Susan Maas
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On April 8, 1883, Edina farm wife and grieving daughter Sarah G. Baird wrote in her diary:

"Neither of us sisters near to witness the scene. Thankful Henry and the children were there when she was 'ready to go.' Mrs. Nicholl and I sat up [with the body] Saturday. Sunday Geo. [summoned us] to come home to make further preparations for funeral. Ada and Mrs. Bowen sat up [with the body] last night. A pleasant day for a funeral – sprinkled a little as we started from the house."

In the late 19th century, during Minnesota's infancy, the average American had an intimate relationship with death. Life expectancy in the hovered at around 45; infant and child mortality rates were high. "For most individuals," writes cultural historian Gary Laderman in his 1996 book *The Sacred Remains*, "death was an integrated element of everyday life."

That familiarity, and the relative religious uniformity of the populace, led to a consistent set of practices in parting with the dead. As described in "Final Rite of Passage," an exhibit of the Cokato Museum, the mostly white Protestants who inhabited the state generally followed the same routine when a loved one died:

> "At the time of death, a hush fell over the household, the blinds were drawn and people walked about on tiptoe and spoke in restrained tones. The undertaker was summoned. …
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> "The embalming was done by the undertaker and his assistant, usually in the bathroom or kitchen. The body was 'laid out' or dressed in the best or favorite suit or dress and moved into the parlor, to be viewed before a casket was obtained.
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> "Friends began pouring in to the bereaved home as soon as the news reached them, and the members of the family, seated in the living room, received their condolences. Each caller tiptoed into the parlor to see the corpse . . . and all commented on how natural and peaceful it looked. Cakes and pies and meats began to appear in the kitchen in profusion, the gifts of friends and neighbors."

> On the day of the funeral, the pallbearers gathered at the cemetery to dig the grave. The bereavement party proceeded on foot or by carriage to the meeting house or church. After a sermon and final reviewal, the mourners buried the decedent in the graveyard.

Obviously much has changed since then. Contemporary Americans are several steps removed from the messiest, most elemental aspects of life. Few of us give birth at home or kill our own chickens for dinner, and we're even less likely to dig our parents' graves. Scientific and technological advances, health regulations, our age-old human reluctance to confront mortality – all have helped to professionalize the disposal of the dead.

And we are, more than ever, a pluralistic society. Nowhere is the rich ethnic and religious diversity of the U.S. – and increasingly, of Minnesota – more apparent than in the myriad rituals and practices we perform when a loved one dies. Grief is universal, but twenty-first century Minnesotans approach and care for their dead in a wide variety of ways.

Muslim families bury deceased loved ones "as soon as possible," says Islamic Institute President Amin Abdel-Kader, also an associate professor of business administration at Augsburg College – sometimes five or six hours after the time of death. Muslims do not embalm the bodies of their dead, Kader says. "It is considered unnecessary, disrespectful, mutilation without cause." State law requires that unembalmed corpses be buried within 72 hours, so time is of the essence, Kader explains.

Washing the body

Families play key roles in preparations for burial; a mortician is employed mainly for transporting the body to the mosque. Once there, family members, friends, or if necessary, unpaid volunteers of the decedent's same sex wash the body. "It's very simple, as if the person is taking a bath: we use soap and water, then dry the body," Kader says.

Next, the body is wrapped in a white cotton shroud, or kafan, with the face left exposed. Funerals prayers (Janazeh) are then offered, and flowers are discouraged as an unhelpful extravagance: "We ask that [mourners] give that money to charity instead." The body is then brought to the cemetery for burial (never cremation). The uncasketed body is placed directly into an earthen grave -- though because laws in the U.S. require use of some kind of structure, a vault with holes in the bottom or one that's filled with dirt is used.

Muslims graves are oriented toward Kabba (in the city of Mecca), the first house of worship built by the prophet Abraham.

Keeping vigil

In Judaism, a critical part of honoring the dead – kavod ha-meit – is keeping vigil with the loved one's body, says Rabbi Jeffrey Wildstein of Temple Israel in Minneapolis. Though reform Judaism differs from traditional and orthodox Judaism in some ways, the vigil is key for all Jews.

