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All Saints, All Souls[1]

THOMAS LYNCH

It was 1964 and I was fifteen and riding in the backseat of my father's black sedan. We had just picked up the Reverend Dr. Harold DeWindt after he'd officiated at the funeral for one of his congregants, and we were driving him to the cemetery for the graveside services. Dr. DeWindt had spent most of the decade supervising the construction and furnishing of the magnificent Kirk in the Hills, a replica of ancient Melrose Abbey, his efforts for the honor and glory of God bringing a bit of thirteenth-century Scotland on forty lakefront acres of Bloomfield Hills, home to Detroit's moguls and moneyed class, the blessed and elect who liked to worship as they lived—in style. If Melrose had the embalmed heart of Robert the Bruce buried among its holy ruins, "the Kirk," as it was called by suburban Detroiters, bore the fingerprints of Harold DeWindt and affirmed the WASPish ascendancy in the order of things.

We had just left the manse by its private drive and were heading east for White Chapel Cemetery, passing in front of the Kirk, its abbey and refectory and spired sanctuary, when the churchman cleared his throat to pose his question to my father.

"What sort of coffin was that you brought in to church this morning, Edward?" The Reverend Dr.'s white mane and rich homiletic baritone, curled to affect the accent of Oban or Belfast, his velvet-collared cape and biretta, always

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The religious and community response to a death in the family has gone astray, leaving the bereaved hard pressed to reinvent a wheel to work the important space between faith and feeling, body and soul, bereavement and belief, the living and the dead. It falls to first responders, clergy among them, to help the heartsore find their way again, to funerals that affirm faith, manage grief, and—by getting the dead where they need to go—get the living where they need to be.

made him seem like Moses to me. Surely he could part the waters and channel the voice of God.

"Black walnut," said my father. "Solid American black walnut."

The churchman slowly shook his head side to side disapprovingly. His voice lowered to a modest scold. "That's just not necessary, Edward; such excess, not necessary." He let pause and silence occupy the space between words to fully amplify his censure. He was enunciating the conventional ecclesiastical wisdom of the day—that money spent on funerals was a tasteless display of crass materialism, of less than spiritual Reformation values. After years of raising funds and taking pledges to erect the Kirk, Harold DeWindt measured every elective expenditure against the difference it might make to "the honor and glory of God."

An "edifice complex," my father called it, and nodding towards the stained-glassed, flying-buttressed, pipe-organed, bell-towered, abundantly landscaped, and sumptuously appointed Gothic façade we'd only moments before wheeled the dead pilgrim out of, he simply replied, "Neither is that, Doctor, neither is that."

An open field, a bended knee, a willing heart—these were essential to a religious impulse. The hand-carved and, by the way, solid walnut church mouse at the foot of the baptismal font, the original oils in the narthex, the pipe organ and stained glass were add-ons and accessories that spoke to the faith and commitment of the congregation and the fundraising virtuosity of the pastor. Why spend a dead Christian's money on caskets when it might better fund the purchase of new robes for the choir or new art for the abbey's study?

Such were the fashionable contentions of the times, that year after Jessica Mitford sold five million copies of *The American Way of Death*[2] and John Kennedy was buried in the first televised funeral in the nation's history. The nation was caught up in the talk of funerals and their expenses and, for many of the reverend clergy, pastoral care of the bereaved became driving the best bargain they could for their congregants for caskets and mortuary accoutrements.

Over the next two decades, the clergy of many white, mainline Protestant suburban congregations effectively threw the bodies out with the boxes. The best way to downsize the money spent on a funeral was to downsize the relative importance of the corpse and so, for the first time in the history of the species, we started seeing funerals notable for the absence of the dead. We called these new events "memorial services."

Writing at the same time as Jessica Mitford, and often in response to her, were authors and scholars among the reverend clergy like Paul Irion, Edgar N. Jackson, David K. Switzer, Earl Grollman, and others, who took a measuredly contrary view to Mitford's, seeing the funeral instead as one of those ties that bound congregants to one another and to the church.[3] They connected the funeral to

[2]Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

[3]Paul Irion, *The Funeral: Vestige or Value?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966); Edgar Jackson, *Understanding Grief: Its Roots, Dynamics, and Treatment* (New York: Abingdon, 1957); Jackson, *The Christian Funeral* (New York: Chan-

other ritual enactments of life's mysteries: baptisms, bar and bat mitzvahs, and nuptials among them.

