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Title:
The disposition of the destitute

Date:
2019

Citation:
Arnold, M., Nansen, B., Kohn, T., Gibbs, M. & Harewood Gould, H. (2019). The disposition of the destitute. Parity, 32 (6), pp.22-23

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/324552

The Disposition of the Destitute

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The *final disposition* is a term used by people in the funeral industry to refer to the burial or cremation of a dead person. The final disposition is a profoundly important event, not simply a pragmatic or material process, and its significance is expressed through ritualised performances. The disposition and its rituals are shared and communal, involving ceremonies attended by the deceased's family, friends, and community, whilst less indirectly the disposition is shared by wider social norms and values around the proper treatment of the deceased body. Although the disposition is common to us all, then, it is also a personalised event in which the particularity of the life lived is recognised. Similarly, the place of interment, whether body or ashes, is named and marked to recognise the individual life of the deceased. Places of interment are thus not only identified, but are also accessible to family, friends and community, for the purpose of ongoing visitation and remembrance.

We do it in respect of our immediate connectedness to the deceased, through intimacy, kinship, friendship or community, or where this is absent, in acknowledgement of our shared humanity and mortality. But where does this leave the homeless and the destitute? What is the current situation for the disposition of the destitute in Australia?

The short answer to the question is mixed, confused, and confusing. Throughout Australia, arrangements for the final disposition are typically made by the next-of-kin. The average cost of a traditional burial is $19,000, the average cost of a cremation is $7,420,[2] and cheapest commercial option, a *direct cremation*, that is, a cremation without a ceremony of any kind, costs around $1,950 in most states. This expense is clearly beyond the means of many people. In Victoria for example, there are around 40,000 deaths per annum of which 5,000 require some form of financial assistance for the final disposition.[3]

Where the next-of-kin is unknown, uncontactable, unwilling or unable to pay, arrangements may be made by: a hospital employee, an employee of a charitable organisation such as the Salvation Army or the Brotherhood of St Laurence, by an employee of the Department of Justice or the Department of Health and Human Services, or by the Police. If the death was 'notifiable' and subject to a Coronial Inquiry, the Coroners Court may make the arrangements. If the deceased was known to have been a member of the armed services, the Department of Veterans Affairs and/or the RSL may contribute. If the deceased was a member of a union, a member of a Church or other faith organisation, or a member of a club such as a football club or Rotary, then these organisations may be asked to contribute.

In recent times, online crowdfunding sites have been used, particularly where the death has been 'high profile'. If the deceased was a recipient of Centrelink payments, then Centrelink may offer a lump sum to subsidise the cost, but again, the exact sum will depend on numerous variables. The contribution made by these organisations thus depends on many factors that are difficult to navigate.

If the deceased is Aboriginal, then arrangements will often be made by organisations established to meet the cultural requirements of the community. In the 1960s in inner Melbourne Aunty Edna Brown established the Aboriginal Funeral Benefits Fund, Victoria's first Aboriginal funeral fund.[4] In 1992, the Weeroona cemetery was established in Greenvale, Melbourne, to meet the need for an affordable and culturally-appropriate resting place for Aboriginal community members.[5] Today, Victorian Aboriginal Funeral Services operate through the Aboriginal Advancement League in Thornbury and offer low and no-cost funerals. The Central Lands Council covers costs in central Australia up to $1,650.[6] Similar assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people operates in other states.

In Victoria an organisation called Bereavement Assistance Limited offer means-tested charitable funerals, including free funerals, to all comers.[7] Established in 1997, the company runs on a not-for-profit basis, cross-subsidising several hundred no-cost and below-cost services per annum with full-fee services and subsidised services, along with subsidies from a variety of other state government organisations, charitable organisations and private donors. The Department of Health and Human Services' contribution is typically only 18 per cent of the total cost of the disposition of the poor.[8]

In addition to Bereavement Assistance Limited the Victorian State Government has contracted three private funeral directors to handle the final disposition of those unable to pay. In these cases cremation is the most common form of disposition, but in regional areas and in cases where there is good

reason to bury, for example where the deceased is Muslim or Jewish or has objected to cremation for other reasons, a burial in shared or common grave will occur,[9] with up to five bodies per grave at Faulkner in Melbourne[10] and six at Rookwood in Sydney.[11] Where the identity of the deceased is known an attempt may be made to contact family and friends and a service will be held. Often this does not occur, and the disposition takes place without ceremony. Cremation ashes will be scattered in an area in the cemetery set aside for this purpose, and though the identity of the deceased is recorded, no marker identifying the deceased is used. In the case of common burial at Faulkner Cemetery, the name, date of birth and date of death of each of those buried is marked on the grave, but common graves at Springvale Memorial Park and at Rookwood are unmarked, though identity and plot numbers are recorded. In Victoria cemeteries are managed by not-for-profit public trusts such as the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust, and these trusts have a budget allocation to cover the cost of the disposition of the destitute, where others have not stepped forward.

