

Lost rites: Godless funerals

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

Having read Selwa Roosevelt's review in the *Washington Post* weekly edition (June 20-26), I intend to read *Being Dead Is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral* (Miramax, \$19.95). It's a spoof on various denominational approaches to funerals. Episcopalians are "sensitive enough to know that simply being dead doesn't mean you no longer care about social status." If you are an Episcopalian *and* in Alcoholics Anonymous, you are assured a large crowd at your funeral.

Hymns? "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" always works. But "Battle Hymn of the Republic" does not work down in the Delta. The authors "warn against 'On Eagles Wings,' whose popularity 'has spread like kudzu.'" It has.

Much of the book has to do with the status of various dishes. Episcopalians and Methodists both look down on Baptists, because they put little bitty marshmallows in their salads. As one chapter title has it, "I Was So Embarrassed I Liketa Died."

The book is indeed an imaginative counterpart to the accounts we read almost weekly of improvisations by those who think they can improve on church funerals. The same issue of the *Washington Post* carried an article titled "Taking Control, Letting Go: Some Families Opt to Bypass the Funeral Industry by Caring for the Deceased." State laws in many cases make it hard to "privatize" care of the dead, but the article shows that many find ways to do so.

Whether in funeral homes, homes or churches, there's a tendency to exchange the liturgy for jocular reminiscences, some of which verge on roasts. The speakers let you know how important she or he was to the deceased. We can recognize the importance of warmth and wit in funerary rituals, which have often been unbearably lugubrious. But we feel cheated if the whole funeral is funny stuff about the remembered dead and nothing at all about the living God.

The drastic informalizing of Christian ritual, whether in garb, greetings, music or words, is designed to cut down on any notions of the transcendence of God, the

mystery of life and death, the vertical dimensions of Christian expression.

I had a chance to relearn how stirring and comforting it can be when funeral rites situate mourners in 20-plus-century-old books and rites after an admired friend, Peter D'Agostino, was murdered in nearby Oak Park, where such violent acts are rare. Peter had been a dissertation advisee, my research assistant for two books, and the kind of graduate one pictures as a successor. He taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He leaves behind an important book, many other writings, a record of promise, a much-beloved wife, Mary Mapes (also an historian), and an understandably doted-on little Rita.

At his wake and the funeral mass there were countless warm and rich reminiscences of a life already well-lived (he was 42), his mandolin and blue-grass violin playing, his impish sense of humor. There were traces of this also in eulogies that were properly reserved for after the benediction. What mattered, when words would not have been sufficient and jokes and roasts would have been blasphemy, was the pastoral address, the historic liturgy, the passing of the peace, the sharing of the bread and cup.

Such events occur in thousands of parishes daily, and those who have been disciplined in the understandings of faith, hope and love and who get to participate in such are given a gift we hope will not fade in these days of market religion, fear of boredom, and the sense that we can improve on everything that brought seriousness and solace—and *then* some humor—in the past.