Good grief: An undertaker's reflections

by Thomas Lynch in the July 26, 2003 issue

It’s sunny and 70 at Chapel Hill. I’m speaking to Project Compassion, an advocacy group for end-of-life issues, on an unlikely trinity of oxymorons—the *good* death, *good* grief and the *good* funeral. “What,” most people reasonably ask, “can ever be good about death or grief or funerals?” The 150 people in this room understand. They are mostly women—clergy, hospice and social workers, doctors, nurses and funeral directors—and they work, so to speak, in the deep end of the pool, with the dying, the dead and the bereaved.

We begin by agreeing that the good death is the one that happens when we are among our own, surrounded not by beeping meters and blinking monitors but by the faces of family and people who care. It is the death of a whole person, not an ailing part. It is neither a failure nor an anomaly; it is less science and more serenity. The good death, like the good life, does not happen in isolation. It is not only or entirely a medical event, nor only or entirely a social or spiritual or retail one. The good death engages our entire humanity—both what is permanent and what is passing. So I am thanking these women for the power of their presence—as nurses and doctors and hospice volunteers, as pastors and rabbis, priests and imams, as mothers and daughters, sisters and wives—for their willingness to stand in the room where someone is dying, without an easy answer, without a cure or false hopes, with only their own humanity, to bear witness and to be present. The power of being there is that it emboldens others—family and friends—to be present too to the glorious and sorrowful mysteries.

And grief, *good* grief, we further concur, is something about which we have little choice. It is the tax we pay on the loves of our lives, our habits and attachments. And like every other tax there is this dull math to it—if you love, you grieve. So the question is not so much whether or not, but rather how well, how completely, how meaningfully we mourn. And though we do not grieve as those who have no faith grieve, as people of faith we grieve nonetheless. We talk about the deeper meanings

we sometimes find in the contemplation of these things and how we sometimes feel God's presence there, and sometimes God's absence.

And everything is going very well. We are all nodding in warm consensus. It's like preaching to the choir—until I come to the part where I talk about a *good* funeral.

A good funeral, I tell them, serves the living by caring for the dead. It tends to both—the living and dead—because a death in the family happens to both. A good funeral transports the newly deceased and the newly bereaved to the borders of a changed reality. The dead are disposed of in a way that says they mattered to us, and the living are brought to the edge of a life they will lead without the one who has died. We deal with death by dealing with the dead, not just the idea but also the sad and actual fact of the matter—the dead body.

Here is where some of the audience stops nodding. Brows furrow, eyes narrow into squints, as if something doesn't exactly compute. The idea of death is one thing. A dead body is quite another. An Episcopal priest in the third row raises her hand to ask, "Why do we need the body there? Isn't it, after all, just a shell?" She is speaking, she tells me, from a Christian perspective.

This "just a shell" theory is a favorite among clergy of my generation. Their pastoral educations on death and bereavement began and, for many of them, ended with *The American Way of Death*—Jessica Mitford's 1963 best-selling lampoon of funerals and funeral directors. It was an easy and often hilarious read. Mitford made much of the math of caskets—how much they cost, how profitable they were, how devious or obsequious the sales pitch was. She disliked the boxes for their expense. And she disliked the bodies in the boxes for the untidy and unpredictable feelings that surrounded them. She recommended getting rid of both caskets and corpses, and letting convenience and cost efficiency replace what she regarded as pricey and barbaric display.

The bodies of Mitford's first husband, who died in the war; her first daughter, who died in infancy; and her first son, who was killed by a bus in Berkeley, California, all "disappeared"—dispatched without witness or rubric and never mentioned in *The American Way of Death* nor in two volumes of autobiography. Their names were erased from the books of her life for fear of the feelings that might linger there. Fearful that the sight of a dead body might trigger overwhelming emotions, she downsized it to "just a shell" to be burned or buried without attendant bother or

much expense.

This was a welcome notion among many of the clergy coming of age in the latter decades of the last century. It aligned nicely with their sense that, just as merchants were removing Christ from Christmas, morticians were removing faith from funerals. What need have Christians of all this bother—caskets, flowers, wakes and processions. Aren't the sureties of heaven enough? The "just a shell" theory furthermore articulated the differences between the earthly and heavenly, the corruptible and incorruptible, the base and blessed, sacred and profane, sinful natures and holy spirits.

Human beings are bodies and souls. And souls, made in the image and likeness of God, are eternal and essential, whereas bodies are mortal and impermanent. "There is," the scripture holds, "a natural body and a spiritual body." In life, we are regarded as one—a whole being, body and soul, flesh and blood and spirit. And we are charged with the care and maintenance of both. We feed the flesh and the essence. We pamper the wounds and strive to improve the condition of both body and soul. We read and run wind sprints, we fast and pray, confide in our pastors and medicos, and seek communion, spiritual and physical, with other members of our species. "Know ye not," Paul asks the Corinthians, "that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?"

