The Possibility of a Good Funeral

THOMAS G. LONG

It may seem strange, perhaps even somewhat disrespectful of the dead, to speak of a “good funeral.” How could a funeral that is, after all, occasioned by loss and grief, be “good”? To call a funeral “good,” however, doesn’t mean that it somehow masks the pain of loss or that it was enjoyable—a “good time”—in the sense of entertainment. It does not even mean that it was artistically excellent with only the very best music and the finest poetry. A funeral can be called “good,” rather, when it accomplishes its proper purposes, when it does the work a funeral is supposed to do.

Many years ago, my wife and I had tickets for a Lincoln Center performance of Mendelssohn’s Elijah by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the Westminster Choir. It was to be the final appearance for the legendary Leonard Bernstein as conductor of the Philharmonic. But, sadly and unexpectedly, Bernstein died of complications from cancer only weeks before the concert. Kurt Masur, who was soon to join the Philharmonic as principal conductor, was hastily brought from Europe to substitute for Bernstein. With only a short time to prepare, Masur poured himself wholeheartedly into the task, spending hours each day painstakingly studying the score and rehearsing with the musicians.

On the night of the performance, Masur rose to the occasion. He was alive

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A “good funeral” is one that fulfills two primary purposes: to accompany the body of the deceased to the place of farewell and to tell well the story of what this life and death means. The good funeral will have a sense of movement and a sense of meaning.

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with urgent energy. He did far more than conduct; his body in excitement arced toward the musicians, his baton was charged with electricity, summoning every measure of effort and excellence from the chorus and orchestra. Masur’s achievement was both ethereal and muscular, the resulting music sublime, and, at the close of the performance, Masur was soaked in perspiration. As the audience stood in a rapturous ovation, he spread his hands, like a priest giving a blessing, first over the soloists and then over all the musicians. Because of his efforts, we had been given a gift—not merely the gift of a superb orchestra or of a fine choir or even of the talents of Kurt Masur. All of these things contributed to the fulfilling of the larger purpose of the concert: the gift of Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*. Just so, what makes for a good funeral is not so much that the speeches are good, or the mood positive, or the music fitting, but rather that all of these things (and more) work together to perform the essential music of a funeral, that is, to bring to fruition the two primary purposes of a funeral: to accompany the body of the deceased to the place of farewell and to tell well the story of what this life and this death mean. When we keep these two purposes in view, we can identify some marks of a “good funeral.”

A SENSE OF MOVEMENT

A good funeral is not static. The first great necessity of death is to move the body of the deceased from *here* to *there*, that is, from the place of death to the place of final disposition. In most places around the world, and throughout most of human history, carrying the body of the deceased to the grave or the fire or the mountain, weeping and singing, mourning and praying along the way, is not done before the funeral or after the funeral—it is the funeral.

We know that the body must be moved; there is no choice about that. However, we do have a choice about how the body is moved and what significance we give to that action. The contemporary trend is to move the body privately, out of sight and out of mind. The deceased—let us call her “Elizabeth”—will be taken to be cremated, buried, or donated to medical science with only a few of the closest members of her family present. Or perhaps even they will be absent and only the funeral director will attend to the disposition of Elizabeth’s body.

To do this privately, however, involves two questionable decisions. First, it assumes that the presence of Elizabeth’s body is somehow a deterrent to what we hope to accomplish, or even worse, an embarrassment sullying the upbeat mood we desire. But Elizabeth’s body is the sign and token of Elizabeth herself and her life. Elizabeth did not e-mail or fax in her love for her husband, her care for her children, her labors as an elementary school teacher, or her compassion as a friend, saying, “You know I’m with you in spirit.” Instead, the substance of her life is in its embodiments. She put her arms around her husband, touched her children with blessing, stood physically and lovingly in the presence of her students, and set her feet along the path to be with her friends. Elizabeth was an embodied person, and she was defined by where her body was and what her body did. We know that Eliz-
abeth’s dead body is not all that was Elizabeth, but it is her sacred remains, the tangible and physical token of her life, and how we care for her body is an expression of our regard for her. If we wish to honor Elizabeth, then we must honor her body.

