CREMATION, AN EXPRESSION OF LIFE STYLE

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An abiding problem in all societies is the disposal of dead bodies. In Western societies the customary mode is earth burial. But an alternative mode, cremation, is available—to those who choose it. Because cremation requires a specific choice, the assumption would seem justified that whatever particular reason an individual would give for his preference for cremation, it would be consonant with his style of living for which disposal of the body is so-to-speak the final expression. As an expressive movement, it is also a form of communication, a kind of final message to the world, of what sort of person he was and how he intended to be remembered. This assumption is in accordance with Alfred Adler's understanding that "the individual is both the picture and the artist . . . the artist of his own personality" (1, p. 177), in accordance with his "life style" (1, p. 174).

In the present paper we intend to show that the choice of cremation itself and the various particular reasons for this choice, are indeed consonant with the individual's particular life style. For this purpose we have collected several cases of well-known persons who chose to be cremated, and are presenting them according various reasons for their choice.

Desire to Shock

Whereas interment is relatively undramatic because of its widespread usage, burning is, in a sense, spectacular. The desire to capture attention, to be dramatic and shocking unto death, could be at the heart of an individual's choice of cremation, especially in connection with the varied possibilities for disposing of the ashes.

A person who believes he belongs rightfully in the limelight may choose cremation as an appropriate mode of still holding people's attention in death. Kitty Rockwell, known as "Klondike Kate," made a reputation by doing the unusual thing: perhaps not as a sincere nonconformist, but because she wanted to make other people gasp. Her request that she be cremated and her ashes scattered on

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the winds of the High Desert (10, p. 289ff.) possibly was intended to shock the public one last time.

When Damon Runyan, the versatile writer and correspondent, died of cancer, he left instructions that his body be burned and his ashes scattered over the Times Square area of Manhattan (17, p. 30). Captain Eddie Rickenbacker went up in an airplane and fulfilled Runyan's wish. To the newsmen this was good copy, to the hordes of Broadwayites it was a typical Runyan gesture, to the layman it was shocking: Maybe Runyan intended it to be all three.

The desire to shock is closely related to the desire to hurt. If a person feels that he has been treated unfairly by others, and if he senses that the public recoils from cremation, he might well choose burning to "get back at" his adversaries and remind them of their injustices. Perhaps this is why Sacco and Vanzetti, the foreign-born radicals, requested cremation. Accused of a murder in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1920, the men were able to produce several witnesses who had seen them elsewhere on the day of the crime. Convicted nonetheless, Sacco and Vanzetti were sentenced to die in the electric chair. In their last statements to the court they made it plain that they considered themselves scapegoats for a society that was intolerant toward all radicals (21, pp. 240-247).

Perhaps it was a father's desire to punish his offspring that caused the artist W. Channing Cabot to direct his ashes to be taken by one of his children and scattered on the old Cabot place, the urn to be cast into Nantucket Sound (15). Did actress Adele Ritchie use murder of a friend, suicide, and cremation as triple means of getting back at a socialite who had invited the friend to a dinner but had pointedly told Miss Ritchie not to attend (13)?

DESIRE TO SHOW TOUGHNESS AND BRAVERY

Those who have witnessed a cremation, talk about its horrors. One can tell himself that the cadaver is unfeeling, that burning it is similar to burning a piece of paper; but when a human-shaped figure is thrust into a furnace heated to supra-Fahrenheit temperatures, strong men blanch and women turn away. According to Jessica Mitford, some funeral directors discourage burning by describing the gruesomeness of the cremation process (11, pp. 166-167). It seems plausible that a person who takes pride in his bravery and toughness would select the "manly" method of disposal.

Consider the case of Caryl Chessman, the notorious "red light bandit" of Los Angeles. Sentenced to the gas chamber for sexual indignities against a number of women, Chessman boasted that he never once lost his nerve and composure during the twelve years he was imprisoned. Shortly before his execution he denied "any newly developed animal fear of death" (20). Although he expressed a desire to live, Chessman spoke freely and unemotionally about his impending execution. He requested that his body be burned—perhaps another gesture to advertise his absolute courage; a gesture similar to the carefree grin he showed as he was strapped into the execution chair (4).

Did Wyatt Earp, the legendary brave man of the West, feel that the reputation he had established in life must be upheld in death, and that cremation would be a better testimony than an earth burial? Did Sammy Mandell, Freddie Welsh, and Kid McCoy, the boxers, select cremation for similar "he-man" reasons?

SELF-EFFACEMENT

At the other extreme, some people constantly look for means of self-effacement. They feel inferior in human company, and wish to fade into oblivion, destroy their identity, and literally become non persons. Such an individual would certainly shrink from having his body embalmed, treated with cosmetics, and placed on exhibition during a funeral and interment. He would rather be put quickly into a cremation furnace. And although some people have the spot where their ashes are deposited marked by a stone, he would prefer to go into complete oblivion.

Whittaker Chambers, the controversial editor-informer, seems to match the foregoing description. An introvert, Chambers all his life held a negative, critical attitude toward himself. He felt that he lacked genuine talent, and often called attention to his own weaknesses. The Alger Hiss case brought much criticism upon Chambers, and even though he insisted that he had told the truth, he half-blamed himself and questioned his own motives. The very book he wrote as an explanation of the case may be taken as an example of self-flagellation (3). When he died, the undertaker was waiting and Chambers was secretely cremated immediately.

The desire to destroy one's identity might take a milder form. A basic self-consciousness, rather than self-hatred, could cause a person

to recoil from the usual kind of burial. We would expect a self-conscious man to be as self-conscious about his corpse as he was about his person. It is therefore not strange that the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson (8), whose tendency toward introversion caused him to retire in despondency for long periods of time, chose the "private" means of cremation.