"We treat the body with respect; we do not leave it unattended." Sometimes a family member stays with the body; often the watcher is a member of the Chevre Kadisha holy society, a group of volunteers enlisted for that purpose. Family members, the Chevre Kadisha, and perhaps other witnesses from the community may quietly recite Psalms over the body during the vigil.

In the Tahara, the ritual washing and preparation of the body for burial, water is poured over the body in a symbolic purification. Then the body is dressed in a shroud, "a simple, clean, white cotton or linen fabric," to represent the belief that "no matter who we are in terms of wealth and status, we are all equal." The washing and dressing are always performed by members of the decedent's same sex.

The body is placed in a casket, sometimes with earth from Israel. As with Muslim funerals, he ceremony is scheduled and performed fairly quickly: between 24 and 48 hours after the death. "Someone has died, and there needs to be quick recognition that this change has taken place," Wildstein says.

Judaism, including the Reform tradition, prohibits embalming. "As it says in Genesis, 'from dust you came, to dust you shall return,' and we believe there should be nothing to interfere with decomposition," Wildstein explains.

Lengthy, elaborate ceremonies

Charlie Godbout, a mortician who has served the Hmong community at Maplewood's Metro Funeral Home for over 7 years, describes death rituals that are "elaborate, in terms of time and emotion. It's a huge part of the social fabric."

Typically, when a Hmong person dies, his or her entire family will gather to wash and dress the body (in either traditional Hmong apparel or formal Western attire), sometimes spending hours together before contacting the mortuary. The body is then removed, and Godbout proceeds with embalming.

The body is likely to be dressed in three or four layers of clothing: different outfits, some Hmong garments and some Western clothes, of the family's choosing. "There's a belief that the body eventually comes back, in some form, from the netherworld," Godbout explains; the variety of clothes ensures that the loved one will be well-equipped for a range of circumstances. No metal or plastic can be buried with the body: Hmong believe that those substances "could cause a physical defect."

The funeral and burial – never cremation, Godbout says – may not take place for many days, in part because Hmong tradition forbids two funeral services to take place at once in the same funeral home. "Hmong believe that the spirit is still present, around the body, after death, and they don't want the spirits to commingle," Godbout says. (Metro Funeral Home is one of only two Hmong funeral homes in the Twin Cities.)

The funeral is a weekend-long ritual that starts and ends with open lamentation. In between, friends and family members chant, socialize, and feast. After the ceremony, they stay to witness the lowering of the casket and the filling of the grave.

The Rev. Daniel Yang, minister of Hmong United Methodist Church in St. Paul, says pre-burial and funeral practices among Hmong Christians incorporate elements from the animist tradition as well as from Christianity.

"First, the pastor and the family get together [around the body] and pray, offering the person's soul to God," Yang says. "After two hours or so, an elder son will wash the body, head to toe. Then the next elder son, then the next one."

After the washing, a male decedent's sons will dress his body; a female decedent's daughters will dress her body. Relatives are summoned: "It's very important for the [extended] family to see them one last time," Yang says, "to ensure that the person has died, and to support the [nuclear] family." Later that day, the mortuary is notified; in the case of most of Yang's parishioners, the mortuary of choice is Hmong Funeral Home in St. Paul.

Hmong Christians, like Hmong practitioners of the animist religion, do not allow more than one funeral to take place in the same mortuary at once, which means families often wait three or four weeks for a funeral. Hmong Christian funerals typically involve an open casket, and last an entire weekend, with worship services Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings as well as Monday morning.

Differences within Christianity

Even within the same religious denomination, traditions and comfort levels can vary dramatically. To at least a small degree, say some clergy and counselors, the inclusion or exclusion of the decedent's body in the farewell process can predict a family's style of grieving.

The Rev. Gloria Roach Thomas teaches a class in the University of Minnesota's mortuary science department called "Death, Dying and Bereavement Across Cultures." Much of her knowledge comes from experience; before becoming pastor at Camphor United Methodist in St. Paul, a predominantly African American church, she served at Brooklyn United Methodist in Brooklyn Center, a mostly white congregation. In general, Thomas sees real differences in the way black Americans and white Americans approach the body of a loved one who has died.

