

DEATH POSITIVE: AN ANALYSIS OF AN AUTHENTICITY MOVEMENT

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
HISTORY OF DEATH CARE IN AMERICA .....	5
<i>Death is Universal</i> .....	7
<i>Burial is Commonplace among Americans</i> .....	8
<i>Shift of Death after the Civil War</i> .....	8
<i>History of Embalming</i> .....	9
<i>History of Cremation</i> .....	13
<i>Death Care Today</i> .....	14
PROBLEMS WITH THE DEATH CARE INDUSTRY .....	16
<i>Lack of Authenticity</i> .....	17
<i>Death Behind Closed Doors</i> .....	18
<i>Waste of Resources</i> .....	19
<i>Exorbitant Prices</i> .....	20
DEATH POSITIVE MOVEMENT .....	22
<i>The Order of the Good Death</i> .....	22
<i>Death Positive Belief Statement</i> .....	23
OUTCOMES OF THE DEATH POSITIVE MOVEMENT .....	28
<i>Home Funerals</i> .....	28
<i>Death Doulas</i> .....	29
<i>Sustainability Efforts</i> .....	31
IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND PREDICTIONS MOVING FORWARD .....	36
<i>Death Positivity as a Social Movement</i> .....	36
<i>Sparking Social Change</i> .....	39
<i>Characteristics of Social Change</i> .....	40
<i>Achieving Authenticity in Death Care</i> .....	42
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	48
REFERENCES .....	49

## **ABSTRACT**

The death care industry encompasses a wide variety of death related services, such as funerals and cremations, in order to prevent or eradicate decay. Problems in death management, such as a history of inauthenticity and lack of transparency, have led to dissatisfaction in care. As a result of the inauthenticity of services, the death positive movement has grown in popularity and seeks to normalize decay, death, and dying. The death positive movement encourages open and honest conversations around death so that death should no longer happen behind closed doors. This thesis analyzes the current atmosphere leading to the creation of the death positive movement and explores each tenet of the movement. Research is conducted through existing library literature. This thesis finds that the movement outcomes have manifested into an increase in home funerals, the use of death doulas, simple earth burials, and greener cremations. Moving forward, I predict the death positive movement and use of more natural disposal options will continue to grow in popularity as Americans seek authenticity both in life and death. I believe that the movement will experience limitations in integration with society, but the current death care industry will adopt aspects of the movement into their operations.

Part of the universal human experience is the reality of life and death. Humans for centuries have had cultural traditions for dealing with the dead. From burial to cremation, there are cultural traditions surrounding death in communities around the world. These cultural traditions that deal with the dead are largely centered on what it provides to the living. The dead have no needs or desires, but the living desires a sense of closure through funeral rites. Funeral rites seek to honor the deceased, which usually means honoring them in an authentic way. The death care industry is the all-encompassing term used to describe companies and organizations that provide services relating to death. Our current death care industry has largely strayed from an authentic death, so the death positive movement has emerged to transform our society and its' views on death.

Death positivity is a new movement focused on death acceptance by making conversations on death and dying a normal part of life. Being death positive means not trying to eradicate decay, but rather accepting decay as a part of the death process. Caitlin Doughty, a mortician who sought to create change in the current death care industry, coined the term "death positive" (The Order of the Good Death). The phrase "death positivity" is a play on the term "sex positivity". This passion for creating a culture of death positivity led to the creation of the Order of the Good Death in 2011. The Order is composed of "funeral industry professionals, academics, and artists exploring ways to prepare a death phobic culture for their inevitable mortality" ("Mission"). Anyone can become part of The Order by accepting the movements' position on death positivity. On The Order's website, there are eight tenets of death positivity. The first and main point is that death should not take place behind closed doors, which Prothero (2001) says can do more harm to society.

Being death positive is about putting control over death back in the family's hands by equipping them to engage in conversations surrounding death and even empowering them to take care of their own dead. The movement is not focused on making money, but on educating, engaging in conversation, and equipping people in all areas of death. Our current death care industry does not encourage education and engagement with death and dying, therefore lacks the openness component of death positivity.

This small grass roots change in America is taking place and emphasizing a death-positive approach. Although society today is not death positive, there are signs that the death positive movement could take off. This includes the argument that in life people are searching for how to live authentically, which means that in death they would search for that same authenticity. What is the most authentic way to die? A look at the meaning of the word authenticity will help.

There are many definitions of the word authenticity. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* first defines authenticity as "The fact or quality of being true or in accordance with fact." Alexis T. Franzese in *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society* says that "there is a ... yearning among people ... to be existentially authentic-that is, to feel true to one's self" (Vannini and Williams 2009:87). Feeling true to oneself is important to the psyche and so authenticity is something that is valued. My favorite definition is best put in Franzese's words, saying authenticity is "defined as an individual's subjective sense that their behavior, appearance, [and] self, reflects their core sense of being" (Vannini and Williams 2009:88). Authenticity in life can be represented through lifestyle choices that reflect ones' being such as where they live, what their

career is, and how they express themselves. Since authenticity should point to the core sense of being, one “either *is* authentic or is *not*, period” (Vannini and Williams 2009:2). Authenticity is searched for in life and death. Meaning that death rites can be either authentic or inauthentic. Facing this dichotomy, our current death care industry is inauthentic as the industry has lost its’ moral compass and drifted away from its’ core values of creating a culture of care.

The future of funerals is about communicating an open, honest conversation surrounding death and the body. The death care industry is evolving as we move into the age of cremation and the memorial service, but people won’t be satisfied with just these changes. As a whole, the death care industry still isn’t providing authentic services that the people desire. According to the Palliative Care section of the Stanford School of Medicine, 80% of Americans desire to die at home (*Where Do Americans Die?*) If Americans want to die at home, it could be presumed their dead body to be cared for at home. This desire for authenticity is sparking a resurgence of home funerals, the use of death doulas, simple earth burials, and greener cremation. We are slowly moving towards a death positive culture in response to the lack of involvement in death and dying in the current and past death care industry.

My thesis seeks to explore the death positive movement through the lens of authenticity. Using existing library literature and online resources, I seek to answer five questions. 1) What is the history of death care in America? To answer this question I will give the historical framework around why we care for the dead and what that has looked like in our past and present in America. 2) What are the problems with the death care industry? This section will explore the inauthenticity of the industry, laws and

regulations, and sustainability factors. Then I will look into how these complaints have been addressed to lead into the most interesting response to industry's failures: the death positive movement. 3) What is the death positive movement? The history of the movement and the eight tenets that comprise the death positive belief statement are discussed. 4) What have been the outcomes of the death positive movement to date? I will discuss outcomes of the movement represented through an increase in home funerals, the use of death doulas, sustainable earth burials, and greener cremations. Lastly, 5) What is the future of the death positive movement? I give my predictions of the implications of the movement and how it will manifest into the wider death care industry.

## HISTORY OF DEATH CARE IN AMERICA

A corpse raises a lot of identity questions among the living as they ask themselves what to do with it. S.R. Prothero (2001) in his book *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* says that “The corpse represents, among other things, a threat to social order, an economic burden to the family, a reminder of our mortality, an offense to sight and smell, [and] an affront to hopes of eternal life...” (pg. 1). Most of these representations of the corpse are negative reminders that the living would like to avoid.