The second questionable decision in a private disposition is that nothing is at stake here in the larger community, that what happens to Elizabeth’s body is of concern only to the small circle of the family and those who were intimately connected with Elizabeth. But what happens to one person’s body discloses how, as a society, we value human life more generally. People who have learned how to care tenderly for the bodies of the dead are almost surely people who also know how to show mercy to the bodies of the living.

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In a few parts of the country, an older tradition still prevails. When a funeral procession passes on the highway, other motorists pull off of the road to show respect, and pedestrians stand in reverent silence as the hearse goes by. This points to a more general truth, which endures even in places where the custom itself is no longer observed, that one person’s death represents a breach for the whole community and an occasion not only to bow in respect toward the deceased but also to remind ourselves of the transience of life and the meaning of life and death. Obviously, Elizabeth’s death has greater impact on those who were closest to her, but her death is nonetheless a loss for the whole society and an emblem of human mortality.

In this way, a funeral shares at least one trait with a wedding. In a marriage service, those to be married walk into the ceremony alone, and they walk out together. It is a piece of community theater that enacts the transition that marriage produces, both for the couple and for the community around them. The couple starts this day officially single; they end this day officially joined together as one, and the rest of us must now think of them differently, act toward them differently, alter the community narrative to account for their marriage.

So it is with a funeral. We enact once again the drama of a person’s passing from here to there. One who lived among us as an embodied presence is now moving to a place where they are no longer among us in that way. A good funeral, then, not only honors the body of the deceased, it also makes it clear, in an active sense, that the one who has died is moving from here to there and that the rest of us are accompanying the deceased along the way.

When my mother died several years ago, I had to make a persuasive case precisely on this point to the funeral director we worked with. This funeral director was most comfortable with the choreography supported by the architecture of his
funeral home, a pattern that makes for an efficient funeral, perhaps, but, in terms of dramatic action, is ambiguous and finally misleading. The usual procedure at this funeral home is to seat everyone attending the funeral in the funeral home chapel, then to roll the coffin in from stage left and to place it on display at the center in the front of the mourners. Then the service, whatever it might be, is conducted, and at the conclusion of the service, the casket is moved again, this time stage right, out a door to a porte cochere, where a hearse is waiting for the trip to the cemetery.

But what could this movement, stage left to right, possibly signify? A bird flying through a barn? And why would the coffin be placed on exhibition at the front, sideways, like a sofa in a furniture store window? What this kind of staging conveys is that a funeral is simply a brief and mainly motionless time of reflection about the deceased. The mourners are in their seats, the coffin is brought front and center to signal the beginning of this contemplation, and then the coffin is whisked away at the end to mark its conclusion. Coffin in, let the meditating begin; coffin out, funeral over. If this is, in fact, what a funeral is about, then the current widespread practice of leaving the body of the deceased out of the equation altogether makes a certain kind of sense. People can reflect on the life of the deceased just as well, or perhaps better, without all the folderol of rolling a casket across the front of the room. Moreover, leaving out the casket, in part, has the additional advantage of eliminating any avaricious speculation about the price of the box or the lavishness of the floral displays.

But a good funeral is not a stationary experience; it is movement, a processional. We desired, therefore, an alternative choreography at my mother’s funeral. We wanted to express that we were accompanying her as she journeyed from the place of her death to the place of farewell. What we were doing in that chapel was only a part of the funeral, a brief pausing along the path in order to pray, sing, and worship. When the chapel service was concluded, we would resume the procession to that place where she would be buried, where we would say farewell, and we would give her into the hand of God.

Consider this funeral rubric from a nineteenth-century edition of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer:

The Priest and the Clerks, meeting the Corpse at the entrance of the Church-yard, and going before it, either into the Church, or towards the Grave, shall sing or say, “I am the resurrection and the life…. [2]

Notice the assumption here. The funeral is not a quiet, still gathering; it’s a processional. The priest meets the “corpse” on the way to the grave. The funeral actually begins not when a funeral director gives a hand signal to the presider that all is in place but instead at the moment the coffin is lifted up and the journey to the grave commences. People carry the body of the deceased, usually from the home of the deceased, to the grave. The clergy go out to join the procession, already underway.