Thomas often observed a quieter, "more stoic" demeanor in the grieving families at her former church. "In my experience, a lot of [white families] would choose not to be in the room" with the body when the funeral practitioner arrived. Conversely, many African American families stay with the deceased loved one for as long as possible, "even while the funeral practitioner is working.

"People start gathering – many times from afar – and they all want to see the body. They cry openly; they might sing and pray; some people scream out," Thomas says. "Many times they'll even follow the body out to the hearse."

She recalls being summoned, last summer, by the family of an elderly parishioner who had just died. "When I got to Bessie, people were stroking her hair, straightening her clothes, smoothing out her covers. It was loving and very attentive. They had asked that the funeral home come later so the family could be there with her." The Rev. Jacquelyn Jeunai, a hospice chaplain at HealthEast and an ordained Baptist minister, says that the way most grieving families – of every religion, race or culture – refer to the body of a deceased loved one differs from the way a clinical researcher might talk about it.

"Even though life as we know it is no longer there, the body is still representative of that life," Jeunai says. "So we're not calling it 'a body' at this time; we're calling it 'him' or 'her.' And it's going to be 'him' or 'her' until burial. The journey is not over until it's all the way over."

Most funerals in Thomas's current church are open-casket ceremonies: a practice that mortician Tim Clausen of Spielman Mortuary says is increasingly less common among his clients of European descent.

More than half of Spielman's clients are African American. About a third are white, and the other "5 to 10 percent" are Asian American. Clausen says only about 10 percent of the black families he works with choose cremation, and even some of those families still opt for a "traditional" funeral service "with the casketed remains present."

'Death-free' services

Many of Clausen's observations echo Thomas's. He sees more European American families choosing memorial services without wakes or visitations, without a body, without vivid reminders that a death has taken place. "A lot of families are even electing not to have any music at the service because they don't want the possibility that it will make them more inclined to cry.

"We're raised in a stiff-upper-lip society. For men, a funeral home is one of the few places where it is acceptable to cry," Clausen says. Many of Spielman's clients of color, he adds, seem able to more fully experience a loved one's death and the rituals following it. "The African American community knows how to grieve: They express their emotions."

Doug Manning, a nationally known grief counselor, lecturer and author, worries about the trend away from funeral rituals and reviewal of the body. "In the Pacific Northwest, up to 40 percent of people are immediately disposed of, with no viewing," Manning says. Where death is concerned, Manning posits, educated white Westerners are erecting "a prison of the positive.

"Funerals remind us of our own mortality, and now the goal seems to be to create services that nobody cries at. We've sanitized it so much . . . my mother sat through the funeral of her own son – my brother – who had died of cancer, and she didn't cry once."

Manning has a clear bias in favor of viewing the body of a deceased loved one. "I am very prejudiced," Manning says. "I believe it's the beginning of facing reality." He also believes strongly in the need for funeral rituals of some kind, for the nonreligious as well as the religious. Much of his time is spent "training people to do funerals for people who don't go to church."

Clausen, the mortician, adds that most funeral practitioners are "not in the best position to recommend" wakes, visitations, caskets – anything but a short, austere memorial service – because the suggestions will be perceived as financially motivated. But he wonders if the quick, "death-free" services are meeting survivors' needs in the long run. Clausen believes that the chance for

survivors to see and/or touch the body nearly always provides a psychological benefit.

"Reviewal serves many purposes. If there's any denial, it can help alleviate that. And with lingering illnesses, where there are a lot of physical changes and suffering, we can help families see the loved one in a more peaceful state," so the final memories are not of pain and deterioration.

"I've never had a family regret reviewal. At time I will go to great lengths to encourage it. I've even had circumstances, in tragic burnings and such, where I've encouraged families to bring in a sleeping bag just so they can reach in and touch the remains. But," Clausen adds, "no one should ever be forced."