

“WHY I’M INVITING MY CORPSE TO MY FUNERAL”
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I have no doubt that wanting to invite my corpse to my funeral is a minority viewpoint in the Fellowship. During the fifteen plus years we’ve been in this building, there have been by my reckoning two caskets in this space—and one held not a Unitarian Universalist but a Baha’i. Having the casket present for that person was part of the prescribed Baha’i tradition. I cannot remember a single casket coming into our old building during my nine years there. Unitarian Universalists don’t generally like to have the body of the deceased present at funerals or memorial services.

There have been cremated remains here—“cremains” in the parlance of the funeral industry. My favorite was Mary Jane Dunwiddie’s cremains, which were lovingly placed in a cookie tin. Each holiday season, Mary Jane mailed her adult children cookies. Why not use one of those cookie tins for her cremains, her children and husband Bill thought? Not only did this evoke a favorite story about her, but she was a frugal type and so would have been exceedingly happy with that decision. Perfect! But far more often than not, even cremains aren’t present at services here.

Brace yourself, because now I’m going to venture further into apostasy for Unitarian Universalists: I want to have the lid of the casket open! It doesn’t have to be open for the service necessarily—I’m not opposed to that—but I definitely want a visitation (or wake or happy hour or whatever you want to call it) and I want the lid open. I’m not kidding! (My mom would be absolutely appalled. Her cremains might just be rolling over in their urn.)

Let me anticipate a question more than a few of you might be thinking: Why in the world would I want this?

My answer starts with a trend in our American culture that has long disturbed me: the banishment of death and the dead. Not so many generations ago, death had a much more tangible presence in our lives. For one thing, with a life expectancy around 47 in 1900 versus the upper 70s today, death was a lot more in the air in those days.

But that’s not the whole story. Not so many generations ago, most people died at home, not at the hospital or a nursing home. Often the family would take care of the deceased’s body, or assist the undertaker in bathing and dressing the body. A common custom was then to lay out the body in its open casket in the family parlor. Family and friends and neighbors would come to pay their respects and express their condolences.

When was the last time you visited a friend’s house and they showed you into their parlor? The only parlors these days are in historic houses and, you guessed it, in funeral homes. The problem with parlors is they became associated with death more than anything else. And we’ve tried to banish death as much as possible. So we banished the parlor. Even in some funeral homes the traditional parlor is going the way of the home parlor. I know of one funeral homes in this area that’s gotten rid of the stuffy old furniture of the parlor and has instead created a space which feels more like your comfy family room or a coffee shop.

My favorite expert on death and funerals is Thomas Lynch, an accomplished poet and independent funeral home owner in Michigan. Lynch compares the changes in how we deal with our dead to changes in how we deal with our everyday bodily waste. He writes about how in the days of chamber pots and outhouses, the "sights and sounds and odors" reminded us on a pretty darn regular basis of "the corruptibility of the flesh." Then Thomas Crapper invented the flush toilet, and now with a simple pull of a lever, "the evidence disappears."¹

The toilet overflows and it's an embarrassing crisis. We rush to fix it, or better yet, we call the plumber so we don't have to deal with it. Just get rid of the evidence! Make it possible to live again at a more comfortable distance from our bodily waste! Similarly, when a loved one dies, we call the undertaker to take care of (get rid of?) the corpse. "Make it go away, disappear," Lynch writes. "Push the button, pull the chain, get on with life."²

Among Unitarian Universalists, once the freshly deceased is carted away, that's usually the last we see of it. This is a pretty different story from having the body laid out for a day or two in our family parlor!

Here's the problem with banishing the dead from our proximity: it sabotages the grief process. I understand from first-hand experience that dealing directly and intimately with the dead is not an easy thing. My mom died very early on a Saturday morning. One of my brothers wasn't able to get there before she died and was carted off by the undertaker. He felt like it was important to see my mother's body before she was cremated, but the funeral home wasn't open again until Monday. My mom didn't wish to be embalmed, so when my brother was finally able to see her on Monday, she looked like she had been dead a few days. I offered to accompany him, an offer he accepted. It's not a favorite moment of mine. And yet, I swear, it was a valuable part of my grief journey, especially since she didn't want a viewing at the memorial service. The fact of her death was pretty hard to deny as I stood by her body that Monday.

There are plenty of people—Unitarian Universalists among them no doubt—who don't want to see their deceased loved ones like that. "I want to remember her the way she was," they say.

"And who could blame them?" Thomas Lynch asks. "Who'd want to see someone they love like this?"

