THE GOOD FUNERAL

Death, Grief, and the Community of Care

Thomas G. Long
Thomas Lynch

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Patrick Lynch

My brother Tom and I grew up in a household parented by Rosemary O'Hara and Edward Lynch, wherein discussions about heavy topics—the inevitability of death and dying; the significance of grief and mourning; the value of liturgy, ritual, and ceremony; and the fundamental belief that God is ever present during our earthly journey—were commonplace. We were blessed to have a father who, because of his work as a funeral director, saw the intrinsic value of all faiths as people navigated their way through the sorrows of death and dying. We were taught to think ecumenically before ecumenism was fashionable.

For example, returning from St. Columban Catholic School as a third or fourth grader, I reported that one of the nuns had instructed us, "Never go into the church next door": Our Shepherd Lutheran. My father assured me that the good nun was wrong. At any time, I could go into Our Shepherd to pray and God would hear me. Furthermore, he explained,

if I wanted to ask the pastor of Our Shepherd, the Reverend Howard Allwardt, to assist me in prayer, it would not be a bad thing. Pastor Allwardt and my father had a relationship that went far beyond pastor and funeral director. They were friends. Similarly, all the local clergy—Baptist, Catholic, Congregational, Episcopal, Methodist, Orthodox, Presbyterian, and Unitarian—were my father's friends and regular visitors in our home. While conscious of their differences, Tom and I and the rest of our siblings were more intrigued by their similarities. Like our father, we had been blessed by these holy people and made the better for it.

Thus, it seemed fitting that in February 1992, on the eve of my father's Mass of Christian Burial, his body was prayed over by clergy from all denominations. Perhaps the most touching of these prayers was offered by our close family friend, the Very Reverend Fr. Laurence Lazar, Dean of St. George Romanian Orthodox Cathedral. Following the traditional Trisagion Service, which includes those beautiful ancient refrains, "Lord Have Mercy" and "Memory Eternal," Fr. Laurence read the following:

> In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
>
> Brothers and Sisters-in-Christ, Our Family.
>
> In his profession your father, Edward, served the final needs of thousands and thousands of people in this community, and, because God had blessed him, he helped and supported many parishes of different faiths. But, the fact that you have invited us, from St. George Romanian Orthodox Cathedral, to be with your family tonight (for which we thank you), and to share with you this final farewell of your father, will always remind us of the special relationship and friendship he shared with us and we shared with him and your family.
>
> And so, on behalf of the Cathedral clergy and our faithful parishioners, I offer you our sincere condolences. And we do so with the same hand of compassion that your father offered

> our people and so many others over the decades. And finally we do so with the prayer that, as St. Paul the Apostle said, "You do not grieve as if there is no hope"; because we believe that "Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead, and it will be the same for all those who love Him."
>
> May God forgive him, and give him rest.
>
> Amen.

This letter speaks to the relationship our father developed over many years with the members of the clergy in our community. As young funeral directors working under his tutelage, Tom and I were made acutely aware of the ministerial partnership shared by funeral directors and the clergy. We learned that both parties were critical to the care of the dying, dead, and bereaved, and that by serving the living while caring for the dead, we brought an added measure of dignity to life itself. This partnership, which in later years extended beyond funeral directors and the clergy to include hospice workers, social workers, and other caregivers, has been a gift to our professional lives.

For years, our father had a habit of asking Tom, "When are you going to write something about what we do?" He was, of course, talking about funerals, and while at the time Tom had published a few volumes of poetry, he had never written a book directly addressing his life as an undertaker. He promised our father that he would get to it someday. Then our father died. Determined to keep his promise, Tom began collecting his thoughts, and in 1997 *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* was born. Recipient of the American Book Award and a finalist for the National Book Award, *The Undertaking* catapulted Tom into the international spotlight. He quickly became one of the most sought after speakers for funeral directors, clergy, and health-care professionals around the world. Meeting and speaking with people he would have otherwise never met, Tom soon recognized the extensive

impact he could make on the way our culture thinks about death, dying, grief, and funerals. As passionate as he was about his work as a funeral director, he became equally dedicated to his life as a writer and lecturer. I believe this career combination, while certainly rare and at times difficult to manage, has borne more fruit than Tom will ever know.

