

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Chronicle of a Death We Can't Accept

By THOMAS G. LONG
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Bryan Graf

AT a funeral directors' convention recently, I wandered around an exhibition floor crowded with the usual accouterments of the trade — coffins, catafalques, cemetery tents, cremation furnaces and the like. Scattered among these traditional goods were also many new baubles and gewgaws of the funeral business — coffins emblazoned with sports logos; cremation urns in the shape of bowling pins, golf bags and

motorcycle gas tanks; “virtual cemeteries” with video clips and eerie recorded messages from the dead; pendants, bracelets, lamps and table sculptures into which ashes of the deceased can be swirled and molded.

It is hard to know what to make of this wild blossoming of unconventional mortuary merchandise. Perhaps it is the creative expression of a society grown weary of the extravagant hearse-and-limousine funerals of the past and ready to experiment with less costly and more personal ways to memorialize the dead. Some funeral directors seem to think so and are responding like dazed Blockbuster managers outmaneuvered in a Netflix age, scrambling to stay afloat in the wake of new technology and cultural improvisation.

But there is another, more accurate way to understand current funeral fashions. They illustrate the sad truth that, as a society, Americans are no longer sure what to do with our dead.

Rituals of death rest on the basic need, recognized by all societies, to remove the bodies of the dead from among the living. A corpse must be taken fairly quickly from here, the place of death, to somewhere else. But no healthy society has ever treated this as a perfunctory task, a matter of mere disposal. Indeed, from the beginning, humans have used poetry, song and prayer to describe the journey of the dead from “here” to “there” in symbolic, even sacred, terms. The dead are not simply being carted to the pit, the fire or the river; they are traveling toward the next world or the Mystery or the Great Beyond or heaven or the communion of the saints.

And we are accompanying them the last mile of the way. Every generation re-imagines these images of what lies beyond this life, but what persists is the conviction that the dead are not refuse to be discarded; they are human treasures traveling somewhere and it is our holy responsibility to go with them all the way to the place of farewell.

Thus, funerals often involve processions, sometimes simple, sometimes elaborate, a form of community theater in which we enact publicly the journey from here to there, thereby enabling both the dead and the living to process the reality and meaning of mortality. Historically, funerals have not simply been quiet times of reflection in secluded chapels but often have included noisy parades winding through the streets.

When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s body was borne on a mule-drawn sharecropper's cart through the thronged streets of Atlanta, the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy wisely and symbolically wore scuffed marching boots under his pulpit robe. "A good funeral," says Thomas Lynch, a poet and undertaker in Milford, Mich., "is one that gets the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be."

Today, however, our death rituals have become downsized, inwardly directed, static and, as a result, spiritually and culturally impoverished. We tend now to recognize our dead only for their partial passions and whims. They were Mets fans, good for laughs at the office, pleasant companions on the links. At upbeat, open-mike "celebrations of life," former coaches, neighbors and relatives amuse us with stories and naïvely declare that the dead, who are usually nowhere to be seen and have nowhere to go, will nevertheless live always in our memories. Funerals, which once made confident public pilgrimage through town to the graveyard, now tread lightly across the tiny tableau of our psyches.

Even those mourners who, by will or habit, wish to take their dead to the place of departure often find their way blocked. Some cemeteries, fearing liability lawsuits from falls and the like, no longer allow funeral processions to go the distance to the open grave but encourage the mourners to leave the coffin in a faux sanctuary at the entrance. And many American crematories, unlike their European counterparts, are not designed to allow mourners to accompany the body all the way to the fire. Instead the dead must be dropped off, like a night deposit at the bank.

We hardly complain, though. For the first time in history, the actual presence of the dead at their own funerals has become optional, even undesirable, lest the body break the illusion of a cloudless celebration, spoil the meditative mood and reveal the truths about grief, life and death that our thinned-out ceremonies cannot bear.

A corpse is a stark reminder that human beings are inescapably embodied creatures, and that a life is the sum of what has been performed and spoken by the body — a mixture of promises made and broken, deeds done and undone, joys evoked and pain inflicted. When we lift the heavy weight of the coffin and carry the dead over the tile floor of the crematory or across the muddy cemetery to the open grave, we bear public witness that this was a person with a whole and embodied life, one that, even in its ambiguity and brokenness, mattered and had substance. To carry the dead all the way to the place of farewell also acknowledges the reality that they are leaving us now, that they eventually will depart even from our frail communal memory as they travel on to whatever lies beyond.

“Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people,” William Gladstone, the British statesman, is said to have observed. Indeed, we will be healthier as a society when we do not need to pretend that the dead have been transformed into beautiful memory pictures, Facebook pages or costume jewelry, but can instead honor them by carrying their bodies with sad but reverent hope to the place of farewell. People who have learned how to care tenderly for the bodies of the dead are almost surely people who also know how to show mercy to the bodies of the living.

Thomas G. Long, a professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, is the author of “Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral.”