The living have practices surrounding death which stem from the avoidance of decay. In his introduction, Prothero (2001:4) states that there are two primary ways of decay; the first is the material decay of the body and the second is societal decay caused by the removal of the person from everyday life. Neither form of decay is attractive in our society today, so we attempt to forbid it in any way we can. The easiest way to do this is by removal of the corpse. When the living are exposed to death, they may develop a defensive posture around death so that they don't have to accept their mortality. This is not conducive to death acceptance as “such a defensive posture against the fear of death may create a barrier against death awareness” (Carreño and Góngora Oliver 2017). Twenty-first century America struggles with death acceptance because decay has been eradicated, therefore leading to a struggle with death awareness. This unwillingness to accept decay has created a culture of inauthenticity and has lead to seeking to eradicate decay in any way possible.

Decay is normally eradicated in American society in one of two ways. The traditional way is through embalming and the eventual burial of the body through the traditional funeral. This is prevention of decay by preservation. Bodies are preserved in

their life-like state as if they never died. The second way decay is eradicated is through the accelerated process of cremation. Prothero (2001:5) describes this process saying, “By destroying the dead through the tonic of fire, cremationists inoculate the living from the dangers of death and decay”. Both burial and cremation eradicate decay and do not contribute to death positivity because of this eradication. Today, the dead are no longer cared for at home. Instead, funeral directors and undertakers do the caretaking. Therefore, Americans are largely separated from death, as they are not involved in the process of caring for the body.

The vast majority of consumers are familiar with the death care industry as the funeral home industry. A change of culture has caused a rebranding into the death care industry. Death care is a self-given title that implies serious attention and provision given to consumers of its’ death services. This branding to the outside world is important to influence consumers’ perceptions of the industry. The shift from funeral home industry to death care industry shows the multi-faceted functions that are provided. The death care industry is not just comprised of funeral homes, but also encompasses cemeteries, crematories, pre-need plans, and third party sales of funeral goods.

Historically, the American way of death has been represented through the traditional funeral. The traditional funeral developed out of the invention of embalming. The components of a traditional funeral involves using a funeral home, embalming the body, having a visitation, burying the body in a casket, and having a graveside service in a public cemetery. These are relatively new traditions around the age-old practice of taking care of the dead.

## *Death is Universal*

Part of the universal human experience is the reality of life and death. Humans for centuries have had cultural traditions for dealing with the dead. Options for disposal vary in popularity amongst different time periods, cultures, and religious attitudes. Examples of disposal of corpses include earth burial, cremation, donating ones' body to science, being placed into a crypt, and even launching ones' remains into outer space. Just as there is no right way to live life, there is no right or wrong way to end life.

It's easy for people of one culture to say that another culture's traditions are wrong, unethical, or even disgusting. Moral and ethical guidelines are situational based and therefore vary from culture to culture. The ancient Greek historian Heroditus recorded the practice of endocannibalism, or eating a dead person's flesh to have taken place by the Callatie tribe. Permissible as part of their culture, today it would be considered obscene to practice endocannibalism. Caitlin Doughty (2017:12) in *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, comments that "we consider death rituals savage only when they don't match our own". She encourages open-mindedness around other's traditions that don't look like our own. Our current industry of death has been the same for the past 100 years or so, but reform is desperately needed. Doughty (2017:14) argues that in order to reform our own industry, we cannot be "falsely convinced we have it right while all these 'other people' are disrespectful and barbarous". To garner information about other's cultures allows for discourse and ultimately the ability to find authenticity, or what custom aligns most with one's inner beliefs.

Historically, most Americans have considered death care in America to be standard and the ideal. The traditions of death in America should reflect core values of the country. As American values begin to change, the culture of death should adapt accordingly. As a whole, we are still reluctant to talk about death and dying. Ultimately, no matter how ones' remains are treated, the main goal is to put them out of sight of the living.

### *Burial is Commonplace among Americans*

Overwhelmingly, the American way to die is represented through burial. There is a history of why burial is the most common practice and how as a nation we have developed our modern day cultural norms surrounding death. Religion has had a large influence in funeral practices in the past, and the lack of religion today will impact the industry moving forward. There is a book written by Jessica Mitford (1963) titled *The American Way of Death* that details American funeral habits up to the 1960's. This idea that there is an "American" way to die dictates that there is also an "un-American" way to die. I will now explore the creation of the American way of death.

### *Shift of Death after the Civil War*

Deaths in America prior to the Civil War mainly took place in the home. There was a preoccupation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to die a "good death" that focused on a domestic death. One would die at home surrounded by family members before and after the death so that they could attest for the condition of ones soul when they passed (Franson 2016). Since death was something that took place at home, burial also took place nearby either in local cemeteries or on the family's land. As most Americans lived in a rural environment, there weren't yet concerns surrounding lack of available land space.

## *History of Embalming*

Embalming is defined as “the treatment of a dead body so as... to protect it from decay” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018). Embalming is an ancient practice first introduced by the Egyptians for religious and sanitation purposes. Ancient embalming is starkly different than modern day embalming, which has been artificially perfected over the past century. Ancient embalming included preservation of the body through natural means such as mummification. Embalming has been in practice since the days of the Egyptians, but has developed as scientific advancements took place.

The increased access to scientific discoveries in the nineteenth century led to Dr. Frederick Ruysch first discovering a successful system of arterial embalming. Next, a Frenchman, Jean Gannal, published a book in 1840 titled *Histoire des Embaumements* that detailed the process. Modern day embalming involves draining the blood from one of the veins and replacing it with a fluid injected into the arteries. This technique is called the arterial embalming technique and the fluid that is injected is called the arterial solution. Dr. Frederick Ruysch is often credited as inventing the arterial embalming technique in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with his work in preserving different specimen (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018). Modern day embalming is anything but natural. The arterial solution is composed of different fluids that are developed for each individual person. The most controversial ingredient of the arterial solution is formaldehyde, a carcinogenic substance. Remaining ingredients of arterial solution is water conditioner, cell conditioner, dye, humectants, anti-endemic chemicals, water, and additional disinfectants (Ajileye, Esan, and Adeyemi 2018). The purpose of embalming is ultimately to preserve the body long enough for the funeral ceremony.

### *Creation of the funeral home*

The beginning of modern day embalming led to the development of undertakers. Undertakers would come to the home to embalm before a home funeral service. Eventually, the funeral home as we know it today was created as the development of cities led to smaller home sizes and there was a need for an outside gathering place larger than the family home (Copeland 2015).

The development of the funeral home is not just attributed to the growth of cities and decreasing home size, but also the role embalming has played a vital role in the success of the funeral home. Undertakers who used to provide services in the home saw "the need and financial promise in building a new home for, or opening their own dwellings to, the dead" (Laderman 2003:18). Funerals were now being shifted outside of the home and into businesses. The popularity around embalming supported the funeral homes and allowed the businesses to grow into the booming industry it was and still is. Embalming became a necessity that people sought after which "without this procedure, funeral directors would have had a difficult time claiming they were part of a professional guild, and therefore justified as the primary mediators between the living and the dead at the moment of death" (Laderman 2003:8).

Embalming was a useful practice in the transporting of bodies long distances, but there became a culture shift in how bodies were taken care of. Funeral homes in the 1920's marketed the idea of making the deceased as life-like as possible, which included embalming, shaving, and applying makeup. This impacted the creation of the traditional funeral. The traditional funeral, as previously mentioned, places grave importance on the use of embalming so that a viewing or wake can be held. Then there will be a service,

often a graveside service as well, with the body eventually being ending entombed in a casket.