When the procession arrives at the churchyard, it travels to the grave. Now, in some cases it may wind its way into the church building for a brief season of prayer and song, but this is but an interlude like a rest in music, a momentary pause before the procession picks up its feet again and makes its way inexorably to the grave. There, while “the earth shall be cast upon the Body by some standing by,” the priest commits the body to the ground, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

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So, we decided to make this clear in my mother’s funeral. She was on a journey, and we were traveling along with her. We brought her into the chapel not through a side entrance but through the same door used by all of the other worshipers at the funeral. We walked with her, accompanying her coffin down the same center aisle others had used. She was coming at that point in the journey to the place of worship, and we were accompanying her. When the service in the chapel was concluded, we turned her coffin around and accompanied her back down the center aisle, the same path all of the other worshippers would take, and remained at her side all the way along the path to the cemetery, where we buried her. In other words, we were attempting to allow the choreography of her funeral to make plain what was actually happening that day: she was traveling from here to there and we were accompanying her along the way.

A good funeral, then, shows the movement that is really happening, and its choreography displays for all to see—rather than hides—the truth that a community of people are carrying one among them who has died from the place of death to the place of farewell.

A Sense of Meaning

Carrying the body of the deceased from the place of death to the place of disposition is the obligation imposed on us by death. But no healthy society has viewed this merely as an unadorned journey from home to grave or seen this action simply in terms of disposal of the dead. The choreography of the funeral also symbolizes society’s deepest convictions about life and death. In a funeral, we are not taking out the trash; we are doing more than just carrying a dead body to the grave or the fire. As we travel that sad pathway, we try to sing and say what this death means to us, to the dead, to all of society.

A funeral bears some similarity to an ancient Greek tragic drama. In her book Love’s Knowledge, philosopher Martha Nussbaum contrasts going to a Broadway
play to the experience of the ancient Greeks attending a theatrical performance. “When we go to the theater,” she writes, “we usually sit in a darkened auditorium, in the illusion of splendid isolation, while the dramatic action…is bathed in artificial light as if it were a separate world of fantasy and mystery.” By contrast, Greek drama was performed in daylight. The stage was in the center of the gathered community, so the ancient Greeks “saw across the staged action the faces of fellow citizens.”

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Plays were staged, Nussbaum notes, not on ordinary occasions but during solemn civic and religious festivals “whose trappings made spectators conscious that the values of the community were being examined and communicated.” Therefore, attending a play was not a way of idly passing the time or distracting oneself with a few hours of entertainment. “It was, instead, to engage in a communal process of inquiry, reflection, and feeling with respect to important civic and personal ends.” One did not go to the theater merely to watch a play, as if the play were happening somewhere over there, but instead to become involved in the event of drama, and “to respond to these events was to acknowledge and participate in a way of life.”

In this sense, then, good funerals are more like Greek tragic drama than like Broadway. We do not go to a good funeral to sit in the audience and watch a presentation of interesting and moving aspects of Elizabeth’s life. We go to participate, to take on our role in this piece of community theater in which, now occasioned by Elizabeth’s death, we enact and interrogate yet again what we believe about life and death, what are our practical and ethical responsibilities toward each other in life and death, and who we are called now to be.

What is it that a good funeral conveys about life and death? Obviously, the communal meanings of death are specific to particular traditions. The funeral of a humanist will speak different meanings than the funeral of a Baptist, a Buddhist, or a Jew. Even so, the unadorned choreography itself of a funeral, the very act of carrying the deceased from “here” to “there,” contains implicit meanings.

First, the fact that a funeral ritual involves direction and movement conveys the truth that the dead are going somewhere.

From the beginning, humans have employed poetry, song, and prayer to

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4Ibid., 16.
5Ibid., 16.
6Ibid., 15.

transform the necessary taking of the dead to the place of disposition into a drama, to recast the movement from “here” to “there” in symbolic, even sacred, terms. The dead are not just being carted to the pit, the fire, or the river; they are traveling toward the next world or the Mystery or the Great Beyond or heaven or the communion of the saints or at least into the legacy of history, and we are traveling with them on the last mile of the way.