But in death, the good priest in the third row seemed to be saying, the temple becomes suddenly devalued, suddenly irrelevant, suddenly negligible and disposable—"just a shell" from which we ought to seek a hurried and most often unseen riddance.

Like many of her fellow clergy, she finds the spiritual bodies more agreeable than the natural ones. The spirits are well intentioned and faultless; the bodies are hungry, lustful, greedy and weak. The soul is the sanctuary of faith, the body full of doubts and despairs. The soul sees the straight and narrow path, whereas the body wants the easier, softer way. The corruptible bleeds and belches and dies, and the incorruptible is perfect and perpetual. Souls are just easier all around. Which is why for years she's been officiating at memorial services instead of funerals. They are easier, more convenient and more cost-efficient. They are notable for their user-friendliness. They can be scheduled around the churches' priorities—the day care and Stephen Ministries, the Bible studies and rummage sales—and around a pastor's all-too-busy schedule. A quick and private disposal of the dead removes the sense of

emergency and immediacy from a death in the family. No need, as W. H. Auden wrote, to:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,

Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,

Silence the pianos and with muffled drum

Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

(*from* "*Funeral Blues*")

There is no bother with coffins at all. The dead are secreted off to the crematory or grave while the living go about their business. Where a dead body requires more or less immediate attention, riddance of "just the shell" can hold grief off for a few days, or a week, or a season. No cutting short the pastor's too brief vacation, no rushing home from a ministerial conference to deal with a death in the parish family. The eventual "celebration" will be a lovely and, needless to say, "life-affirming" event to which everyone is invited—except, of course, the one who has died. The talk is determinedly uplifting, the finger food and memorabilia are all in good taste, the music more purposefully cheering than poignant, the bereaved most likely on their best behavior, less likely to "break down," "fall apart" or "go to pieces"—they will be brave and faithful. And "closure," if not achieved, is nonetheless proclaimed, often just before the Merlot runs out.

The memorial service makes much of dealing with memories of the dead by steadfastly refusing to deal with the dead themselves. It is the emotional and commemorative equivalent of a baptism without the baby or a wedding without the blushing bride or a graduation without the graduates. A funeral without the dead body has the religious significance of the Book of Job without the sores and boils, Exodus without the stench of frogs, Calvary without a cross, or the cross without the broken, breathless, precious body hanging there, all suffering and salvation. It is Easter without the resurrected body.

So I asked her reverence: What if her congregants, instead of showing up to worship, left "just their shells" in bed on Sunday mornings? Or what if, instead of dressing up the children's "shells" and driving them across town to church, they assured their pastor that they were "with her in spirit"? Might she think there was something

missing from the morning services? At this she looked at me, perplexed. Or what if Jesus had not raised his “just a shell” from the dead? What if he’d resurrected the “idea” of himself, say, or his personality? Would we all be Christians these centuries since?

The clergywoman was not amused.

When Joseph of Arimathea, in league with Nicodemus, pleaded with Pilate for “just” the body of Christ, he was acting out a signature duty of our species. And when the Marys came bearing spices and ointments to anoint the corpse, they too were acting out longstanding obsequies “in keeping with the customs of the Jews.” It is the custom of humankind to deal with death by dealing with the dead.

The defining truth of our Christianity—an empty tomb—proceeds from the defining truth of our humanity: we fill tombs. The mystery of the resurrection to eternal life is bound inextricably to the experience of suffering and death. Indeed, the effort to make sense of life—the religious impulse—owes much to our primeval questions about the nature of death.

Is that all there is? *Can it happen to me*? *Why is it cold*? *What comes next*?

The funeral—that ritual wheel that works the space between the living and the dead—must deal with our humanity and our Christianity, our spiritual and natural realities, our flesh, our fears, our faith and hopes, our bodies and our souls.

Lately it seems the wheel is broken, or has gone off the track, or must be reinvented every day. Nowadays news of a death is often attended by a gathering ambiguity about what we ought to do about it. We have more choices and fewer certainties, more options and fewer customs. The culture—that combination of religious, ethnic, social and market dynamics—seems to have failed us. We are drawn, it seems, toward two extremes—to do anything and everything or to do nothing, nothing at all.

