

Get to Know Your Local Undertaker

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Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 245 pages.

My father was a Presbyterian minister and taught me much about being a good pastor. A helpful piece of advice he passed on to me was: “Get to know your local undertakers. They know the people and the community they serve. They also know the best places to eat!”

Over the years I have found this to be sound advice and have been blessed by my association with some excellent funeral directors with whom I have worked to take care of the dead and those who loved them. This is an awesome and humbling responsibility for which none of us is prepared. In *The Good Funeral*, a minister and a funeral director have teamed up to provide us with a remarkable resource that should be read by everyone who is concerned about the quality of our common life.

It sounds like a tough assignment to recommend reading a book about the care of the dead. Our culture encourages us to ignore the unpleasant reality the Apostle Paul called “the last enemy.” Yet death comes, and clergy and funeral directors must regularly confront the work of the enemy—a dead body. So I found reading *The Good Funeral* good preparation for the confrontation and a help in ministering to the grieving in a caring community.

It is no accident that this Presbyterian minister and professor of homiletics—Tom Long—and this Roman Catholic undertaker and poet—Tom Lynch—would collaborate on a book about “death, grief, and the community of caring.” They have both, from their varied experiences and perspectives, been reflecting for years on these matters. Both of them are excellent storytellers, and the stories they tell are poignant and rich. Both are gifted with the use of words that inform and touch deep parts of our hearts. And when you add to their insights and gifts two engaging “forewords”—one by Tom Lynch’s brother and colleague, Patrick Lynch, and one by Tom Long’s friend and colleague, Barbara Brown Taylor—you have a remarkable book on the good funeral.

Each of us is influenced by our location as individuals with a history which has shaped us and provides the lens through which we look at life and death. The two Toms spend time at the beginning of *The Good Funeral* letting us know “how we came to be the ones we are.” These windows into their lives help us understand the passions, concerns, and commitments they bring to their discussion of death, grief, and the caring community.

The authors are concerned that we have lost our way in performing an essential responsibility we have as human beings. We are not taking care of the dead. From their two perspectives, they explore the reasons we have gone astray, and I found the explanations fascinating and helpful. Tom Long puts it this way:

What happens, or doesn’t happen, to the bodies of the dead tells us much

about what we believe about life and death, what we think of ourselves as a society. A corpse is entrusted to the care of the living for only a matter of hours or a few days, but how we carry out our responsibilities to the bodies of the dead is a strong clue as to how we will treat the bodies of the living. (p. 86)

To recover what it means “to serve the living by caring for the dead,” it is essential that we honor the body of the deceased. For the Christian funeral, this means having the body present. In our culture, the growing preference for cremation has meant the body is absent, so we engage in “a celebration of life” without the presence of the person being celebrated. There is a good discussion of cremation which does not exclude it as an option. You can have the body at a service prior to the cremation.

The disposition of a dead body is the last stage in life’s journey, and the authors believe it is essential “to go the distance,” to accompany the body to its final resting place whether that be a grave or a fire. The theological implications of caring for and accompanying the body demonstrate a spirituality that embraces the sacredness of the body and expresses an incarnational faith. The theological implications are staggering! The authors are asking us to recover the funeral as an act of faith which puts the life of the dead in the context of a sacred story, a journey, in which we can entrust the deceased and ourselves into the hands of God. Such a recovery provides a powerful witness in a secular society in which there is a deep human longing not to be closed off and indifferent to the transcendent.¹ There is much more in the book—a critique, for example, of the roles of Jessica Mitford and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross; an insider’s view of what has gone wrong in the funeral “business” both commercially and ecclesiastically; and a dialogue with the core values of various religious traditions in dealing with matters of life and death.

Whether or not you agree with the arguments the authors are making, I hope I have convinced you that this is an important book for those who seek to care for the dead and to be with those who are grieving. I gladly confess that in my own ministry, the work of the two authors has strengthened my ability “to care for the living by caring for the dead.” And among the ways I believe I have been helped is the encouragement I have received by entering into serious theological conversation and by working to develop better practices with a local funeral director, Mark Higgins, about matters of life and death in a caring community.

Note

1 David Brooks writes a helpful piece, “The Secular Society,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2013.