Embalming today is intertwined with the funeral service and makes it possible for the body to be on display days after death. Americans are largely ignorant of what the act of embalming involves, which does not help the consumer make educated decisions surrounding death care. Mitford (1963:44) was a harsh opponent of embalming saying, “one must wonder at the docility of Americans who each year pay hundreds of millions of dollars for its perpetuation, blissfully ignorant of what it is all about, what is done, and how it is done”. Convincing the people that embalming is necessary has helped keep the traditional funeral alive.

These elements of a traditional funeral served a purpose for the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century in which the popularity of it increased. It should also be noted that the increased use of funeral homes coincided with the industrialization of America. As previously mentioned, the use of a funeral home was necessary as home sizes decreased and the city population increased. Just as factories became the main employer of the age, so did death become integrated into the industrialized mindset. The values of the age were reflected into traditions of the funeral. Gary Laderman (2003:47), Author of *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home*, says “The values beginning to energize the social body in the modern era contributed greatly to the shape and texture of the American funeral”. The aspects of the traditional funeral developed to meet the needs of the people of that time period.

The funeral home was created as an adaptation to the domestic home. These new funeral homes tried to keep that same authenticity of the home funeral by replicating the

space of the home. Since funerals used to take place in the parlors of homes, the business tried to keep that familiarity among its' customers by having funeral parlors of their own. The viewing, which usually takes place in the funeral parlor, was to imitate the display of a corpse that was traditionally held in the bedroom. Laderman (2003:26) says that these new slumber rooms "served as a place where the deathbed scene, a traditional component of the death in private homes, could be reintegrated into funeral rituals at this home away from home." This is one of the first examples of the funeral home trying to sell authenticity, but in doing so their plan backfired.

The funeral home not only carried the task of caring for the physical body of the dead, but the role developed to take on additional responsibilities. These included the position of funeral director in terms of proving emotional and psychological services (Laderman 2003:24). Laderman (2003:24) speaks of the responsibility of the funeral home saying,

"The rise of funeral homes was seen as a great relief for the bereaved, who could now entrust the body to the caring, knowledgeable proprietor of the local funeral home. Although the corpse was moved out of the home, the funeral director would ensure the opportunity--for a price-- of meaningful, healing closeness with it."

Especially as more people began to die in hospitals, the American people lost the personal connection to death. Death was removed from the home as families began to entrust the funeral home with the responsibility to care for the dead. As death became farther and farther removed from the home, this cemented the future viability of the death

care industry as people saw it as a necessity. The death care industry grew beyond that of just burial, as cremation services became increasingly popular over time.

### *History of Cremation*

Ground burial is not a space conscious form of disposal. Cremation is an ancient practice, but in our country there is a stigma attached to cremation due to Christian cultural views. Due to the large Christian influence in America, the Christian viewpoint that humans should be interred as an example set by Jesus' burial was engrained in the culture. As the idea of cremation began to command global attention, people in the 1880's started having concerns about how much valuable land that cemeteries would take up. Burying every single American would create millions of graves, which was and still is not feasible. The population was increasing and space issues were a major concern. Thus led to the creation of the first documented crematory in the United States.

The first crematory opened in the year 1876 and was started by Dr. Francis Julius Lemoyne. The first cremation took place in Washington, PA at the Le Moyne crematorium on December 6, 1876. The incineration of the Baron de Palm drew quite a crowd of witnesses from newspapers and scientific communities. Hugo Erichson (1887:24) who wrote the book *Cremation of the Dead*, said that "Being prejudiced from the beginning, it is not at all surprising that they [the witnesses] should have given unsatisfactory, highly sensational, and misrepresenting accounts of the affair to the world". Although the public scrutinized one of the first cremations to take place in the U.S., it led to public awareness of the option of cremation.

Figures like Le Moyne and Erichson were part of a global movement of increasing public awareness on the benefits of cremation. Advocates for cremation

argued that it is a more economical, sanitary, and space saving option. Cremation began to lose its social stigma and numbers of cremations steadily climbed. In the early 1920's, Reverend Quincy L. Dowd released *Funeral Management and Costs: A World-Survey of Burial and Cremation*. Dowd (1921:242-244) reports of seventy-four crematories in the year of 1919, a statistic given by the Crematory Association of America, but reports that the population is underserved and in need of more services. By 1963, cremation experienced a surge in popularity due to a perfect storm of events. Prothero (2001:165) details the perfect storm as the reversal of the cremation ban by the Catholic Church, the release of Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, and the emergence of assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. Since 1963, cremation has seen a steady rise in popularity.

Twenty-first century America is experiencing a subverting of "traditional" ways of death that is changing the death care industry. This change surrounds a shift in services being offered. Embalming and burial used to be the main option of disposal up until recently. Now because of changing American values and a different desire to be remembered, Americans are choosing cremation. The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) released data that in 2015 the rate of cremation surpassed the rate of burial in the United States. Reasons for consumers choosing cremation include "cost considerations, environmental concerns, [and] fewer religious prohibitions" (National Funeral Directors Association 2016). As of 2018, cremation is becoming the disposal method of choice.

### *Death Care Today*

The commercialized death care industry has taken off when many consumers don't even know that there are publicly traded providers of death care. In fact, this \$14.2

billion industry is more prevalent than one might think. According to the National Directory of Morticians Redbook, there were 19, 177 funeral homes in the U.S. in 2018 (“Statistics” 2018). The National Funeral Directors Association reports that approximately 86% of funeral homes in the United States are privately owned, and publicly traded corporations own the 14% remaining share. These public corporations include Service Corporation International (SCI) who has approximately 12% of the market share and Carriage Services. Inc and StoneMor Partners who own approximately 1% each (Lerman 2014).

## PROBLEMS WITH THE DEATH CARE INDUSTRY

Cremation still quickly ushers away the body as the living repulse to the idea of decay. Still, certain people desire a connection to the dead and a change of how things have always been done. This may be due to a lack of transparency in the current death care industry. Consumers have no idea what actually happens to a body when it is sent to the crematorium. When they receive their loved ones ashes, they don't even know what makes up the contents of the jar. The contents of the jar might not even be the remains of their loved one at all. Consumers have been in the dark, and now want to take things into our own hands. This movement also gains popularity as people try to live more sustainable lifestyles. Americans are looking for authentic ways to die. Despite cremation being in high demand, I believe that our culture is still looking for a more authentic way to die. Whether it is the internment or cremation of remains, these are both outdated concepts of death since both of these modern day concepts come from the 1800's.

The same people who ran the corrupt funeral home industry are the ones taking advantage of the cremation market. There might be an increase in cremation, but the industry itself has never changed so cremations are not all of a sudden the more ethical choice of disposal. Funeral homes and crematoriums attempt to hide decay and dying from the public. The commercialized death care industry is not death positive because it tries to avoid decay by quickly ushering the body into either the embalming or cremation process.

### *Lack of Authenticity*

The funeral traditions in America have largely remained unchanged since the industrialization of death in the late 19th century. Our society has changed so much in the past 150 years that it seems questionable that our practices surrounding death have not changed according to our different society values. We are experiencing a cultural lag in our death care industry. Cultural lag is a term coined by sociologist William F. Ogburn in his 1922 book *Social Change with Respect to Cultural and Original Nature*. Ogburn explains his theory of cultural lag saying, “various parts of modern culture are not changing at the same rate, some parts are changing much more rapidly than others” (Ogburn 200). The changes in our culture today from the 1800’s include that Americans are more mobile, less religious, and place less emphasis on tradition. I am arguing that Americans also value authenticity in life and death. These changes in culture have slowly been implemented across the death care industry, but the cultural lag is still present. The services being offered in death care have not changed at the same pace as American values. Specifically, a culture of inauthenticity in the industry reflects a cultural lag as Americans increasingly value authenticity.