But remembering her the way she was (Lynch tells such people) begins by dealing with the way she is. Right now. Right here. Dead. Laid out. Lynch declares:

I'm the apostle of the present tense. After years and years of directing funerals, I've come to the conclusion that seeing is the hardest and most helpful part. The truth, even when it hurts, has a healing in it, better than fiction or fantasy. When someone dies, it is not them we fear seeing, it is them *dead*. It is the death. We fear that seeing will be believing.³

I agree with Lynch: seeing is believing. It's painful. And it's a necessary step in the grief journey. Like everything else in the grief process, the hurt behind it won't go away if we ignore what happened, or pretend it didn't happen in all its finality. To work through grief, we have to welcome in the reality of what happened.

¹ Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 33.

² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³ Thomas Lynch, *Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 96.

The banishment of death and the dead also sabotages understanding in our that death is an inextricable part of life. This is why I placed this sermon in February, when our theme is evolution. Death is a key part of the personal evolution of each one of us. We are born. We live. We die. These are the facts. Understanding and even embracing the fact we die plays an important and constructive role in shaping our lives. I don't want to be like a Woody Allen character, constantly obsessing over my mortality. But I want to be aware of it. It lends a bit of urgency to my life. It helps me be grateful for the gift of life, even on a crappy day. Death is part of life. Its reality is an important source of meaning and purpose and perspective. "I die, therefore I am," Lynch writes.⁴

Wendell Berry's sycamore embodies the inextricable linking of life and death. There's the sycamore, harmed even when it flourishes, a hollow in it destined to kill it. It stands in its place and feeds upon it, and is fed upon, and is native, and maker. It is alive. It is destined to die. Just like us.

How did I come to this viewpoint about funerals? As a kid, I think I only attended one funeral or visitation with an open casket: an old babysitter who died while I was in high school. So I was intrigued several years later when my wife Amy's grandfather died and was laid out at the visitation. I found it amusing that as he lay in the coffin, his body was somewhat peripheral to the swirl of conversation in the room—just as was the case when he was alive in his and Grandma's living room. Stretched out on the couch, he didn't say much as the conversation buzzed around him. He dozed off every now and then. Once in awhile a profound statement or question showed he was fully tracking the conversation when he was awake. At the visitation, once or twice I glanced over to see if he might chime in with a comment. He didn't.

There were a lot of little kids at the visitation, including some of our grand nieces. I remember one of them, maybe six years-old, was very curious and asked lots of good questions. But she didn't seem freaked out. My hunch is this didn't scar her, but instead gave her a good introduction to this important aspect of life. Shielding our kids from death and the bodies of the deceased is a missed opportunity for them to learn about death. I'd rather my kids learn about death in that context, surrounded by family, than by watching death and mayhem on TV.

Here in brief are my other funeral plans.

I'd like to have a service here. I like the idea of having my funeral in the same space where we not only remember the dead but where we also dedicate babies and celebrate marriages. That's another thing about the parlor of old: it's where families gathered not just to honor the dead but also to welcome a new baby and to witness a wedding. This space, like the parlor of old, is made sacred in part by the rites of passage that take place in it.

I don't really care what kind of casket I'm laid out in. I loved the casket of Jane LaChapelle McCarty, the Baha'i woman whose funeral took place in this building. It was a simple wood casket. It was skillfully hand-crafted—by an order of priests if memory serves—and was beautiful in its simplicity. I imagine it didn't cost as much as a casket of precious metal, but it probably wasn't cheap either. I'm okay with something cheaper and simpler than that if that's what my family wants. Even a cardboard box will do.

I hope that the funeral service gives space for grief as well as celebration, tears as well as laughter. I hope some things are said about me. I'd like it not to be a "fill in the blank" service. I'm okay with not just the good being lifted but the bad and the ugly too. I think it's good when the words that are said about a deceased person don't cause everyone to look around as if to say "Who are they talking about? It can't be this person."

⁴ Lynch, *Bodies in Motion and at Rest*, p. 168.

There's a Marge Piercy poem about death in our hymnal I'd like to have included. I'm not going to share the number right now because I don't want you tuning to it and checking it out.⁵

I think "What Wondrous Love" would be a lovely hymn to include. "When I was sinking down, sinking down between my sorrows ground, friends to me gather'd round," the hymn goes. "To love and to all friends I will sing, I will sing, To love and to all friends who pain and sorrow mend, with thanks unto the end I will sing, I will sing."⁶ Perfect! After Saturday night's concert here, I think I'd like to add that Vaughn Williams piece the string orchestras performed. Wow! That might be a bit much to pull off though.

