Is the cemetery dead?

BY DAVID C. SLOANE

IN 1831, ARCHITECT Jacob Bigelow built a radically new kind of cemetery at Mount Auburn in Cambridge. It was much larger than its forebears, located on what was then the suburban fringes, and designed to create a romantic space of death that also served as a horticultural, sculptural, and even recreational place. Mount Auburn and the many cemeteries that followed were a rousing success, making the American cemetery a major tourist site for much of the 19th century.

However, in the 20th century, Americans medicalized and privatized dying and death, creating a death taboo that isolated cemeteries. The dying were put in hospitals or nursing homes, visiting hours were moved to funeral homes, and cemeteries were professionalized and standardized. While Mount Auburn remained a popular spot with locals because of its natural and artistic beauty, even it could not retain the cultural prominence that it and the other great urban cemeteries, like Green-Wood in New York and Spring Grove in Cincinnati, had had in the previous century.

Today, American funerary practices are undergoing dramatic and sudden change. This year, cremations surpassed burials for the first time on record. By 2030, cremation may reach 70 percent. That's shifted the locus of the rituals associated with death from cemeteries to corners of the world that hold particular meaning to the departed or their survivors, from backyards to bodies of water. At the same time, social media are changing the way we deal with grief — once a deeply private affair, it has increasingly become a public process online.

As customs change, cemeteries are trying to keep up. Events such as the Run Like Hell 5K in Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery and the beer baron tour in St. Louis's Bellefontaine show how these places are becoming more accessible to the public. Hollywood Forever's Life Stories where a family can submit photographs for a remembrance video suggest their new digital savvy. And, at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, a family can scatter their loved one's ashes, something cemetery operators have opposed including for decades.

In 2014, Mount Auburn Cemetery began offering “natural burials” that do not include embalming and other popular procedures. It was an iconic moment, for an esteemed, yet very traditional institution to adopt a practice popularized by the contemporary death reform movement. But it was actually not so contradictory. Cemeteries, even ones as august as Mount Auburn, have been trying to adjust and renew their connection to the broader public even as reformers question the very need for a cemetery or convince them to adopt such reform measures.

Cemeteries face a sort of life-or-death crisis. The increasing popularity of cremation has meant that cemeteries are no longer critical to storing remains, while mourning on social media has removed the necessity of cemeteries as a primary place to mourn. Public mourning also has re-emerged with the widespread acceptance of roadside shrines, ghost bikes (white bikes placed on the roadside where a cyclist died), memorial vinyl decals for the back windows of cars, and memorial tattoos. While zombies roam the big and small screen, real death has returned to our streets, buildings, walls, vehicles, and even bodies.

While these new practices relocate mourning and remembrance out of the cemetery, other trends, such as natural burial, provide new opportunities for cemeteries. Natural death advocates promote the practice as a more environmentally sensitive mode of burial that eschews embalming, hardwood caskets, and steel or concrete vaults as pollutants. Reformers have succeeded in getting widespread notice, though relatively few Americans have chosen green burial thus far.

Green advocates have often met cemeteries halfway. Some cemeteries offer natural burial adjacent to conventional sections, but have to maintain their whole cemetery without pesticides and herbicides. As a result, cemeteries such as Mount Auburn see an opportunity to offer consumers choices.

Confronting death is painful and upsetting. We lose a person we love in an act of finality which has no comparison. Yet how we did things before may not be how we will do them in the future. Consumers just need good, unbiased information, and a willingness to overcome any family hesitancy about unconventional choices.

Cemeteries can embrace change — even radical change, as the founders of Mount Auburn demonstrated. This fall, Mount Auburn will host Death Salon, a festival of alternative approaches to death and mourning, including lectures and a demonstration of green burial. That Death Salon is coming to Mount Auburn suggests cemeteries can remain beautiful, natural, historic, and artistic places, even as they embrace new practices that allow them to attract new lot-owners and reconnect them to a broader public.

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Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge.