

The Funeral: Changing Patterns and Teachable Moments

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Undercover in Orlando

"So, where is your funeral home?" asks the man in line behind me. It is late October, and I am standing, somewhat sheepishly I must admit, at the registration desk of the annual convention of the National Funeral Directors Association in Orlando, Florida. The NFDA is the largest trade association in the American funeral industry, and my excuse for being here is a sabbatical leave aimed at producing a book on funerals. By attending this convention, I am trying, among other things, to find out what religious, social, and economic forces are at work on funeral practices. At the moment, however, I am mainly trying to stay undercover, attempting — amid the three thousand funeral directors swirling past me into the conventional hall — not to look like the snooping theologian that I am, and so far it seems I am succeeding. The man behind me wants to know where my funeral home is.

"Actually," I admit, after a moment of hesitation in which I ponder whether or not to come clean, "I'm not a funeral director. I'm a professor."

"A professor?" His eyes narrow in puzzlement. "Of what?"

"Well...of theology." Now he was really puzzled, so I elaborate. "I teach in a seminary. In fact, I'm a minister, and I'm writing a book on Christian funerals. The reason I am here is to try and find out how the world looks to you folks in the funeral business." How easily the whole truth burbles out. I realize I am speaking *sotto voce*, my voice a conspiratorial whisper, as if I had just confessed to being a Ukrainian spy and that my ballpoint pen might or might not be a radio transmitter.

Now it was his turn to whisper. "I just sold my funeral home in Ohio and retired," he breathes softly, glancing back across his shoulder to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "I'm a Christian, a Methodist. I'm glad you're here. You'll learn a lot. Some of it you'll like, and some of it you won't."

He was right. By the time the convention was over, I had — among other things — watched a gaggle of energetic young dancers, each of them part aerobics instructor and part Chippendale, come bounding onto a rainbow-lit, machine-fogged stage to open the convention. I had listened to Mary Matalin and her "strange bedfellow" James Carville exchange mostly good-natured right-left political jabs in a keynote address. On the exhibit floor, I had seen hearses and the latest in urns and caskets and stood in the audience dazzled by the winking video screens of "Vault-a-Mania," a Jeopardy-styled game show sponsored by the Wilbert Burial Vault Company (categories: cremation, customs, famous people, and vaults). I had listened to discussions on how to avoid litigation and cost-effective ways to comply with OSHA. I watched a graphic videotape on difficult embalmings, and I sat in seminars where funeral directors, among other things, wrestled with tangled ethical issues, studied African-American funeral customs, tried to learn how better to care for those families who have lost children, and fretted about the potential consequences that being "in the business" has on their own children. I listened to debates over the role of the funeral director in

reconciling feuding families, and I was startled to find one seminar on professional matters turning into a spontaneous Bible study on the Gospel of Matthew. I heard the conferees laugh, and I saw them be moved to tears with compassion. I was there several days, and what the man said was true: some of it I liked; some of it I didn't.

Ministers and Merchants of Mystery

What I didn't like was, I suppose, utterly predictable. Outsiders are always somewhat shocked by the capacity of funeral professionals to treat death as a business, with all the attendant marketing ploys and tolerance of merchandising gimmicks, and I am no exception. I am offended by how easily a symposium on cremation preferences in America turns into a shameless tactical seminar on selling more merchandise to the "cremation consumer." In another seminar, I wince when a funeral director complains bitterly that "the clergy have taken the funeral away from us." Wandering through the aisles of the exhibition center, picking my way through booths featuring urns in the shape of duck decoys and golf clubs and listening to merchants hawk CDs of sweetly sentimental music to play on a boombox at graveside, I am struck by the short distance between accommodating popular fashions in piety and playing to downright tastelessness. Moreover, the basic commercial fact is that funeral directors collect fees from grief-stricken people, and this renders them chronically subject to charges, justified and not, of extortion. Indeed, the very week of the convention, one of the major network television news magazines featured an "expose" of some of the latest financial scams pulled over on mourners by the bottom feeders in the funeral industry.

So, the man from Ohio was right: I found some things at the convention I didn't like. Ironically, though, much of my distaste with what I found among the funeral directors was uncomfortably similar to the kind of aversion that many feel toward the church and the ministry. The kitsch and commercialism on the exhibition floor of the NFDA convention find their ready parallels in the typical Christian bookstore. Moreover, beyond the greedy, vulgar, and unscrupulous practices (of which the funeral industry has its share) what is truly troubling about funeral directors is precisely what many find disturbing about ministers: they saunter casually and nonchalantly around a reality that the rest of us find mysterious and frightening. They seem as comfortable at the edge of death's abyss as clergy do in the face of the awful holiness of God. People are disturbed by even the legitimate business concerns of funeral professionals in the same way that they are bothered by the bureaucracy of "organized religion" and the passing of offering plates in a Sunday service; such mundane matters seem to be intrusions of human structuring onto what is essentially wild, untamable, and seared with holy dread.

Sometimes the fact that funeral directors and ministers remain calm in the face of mystery produces the suspicion that they must surely be prompted by ulterior motives, avarice and power being the favorite suggestions. Mainly, though, people simply keep their distance; funeral directors hang around the dead, ministers hang around God, and both carry the taint of taboo. James Dittes of Yale once observed that people tend to sit in the back pews of churches not because they are disinterested but because they sense something holy and perhaps dangerous happening in the chancel and they do not want to draw too close. Just so, since ministers and morticians represent the fearsome realities of life's ultimate limits, people are inclined to give them wide berth.

Humor, of course, is one way to keep something at arm's length, and funeral

directors, like clergy, are the victims of more bad jokes than one ought to have to endure (the local coverage of the convention in the Orlando media had its share of the usual weary puns about “grave concerns” and “‘re-hearsing’ the future of the funeral”). Moreover, funeral directors share the ministry’s experience of a certain vocational loneliness, rightly feeling that few people genuinely understand who they are, what they do, and why they do it.

But there is more to the story. The retired funeral director from Ohio did predict that I would like some of what I saw, too, and he was correct there as well. Mainly, what struck me favorably was the way that many funeral directors see themselves as “called,” involved in a vocation of human compassion and that the best of these funeral professionals, like the most alert among the clergy, are keenly aware that they perform their ministries of mercy in a swiftly changing social context. Funeral directors swim in the same boiling and fermenting cultural soup as do ministers, and the same trends that have so shaken the confidence of the mainline churches in recent decades have also profoundly affected funeral homes. Like many ministers, funeral directors are often unsure about the nature of the forces at work producing these changes, but they are eager to discern, in the face of perplexing and shifting patterns in regard to death and ritual, the proper role and character of the funeral service.

The Funeral in Transition

The swirling social realities of death rituals in the 1990s stand out against the backdrop of the more stable late-nineteenth-century concept of the funeral. At the end of the 1800s, a funeral was essentially a home-based, family-centered event. The body of the deceased was often displayed in the parlor of the family home (a standard architectural feature of many houses of the period), and family and friends would gather (frequently traveling only the distance from the next farm) for a season of mourning, storytelling, and eating together. A funeral service essentially consisting of prayers, scripture, and sometimes a eulogy would be held in the home, or the church, or at graveside. People were typically buried among their ancestors in the family burying ground on the farm, in the church graveyard, or in a public cemetery (the creation of park-like urban cemeteries with willows, brooks, and benches for meditation was a nineteenth-century phenomenon).

The modern “funeral director” is the direct evolution of the nineteenth century “undertaker,” a merchant (often otherwise in hardware or furniture) who “undertook” to provide certain services at the time of death that families found distasteful or difficult, such as embalming (a practice that became more widespread with the technological advances in body preservation that occurred during the Civil War) and transporting the corpse. As houses grew smaller and more efficient, morticians began to build “funeral parlors” and eventually more expansive “funeral homes” to replace the vanishing home parlor. At this point, the presence of the funeral professional was an evolutionary, not a revolutionary, change since the idea was to replicate the home, to preserve the basic family-and-hearth-centered pattern of the funeral that prevailed well into the twentieth century.