Second, in a good funeral, preparing a body and carrying it to the place of disposition shows that this act involves the labor of many hands.

The ceremonies of death, like the everyday interactions of life—gathering food and having children and building dwellings and making it through the dark nights—are things, if they are done well, we must do together and, in a deeper way, are privileged to do together. Bearing one another’s burdens, in life and in death, is definitive of humanity. As Holocaust survivor Artur Sammler, in Saul Bellow’s novel *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, says at the funeral of his friend Elya Gruner,

> Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, as willingly as possible and as well as he was able, and even to an intolerable point, and even in suffocation and even as death was coming was eager, even childishly perhaps (may I be forgiven for this), even with a certain servility, to do what was required of him. At his best this man was much kinder than at my very best I have ever been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusions and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.7

In our deepest selves, Sammler is saying, we know the terms of our “contract,” our mutual obligations, the humanity to be discovered in caring for each other with kindness. Kindness is not merely a thought or a nice intention; it takes material form. It is preparing a bowl of soup to comfort the weary travelers, picking up a neighbor’s child at school, placing a cool cloth on a fevered brow, helping the farmer in the next field over repair the barn that the windstorm damaged. Just so, to perform, with others, the labor of carrying one we cherish and grieve to the place of farewell is a physical manifestation of the willingness to bear one another’s burdens with kindness and love.

Third, the choreography of a funeral, involving a processional moving across the land, tells an enacted story about life, death, and hope.

To accompany the dead from “here” to “there” is to enact a ritual story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the beginning there was Elizabeth, and in the middle there was lament and a slow walking toward a new reality, and in the end there was the letting go as we gave Elizabeth to the earth, to the other side of the river, to God.

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The fact that the funeral has a narrative shape is a gift, a reassurance in the midst of the fragmentation, broken promises, unfinished tasks and, as Sammler says, the “confusions and degraded clowning” of existence, that human lives ultimately have coherence and wholeness. When the literary critic Anatole Broyard became terminally ill with prostate cancer, he wrote, “Just as a novelist turns his anxiety into a story in order to be able to control it to a degree, so a sick person can make a story, a narrative, out of his illness as a way of trying to detoxify it….I would also like a doctor who enjoyed me. I want to be a good story for him.”

Of course, most funerals magnify this narrative unity and bring it into speech through Scripture, song, homily, and eulogy. Through our words we bear witness to the fact that, even in spite of the rude interruption of death, that most jagged-edged of human experiences, this was a life that made sense, to us, to God, to the eye of love.

In her memoir One Writer’s Beginnings, the great Eudora Welty said that writing is something like riding on a train in the mountains at night. At first, there is only the darkness and the uncertainty, but then “suddenly a light is thrown back, as when your train makes a curve, showing that there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you’ve come, is rising there still, proven now through retrospect.”

This discovery of a mountain of meaning rising in retrospect is why walking in procession through the narratively shaped path of a funeral is a tacit confession of faith, faith at least in the sanctity and integrity of life. No matter how broken or shattered a life may have been, to accompany the body of that person all the way from here to there is to bear witness to the truth that this was a person of substance and there is a story worth telling about this life.

The choreography of funeral confesses this faith in enacted form, but one does not need to be an officially religious person to walk the path of this creed, as Luke Ripley, the anxious father and tenuous Catholic of Andre Dubus’s short story “A Father’s Story,” recognizes even as he attends morning Mass. “Do not think of me, “ he says, “as a spiritual man whose every thought during those twenty-five minutes is at one with the words of the Mass.” He says that when he watches the priest at the altar every morning at worship he knows he will be distracted by mundane affairs—the weather, the wanderings of memory, daydreams—matters that have nothing to do with the sacrament. Even so, Luke recognizes that the rhythm and structure of the Mass carry him along, even in his distractions:

I have learned…both the necessity and wonder of ritual. For ritual allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love.