The resisting of mass change in the industry to match American values shows this cultural lag and resistance to social change. The textbook *Sociology: The Essentials* explores the idea of social change as multidimensional. It raises the idea that societies are always changing and that social change is “the alteration of social interactions, institutions, stratification systems, and elements of culture over time” (Anderson, Taylor, Logio 407). Even though elements of culture and social interactions have changed, the institutions, such as the death care industry, are not reflecting this change.

Keeping authenticity within a business is hard to achieve as competing values are at stake. The death care industry comprises commercialized death services provided by companies such as Service Corporation International (SCI), which operates 2,000 funeral homes across the United States of America. To gain leverage against their competition, they claim to offer specialized services. Jorn Lamla in the chapter “Consuming Authenticity: A Paradoxical Dynamic in Contemporary Capitalism” says, “Again and again they promise individual distinction, but are actually no more than incessant variations on an unchanging theme” (Vannini and Williams 2009:180). The same funeral options are being offered around the country at exorbitant costs with very little variation. Consumers are not properly educated on the services being offered because the industry withholds information. The industry has lost sight in providing meaningful death care services, and instead seeks to gain as much money possible from vulnerable consumers.

#### *Death Behind Closed Doors*

Death taking place behind closed doors gives the death care industry opportunities for exploitation. One example of the consequences of death taking place behind closed doors is the case of National Funeral Home in Falls Church, VA. The Washington Post published an article in 2009 about how this funeral home employee reported that “as many as 200 corpses were left on makeshift gurneys in the garage, in hallways and in a back room, unrefrigerated and leaking fluids onto the floor” (White and Tate 2009). Family members expect their loved ones to enter into a culture of care, but if they have no part of the process they cannot dictate what happens to their loved one. This is not an isolated incident. In 2014, a cemetery in California owned by SCI reached an \$80.5 million settlement in a lawsuit by 25,000 Jewish families that accused the company of

desecrating remains (Moshtaghian 2014). The public's trust with the death care industry is suffering as a result of death happening behind closed doors. Consumers cannot make educated decisions on care if they are being lied to on what happens to their loved ones behind closed doors.

Funeral homes also have a history of ambiguity in their prices, which makes it hard for consumers to make fair decisions. In response to this deception in pricing, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) enacted the Funeral Rule in 1984. The rule was created to protect consumers so that they can choose only the goods and services they want. Under the funeral rule, funeral homes must give an itemized price list both in person and if requested over the phone (FTC 2018). This rule's goal is to push transparency in the industry, but it is an outdated ruling that isn't effective in helping consumers of death care in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because there are no requirements for online price listings.

The death care industry capitalizes on the ambiguity around death and dying and the fear our society has of decay. The current death care industry is incongruous with the death positive movement as it seeks to capitalize on consumers' fear of decay instead of informing them about death and decaying. Ultimately, the same funeral home industry that has a history of lack of transparency has bled into what is now the death care industry. Those who were deceptive to consumers of funerals are the same ones being deceptive to consumers of cremation. The name change did not change the industry.

#### *Waste of Resources*

The death care industry attracts customers with shiny steel and beautiful mahogany caskets that all end up going into the ground. I believe that it is a waste of valuable resources to use the extent of materials currently consumed for the purpose of

internment. In Katrina Spades (2015) article it is reported “Each year in the U.S., 20 million board feet of hardwood, 1.6 million tons of concrete and 4.3 million gallons of embalming fluid are buried in conventional cemeteries.” In fact cremation is not much better as, “the average cremation uses 28 gallons of fuel to burn a single body, emitting about 540 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. That’s about 250,000 tons of CO2 each year”(Spade 2015). If you decide to place the urn in a columbarium, which houses funeral urns within a set structure, even more resources will be put to waste. A columbarium is similar to conventional cemeteries or mausoleums in their waste of resources.

Burial is unsustainable. For example, the estimated in population of New York City is 8,622,698 (*Annual Report of Vital Statistics: New York State 2014*). According to the annual report on vital statistics of New York State, there were 51,707 deaths in New York City in the year 2014. For every body to be buried, that would require a tremendous amount of land resources in a space that is already short on land. Burial is a viable option only for the rich and those who live in rural areas, while those with no other option will mostly use cremation. Since cremation is still not the most sustainable option, the search for an alternative remains.

#### *Exorbitant Prices*

Many people cite the increase in cremation as a win for funeral reform, as cremation takes up less land space and is more environmentally friendly. Cremation in of itself is not a bad option for disposal, but it still presents challenges for family member’s to process a loved one’s death as decay is accelerated. The death care industry is not there to act in the best interest of grieving family member’s as they are focused on making

money. Funeral homes are now creating cremation and innovative memorial service options as a necessity to survive as a business. Cremations are in demand, and the traditional funeral is not. The problem is that cremations do not generate as much profit for the business as the traditional funeral.

Each of the components of a traditional funeral offers an opportunity to make money. In fact, the average traditional funeral today costs between eight and ten thousand dollars (Boring 2014). A cremation with a basic memorial service costs about \$1,600, but that cost could be less if opting for a direct cremation, which provides the cremation without any additional fees such as a memorial service (Mathisen 2013). The death care industry has no incentive to bring death out from closed doors to make it more accessible because there is no money in transparency. They have made death a business first, a 14.2-billion-dollar business (“Statistics”). The industry uses society’s fear and anxiety around death and decay to make large profits from it. If they were the only option for consumers, then the consumers have no option but to pay exorbitant prices for their services. The industry has monopolized the care of the dead by putting industry professionals in charge of care, but their main focus is just like any other business, on money.

## DEATH POSITIVE MOVEMENT

A social movement emerged out of the desire for social change and a desire for an authentic death and dying experience. Both consumers and death care industry professionals were not happy with the way that the current system was operating. There was a lack of natural burial options despite a desire for cheaper, simpler, environmentally friendly, and authentic funerals. In his 2008 book *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*, Mark Harris talks of a new “deathscape” where one returns to the natural. A pioneer in the natural death movement, the UK based National Death Centre has been educating and advocating for natural death since 1991. The desire for authenticity includes natural death, and the formal death positive movement has expanded on not only having a more natural death but trying to change our death phobic culture as a whole. The concepts of death positivity were already under way, but it needed a name and movement behind it. In 2011, mortician Caitlin Doughty formed the Order of the Good Death, which soon spawned the death positive movement.

### *The Order of the Good Death*

The Order’s website gives a brief background into the history of the development. In a fairy-tale like way, a story of a recent mortuary school graduate, Doughty, is recounted as having a realization whilst driving a van of corpses to a crematory. The website states that she “dreamed of living in a culture with a more open, honest engagement with death. She believed that change would only happen with a better funeral industry, where the family could be involved with the process, and the dead weren’t

hidden behind closed doors (or closed vans).” Doughty started the conversation around death and shared her dream with a diverse group of people. She found like-minded persons wanting to engage in more honest conversations about death.

Doughty contributes Ernest Becker and his 1973 book *The Denial of Death* as the inspiration of the work of the Order of the Good Death. Ernest Becker was an American cultural anthropologist and Sam Keen details that this work details, “The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death” (Keen 1973). Knowing this, it makes sense that our death care industry has sought to keep death behind closed doors and as a result death has become disconnected from our society.

