

Accepting the end: Bucket lists, cemeteries show changing attitudes toward death

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(Phys.org) -- Bucket lists are more than goals or accomplishments a person wants to achieve before dying. They are also a way for people to discuss death -- even though most of us probably would rather avoid doing so, according to a Kansas State University historian.

"Much of [American culture](#) in the 20th century has been engagement in [death](#) avoidance," said Albert Hamscher, the university's Kenneth S. Davis professor of history. "Bucket lists signify a willingness at least to discuss death again. But note how it is purely secular in its contours. It focuses on the here and now rather than the hereafter, which has been how people typically frame death."

Death avoidance is a relatively new [phenomenon](#) in Western society, according to Hamscher. Philippe Aries, a 20th-century French historian, referred to the attitude as "the forbidden death" in his book, "Western Attitudes Toward Death from the [Middle Ages](#) to Present." Instead of being exposed to it, which commonly happened in Europe until recent generations, people have been shielded from death. This avoidance became more popular with medical advances and increased secularization.

"Religion has always given death a frame of reference," Hamscher said. "Absent that, death becomes a frightening topic. Death can appear frightening in that context because it has no larger explanation. It's an existential black hole."

Medical advances have also facilitated this shift through [isolation](#) of death to the elderly and those in institutional settings. Hamscher said the remoteness from the death process can often result in a person not experiencing death in their family for 20 or 30 years.

Hamscher's interest in historical attitudes toward death and dying was piqued by visits to cemeteries, which he said help demonstrate changes in attitudes toward death and dying during a long period of time. This prompted much of Hamscher's published work related to death and dying, with an emphasis on pictorial headstones.

His research has affirmed many of Aries' observations, especially comparing modern and older sections of cemeteries. Older cemetery sections often feature standing headstones, which presume a person will trim the grass and properly maintain them, Hamscher said. Walking paths provide similar evidence, along with flora and trees and shrubs. The occasional bench creates an atmosphere where mourners can convene with the dead, he said.

Meanwhile, modern cemeteries often feature little greenery and flat headstones. Few walking paths dot the landscape and the presumption appears that no one will visit, Hamscher said.

"The least intrusive elements of the cemetery are the dead themselves," Hamscher said. "That's a perfect example of the forbidden death -- that even in cemeteries, death is not in the forefront."

Hamscher specializes in early modern France and the cultural history of U.S. cemeteries. He has published four books and a variety of scholarly articles, essays and book chapters on early modern French history, pictorial headstones and memorial park cemeteries. He teaches courses on both European and French history. He also teaches Death and Dying in History, a course he developed.

Provided by Kansas State University

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