This nineteenth-century pattern endures in our imagination (and, to some extent, in movies and television), but the actual funeral practices of society are on the move. Sometime after World War II, and rapidly picking up speed in the last twenty years, the older pattern began to permutate as a result of a number of cultural forces, such as

the following:

1) *Mobility: A People with No Home* — Americans do not stand still long enough to maintain the funeral patterns of the last century. When an eighty-one-year-old man dies in a retirement village in Florida, chances are good that he moved there fifteen years before from Michigan, and that no one in his family lives “back home” any more. One child, a son, lives perhaps in San Diego with his second wife and her children by a previous marriage, while a daughter may live in Nashville where she moved five years ago with her family when her husband was transferred by his company. Another daughter, unmarried, is an accountant who may reside in New York City. In short, there is no place to call home, no consecrated family space, no hallowed hearth, no sacred burial ground. One manifestation of this mobility is the dramatic rise in the rate of cremation in the United States, now slightly over 20% nationwide, with, not surprisingly, the highest rates found in the far West and in Florida (approaching 50%).

2) *The Prejudice Against Ritual: A People with No Narrative* — Americans have always held ritual life with a light grasp. Perhaps this is a product of the fact that we are not even ten generations old as a nation, or a function of the individualistic Yankee ingenuity in our civic soul that ignores the rules and tends to undermine fixed rites and patterns, or a result of the simple fact that we have become affluent enough to finance “lifestyle enclaves” rather than depending upon larger social entities.

Whatever the causes, we are a culture of experimenters with a dearth of enduring rituals and sturdy public ceremonies. Rituals are a kind of folk theater, dramatic and enacted master narratives, and to participate in a ritual requires knowing and sharing this common narrative and being willing to lay aside the routine activities and roles of life in order to take up a part in the communal drama.

Increasingly, Americans are reluctant to do this. Take, as an example, the social ritual of what could be called the definitive American ceremonial occasion: the Fourth of July, Independence Day. The master narrative here is, of course, the story of the American Revolution, and the ritual drama involves leaving our places of work and leisure to gather in the public square for a time of flag waving, playing patriotic music, watching the local militia march, consecrating the memories of the “Founding Fathers,” and hearing speeches celebrating liberty.

As a matter of practice, though, only a tiny portion of the American population actually does such things on July 4. Instead of abandoning our routine and leisure to take up the appointed communal ritual of the day, most of us allow the energy to move in precisely the opposite direction: the day’s ritual serves our routine and recreation. The real master myth of July 4 is not the story of the American Revolution, but the narrative of leisure, and its real symbols are not public ones, like flags and speeches about liberty, but more private icons like barbecue grills.

My point is not to criticize this; I prefer grilling hamburgers at the lake on July 4 to listening to political rhetoric and Sousa marches, too. My point, rather, is to make a comparison. If we have lost our passion about our national birth narrative and are, therefore, ready to abandon the civic dimensions of our central national holiday, we are also evidently quite prepared to lay aside other public rituals as well, including those around death.

Think about what it means to go to a funeral. From the point of view of ritual, attending a funeral is much more than merely an individualistic act of simple compassion. It is playing a necessary social role in a larger civic and religious drama;

it is part of a corporate enactment of who we are and what we believe at the time of death. But like Independence Day, such rituals demand coherent and passionately held master myths, and the sacred and public narrative that would sanction the larger meaningfulness of an action like attending a funeral has faded from our memory. What remains is a much more personal impulse: going to a funeral is a way to “show support” for grieving friends, and since presumably there are many ways to do this that do not involve taking time off from work, it comes as no surprise that attendance at funerals is reportedly down in many areas of the country.

Moreover, there is a small but fascinating and growing trend toward eliminating death rituals altogether, or at least minimizing them. Many Americans are at least dimly aware of the fact that they haven’t got the foggiest idea why one should have a funeral in the first place. They are expensive, inconvenient, and, for many in our secular society, disconnected from any meaningful symbol system. One scholar in the field of funeral practices has observed that the United States appears to be the only nation in the world where cremation or body donation is often done without any funeral ritual whatsoever. In other cultures, even in those where the cremation rate approaches 100%, there is almost always some kind of religious or humanistic service in memory of the deceased. But for Americans, the question that grows ever larger is, Why? We lack a common story about death — secular or sacred — and any ritual that lacks a supporting narrative cannot survive in thin air.