The creation of the Order of the Good Death in 2011 combined funeral industry professionals, artists, and academics into one mission oriented group. What is their mission? In short, it is to make death a normal part of the conversation of life. Their conversations led to the creation of the death positive movement. The movement has eight tenets of beliefs. All eight tenets of beliefs are explored below.

### *Death Positive Belief Statement*

#### *1. Death behind closed doors causes harm*

Their first and core belief is that death should not be something that takes place behind closed doors, but rather is open and accessible to all people. The Order states, “By hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society” (“Death Positive”). Since the industrialization of the death care industry, it has operated in secrecy, which gives the industry power to exploit consumers. Consumers do not know what is taking place behind doors and therefore cannot protest it.

## *2. Culture of silence needs to be broken*

Death has been removed from our homes, and therefore removed from our daily culture. Life expectancy of the average American is now 78.8 years according to the CDC, so people are dying later than in previous generations (Xu, et al. 2016). Fewer deaths are taking place, as well as fewer conversations around death. In order for death to have cultural relevance again, the conversation needs to reenter our homes.

The media in television and film gives an opportunity for us as a whole to create a conversation around death. Prominent and award-winning television show, *Six Feet Under*, spanned from 2001 to 2005 and brought conversations of death to the family living room. The comedy followed the lives of the Fisher family, and the experiences of that come with owning a locally owned funeral home. This was a great opportunity for Americans to sit and talk about death and dying.

Talking about death is taboo in our culture because of our fear of decay, death, and dying. The Order seeks to break these boundaries by “discussion, gatherings, art, innovation, and scholarship” around death (“Mission”). Like any other taboo, engaging in conversations around the person, place, or thing will break the forbidden association.

## *3. Talking about death is not morbid*

Just as it is normal for expecting parents to learn about the birth process through resources and dialogue, so should it be normal for anyone to engage with death. Conversations around death can be many things, but it doesn't always have to be morbid. The Oxford English Dictionary defines morbid as, “Characterized by an abnormal and unhealthy interest in disturbing and unpleasant subjects, especially death and disease.” The definition of morbid brings about a negative connotation, but a conversation on death

doesn't have to be negative. One way the Order has started engaging the public with conversations about death is through the event series, the Death Salon.

The Death Salon provides a physical space for people to come together and discuss mortality. This event series takes place in different cities across the country and “brings together independent thinkers engaged in the exploration of our shared mortality by sharing knowledge and art” (Boring 2014). Anyone is welcome to come, and it gives an educational opportunity for participants to learn more about death. Preceding the Death Salon was the Death Café first organized in 2004. Both the Death Salon and the Death Café seek to bring about authentic conversations surrounding death.

The Death Café movement brings real people to talk about real experiences and expectations about death. Jack Fong in his 2017 book *The Death Café Movement: Exploring the Horizons of Mortality* comments, “Death Café attendees appear to be personalizing, if not authoring, their own crucial narratives and expectations regarding end-of-life issues” (pg. 2). Topics of conversation range from how one might want to die, options for disposal, anecdotes of death and more. The Death Café is a non-profit organization that does not seek to make money or push an agenda in any of their events. Sociologist and anthropologist Bernard Crettz birthed the concept of the death café in 2004 in Neuchatel, Switzerland. By 2010, he held 40 death cafes and the movement began to spread to other parts of Europe (Fong 2017). Information brings power and with the spread of Death Cafes, there has been more education surrounding end of life disposal options.

#### *4. Caring for the dead is not dangerous*

Despite common perceptions on the dead body, it is in fact not dangerous. The dead body does not pose a threat to the living- so that it is okay for us to touch, hug, or even kiss a corpse within a couple days of death. This subverts everything the conventional industry has taught society. For example, the industry has generated the perception that corpses are to be only handled by licensed professionals when in fact having family care for their dead was a normal thing of the past. It should be normal now too, and if families wish to be part of this process they should be able to do so.

#### *5. Laws should honor the will of the dead*

This particular tenet has to do with how historically a person's identity could be taken from them and they could be misrepresented in death. For example, if someone was an atheist in a Christian family it was common for them to have a Christian funeral. Social laws and actual legislation should ensure that a person can be represented in death how they lived their lives on earth.

#### *6. Death and sustainability*

This tenet focuses on the idea that we have a responsibility to take care of the planet we inhabit. Sustainability practices do not carry much weight in the conventional death care industry, but it is important to be mindful in how resources are used. As much as possible should be done to limit the amount of toxins and harm caused to the environment by funeral rites.

#### *7. Empowering death planning through conversation*

Planning for end of life wishes in advance is important because it allows for dialogue. This dialogue to take place with family and caregivers can allow for an

authentic death and dying process to result. This tenet states that family members should know the dying's last wishes.

*8. Advocacy can inspire change*

The tenet is based on the idea of starting change by embracing death positivity. As individuals begin to have conversations and change their attitudes, this change will spread, and other people will change their opinions on death and dying. Culture changes and this movement is an opportunity to have positive cultural change.

## OUTCOMES OF THE DEATH POSITIVE MOVEMENT

### *Home Funerals*

One outcome of the death positive movement is represented through a resurgence of home funerals after one-hundred and fifty years of death being removed from the home. One story of this return to the natural is of a little girl named Caroline and the home funeral that her family chose to hold. Huffington Post writer, Jaweed Kaleem (2017), reported that Caroline's parents, Alison and Doug Kirk, had taken care of Caroline her entire life as she suffered from Niemann-Pick disease. Then when she died at age nine, they decided to have her funeral take place at home because it would be the place where she was most comfortable. Having a home funeral was the best option for their family and represented the authentic way to remember Caroline.

Another example of the general public being able to take care of their dead is through the home funeral of Sharon Bailey in 2009. Four years before the term "death positivity" was even coined, the daughters of Sharon Bailey, Laura and Beth, decided to opt for a home funeral. Detroit Free Press Writer, Ann Zaniewski (2015), reports the details of the home funeral in her article "Having a funeral at home, not at a funeral home." Zaniewski (2015) reports that the daughters of the deceased washed and cared for the body of their mother. They laid the corpse of Sharon Bailey on the sheets of her bed on ice packs, and she spent three days in the family home. This time allowed for friends and family to say their goodbyes in a serene and authentic environment. Beth Bailey Barbeau said, "I'm really proud of how she died. She died safe in a home with people caring for her and loving her" (Zaniewski 2015). These instances such as the ones from the Bailey family show how positive a home funeral experience can be.

Having a home funeral is about taking part in the grieving process and accepting decay. It can be beneficial for some families, like the Bailey family, to feel like their loved one is honored in an authentic way. Instead of entrusting the body to a funeral home, they felt able to do the caretaking themselves. Home funerals are possible for anyone interested, and they are much lower cost than a traditional funeral because one is not paying for frivolous expenses. Elements of the home funeral include washing and dressing the body to be displayed in a comfortable spot. Families can choose to keep their loved one at home for as long as they wish, with recommendations to ice the body and keep the air conditioning on. The family can spend as much time as they need to mourn with the body, and even invite friends over to say their final goodbyes. If a family still desires to have a home funeral without wanting to take care of the body themselves, a death doula can be hired and brought into the home.

### *Death Doulas*

A death doula is an individual who can be tasked with taking care of a varying amount of duties surrounding death and dying. These duties can involve pre-planning for death, being there while a person is dying, and then caring for the body postmortem. A death doula is there for extra assistance and will always encourage families to participate in whatever feels comfortable. Navigating a home funeral for the first time may seem daunting, so a death doula will make the process less intimidating. The first step in having death be less intimidating is to make sure ones affairs are in order.