Arrangements vary from state to state. In New South Wales, for example, if the death occurred in a public hospital and the deceased is without means, the hospital is responsible for arrangements and the cost, after taking all reasonable steps to recover costs from the deceased's estate and from relatives and friends. The Department of Forensic Medicine may also submit Form 373 to the Coroner, who in turn issues an Order of Disposal of a Destitute Person to the appropriate Public Health Unit requesting a burial or cremation from a State Government contracted funeral director, who then forwards the invoice to the Public Health Unit for payment. The Salvation Army also provide funeral services.[12] In South Australia Funeral Assistance SA may help low-income families, and depending on the circumstances, may make a relatively small contribution ($625) or may meet the full cost of a simple disposition, funeral service and floral tribute. Queensland's Department of Justice and Attorney-General makes arrangements through the Magistrates Court or the Coroners Court when a family applies for funeral assistance and where the person has died in Queensland. The Department is required to provide a 'simple burial or cremation' to any deceased person whose assets cannot cover the cost of their funeral. If the death occurred as a result of violence, financial assistance may be available from Victim Assist Queensland. In the Northern Territory the Indigent Persons Funeral Scheme will make arrangements for the disposition, and in Tasmania the Essential Care Funeral Package is offered to those without financial means.

From the above it would seem that dignified arrangements are possible in some circumstances, through for example, the Bereavement Assistance Limited, Funeral Assistance SA, the Aboriginal Advancement League, and no doubt others that we have missed. It may also be possible to put together an adequate collection of contributions from charitable sources and benevolent organisations, providing someone is prepared to do the complicated leg-work. But should we expect this of the bereaved, and what of those who have no bereaved?

Arrangements for the disposition of the destitute that acknowledge our shared humanity and mortality by providing for ritual, personalisation, participation, place identification, and accessible visitation are important, even in sad circumstances where the person in question has no family, no intimates, no friends, and no immediate community to experience these arrangements.

An example of an attempt to make such arrangements that were not just for the poor but actively engaged *with* the poor occurred at New York's potter's field in 2005, where a service was created to remember those buried there.[13] Key principles in the arrangements were:

- Acknowledging that there is not one single experience of what it means to be poor […] and that being poor is merely one aspect of their lives.
- Plan and perform rituals led by poor people.
- Create a space to invite people to enter the lived experienced of poverty, to help others make meaning out of it and discern ways for everyone to respond.
- Engage in a process of mutuality, justice seeking and justice making, creativity, and authenticity as part of the whole ritual process.
- Understand that a social movement to end poverty is a ritual itself, composed of many ritual actions and performances.

It is important for the moral and public standing of funeral service providers, cemeteries and crematoria trusts, community organisations, state institutions and for the wider society we all share, that arrangements such as these are made in acknowledgement of the life and death of one of our own. It is not the deceased who is diminished in the absence of these arrangements, it is all of us.

Endnotes

1. The authors are members of the DeathTech research group — *https://deathtech.org/*
2. *https://www.gatheredhere.com.au/assistance-funeral-costs-australia/*
3. Personal correspondence, Ted Worthington, Bereavement Assistance Limited.
4. *https://www.vic.gov.au/aboriginalvictoria/community-engagement/leadership-programs/aboriginal-honour-roll/2014-victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll/edna-brown.html*
5. *http://whp.altervista.org/weeroona.php*
6. *https://www.funeralzone.com.au/help-resources/arranging-a-funeral/funeral-assistance-destitute-funerals-help-with-funeral-costs*
7. Personal correspondence, Ted Worthington, Bereavement Assistance Limited.
8. Ibid
9. *https://ezifunerals.com.au/paupers-funeral/*
10. Personal correspondence, Ted Worthington, Bereavement Assistance Limited.
11. *http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/pauper-burial-numbers-rising-in-hard-economic-times/story-e6freuy9-1225711578270*
12. *https://salvosfunerals.com.au/*
13. Amy Gopp (2007) *Ritualizing with the Poor: The Potter's Field Memorial Service*, Liturgy, 23:1, 15-19, DOI: 10.1080/04580630701673232

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