As Tom continued to travel and lecture following the release of *The Undertaking*, another gifted Tom, Dr. Thomas Long, a theologian and Presbyterian clergyman, was writing extensively on the same topics. Thus, it comes as no surprise that "the Toms" began reading each other's books and presenting to the same audiences. They soon met and, recognizing in the other a kindred spirit, they began corresponding on a regular basis. Over the course of many conversations, my brother learned that Tom Long was taking theological exception with the increasing willingness of funeral directors and clergy alike to turn good funerals, which he considers acts of sacred community theater, into convenience-based and spiritually empty "celebrations of life." My brother's message has been nearly identical. He has openly criticized funeral directors, clergy, and the culture at large for allowing funerals to become anything less than an existential experience possessing certain basic elements: someone who has died, someone to whom that death matters, and someone to broker the message between them. An event, he insists, which lacks these fundamental components does not fulfill the real obligation of a funeral: "to get the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be."

My brother and I decided years ago to share with as wide an audience as possible our belief that grief is inevitable; public mourning is healthy; and that funerals, when done properly, are immeasurably valuable to the bereaved. We theorized that Tom, who is not only a funeral director but a well-known writer, could influence a diverse audience through his writing

and lecturing. His was an independent, credible, and articulate voice, and because he was not tied to any trade group or professional association, we believed media outlets would more readily solicit his opinion. Our theory was correct. Tom was soon contacted by newspapers, magazines, and Web sites around the world. Everyone wanted to know what this small-town undertaker had to say.

While Tom continued to write and lecture, he and I agreed it would be best if I sought leadership positions in our state and national associations of funeral directors. In this way, I could directly influence thousands of funeral professionals who may or may not be going about their work the best way. In the course of my association journey I have met many professionals who understand exactly what Tom and I mean when we talk about good funerals. I've also met people who have become terribly misguided. Tom has influenced those outside our profession and I've done my best to influence the profession from within. For both Tom and me this collective endeavor has been time-consuming, tedious, and, at times, even thankless. But we have been motivated in large part by the memory of a twelve-year-old boy who, in 1936, after seeing funeral directors quietly dress and casket his dead uncle, a priest, decided at that very moment that he would do the same with the rest of his life. That twelve-year-old boy was our father. As soon as he came home from the war, he became a funeral director. The first twenty-five years of his career he worked for others. But in his fifties, along with his sons, he founded Lynch & Sons Funeral Directors, which now operates seven locations serving about 1,500 families a year. Tom and I have spent our entire professional lives in thanksgiving for what that twelve-year-old boy saw and the legacy he left behind.

In 2003 our efforts began to merge. It was my year as president of the Michigan Funeral Directors Association and I was overseeing the coordination of our annual convention.

Tom and I began discussing potential programming for the attendees and immediately thought of Dr. Long. To this end, "the Toms" led a panel discussion about trends in contemporary funeral practices and were absolutely masterful in their ability to communicate with each other and the audience. I knew immediately that their collective insights could benefit a much broader audience. Thus, six interdisciplinary seminars were scheduled for late October through early December 2003. Titled "The Good Death, Good Grief, Good Funerals: Finding Our Place on the Continuum of Care," these statewide programs were attended by over 1,500 funeral directors, clergy, hospice workers, social workers, and students. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

Several years later I was elected President of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), the leading and largest association of funeral directors in the world. Among my hopes was to bring the same program we had in Michigan to the national audience. NFDA's executive board recognized the value of such programming and approved the first regional Clergy/Funeral Director seminars sponsored by NFDA in over a decade. With the cooperation of over a dozen state funeral director associations, "The Good Death, Good Grief, Good Funerals" program was presented in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Indiana, and Georgia. The response was the same: when it comes to death, dying, grief, and funerals, Long and Lynch were producing the best scholarship in the world.

This book is the culmination of the countless hours Tom Lynch and Tom Long have spent together at these meetings and others, listening to and speaking with thousands of funeral directors, clergy, and health-care professionals. I cannot stress its importance enough as we investigate the meaning of death, dying, grief, and funerals in our own lives. It will be the book of record for generations to come.