PRESERVING ONE'S IDENTITY

Where one person uses cremation to destroy his identity, another may use it to preserve his identity. Cremation makes it possible for a person to escape the remoteness and uniformity of the cemetery, to be intimately close to a loved one—in a closet or on a mantel, or even carried about in a package. Many persons have attempted to continue their close ties after death by specifying that their ashes be turned over to a friend or loved one. The ashes of Annie Oakley, the amazing markswoman, were kept by a friend until soon after her own death, her ailing husband, Frank Butler, died. Then her ashes were buried near his body in the Brock Cemetery at Greenville, Ohio (9, pp. 230-231).

Apparently Minnie Maddern Fiske chose cremation both because of a basic self-consciousness and because she wished to retain her identity. A newspaper account asserted that the actress "did not wish strangers to see her after death, and she wanted her friends to remember her as they had known her" (14). She directed that her body not be viewed before its disposal, and her ashes were retained by her husband.

ROMANTIC IMPULSES

One of the recurrent themes in romantic literature is the identification of human beings with nature. It is exemplified in the writings of Thomas Wolfe, who stood at the edge of the Black Forest and fancied that in the deep of the woods, perhaps in the trees themselves, his soul was born. Ralph Waldo Emerson stood on a knoll near Concord and felt completely absorbed in nature. Recalling his experience, he wrote:

> Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental (7, p. 10).

Neither Emerson nor Wolfe was cremated, but it is easy to imagine a person's using the cremation process to express a mystical impulse similar to theirs. Perhaps President Wilson's Secretary of the Interior, Franklin K. Lane, throbbed with an Emersonian feeling of vastness, of identification with the far-flung universe, and thus requested that his ashes be scattered to the winds at the top of El Capitan Park in the Yosemite Valley (12). Why did Clark Millikan, professor of aeronautics, have his ashes scattered over the Painted Canyon (19), while Clarence Darrow stipulated that his be spread over the Jackson Park Lagoon in Chicago (16)? Was there a mystical impulse behind Charles Coburn's request that part of his ashes be scattered "along the Mohawk Trail from the highest peak between Albany and Fitchburg, Massachusetts" (18)?

We would expect Irvin S. Cobb to make a last attempt at cynical humor in his will; perhaps he shared Wolfe's thoughts when he instructed the undertaker to spread his ashes around the roots of a dogwood sapling in Paducah, Kentucky's Oak Grove Cemetery, opining that "should the tree live, that will be monument enough for me" (5, p. 250). Senator Henry C. Hansbrough of North Dakota had his ashes scattered beneath an elm tree on the United States Capitol grounds (2, p. 1004), and Thorstein Veblen ordered his to be thrown "into the sea, or into some sizable stream running to the sea. . . ." (6, p. 504).

AESTHETIC SENSITIVITY

George Bernard Shaw is reported to have said: "Dead bodies can be cremated. All of them ought to be; . . . earth burial, a horrible practice, will some day be prohibited by law, . . . (partly) because it is hideously unaesthetic. . . ." (11, pp. 162-163). Many people agree with Shaw. Rather than having their bodies placed under the ground to endure "the unspeakable horrors of decay" (11, p. 167), they prefer to use the "clean, beautiful method of resolution by incandescence" (11, p. 167). Further, they believe that the public would find cremation more aesthetically pleasing than interment, and that the practice would reduce somewhat the space and sanitation problems.

Jessica Mitford has expressed the opinion that cremation "appeals to the nature lover and the poetic minded" (11, p. 161). Indeed, one can easily see this motivation in the cases of Carl Sandberg, Amy Lowell, Sara Teasdale, and Joaquin Miller, all of whom were cre-

mated, as well as the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the sculptor William Zorach. Could the composer Sigmund Romberg have felt that the slow decaying process was incongruous with the rhythm of existence and that the speedier method of burning was more fitting?

DESIRE TO BE AN ENLIGHTENED PERSON

The final motive to be discussed is the desire to be a reasonable, progressive, enlightened person. This kind of desire involves a willingness to abandon tradition and convention whenever indicated, and to solve one's problems in a usefully creative and practical way. If a person is aware of the space and sanitation problems, or discerns that earth burial has become so ritualized that it is essentially meaningless and offensive, he will be more likely to reject interment and choose the alternative of cremation.

It seems legitimate to attribute this motivation for cremation to a number of individuals whose willingness to depart from tradition and approach life's problems with zest and imagination is well known: Albert Einstein, the physicist; Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and Wolfgang Köhler, psychologists; Robert G. Ingersoll, the lawyer; Charles Sanders Peirce, Williams James, and John Dewey —"the great triumvirate of American pragmatism"; and Ilsley Boone, the Baptist clergyman who was a cofounder of nudism in America.

SUMMARY

In Western societies cremation is not the rule and must be specifically requested. In accordance with Alfred Adler's understanding of the unity and self-consistency of the individual, his life style, we assume that a person's final important choice, of cremation, would be somehow expressive of his life style in general, a final communication to the world, so-to-speak, of what he stood for and what he wanted to be remembered for—or that he wanted to be forgotten.

By the examples of a number of well-known persons who have been cremated we have attempted to show that the choice of cremation can indeed be consonant with a variety of different personal characteristics: desire to shock the world, desire to show toughness and bravery, self-effacement, desire to preserve one's identity, romantic impulses, aesthetic sensitivity, and finally desire to be a progressive and enlightened individual.

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