A death doula can be as involved in the death planning process as someone would like them to be. Marilyn A. Mendoza (2018) in her article *Doulas for the Dying* reports engagements a death doula might have during a planning conversation below.

One of the most important things that a doula does is to actively engage the one who is dying in the entire process. It gives them a voice that often is denied to them. Doulas ask a lot of who, what, how, and where questions. Who do you want at your bedside as you are dying? What music would you like to hear? What type of bed would you like to be in, hospital or your own? Where would you like the bed? Doulas ask a lot of questions but more importantly they listen to what the dying want and need and do whatever they can to fulfill their requests.

A death doula is there to help satisfy the needs of the dying and their family.

Since a doula can be engaged in a conversation on preferences with someone long before they will die, it can be made sure that their wishes are honored postmortem. This is key to authenticity. Services such as these provide someone the opportunity to plan a funeral on what they want, not just what society and the death care industry wants. Death doulas value providing these authentic funerals where people can be completely open on how they want to die. The main service a death doula can provide is through being there for someone as they transition into death.

Death doulas not only help with the physical caring of the body but also can provide emotional or spiritual support. Spiritual support can be offered through the performance of rituals while dying. The physical support can be the washing, dressing, and caring for the body during the home funeral. Emotional support can be offered as many doulas follow up with the family for a time after death (Mendoza 2018). Death doula services are being sought after because they can provide families with a lot of peace of mind during a difficult time in life. There are no federal or state death doula laws, as compared to requirements to become a licensed funeral director. Henry Fersko-

Weiss founded the International End of Life Doula Association (INELDA) in 2015 to provide support and training for those interested in becoming a death doula (Mendoza 2018). Part of the death doula training is emphasizing a death positive approach. I believe the death positive aspects of the death doula make it so fulfilling to both potential users of this service and death doulas alike.

The death doula is providing a death positive end of life service because they encourage dialogue around dying, involve the entire family, encourage engagement with the body and its' natural decay, and strive to keep an authentic death focused on the dying's wishes. These services are a return to how death was treated before the industrialization of death. Having a home funeral and the concept of a death doula are all very normal and historic traditions. Opting for a death doula service is also sustainable since it does not involve embalming. With a simple earth burial after a home funeral, a death can be both modest in cost and in resources used.

### *Sustainability Efforts*

#### *Simple earth burials and green cemeteries*

Only certain cemeteries are designated as natural burial lands. In fact, there are only twenty-two natural burial grounds in the United States listed on the website *Natural End*, which provides information for people interested in more authentic burial options (“Where to Go - Natural Burial Options”). A natural burial land won't require the use of a burial vault. Concerning burial, there are federal laws, state laws, municipal laws, and then certain cemetery requirements. Most states do not have laws requiring the use of a burial vault, but private cemeteries will require a burial vault per their own requirements.

A burial vault is used as an extra layer surrounding the casket that is also placed inside of the ground. Cemeteries require burial vaults so that the land can maintain a more uniform landscape that will make mowing the grass easier. Just as funeral homes charge exorbitant prices for a casket, so do cemeteries for the prices of a vault. Vaults are another set of wasted resources and represent another added layer keeping the body from coming into any contact with the soil in order to prevent decay. Most bodies that are buried in a conventional cemetery will not be able to decay. A simple earth burial embraces decay as the body will eventually come into direct contact with the soil. Simple earth burials will not contain a burial vault, and if a person wishes they do not even have to be buried in a casket. Alternative burial options such as shrouds can be used to place the body in the ground.

#### *Biodegradable burial materials and markers*

The tremendous amount of resources wasted through burial was detailed in the section on problems with the death care industry. Taking a death positive approach according to the sixth tenet of death positivity involves cultivating a sustainable death (“Death Positive”). The movement has responded to a need for sustainable burial options through the promotion of natural burial materials, as well as inventions of new biodegradable products.

Using an eco-friendly casket made of organic materials such as sea grass, willow, or bamboo to either bury or cremate would be one way to reduce environmental impact. An alternative to a casket is the use of a burial shroud made from eco-friendly materials. For cremation, one can choose to scatter the ashes of a loved one to make even less of an environmental impact. The website *agreenerfuneral.org* helps consumers explore their

urn options, suggesting that one option is to use an urn that will naturally break down when it is exposed to earth or water. Materials that can make eco-friendly urns include “cornstarch, Himalayan Rock Salt, fast growing bamboo, and sustainably-produced handmade paper” (“Biodegradable Urns”). If families choose to keep the remains, they can select an eco-friendly urn instead of utilizing a columbarium. One way to help contribute rather than take away from nature is to have a tree planted in memory of the deceased.

If one desires to have a permanent place where a loved one can be visited, opting to plant a memorial tree in a natural burial ground is an authentic option. A tree can be planted over a grave or used as a place marker to honor someone’s life if his or her ashes were scattered. This is a great option for those who want to help replenish natural resources and the consequences are two-fold. Planting a tree as a grave marker will help increase oxygen and cleaner air. Also, when someone is buried on land it must be then designated as cemetery land. This will protect the space from being developed in the future, so the habitat can be preserved. Having land set aside not for development is important nowadays with the threat of land being developed. This designated cemetery land could be turned into parks and public space, as a return to how things were in the past.

### *Greener cremation*

Cremation ultimately still eradicates decay, but that doesn’t mean that cremation is not a valid option for disposal. With decreasing land space, cremation that is done in a sustainable way is still a good option. Certain practices can be done for those who choose cremation to achieve authenticity with nature Since CO<sub>2</sub> makes up the majority of

greenhouse gas emissions, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> released by cremation needs to be lowered. One pioneer in green cremations is the community of Crestone, Colorado.

Crestone is the only community in the United States that uses an open funeral pyre to cremate individuals, and they've had such a high demand that they've restricted services to only the local community. Caitlin Doughty (2017) discusses in her book *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death* the Crestone model of cremation and how they've been able to reduce pollution. Their model uses less wood by raising the pyre high off the ground. Having an open funeral pyre is very counter cultural, but with the success seen from this community in Colorado it might spread to other communities in the United States.

### *Recomposition*

A new death positive alternative to burial and cremation has started its' pilot phases. This new option founded by Katrina Spade is called Recompose, an innovative method of disposal for city use that can be an alternative to burial or cremation. Recompose is offering an authentic and death positive approach to disposal by using a rapid soil decomposition process for human remains inside of a community facility. The Recompose website describes the model as "gentle, humane, and ecological ... with a process called 'recomposition.' This natural process gently converts human remains into soil" ("FAQ About Recomposition"). This disposal option seeks to use nature's normal processes, thus fulfilling the achievement of combining authenticity within nature. The Recompose project seeks to have public recomposition facilities where, "The transformation of human to soil happens inside ... reusable, hexagonal recomposition vessels. When the process has finished, families will be able to take home some of the

soil created, while gardens on-site will remind us that all of life is interconnected” (“FAQ About Recomposition”). Thus, the facility also seeks to help families be part of the decay process since they can come to the facility in time of mourning, and at the end of thirty days be offered soil that was contributed to by their loved one. This fertile soil can be used to grow new life, much like how the decayed leaves provide the ability for new leaves to decay.