3) *The “Monogrammed Celebration” Impulse: A People with No Gospel* — When Americans are pressed for an answer to the question “Why have a funeral?” one response we do seem to be able to generate is that the funeral is a time to celebrate the uniqueness of the person who has died. The emphasis here falls on both dimensions: celebration and the person. Increasingly, American funeral services are assuming an upbeat, almost festive, mood, and death rituals often are taking on a “monogrammed” look with intimate artifacts of the deceased in evidence everywhere. The funeral home will often display photographs, trophies, writings, and art objects of the person who has died; more and more, personal items like jewelry, texts of favorite songs and poems, even tennis and golf balls are placed in the casket; and reflections and reminiscences about the deceased are included in the funeral liturgy.

Some of this is a good and needed reaction to the impersonal and melancholy funeral practices of the past. There is a reaching toward some sort of thanksgiving for the life and unique contributions of a singular and irreplaceable human being. Often, however, there is also a sadness at the heart of this celebration. Since we are losing our grip on the larger, deeply nourishing, and more spacious narrative of the gospel, most of what remains to celebrate is the tiny story of one small life. Since the cross makes so little sense, golf balls and charm bracelets move into the symbolic vacuum.

A Teachable Moment

This is not a time to be wistful about funeral practices of a time gone by. Much of the “traditional” funeral is beholden to the romantic ideals of the nineteenth century and the psycho-sentimentalities of the twentieth and, thus, deserves to be discarded. The Puritan stream of the Reformed tradition, mindful of the idolatries of the morbid and fearful funerals inherited from the medieval period, was never enchanted to begin with over the idea of making much of a fuss about a funeral. Also, the culture is changing and funeral practices will inevitably modify and become more responsive to

the pluralistic character of our society.

On the other hand, the flux and confusion about death rituals may provide the church a rare and teachable moment. A death forces us to face what we hope elsewhere to deny, that we are not living without limits, that the ours is not an utterly open-ended narrative. A death sharply discloses that attempts to rely on such a boundless story were, after all, based on lies, and there is a search, albeit brief and fragile, for a narrative that is true, a story that can repair the breach and can make sense of the realities of death and life. The old notion in fundamentalist circles of using a funeral to evangelize the individual mourners needs, of course, to be avoided, but maybe there is a healthy place for allowing the power of Christian worship at the time of death to evangelize a disoriented culture.

The main purpose of a Christian funeral is not to “facilitate the grief process” or to celebrate the unique life characteristics of the deceased — although both of these may well occur. What a Christian funeral does primarily is to provide a suitable structure and language for the worship of God at the time of death. Much can be said about what this structure and this language should be, but essentially the Christian funeral retells the narrative of God’s saving mercy from the point of view of life and death. As such, it does not shy away from the honest-to-God truth about death and it does not fail to announce the honest-to-God hope that flows from the promises of the living God.

In funerals, the life stories of those who have died and the stories of those who must go on without them are also told, but this telling is done in the framework of the larger gospel narrative. The stories told at a funeral push beyond biography to baptismal narrative.

In a culture that knows no home, we are privileged to announce that God’s people have always been gathered from among the homeless: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” (Deut. 26:5). In a culture that has no narrative, we are privileged to be tellers of the tale about the God who heard the cry of suffering people and came with mercy and healing. In a culture that lacks a gospel, we are privileged to say that “our only comfort in life and in death” is that we belong, body and soul, not to ourselves but to our “faithful savior, Jesus Christ...” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 1).

Ministers who plan Christian funerals must be nimble. They must be prepared to work cooperatively with the discerning funeral director but also prepared, if need be, to “take away” the funeral for the sake of the gospel. They must also be prepared (as they are at weddings) to place the funeral liturgy in the midst of a welter of competing cultural signs and symbols. This will mean that no one pattern for the funeral can transcend all local circumstances. Will there be a memorial service with the casket absent or a service with the body present? Will there be a private burial with the family followed by the public funeral, or will the funeral be followed by an equally public committal? Will the funeral be in the home, the church, or the funeral home? Will there be a time in the funeral when stories of the deceased are told or will the liturgy be restricted to prayer and scripture?

There are a thousand questions like these and many acceptable answers. It is encouraging, however, to discover that in many places around the country ministers are wrestling with such questions and seeking creative ways to allow the rituals of death to become proclamations of the gospel.