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A good funeral is indeed “performing the spiritual,” allowing even the tongued-tied
to dance a ceremony of love. And since the ritual of the funeral is shaped by narra-
tive, it is urgent that we tell the whole story by going the full distance with the dead,
all the way to the grave or the fire or the sea.

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Several years ago, I was on an airport bus, traveling to give a lecture about my book on Christian funerals to a pastors’ conference held on a Midwestern university campus. Across the aisle from me were a young father and his son, both wearing Mickey Mouse ears and T-shirts from Orlando’s Walt Disney World. They were obviously on their way back from a vacation to the Magic Kingdom. Both were in good spirits, and the father spoke to me in a cheerful voice, “So, where’re you headed?” I named the university, and he responded, “Really? That’s great! What’re you doing there?”

I didn’t want to tell a guy wearing Mickey Mouse ears that I was going to speak about death and funerals, so I simply said, “Oh, I’m giving a lecture at a conference there.”

He wouldn’t let it go. “Interesting! What will you talk about?”

There was nothing to do but ’fess up. “I have written a book about Christian funerals,” I admitted, “and I am going to talk to pastors about the importance of funerals.”

This young father became quickly solemn. “I am the one,” he said softly, “who has the privilege of washing the bodies of the dead at the little mosque I attend in Wisconsin.” He paused, and then he added, “I don’t understand you Christians. You don’t stay to the end. You leave before things are done.”

I winced, because he was right. When it comes to funerals, most Christians today arrive in the middle of the play, stay for Act II, and then leave before the drama is complete, before the full story is told. Act III is a lonely ceremony left to the deceased’s closest family, or sometimes the body is taken to the crematory and left in a warehouse until its number comes up for the furnace. Nobody stays to the end. But if a funeral is more than our “paying respects” or joining in on a momentary and artificial “celebration of life,” if it is the bearing of the burden of the one who has died and telling the narrative of farewell and completion, then we need—for their sake, for our sake—to go the whole distance.

*Fourth, because a funeral moves through time, it speaks the promise of transforma-
tion.*

In the stillness of a typical memorial service, the implied task is to reflect, to sit motionless and to allow oneself to be centered on the proper memory of the
deceased. A funeral, however, is on the move, and as such it symbolizes a different promise: at the end of the day, everything will be different and all of us will be changed.

Of course, sometimes people are just as grief-bound, just as angry, or just as numb at the close of a funeral as they were at the beginning. Just going through the process of the funeral does not magically heal the wound. But like all great rituals, funerals hold their promises in trust for us. They are embodied actions that announce what is already true; even if the participants have not yet arrived at that conclusion, they can dwell fully in that truth and must still live toward it.

To walk across the landscape carrying the body of Elizabeth involves motion taking place over time, and this movement over the land and this passing of time signal the transformations that will occur in those of us who accompany her. Just as a New Orleans jazz funeral starts low and goes slow, then moves higher and strikes fire, at the end joyfully announcing the marching in of the saints, so all funerals promise an emotional transformation and healing. It may take weeks, or years, or a lifetime, but our walking from “here” to “there” with Elizabeth is also a confidence that we, too, are moving from “here” to “there” in our grief and in our hope.

In this movement over time in a funeral, we also act out a significant moment in the recognition of our mortality and the maturing of our souls. At the beginning of the funeral, we embrace Elizabeth. We wash and clothe her body, we tenderly lift her and carry her to the place of farewell, and there we let her go. A funeral moves from embrace to release, a sign that to be human we must learn to hold the living in love and to let go of the dead in hope. Most religious traditions confess that our relationships with those we love are not destroyed by death, but they are dramatically changed. Elizabeth will not be with us in the way that she has been with us until now, and when we get to the end of the funeral journey, we must open our hands and let her go.

But our religious traditions also promise that this movement over time in the funeral promises not only a change in us, but also a change in Elizabeth. We let her go not into nothingness but into the life of God. We do not know much at all about what this means, but we do know that God can be trusted and that, for Elizabeth, all is well. From our limited vision, Elizabeth has changed from one who was living and breathing to one who is now dead. From the vision of faith, though, Elizabeth is not merely changed; she has been transfigured.

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