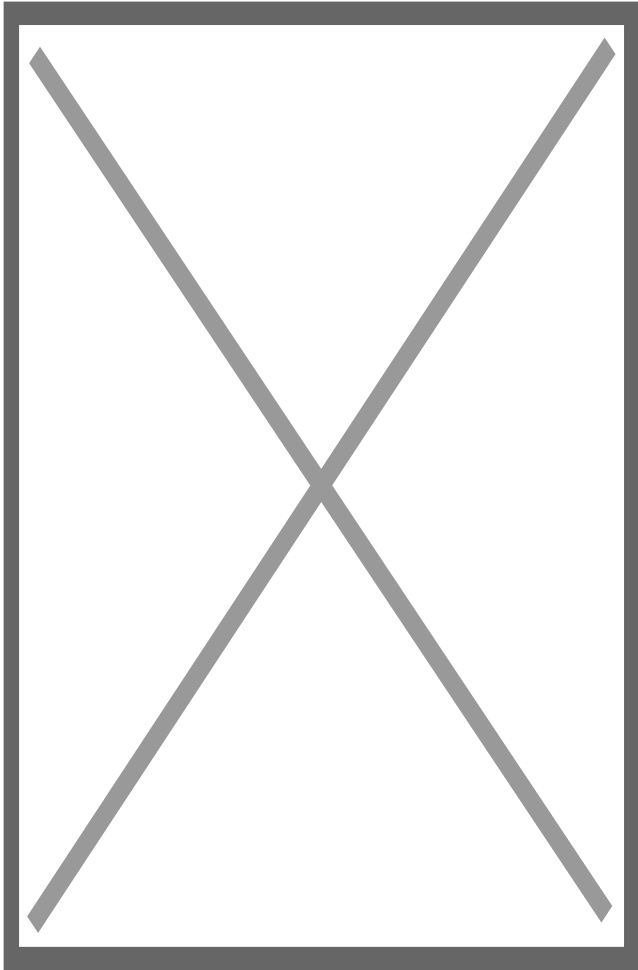


The body in question

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue

In Review



The Good Funeral

By Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch
Westminster John Knox

With *The Good Funeral*, the two best writers on American ways of death, burial and grieving have given us our best book on funerals. Most of us who are familiar with Thomas Lynch met him in his poetic, widely acclaimed *The Undertaking*. Thomas Long's funeral book, *Accompany Them with Singing*, is an eloquent, theologically formed plea for the church to recover the theological significance of the Christian funeral. Now the thanatology Toms have combined their considerable writing talent and knowledge. No pastor can be said to be prepared to lead in the essential liturgies of death and dying without having read this book and having shared its truths with the congregation.

In an opening chapter of autobiographical reminiscence, Long shows the major role that the liturgies of burial have played in his vocation. Citing my own testimonial in *Resident Aliens*, he demonstrates how the church's funeral practices have radically changed in only a couple of decades—how we have sold out to the whims of the culture and, in the process, exchanged the treasure that the church has to offer grieving people for a mess of cheap psychotherapeutic platitudes served up by a stand-up comedian in a bogus “Celebration of Life” where the body of the deceased seems to be an embarrassment. Indeed, the body whose death has occasioned the need for burial rituals appears in modern practices to have vaporized so all of us can quickly grab “closure” and “get over it.”

Long's memory of his uncle Ed's funeral, in which a simple small-town pastor ministered to grieving family and friends, is one of the many stories with which he bolsters his claim that planning and leading funerals is one of the most important duties of a pastor. From the moment the pastor showed up among the mourners for Uncle Ed, his presence “disclosed the holy hidden in our grief.” “This frail human being, striding across the lawn in his off-the-rack preacher suit, desperately trying to find some words of meaning to speak, brought with him the grace of God, the sudden awareness that we were not merely there to bury a dead relative but to venture out on a sacred pilgrimage.”

Lynch, who prefers to be known by the honorable and accurate designation *undertaker*, reiterates his wonderfully straightforward assertion that undertakers are useful in “helping the living get to where they need to be by getting the dead where they need to go.” Lynch insightfully argues that the moment some precursor of *Homo sapiens* first honored the cherished body of a deceased member of the tribe by tenderly burying it rather than pushing it over a cliff was the moment the species became human.

Long contributes an excellent discussion that contrasts early Christian practices with the way pagan Romans dealt with dead bodies, arguing that the reverent deposition of bodies is a unique and powerful aspect of Christian witness. Lynch says that a civilization is known by the honest, respectful ways in which it treats the dead.

Their discussion of Jessica Mitford's polemical broadside *The American Way of Death*—a book that revolutionized Americans' attitudes about funerals—accepts Mitford's justifiable criticism of the funeral business but also exposes her subtle but powerful revulsion at the body.

Indeed, the theological theme that runs through *The Good Funeral* is that bodies matter to Christians in life, in death and in any life beyond death. Long and Lynch charge that many modern critiques of funerals and grief have as a common theme the unchristian—and psychically dangerous—notion that bodies don't matter.

Though he pays homage to the usefulness of and great good that is done by his profession, Lynch is unsparing in his criticism of the abuses and the just plain silliness within the industry. He made me rethink my earlier pastoral advocacy for securing prepaid, prearranged funeral services. Pastors will be both encouraged and shamed by Lynch's deep faith in the way God puts to good use the preparation of bodies for burial, traditions of the wake and extended mourning, community services of worship, and the visible, participatory burial of the body.

The authors clearly admire the church's traditional funeral practices, and they make some hilarious jabs at contemporary aberrations, but they are reluctant to give Christian communities detailed guidance about just what ought to be said and done at funerals. Their aim is to reclaim the funeral as not only an occasion for the church to care for those in grief but also a time to prophetically tell the truth about life and death in the light of Jesus Christ. But Long does insist that the body of the deceased be handled honestly, respectfully and lovingly. Lynch calls contemporary memorial services “bodiless obsequies.”

As Long stresses in his book *Accompany Them with Singing*, a good funeral is an enacted drama in which the living lovingly and faithfully move with the dead to where they need to go while they, the living, process to a

new place in their own lives. In the face of our culture's tendency to lapse into either rank sentimentality or various forms of deceit about death, the good funeral gives meaning to the threatening, often terribly painful separations caused by death. Funerals offer an opportunity for the faith community to boldly say what it believes in the face of death and for us pastors to hold up Christ's promise of transformation for the living as well as the dead.