ABSTRACT. In spite of the fact that it is required only occasionally for sanitary reasons and not legally mandatory, the practice of embalming is widespread in contemporary American society. This study explores the historical, cultural and psychological factors which gave rise to the practice of embalming and why the practice continues. Two case studies are presented in which delayed grief reactions were present; linkages with embalming are described. It is suggested that the frightening finitude of the self and a fear of death in modern society have led to practices in which the corpse is viewed as looking "natural," thus denying the reality of death. Embalming is seen as the final assault on the self, which can also carry with it problematic psychological consequences for the survivors.

Key words: death, delayed grief reaction, denial, depression, embalming, grief work, repression

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of death is strictly connected with the meaning of life. Through the centuries, human beings have strived and struggled and emotionally tortured themselves in order to discover the meaning of existence. The frightening finitude of the self, the progressive deterioration of the body and the fear of death have created strong defense mechanisms. At times, the business of living submerges the desire to gain insight into a total vision of the universe and the self.

It is postulated that the widespread social custom of embalming the human body in American society reflects the attempt by individuals and society at large to ward off a basic archetypal fear of death. Attitudes towards embalming have differed in the past and occasionally attempts have
been made to critically evaluate this social custom, so passively accepted by the majority of people. Ethical, religious, psychological and practical issues are interconnected and are at the basis of the manner in which society disposes of human remains. Profound contradictions, both religious and social, can be seen when reflecting on this social practice. At times in a psychiatric practice, as a consequence of what can be called the last invasion of human privacy — embalming — psychological disturbances in the form of delayed grief may be observed among survivors.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The presence of a spirit, an “elan vital,” encased in a visible body, subjected to a lifetime of decreasing vitality until the time of death, has puzzled human beings throughout the centuries. Vovelle noted that popular practices, religious rituals, philosophical theories and the sociological context have interacted with one another to influence practices of death and dying.

The Egyptians constructed pyramids with mummified pharaohs inside. Etruscan tombs contained utensils and food that the dead might need in the next life. The early Hebrews practiced embalming. Herodotus indicates that from 4400 B.C., at the time of the dynasty of Menes, until the advent of Muhammadanism in the seventh century A.D., embalming was an accepted practice among both the Egyptians and Hebrews. However, embalming has not been permitted in Jewish societies since the seventh century A.D.

During the first millennium, death was experienced as the so-called tame death. It was foreseen and controlled by the dying person who accepted it with regret and resignation, but with no great anxiety or fear. This is understandable when taking into consideration its historical-cultural context. Seneca, in the first century A.D., thought that death would liberate the divine principle in each person and allow it to rejoin the Aristotelian “primum movens.” Marcus Aurelius, in his colloquium “Cum Se Ipso,” looked at the human body as temporary and insecure and actually hoped for his soul to detach from it. Dante tried to transcend the finitude of humankind while searching for truth and values. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, economic upheavals and the religious climate of Western society led the individual to appreciate his/her helplessness and to view God, the Omnipotent, as the only hope for salvation. Baroque architecture of this period can be interpreted as an elaborate act of praising God and of man’s desperate hope for forgiveness. Later, Hegel, Marx and Freud, in the nineteenth century, stressed the “here and now” and stoically accepted the finitude of the self.