

The dead and gone: Rituals of mourning

by [Thomas Lynch](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

Not only did they die, they disappeared. There's the terrible fact becoming all too clear. *We will not get them back to let them go again*, to wake and weep over them, to look upon their ordinary loveliness once more, to focus all uncertainties on the awful certainty of a body in a box in a familiar room, borne on shoulders, processed through towns, as if the borderless country of grief could be handled and contained, as if it had a manageable size and shape and weight and matter, as if it could be mapped or measured.

Humankind consigns its dead to oblivions we choose—the grave, or flames, or tomb, or sea, or open air. And the doing of it is the way we deal with it. These hard duties have their comforts. So the further hurt of that late-summer Tuesday's dead is that it will not be kin that scatters them, or friends who carry them or family ground that covers them, or their beloved who last whispers soft goodbyes. They are the lost—too vastly buried, too furiously burned, too utterly commingled with the horror that killed them to get them back, to let them go again. We could not rescue very many. We will recover all too few. There are thousands dead and gone, Godhelpus.

We know this the way we know the weather and the date and dull math of happenstance we are helpless to undo.

I've been a funeral director for 30 years. I've waited with the families of abducted children, foreign missionaries, tornado victims, drowned toddlers, Peace Corps volunteers, firefighters overcome by flames, passengers in fallen planes, Vietnam and gulf war casualties—waiting for their dead to be found and counted, identified and returned to them from whatever damage or disaster claimed them. And I've heard no few well-meaning ignoramuses suggest that the body in the box, there among the gladioli and hushed respects, was “just a shell” or “only the tent” or some other metaphor to minimize the loss. They meant, of course, to say that our souls outlive us, that we are more than blood and bone and corporality.

But the bodies of the dead are not “just” anything or “only” anything else. They are precious to the living who have lost them. They are the seeing—hard as it is—that is believing, the certainty against which our senses rail and to which our senses cling. They are the singular, particular sadness that must be subtracted from the tally of sadness. So the cruelty is real, the pain of it unspeakable. It is as if, until they are returned, their deaths belong to their murderers, the media, the demographics or the larger history of the world. But if they are victims of terrorism, casualties of a widespread war, part of a national tragedy, they are no less spouses and parents, daughters and sons, dear to friends, neighbors and fellow workers who are not only missed in the general sense, but missed as surely in the flesh—in beds, at desks and dinner tables, over drinks and talk and intimacies—the one and only face and voice and touch and being that has ceased to be. And their deaths, like their lives, belong to the precious few before they belong to the many who care.

When do the missing become the dead? When do the lost become the lost forever? When does hope give way entirely to grief? When will searching no longer serve the living or the living that have died? How will each family’s lamentation be heard above the nation’s keening? Where is God in all of this? The dead, of course, do not much care. They are predictably indifferent to such details. Perhaps it is the first gift of paradise. The dead don’t care. Only the living do. Whether faith furnishes our heavens, or doubt leaves the decor up for grabs, or wonder keeps the particulars ever changing, Whomever Is in Charge There must take care of them. God is good to them, wherever God is these days. The dead who occupy these places know our hearts, our hurts and how we have searched and watched and waited for them.

We do what we do for the living’s sake. The living must decide when the time has come to cease looking and begin to mourn, to organize the liturgies of thanks and praise and affliction, to shake a fist in God’s face and say the ancient prayers. All the dead require is witness and remembrance—to say they lived, they died, they matter to us.

So if we must leave them to a burial we did not choose, a fire we did not want for them, is that place not hallowed by the common pyre and grave it has become?

There has been talk and will be more, of course, of what to build there. Build witness and remembrance, high into the sky. Name the dead, keep the count and record of what happened there. Don’t forget. Build what says that, while the dead don’t care, their deaths mattered to the living who watched and waited and searched among the ruins and prayed and hoped and only let go grudgingly, when they were sure

that God, whomever God is these days, was there.