FOREWORD

Barbara Brown Taylor

When people ask me what I miss most about parish ministry, the answer is easy. I miss baptisms and funerals, the bookend rituals in which life and death point to one another, linking birth to death and death to new life. I miss standing by stone bowls full of water and open graves full of dirt, reading from a prayer book that gave me magnificent words to say while I handled water, flesh, oil, and earth in ancient, sacred ways. Even now I can easily turn to those pages because they are the most wrinkled in the book—the baptismal pages pocked with dried water and oily thumbprints, the funeral pages smeared with rain, tears, and mud. In my Episcopal tradition, both rituals are sacraments, which means that there is no separating the spiritual truth in them from the physical truth in them. The magnificent words and the sacred handling both require human bodies; there is no other way to address human souls.

The two Toms—Long and Lynch—make that point so well in this book that the hardest part of writing a foreword is

resisting the urge to quote them nonstop. Early on they speak of the power of language to name and transform reality, and that is one of the chief virtues of this book. The authors have spent decades thinking about their topic, settling more deeply into it than most of us are comfortable doing. More than that, they have spent decades bodily invested in the practice of burying the dead, so that what they say grows from the ground of long experience. On page after page they say what they know so gorgeously that it strikes the heart like a gong. Those of us who have buried our own dead know the truth too; we simply did not know how to say it half as well.

That is the other standout virtue of this book: the authors embody the truth they tell with such rich narratives that their real-life stories call forth the reader's own. When Tom Lynch recalls an episode of the television hit *Six Feet Under*, in which an Episcopal priest uses a ritual shaker to sprinkle dirt on a dead man's coffin, I am taken straight back to the first funeral I ever did. The church service was over. The family and a large number of friends had followed the hearse to the cemetery, where we had parked our cars and processed behind the coffin to the grave. I had rehearsed everything ten times over to make sure that there were no undignified surprises, but nothing prepared me for the vial of sand that the funeral director held out to me after the coffin had been lowered into the ground. My next lines included the phrase "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," but what was in the vial did not look like any of those. It looked like something from a child's sandbox, or a nice beach in Florida. The sacrament required more.

I did a quick visual search for real dirt but the entire gravesite had been covered with artificial turf. With no time to waste, I lifted the corner nearest my feet and rummaged around under the green plastic grass for some red Georgia dirt. The damp clump sat in my hand during the final prayer. Then I dropped it on the beautiful casket at the bottom of the

hole, where it made an unseemly mess and a very final sound. Since none of us had rehearsed that part we all sat silent for a moment while we registered the incongruity of what had just happened, which was also the reality of what had just happened: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The next time the funeral director and I did a graveside service together, he had a handful of dirt ready for me. I never saw another vial of sand.

One gifted storyteller would be enough for a volume like this, but this one has two. When Tom Long tells the story of the Buddhist undertaker who cared for the bodies of those lost in a tsunami, I am back at the funeral home where my father was cremated. Because I was the one who was with him when he died, I wanted to be the one to carry his remains back home, which meant finding something to do for the three hours it took his ashes to cool. The funeral home was one of Atlanta's oldest, situated in a part of town that had become affordable for a number of new immigrant communities. The family who owned it had ignored the trend toward furnishing such establishments as blandly as possible. This place was full of old grandfather clocks, carved wooden mantelpieces, and pieces of furniture so large and dark that they looked like sleeping buffalos—an effect heightened by the dim lighting, which came mainly from antique ceiling fixtures with painted glass globes.

After my husband Ed and I had identified my father's body and signed all the papers we lingered in the lobby, walking past the rooms set aside for visitations. Two of them had open caskets in them but no visitors yet. In the last room, three sticks of incense burned in a vase on a table at the entrance. Everyone inside was dressed in white. When I stepped back to look

at the name of the deceased, it seemed likely that he had been a Theravada Buddhist, or had at least come from the part of the world where that tradition is dominant. I could not have asked for a better reminder that what felt like my singular loss was in fact my sure bond to everyone else on earth. Whether death comes by cancer or tsunami, grief is a language everyone speaks.