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Each of these authors saw the big life events as laden with emotional, spiritual, and religious import. Edgar Jackson, an army chaplain during World War II and a trained psychotherapist as well as Methodist pastor, regarded bereavement and grief as the necessary recovery of emotional capital the mourner had invested in the lost loved one, a process that must be accomplished before the capital could be reinvested in a new relationship. Dr. Jackson's and other paradigms of grief and mourning made much of the role played by the funeral in confronting the reality of death and loss, providing a venue for the open expression of difficult feelings and community support, and setting in motion a process of healing of the social and psychological fabric rent by death. But these books got little notice in the wider world of reviews, so whereas Mitford's classic sold in the millions, the minister-authors' sold in the dozens.

When Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist, published her best-selling *On Death and Dying* in 1969, her "five stages of loss," originally configured around the experience of dying patients, were easily adapted to become the "stages of grief."[4] The bereaved were accordingly seen to be working their ways through and among the familiar stations of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Like Mitford's critique of mortuary conduct, Kübler-Ross's model for grief recovery entered the conventional wisdom so seamlessly that three decades later Richard John Neuhaus, in the introduction to his meditative anthology called *The Eternal Pity*, could observe:

> Death and dying has become a strangely popular topic. "Support groups" for the bereaved crop up all over. How to "cope" with dying is a regular on television talk shows. It no doubt has something to do with the growing number of old people in the population.... Evelyn Waugh's *Loved One* brilliantly satirized and Jessica Mitford's *American Way of Death* brutally savaged the death industry of commercial exploitation. Years later it may be time for a similarly critical look at the psychological death industry that got underway in 1969 when Elizabeth [*sic*] Kübler-Ross set forth her five stages of grieving. No doubt many people feel they have been helped by formal and informal therapies for bereavement and, if they feel they have been helped, they probably have been helped in some way that is not unimportant. Just being able to get through the day without cracking up is no little thing. But neither, one may suggest, is it the

nel, 1966); David K. Switzer, *The Dynamics of Grief* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970); Earl Grollman, *Explaining Death to Children* (Boston: Beacon, 1967); Grollman, *Concerning Death: A Practical Guide for the Living* (Boston: Beacon, 1974).

[4]Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

> most important thing. I have listened to people who speak with studied, almost clinical, detail about where they are in their trek through the five stages. Death and bereavement are "processed." There are hundreds of self-help books on how to cope with death in order to get on with life. This book is not one of them.
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> A measure of reticence and silence is in order. There is a time simply to be present to death—whether one's own or that of others—without any felt urgencies about doing something about it or getting over it. The Preacher had it right: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die…a time to mourn and a time to dance." The time of mourning should be given its due. One may be permitted to wonder about the wisdom of contemporary funeral rites that hurry to the dancing, displacing sorrow with the determined affirmation of resurrection hope, supplying a ready answer to a question that has not been given time to understand itself. The worst thing is not the sorrow or the loss or the heartbreak. Worse is to be encountered by death and not to be changed by the encounter. There are pills we can take to get through the experience, but the danger is that we then do not go through the experience but around it.[5]

Like Mitford, Kübler-Ross's model for "staged" grief entered the conventional wisdom and common knowledge unencumbered by such critique or scrutiny. It was user-friendly, easily understood, conceptually tidy, and serviceable. A regular on talk shows and at professional conventions, Kübler-Ross was the recipient of nearly twenty honorary doctorates from the nation's finest universities, and in the space of a couple of years, the primary mission of all activities surrounding a death in the family became the wise management of grief and its stages. While it was quite helpful to regard a death as multidimensional, that is, something that happened not only to the person who dies but to the many to whom the death really matters—family and friends and fellow congregants—the concentration of energies and intentions around the neatly staged grief of stricken survivors further minimized the role the dead play in what my colleague Thomas Long quite properly has called the "sacred community theater" that surrounds a death in the family. And just as the religious dualism that separates body and soul and accounts for the "just a shell" mentality that dismisses the corpse once death has occurred misses the holistic ontological facts of lives, the cultural reaction to Kübler-Ross's work tended to see mortality in dualistic terms in which the dead could be disposed of summarily while the mourners must be carefully counseled through their stages towards an eventual healing. The disposition of the dead was separated from the care and treatment of the living.