To be sure, funerals and funeral directors can disappoint us, confusing, as they often do, the fashions with the fundamentals, the accessories with the essentials, the accoutrements with the enduring truths. The clergy and faithful have good reason to be wary. The merger and acquisition frenzy of the past two decades has had the same effect on funeral homes that it had on pharmacies and hardware, restaurants and medical care. Personal, compassionate, professional service is often lost to the

“Have a Nice Day” speak of corporate cover. The sales-pitch, bottom-line, every-sadness-a-sales-op mentality that Mitford wrote about 40 years ago has not disappeared, especially among the three large mortuary conglomerates—Service Corporation International, Alderwoods and Stewart Enterprises—that own nearly 20 percent of the funeral homes and cemeteries around the country.

The largest manufacturer of caskets in the country markets “visitation vignettes”—a kind of theater of the absurd where the dead are laid out in “life-style” caskets among emblems not of their faith or family but of their hobbies. There is the “sports dad” vignette, heavy on beer and sports paraphernalia, and one for gardeners, and the much publicized “Big Mama’s Kitchen” with its faux stove, kitchen table and apple pie for the mourners to share with those who call. And while most families want to personalize a funeral, the market almost always errs on the side of excess, too often tendering the ridiculous instead of the sublime. We would not mistake a good diamond for a good marriage, or stained glass for true faith, but we are always mistaking a good box for a good funeral. It is the triumph of accessory over essentials.

These funerary fashion blunders make most people more than a little wary. Too often, however, to avoid the fashions, the fundamental obligations are neglected—to bear witness to the life that was lived and the death that has occurred. Too often the body is dispatched by cell phone and gold card to the grave unaccompanied by clergy, family or the company of those who care. It is a function performed by functionaries—quick, clean, cheap, convenient and ultimately meaningless.

A good funeral is not about how much we spend or how much we save. Rather it is about what we do—to act out our faith, our hopes, our loves and losses. Pastoral care is not about making death easier, or grief less keenly felt or funerals cheaper or more convenient. It is about bringing the power of faith to bear on the human experience of dying, death and bereavement. And our faith is not for getting around grief or past it, but for getting through it. It is not for denying death, but for confronting it. It is not for dodging our dead, but for bearing us up as we bear them to the grave or tomb or fire at the edge of which we give them back to God.

Among the several blessings of my work as a funeral director is that I have seen the power of such faith in the face of death. I remember the churchman at the deathbed of a neighbor—it was four in the morning in the middle of winter—who gathered the family around to pray, then helped me guide the stretcher through the snow out to

where our hearse was parked. Three days later, after the services at church, he rode with me in the hearse to the grave, committed the body with a handful of earth and then stood with the family and friends as the grave was filled, reading from the psalms—the calm in his voice and the assurance of the words making the sad and honorable duties bearable.

I remember the priest I called to bury one of our town's indigents—a man without family or friends or finances. He, the gravediggers and I carried the casket to the grave. The priest incensed the body, blessed it with holy water and read from the liturgy for 20 minutes, then sang *In Paradisum*—that gorgeous Latin for "May the angels lead you into Paradise"—as we lowered the poor man's body into the ground. When I asked him why he'd gone to such trouble he said these are the most important funerals—even if only God is watching—because it affirms the agreement between "all God's children" that we will witness and remember and take care of each other.

And I remember the Presbyterian pastor, a woman of strength and compassion who assisted a young mother whose baby had died in placing the infant's body into a tiny casket. She held the young woman as she placed a cross in the baby's hands and a teddy bear at the baby's side and then, because the mother couldn't, the pastor carefully closed the casket lid. They stood and prayed together—"God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change"—then drove with me to the crematory.

Or the Baptist preacher called to preach the funeral of one of our famously imperfect citizens who drank and smoked and ran a little wild, contrary to how his born-again parents had raised him. Instead of damnation and altar calls, the pastor turned the service into a lesson in God's love and mercy and forgiveness. After speaking about the man's Christian youth, he allowed as how he had "gone astray" after he'd left home and joined the army. "It seems he couldn't keep his body and his soul aligned," the young pastor said, and seemed a little lost for words until he left the pulpit, walked over and opened the casket, took out a harmonica and began to play "Just As I Am" while everyone in the congregation nodded and wept and smiled, some of them mouthing the words of promise and comfort to themselves.

In each case these holy people treated the bodies of the dead neither as a bother or embarrassment, nor an idol or icon, nor just a shell. They treated the dead like one of our own, precious to the people who loved them, temples of the Holy Spirit, neighbors, family, fellow pilgrims. They stand—these local heroes, these saints and

sinners, these men and women of God—in that difficult space between the living and the dead, between faith and fear, between humanity and Christianity and say out loud, “Behold, I show you a mystery.”