With hours left to go, Ed and I walked outside into a gray December day. I wanted to head down the sidewalk to find a place for lunch; Ed wanted to circle the building. As soon as we rounded the first corner I knew why. Three tall chimneys rose from a wing attached to the back of the funeral home, with smoke coming out of the center one. A red-tailed hawk climbed upward on the spiral of heat produced by the furnace below. We stood and watched until the air stopped rippling and the hawk flew away. Later, when we signed again for the urn of my father's ashes, they were still warm to the touch.

We did not carry out all of his wishes, which included being dressed in his tuxedo for an open-casket funeral. We did the best we could at an Episcopal church with the urn, and I remain deeply grateful to the clergy friends who stepped in so I could sit in a pew and weep. Now that I have read this book, I wish we could do it all over again. I would insist on the body, if not on the tux. But since we cannot do it all over again, I will do the next best thing: I will use what I have learned from this book to make some suggestions to my next of kin. Whether they know it or not, they will benefit from going the distance with me, bearing as much of the burden of me as they can stand—for, as both Toms say more than once in this book, it is by getting the dead where they need to go that the living get where they need to be.

The authors say that they have written this book for pastors and funeral directors, to help those first responders remember what their jobs really are. I have no doubt that this book will

be helpful to such people. But if my reading of it is any indication, then the questions the two Toms raise and the counsel they offer will go much deeper than that. It will remind anyone with a body what a means of grace that is, and how important it is to handle the sacrament of flesh with reverence all the way to the end. If we get our hands dirty, so be it. There is no better way to touch the soul.

PREFACE

Several years ago, at the kind invitation of the Michigan Funeral Directors Association, the two of us spent a few weeks traveling like troubadours around that state's pleasant peninsulas. Our assignment was to speak to gatherings of funeral directors and clergy in various locations around Michigan on the theme of the "good funeral." We were, in some ways, an odd pair—one of us a funeral director and the other a seminary professor and ordained minister; one of us raised Catholic and the other Protestant; one of us a composer of poems, short stories, and plays and the other a writer of seminary textbooks and church homilies. But the more we traveled and talked, the more we realized that we were kindred spirits on many things, especially matters funereal.

We discovered that both of us are persuaded that the rituals and practices around death are a window into the soul of a culture. And we also discovered a mutual concern that our cultural soul is currently troubled on this very score. A society

that is unsure about how to care for the dead and is confused about what to do with grief and loss is a society that is also uncertain about life. We found a common passion to work to reclaim wise ways of addressing death, both as an end in itself and also as a means toward recovering wise ways of simply being more alive as human beings.

Since those days in Michigan, we have had many other opportunities to work and speak together. Along the trail we have swapped stories and jokes about clergy and funeral directors, exploring both the foibles and the virtues of our two professions. We have talked, studied, and collaborated, our thoughts striking fire like flint against steel, so that over time we have refined our ideas of what makes for good death practices. Sometimes we have lost track of whose ideas were whose as our understanding has been deepened and brought closer through our conversations.

This book is the result of, and an expression of, those conversations. Because death, grief, and funerals are never impersonal topics, and how one views them is inevitably shaped by experience, we open this book with two autobiographical chapters, one by each of us. One of us grew up to be a funeral director, and one of us grew up to be a theologian. These are not simply our jobs; these are the places that we have come on our life's journey. So we spend a few pages recounting how we got to those places and hoping these chapters will be an invitation to our readers to contemplate their own journeys.

In the remaining chapters we examine the themes of death, the body, the nature of a funeral, cremation, grief, the proper role of funeral directors and religious leaders, and the current perplexities of the culture about these issues. Because we have written from our separate perspectives—clergyman and funeral director—we have identified which of us wrote each chapter.

Many people today are interested in and concerned about

funerals and death rituals, and we had all such readers in mind as we wrote. In particular, though, we had clergy and funeral professionals, including seminarians and mortuary science students. If our practices around death are to become more grounded, more humane, and, indeed, more faithful, it will require wise leadership from those who most closely care for families at the time of loss.

Thomas G. Long
Thomas Lynch