makes the point that these were generally choices exercised by minority groups rather than the majority on whom our study is now able to focus.

We began this paper by noting that ritual represents a way of both creating meaning (Levi-Strauss, 1967) and stimulating and managing emotion (Turner, 1969, p. 38). We conclude with words from another interviewee which describe how she dealt with the unwelcome discovery of the residue of her daughter’s ashes in the polytainer after she and her husband returned home from scattering what they thought was the entire body of ashes. Distressed by their oversight, the interviewee and her husband nonetheless went on to scatter this residue on a tree in their garden. As a result she gained a comforting sense of her daughter’s presence close to home, and indeed noted how vigorously the tree seemed to sprout as a result. What her words indicate are the processes through which, despite unplanned occurrences, connections can still be made through narrative and meaning generated as a result.

And then it was alright, so the separation of the ashes didn’t matter then because a new meaning had come, and it is this question of, as Viktor Frankl³ said, coming to terms with . . . you can. I think he said—you know he was in a concentration camp and he arrived at this conclusion; man can cope with, or human kind can cope with, any suffering provided they can find meaning. But there isn’t always a meaning, it’s sense as much as suffering. But you weave the meaning yourself, you find your own story, find your own meaning so you can live with it and accommodate it. So I think that was an example of me in that situation, reaching for and finding a meaning which I could live with and then it didn’t matter that they (the ashes) were separated.

In these examples, we have seen individuals and families making decisions about ashes that seem to satisfy their desire to remain connected to the deceased. They appear to have chosen materials and acts that are drawn from the past, yet speak to the future; whether places, people, or objects. Just as the management of a larger, more elaborate grave and headstone demands attention and time, so cremated remains are often disposed of in ways that allow, or even compel, sustained practices of remembering.

We might then argue that in many of the examples described here, extended ritual processes are frequently engendered through reference to more traditional institutional symbols and that this can frame a process that charts the individual life in its very particular domestic and kinship contexts. No longer, however, is that life contextualized through the categories of church and society. The attempt to arrive at meaning that “can be lived with” thus circumvents the static categorization of a “ritual” and makes way for a more fluid memorializing trajectory that we may better conceive of as ritualization (Seremetakis, 1991), since it encompasses and extends the life narrative of the deceased.

Endnotes

- 1 We are grateful to the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) for their support with this project (Environments of memory: New rituals of mourning and their social and emotional implications).
- 2 To ensure confidentiality, all proper names used are pseudonyms.

- 3 Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) was Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry in Vienna and a survivor of the Theresienstadt Nazi concentration camp. His inspirational book *Man's search for meaning* (1964) drew on his camp experiences to argue that human beings can survive any suffering if they hold on to their choice as to how they will respond to what is happening to them.

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Biographical Notes

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