A reception with tasty and interesting food following the service would be swell. Offering the Stone Cellar's Six Grain Ale would make it even better. If Bud Lite is served, I swear I'll hunt down whoever made that choice and haunt them forever.

Once the service is done and my corpse heads elsewhere, I'm fine with cremation or burial. The main thing is I want to return to the earth. I don't feel like a cement vault is necessary since that only serves to delay my body's inevitable return to the elements.

Whether cremated or not, I'd like my remains to be buried. I personally find it immensely helpful to have a specific place to pay my respects to a deceased loved one. There's something sacred and powerful about visiting the old family plot where we buried my mom's cremains. It's a touchstone place for me.

And I'd like my body or cremains to be put in the earth with the assistance of my closest family. Bending down and placing the urn with my mom's cremains in the earth is one of the hardest and most meaningful things I've done in my life. Walking away before the interment or the inurnment and letting the cemetery workers deal with the task on their own is another missed opportunity.

I want the gravesite to be marked. Just my name on the gravestone would be fine, like Louisa May Alcott's gravestone, which I recently visited (see photo below). Writing an epitaph could be fun for my family. My favorite epitaph is one Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote for his n'er-do-well brother Robert: "Thou hast been faithful over a few things." It's a little more poetic than "Thou hast really screwed up in almost every way imaginable." That Emerson was good with words.

My expectation is at some point in the not so distant future I will be long forgotten and having my grave marked won't matter. I don't expect descendants two hundred years from now will have any clue where I'm buried, or if they do, will really give a rip. But for a generation or two it's helpful. In other words, the marker doesn't need to last forever.

I'm struck that in England, most of the gravestones are now completely illegible. (See photo of grave example below.) Even gravestones carved out of granite truly aren't there in perpetuity, no matter what the monument company promises.

Maybe someday my gravestone will be repurposed for some other use. In York in England, construction workers keep digging up Roman sarcophagi. They don't know what to do with all of them, so they're just lying around here and there. We had a tour guide who used a sarcophagus as a chair. (See photo below) Why not? I'd be cool with that, too—not that my gravestone has to be big enough to sit on. A launching pad for a cat would be fine, too—like a gravestone I found in a cemetery near Charles Darwin's house. (See photo below.)

⁵ Marge Piercy, "Connections Are Made Slowly," Responsive Reading #568 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

⁶ "What Wondrous Love Is This," Hymn #18 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

If you're typical Unitarian Universalists, you might be thinking, "But what about the cost?" Well, I don't begrudge the funeral industry making some money on my death. They provide a service that I think is helpful and important. Funeral directors need to eat and maintain a home and educate their kids, too. I do have trouble with funeral directors who take advantage of the bereaved and try to up-sell them. My hunch is this wasn't such a problem when the undertaker was your neighbor and could be easily driven out of business if he (it was typically "he" back in those days) treated families shabbily. I suspect that reprehensible behavior by funeral homes is far more common in this era of consolidation and multi-national funeral home conglomerates. What does the world's largest funeral conglomerate (with some 2000 funeral homes and cemeteries in North America) care if one of their home in Menominee Falls treats Aunt Betty's family badly? It wouldn't even be a blip in the bottom line. I'd advise my family to work with a locally owned funeral home, assuming they can find one.

So that's what I'd like to have when I die. But I need to add an important one-word instruction to my family: Whatever. You see, ultimately I won't really care what my family does because I'll be dead. The funeral isn't for the dead; it's for the living. Maybe following my wishes will make the whole thing more meaningful for my family. But maybe it won't. If the latter is the case, then I fully empower my family to disregard anything I've said. Do what will be meaningful and helpful to you. Spend what you want. Don't go cheap because you think that's what I'd want, but go cheap if that's what you want to do. And if you disregard every single thing I've suggested, I promise not to haunt you. Even if you serve Bud Lite at the reception. In general, when I die I plan to put my feet up and take it easy. [Undertaking, p. 8]

I also empower my family to have some fun, too, even if the circumstances seem tragic. I'll end this sermon with you my favorite gravestone. Sheila Shea is buried in the historic Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts. The front of her stone has her name and the years she lived. She lived forty-four years. The life of the party, evidently cancer cut the party short for her. I can imagine there was a fairly strong whiff of tragedy about the whole thing. But Sheila and/or her family must have had a sense of humor, because on the backside of the tomb, they put the question many of you are likely pondering at this very moment: "Who the hell is Sheila Shea?" (See photos below.)

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