This "therapeutic" model of post-death activity dismissed our religious and cultural obligations to the dead—to commend them to God and a heavenly eternity by a "proper" funeral and burial—in favor of those that stressed what might be done to help uphold the living, hobbled by grief, on their road to recovery. In this latter paradigm, the corpse became unnecessary and oppressively weighted

[5]Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *The Eternal Pity: Reflections on Dying* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) 3–4.

"baggage," an encumbrance, freighted with suffering and pain and sadness, better disposed of so that the mourners could travel light through their "celebrations of life," hitting their stages in a timely fashion and finally achieving acceptance and recovery. In short, the narrative of judgment, redemption, and eternal bliss, stations in the ongoing journey of the soul, were replaced by narratives of therapy, healing, and recovery, points in the journey of the bereaved.

For its part, the church, ever eager to meet the mourners at the door, changed their rubrics from the somber, black-and-purple-vested requiems to the white-robed, paschal-themed "witness to the resurrection" services. The liturgy shifted from the Gregorian laments of the "Dies Irae," all doom, judgment, and salvation, to the joyous hymns of Easter and homiletics of heavenly reward. And just as a "celebration of life" is easier to market than a funeral, perpetual light and eternal rest are more user friendly than grief's dull fear and hopelessness.

The living who do best in grief are those who do their part for the dead. It is by getting the dead where they need to go that the living get where they need to be.

Rarely in the religious or cultural response was there space afforded to believe like people of faith and grieve like people of flesh, which is exactly the experience that most of us have when someone we love dies—part hopefulness, part helplessness, part grudging towards God, and part gratitude. This is why, after many years in funeral service, I've come to understand that a death in the family is not only or entirely a psychological event, nor only or entirely a religious event, nor only or entirely a social or retail or commemorative occasion. It is all of these and then some: an existential event involving being and ceasing to be, faith in eternity and fear of extinction, grief and belief, holding on and letting go.

And the living who do best in grief are those who do their part for the dead. It is by getting the dead where they need to go that the living get where they need to be. By acting out our ancient obligations to the dead we get to the edge of the life we will be living without them, consoled by the promises we claim in faith, happily haunted by our dreams and memories of those gone before us. It may not be a happy ending, but it is a return to life on life's terms. "Grief," I remember Edgar Jackson saying at a seminar, with the wisdom of a longtime pastor, "is the other side of the coin of love." And they do seem part of the one currency and coinage, and they suggest an inescapable math, to wit: if you love, you grieve. About this math we have no choice. The only way to avoid grief, it seems, is to avoid each other, form no attachments, keep to ourselves, never play for keeps. This maxim held up well enough after I'd read John Bowlby's three-volume, door-stopping study of *Attachment, Separation*, and *Loss,* published between 1969 and 1980.[6] The

[6]John Bowlby, *Attachment: Attachment and Loss* (1969), *Separation: Anxiety and Anger* (1973), and *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (1980).

British psychiatrist's three volumes on attachment theory and maternal deprivation in childhood development, like the old Methodist pastor's simple math of love and grief, had little to add to the understanding of these mysteries that Roy Orbison sang in his hit cover of Boudleaux and Felice Bryant's song, "Love Hurts," which, like "Jesus wept," managed in two words to codify the nature of grief and humanity.

We buried our mother on All Hallow's Eve. It was years ago now, still I remember coming home from our duties at Holy Sepulchre to trick-or-treaters making the rounds in the early gloaming and rustle of leaves. We hurried our youngest boys, Michael and Sean, into their costumes and out to roam with other pint-sized ghosts and goblins for the appeasements of penny candy.

All Saints and All Souls, these first feasts of November, have always been about brokering peace between the living and the dead among us—between pagans and faithful, Celts and Christians, New Age Believers and Doubters-at-Large—all of us humans for whom the dead are not entirely gone and the gone are not entirely forgotten. The seasonal metaphors of reaping and rotting, harvest and darkness, leaf fall and blood sport and killing frost supply us with plentiful *mementi mori*. Whatever is or isn't there when we die, we are likewise frightened and excited by it.