Recomposition is a groundbreaking technology that is currently in a pilot program. Its’ proponents hope to gain permission by the Washington State government to make recomposition legal. This would change the landscape of the current death care industry by introducing an entirely new method of disposal. Just like many other death positive approaches, there are large limitations due to laws already in place.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND PREDICTIONS MOVING FORWARD

The death care movement started in response to a need that was not being met. Death was happening behind closed doors, families were being lied to, prices were skyrocketing, and environmental impacts looming. Families sought to be true to themselves and honor loved ones end of life wishes. Caitlin Doughty put a name to a cultural and value change already taking place. In the next section, I explore how the death positive movement fulfills the requirement of a social movement. By looking at what a social movement is, I give my predictions on certain successes and failures of the movement. In the next section, I will explore what authenticity in death care can look like and the implications of the movement forward.

### *Death Positivity as a Social Movement*

When looking at death positivity one can easily see how it meets the requirements for a movement. A social movement involves a group that acts with continuity and organization to promote a change within society (Turner and Killan 1993). The textbook *Sociology: The Essentials* outlines the characteristics of a social movement as both spontaneous and structured, while aiming to change either individual or group behavior.

### *Death positivity as structured and spontaneous*

The structure of the movement involves the organization, The Order of the Good Death, and the people who have committed to death positivity. They are part of a collective group that can be identified. This organization can advocate on behalf of the individuals' that comprise it through public initiatives and education programs. Other formal organizations associated with the death positive movement include the Art of

Dying Institute at the Open Center in NY, NY. There are many more people across the country engaging in death positive behaviors even if they are not explicitly identified as “death positive.” For example, a community member or family member may decide to be involved with taking care of the body at home after death. They might not be a designated “death doula” through training, but they are accomplishing the same task. This is the element of spontaneity within the movement. Even though there is a formal organization consisting of death professionals, the practices of the movement are simple and are available to the general public.

The simplicity behind the movement is able to gain momentum, as normal citizens feel like they have the ability to reclaim and take care of their own dead. With the death positive movement raising awareness on the feasibility of home funerals such as these, it will allow for more to take place. This leads into the next characteristic of a social movement, which points to a movement’s goal in aiming to change individual behaviors or some aspect of society.

*Death positivity seeks to change individual behavior and spark societal change*

Going hand and hand with one another, a movement seeks to change society’s viewpoints as a whole on a subject, which can only be done by a change in individual behavior. The death positive movement seeks to see a change from a death phobic culture to a death positive one. A society can only change if there is a change amongst the people who comprise the larger group. So for instance, inciting conversations over death into the everyday can bring awareness to ones mortality and inspire others to talk about death. This will cause social change on a widespread level. Looking at the recent food movement will help me demonstrate this point further.

The public has begun to be more concerned about the quality and healthfulness of its' food. A case study featured in the *Sociology: The Essentials* book focuses on this growing public concern over where one's food comes from and how it is grown (Anderson et al. 2014:410). A case study sought to find the answer to the question, "Do people purchase food because of their political and ethical values?" (Anderson et al. 2014:410). They found that yes, consumers want the food they purchase to reflect their values. This may include placing a value on buying organic because it is more authentic. The effect of a preference for organic foods has been implemented into the mainstream as most chain stores have an organic section in their store. It appears that the food movement advocating for eating more local, organic, and healthy foods has influenced consumer preferences.

Similarly, I believe that the death positive movement will influence the future evolution of death care. Both movements advocate for a more authentic experience. Certain groups of people respond to this desire for authenticity. This is why the organic offerings have not overtaken the entire produce section. I predict that authentic death care services will not dominate the entire industry, but they will be present in every market as a result of a desire for these services. Conventional burials with embalming will still take place. Caskets made out of precious resources that are sold at high costs will still be sold. More "unconventional" options such as burial shrouds, no embalming, and options to not have a burial vault will become more available. The death care industry will never be the same as a result of the death positive movement, just as the food industry remains changed since the food movement. Elements of the movement will permeate into wider

society, but the main stakeholders of the movement will most likely remain a niche group.

### *Sparking Social Change*

The death positive movement started as a result in an inauthenticity of how we talk about and experience death. This movement has started social change as people become more open to talk about death and place emphasis on having a death that reflects their political and ethical mores. As they start dying in ways that reflect those mores, they are achieving their authentic selves by making authentic decisions. Social change stems from social movements. Social change is defined as an “alteration of social interactions, institutions, stratification systems, and elements of culture over time” (Anderson et. al 2015:214). Social change involves microchanges and macrochanges, with examples of those found in the death positive movement.

#### *Micro and macro changes*

Microchanges focus on change in the day-to-day interactions of people, while macrochanges are on a larger scale. I pinpointed examples of both within the death positive movement. An example of a microchange within the death positive movement is that people start incorporating conversations around death into their daily lives. Bringing up death, dying, or the grieving process into conversations with friends and family can do this. A macrochange as a result of this has been the popularity of the Death Café as it has spread to hundreds of cities across the globe. People choose to attend the Cafes regularly and broader society is exposed to the opportunity to engage in death positive conversations.

## *Characteristics of Social Change*

### *Change is uneven*

The death positive movement has experienced uneven growth when comparing the different components of it against each other. For example, it is doing a good job over starting conversations around death and dying, but people are not yet opting to care for and take charge of their own death. These two things are not developing at the same time.

### *Onsets and consequences of social change are often unforeseen*

We can't say how the death positive movement will have changed society in the next ten to twenty years. In an effort to achieve authenticity in death, we might create a consumer driven "authenticity selling" machine. The movement has good intentions, but as it becomes put into practice its' real potential and limitations will be realized.

### *Social Change Often Creates Conflict*

With a clash over values, there might be conflict. Specifically concerning laws and regulations, the conventional industry might fight the change death positivity is trying to bring about. Looking at past social movements reveals this conflict over social change. Specifically, the Civil Rights Movement experienced a lot of conflict as a social movement.

One example of conflict during the Civil Rights Movement was "Bloody Sunday." To gain equality and fight discrimination, King led the march from Selma to Montgomery to fight for voter's rights. The march garnered worldwide attention when the nonviolent marchers encountered state troopers in their path who "knocked the marchers to the ground. They struck them with sticks. Clouds of tear gas mixed with the screams of terrified marchers and the cheers of reveling bystanders" (Klein 2015). As a

result of this “Bloody Sunday”, Congress was mobilized and passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. King’s marches invaded the political dimension as mass numbers came out to demand change. The government could not ignore the sheer numbers of people all coming together to fight for a cause. This movement experienced successful results and looking to the movements such as these will help predict outcomes and give recommendations to movements in the future. The death positive movement is both a social and philosophical movement, with advocacy taking a different approach to the Civil Rights Movement. I’m not suggesting that the death positive movement take the same approaches as the civil rights movement did, but I think looking at this movement can show that a movement can be successful. It can also show that every movement has its’ challenges.

Specifically, within the death positive movement the most limitations it will have in being adopted to the broader society will be due to certain legislation. Currently, certain states have laws that require a licensed funeral director to be involved in some aspect of a person’s death. Most often the funeral director is required to be the person to process the death certificate. For those living in the minority of states with this law, it can prohibit the freedoms to have an authentic death and dying process. As much as one can plan for their ideal funeral, not everything may be feasible due to either legislation or circumstance.

Another limitation to the spread of the death positive movement is that many may not die in a way that is expected. In certain states, a body must be embalmed if it is not buried within twenty-four hours after death. This is not a lot of time to gather together the proper resources for a funeral, especially if one has not planned in advance. Activities

associated around the death positive movement may be seen as too difficult or hard to plan. They do take a more conscious effort put into the process, but this is what contributes that element of authenticity. The potential benefits of dying in an authentic way may not outweigh the costs of extra planning.