Thus, all over the Western world, from secular Europe to Mexico and South America, graves are being decorated on those days with candles and fresh flowers. Picnics are held among the old stones and markers, families are gathering round family plots to give the dead their due of prayers and remembrances. We humans are truly bound to and identified with the earth, the dirt, the *humus* out of which our histories and architectures rise—our monuments and memorials, heaps and catacombs, our shelters and cityscape. Everything human is "of the earth." This "ground sense," to borrow William Carlos Williams's idiom,[7] is at the core of our humanity. And the stones we cut our names and dates in, each is an effort to make a uniquely human statement about death and memory and belief. *Our kind was here. They lived; they died; they made their difference. We did right by them. They were not forgotten.* For the ancient and the modern, the grave is an essential station.

But less so hereabouts, where we tend to whistle past our graveyards and keep our dead at greater distance, consigned to oblivions we seldom visit, estranged and denatured, tidy and Disney-fied memorial parks with names like golf courses or megachurches: Willowcreek and Oakland Hills.

In her honors seminar "Death in American Culture" at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, Professor June Hobbs takes her students on a field trip to Sunset Cemetery in nearby Shelby. Dr. Hobbs believes that cemeteries have much to tell us about ourselves. For most of her twenty-something-year-old students, it is "literally their first visit to a cemetery." "I find this astonishing," says Dr. Hobbs. "This county had more casualties during the Civil War

[7]"Tract," in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume 1: 1909–1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christoper J. MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1991) 72.

than any other. The dead were everywhere, the churchyards filled up, Sunday afternoons were spent visiting graves. The dead were very much a part of the community, kept alive in everyday conversations." Now they've been downsized or disappeared.

She speaks to a culture that quietly turned the family "parlor" into "living rooms," "burial policies" into "life insurance," and funerals into the ubiquitous "celebration of life," notable for the absence of a corpse and the subtle enforcement of an emotional code that approves the good laugh but not the good cry. Convenience and cost efficiency have replaced ethnic and religious customs. The dead get buried, but we seldom see a grave. Or they are burned, but we never see the fire. Photographs of coffins returned from wars were forbidden by presidential fiat, and news coverage of their burials discouraged. Where sex was once private and funerals were public, now sex is everywhere and the dead go to their graves in retorts, often as not without witness or ritual. Cemeteries, once part of the ecclesiastical and municipal landscape, are private enterprises, well off the beaten track.

Still, there's something deeply and uniquely human in the way we process mortality by processing mortals from one station to the next in the journey between life as we know it and the hereafter as we imagine it, in that space the dead inhabit—heaven or happy hunting ground, nirvana or Valhalla. Wherever the dead go or don't, it is the duty of the living to get them to the edge of the oblivion we consign them to. Where, we humans always ask ourselves, do the dead go? All saints, all souls share these curiosities. And all of the living are well and truly haunted by them. Where do we come from? Where are we bound? Oblivion or home? There are inklings of answers among the stones.

There is no shortage of heartache, no lapse of sadness: every day six thousand or so more Americans die. They are spouses and parents, daughters and sons, siblings and soul mates, neighbors and friends. Each bears into their hereafter the wonders of the ones they have left behind to pray for them and to them, to remember and lament.

I am not alone nor am I the first to sense that the religious and community response to a death in the family has, for a variety of reasons, gone astray, leaving the bereaved hard pressed to reinvent a wheel to work the important space between faith and feeling, body and soul, bereavement and belief, the living and dead. A death in the family remains one of the great watershed events, pressing us to consider last things and verities in ways few other moments do.

It falls to first responders among clergy and funeral directors, hospice and medical professionals, family and friends—those who show up in times of trouble willing to ante up their own humanity and faith and expertise—to help the heartsore find our ways again, to funerals that affirm faith, manage grief, and, by getting the dead where they need to go, get the living where they need to be. ⊕

THOMAS LYNCH, poet and writer, lives in Milford, Michigan, where he has been the funeral director since 1974, and in Moveen, Co. Clare, Ireland, where he keeps an ancestral cottage.