Since death positive funeral practices are currently in the minority, access to such services is limited and the movement may have restricted access to minority populations. The movement and its' lack of widely accepted options to the conventional world will alienate certain populations from having access to these services. For example, people who live in an urban area of low socioeconomic status do not have the space for a home funeral nor the money to send the corpse for burial at a natural site. Cremation may be the only option in this circumstance. Someone of high socioeconomic status in a rural area will have a greater chance of being able to provide the authentic home funeral, death doula service, and natural burial for themselves that they wished for.

### *Achieving Authenticity in Death Care*

#### *Regaining authenticity with nature*

Nature follows the cycle of birth, maturation, death, and decay. Our society shies away from discussing the last half of the life cycle that involves death and decay. Think about the forest and the role decomposition plays in that ecosystem. Without allowing decay of leaves and other organic matter, the forest floor would be stacked high reaching the tree tops with leaves. Allowing decomposition and decay is important to allow for new life to take place. The leaves falling in autumn and settling on the forest floor to decay by decomposers is an example of an authentic lifestyle because it does what it was created to do.

We have averted decay and therefore avoided authenticity in our current death care industry. This has been done through the prevention of decay through embalming and the eradication of decay through cremation. Regaining authenticity in death with nature would be to accept decay and allow for our organic matter to combine with the soil through decomposition. This involves being buried in an eco-friendly casket and placed in the ground without a burial vault. Of course, embalming would not be used either so that toxic chemicals will not leach into the soil. Relating to environmental impact, cremation must be done in such a way to limit negative effects in order to retain authenticity with nature.

*Authenticity means matching death care with the deceased's identity*

The problem with the traditional funeral is that it treats the deceased as if they have the same religious beliefs, values, and are under the same socioeconomic status. Under the traditional funeral, a beggar and a billionaire could be offered the same funeral package. Pressure from cultural standards could create a desire for both ends of the spectrum to be remembered in the same way. Even though the funeral could cost the beggar's family much more than they could afford, this pressure to provide a dignified and proper funeral for the loved one may send them into further financial insecurity from a funeral.

The traditional funeral mainly has the same components despite a few elements of personalization here and there. Meaning, there is always a viewing, always embalming, and always a service. Some components of this traditional funeral would not be authentic to the beggar as the grandiosity would not reflect his lifestyle on earth. Therefore, authenticity does not mean just offering a funeral that is highly personalized. Authenticity

must be coupled with death positivity, which is embracing death and decay and not keeping it behind closed doors.

One example of an authentic but not death positive funeral are the services offered by Marin Funeral home in Puerto Rico. This funeral home can make the dead look like they are alive by posing them participating in some of their favorite activities while alive. At the funeral of Renard Matthews, his corpse was placed in an office chair, wearing a Celtics jersey, while holding a PS4 controller. This is a very authentic way to die, but not death positive because it is preventing decay and trying to pretend as if death never happened. These funerals are controversial, but the authenticity they bring resonates with customers. This same level of authenticity can be achieved without the embalming and pretending that he was still alive. Pretending that someone never died is not death positive, and this is one aspect of the death care industry that needs to change.

We're at a cross roads of change, and the industry will not be the same from this point on. The industry versus the movement present two polar opposite viewpoints that need to find some common ground. The death positive movement is not meant to compete with the industry, but there is no denying that these two are interconnected. Moving forward, I predict that the death positive movement will permeate into the conventional death care industry.

The death positive movement will be too much for society to take in all at once, but certain elements will need to be taken in and processed. I think the Death Salon/Death Café movement has demonstrated its' popularity and has the potential to permeate regular society. People want to have spaces where it is acceptable to talk about death. I predict that these meetings will grow to all large cities around the United States and eventually

rural communities as well. Also, pop culture and television shows such as “Six Feet Under” have the potential to increase the conversation of death and authenticity.

Another way that authenticity in the death industry will be pursued is through an increase in natural offerings that the death positive movement endorses. In my opinion, funeral homes should adopt and promote the option of not embalming the body. They could still charge for the washing, dressing, and overall care of the body so their services would not be rendered obsolete, but giving them loved ones a choice would restore trust in the industry.

In an effort to diversify services, I believe funeral homes will hire death doulas to dispatch to homes in order to appeal to a rising demand in these services. If society puts their money where their mouth is, and the funeral homes start losing money then I think they will do anything possible to regain their profit. The death care industry will be forced to adopt more natural and authentic burial and cremation options as a result of changing consumer choices.

Katrina Spade, founder of Recompose and the past Urban Death Project, says

“The future of death positivity ... lies in seeing how its past incarnations most certainly created an activist playbook for the future. To me, this re-engagement with death acceptance is an extremely positive and hopeful development that in turn supports and encourages the end-of-life conversations happening every day.”  
(“FAQ About Recomposition” 2018)

This quote is the reason why I have included the history of death management in this thesis since death positivity is a return to how death was treated in the past, as an inevitable part of life. Ideas for death care can come from ancient traditions of past, just

as modern-day embalming was taken from the ancient Egyptian practice of embalming. Combining elements of the past with new technologies will be part of the future of the death positive movement.

I detailed that achieving unity with nature is one component of an authentic death. Much of the future of the death positive movement I believe will have to do with sustainability in death. Limitations of the death positive movement include land space issues. Currently, the two main options are to cremate or to bury. Cremation may not be part of the deceased's wishes if it cannot be done in the most sustainable way. Since there is only one open-air funeral pyre, conventional cremation is the only way. Therefore, the remaining option of burial might be pursued. There is still not a wide range of options for natural earth burials, so it may be hard for someone to achieve a completely natural burial. Ideas such as the recomposition project seek to provide solutions to some of these concerns over land space usage.

A potential limitation of emerging innovations surrounding death care is that the technologies may not be developed in time to ride the wave of the death positive movement. Innovation and the social movement need to be combined in order for there to be a maximum amount of recognition and ultimately social change. For example, the Recomposition project is still in its trial phases and is not yet permissible by law. It may take several more years for this technology to be perfected and allowed for use. The death positive movement is experiencing popularity as of now, but if innovation starts to slow down the public excitement for wanting authenticity in death will wane. This would not be because people would no longer strive for authenticity or want to employ aspects of

death positivity, it's just that the conventional death care industry would be used in the meantime to be substituted for lack of services.

## *Conclusion*

The death positivity movement has taken off and stemmed from a lack of inauthenticity from our current death care industry. People are striving for authenticity in life and death. The death positive movement is flowering as death doulas, home funerals, and sustainable disposal practices gain popularity. The movement has a lot of potential in becoming one of the great movements of our time, but there are significant limitations to a strictly death positive approach overtaking the traditional way of thought on death. As a result of these limitations, I don't believe the death positive movement will reach its full potential. I do think the movement will leave a permanent mark on our death care industry and the industry will decide to start offering certain services to cater to changing needs. In the end, I don't predict that the movement will disappear entirely, but only a niche group of people will be able to reap its' benefits.

The largest limitation of the death positive movement is that it is seeking to change not only our society today, but also the past one hundred and fifty years of thinking about the dead body and decay. It might be said that the damage has already been done and that there cannot be a full return to how death and dying was in the past. Our culture is death phobic and that will be no easy feat to change it. It is hard for people to take a hard one hundred eighty degree turn in anything in life. Going from our death phobic culture to a death positive one will happen slowly over time. As I spoke about earlier, change is uneven and occurs at different times. It might take a long time for the work of the death positive movement to overcome its' limitations and see its' goals come to fruition.

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