

Q&A with Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch **on *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care***

1. *What is the biggest challenge preachers and funeral directors face today regarding the funeral, and how do you hope this book will help them?*

Long: To help families who have lost touch with any kind of tradition, who feel condemned to improvise out of straw a death ritual or to forego one altogether, to rediscover the treasure of tradition and to reclaim the very human and humane act of caring for the dead and for the grieving.

Lynch: Helping families to engage in the essential, the meaningful and deeply human responses to a death while downsizing the accessories, the trivial, the diversions.

2. *Over the last few decades in North America funeral services have trended away from including the presence of the body. Can you account for why this trend has occurred?*

Long: The reasons are several and complicated, but basically it is because, where once funeral rites were about both the dead and the grieving, contemporary memorial services have focused exclusively on the grief side of the equation, on the mourner and the mourner's intra-psychic journey to stability after a loss. When me and my grief are the only realities, the presence of the body is viewed as a distraction at best, a terrible obstacle at worst.

Lynch: It is simply a lighter lift, religiously, socially, economically, and otherwise, to deal with the "idea" of a death rather than the death itself, the dead body.

3. *Why do you think the presence of the body at the funeral service is important? How does having a bodiless service affect how humans understand the concept of death?*

Long: The body is important for many reasons, the main one being that all human societies have known, deep in our DNA, that caring for the bodies of those we love is the human thing to do, in fact, tender care of the body is the last humane act toward a loved one we are given to do. We may say, "Well, the body's just a shell," but in our hearts we know this is not true. Bodies are so precious to us that our society did not rest until every possible means was employed to recover the bodies of those lost in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Not to walk with the dead all the way to the place of their farewell is like throwing out their bodies as refuse; we know better than that. When the body is absent at a funeral, we deprive ourselves of the deeply human act of accompanying the dead, of knowing that we have carried out our full responsibility toward those whom we have loved.

Lynch: Having to get the dead from one station to the next in disposing of the body gives meaning and purpose to the living. A bodiless funeral, like a baby-less baptism or a brideless wedding is missing an essential manifest.

4. *The book notes that the number of cremations versus burials is expected to reach 50% in the next decade. What accounts for this rise? Are you opposed to cremation as an alternative to burial?*

Long: Cremation is one of several perfectly acceptable forms of bodily disposition. I do not oppose it and would encourage families to consider it as an option. The question is not cremation per se, but instead what cremation means to those who select it. If we accompany our dead all the way to the fire, caring for them tenderly, and giving them up to the mystery that lies beyond, cremation is as acceptable as earth burial. If, however, cremation is merely a matter of convenience, a way to get rid of the dead and avoid “the hassle of the body,” then the practice of cremation is injurious to our social character and to our souls. Earth burial, by the way, is no guarantee of profound meaning; people can be buried in a negligent manner, too.

Lynch: I believe cremation—the burning of the dead body—is an ancient and honorable and efficient practice. But just as burial is about more than the backhoe, cremation is about more than the retort. I believe as a culture, we are less “grounded,” less “bound” to a particular geography or homeplace so the permanent, immovable grave has less appeal for more people.

5. *Both preachers and funeral directors have been the subjects of public scrutiny and suspicion over the years. Why do you think that is?*

Long: Some of the scrutiny and suspicion comes because of certain ministers and funeral directors, hopefully they are a tiny minority, who have been greedy, smug, self-serving, and abusive. But beyond this, ministers and funeral directors are icons of two of life’s most troubling realities: death and God. What people believe about death and God is always complex, emotionally fraught, and full of contradiction, and funeral directors and pastors sometimes serve as the symbolic places where these attitudes come to rest.

Lynch: Whenever you mix money and morality or money and mortality public oversight is to be encouraged and expected.

6. *How did the 1963 publication of Jessica Mitford’s *The American Way of Death* affect the public perception of funeral industry professionals? Where did Mitford have it right? Where was she wrong?*

Long: Mitford’s book was perfectly pitched and perfectly timed to give voice to a whole generation’s uneasiness about the relationship between death and money. Her work was influential in achieving many of the consumer safeguards now in place regarding the funeral business, and for that I think we should be grateful. But Mitford had another side beyond consumer advocacy. She sneered not only at the bad apples among funeral directors; she sneered at all of them. And she sneered at the rest of us, too, people who need to grieve and to observe reverent rituals at the time of death. She took a “stiff upper lip” approach to death and had nothing but contempt for “all that fuss” people make over their losses. She may have had her finger on the pulse of the consumer, but she had almost no feel for the human heart.

Lynch: Her book helped to open a conversation about funerals that was long overdue. She was right to lampoon some of the hardselling and silliness in the mortuary marketplace. She was mistaken to think that “how much does it cost?” is the only worthy line of inquiry.

7. *What do you see as the primary role of the preacher in the funeral?*

Long: I think the preacher has two main roles. One, as preacher specifically, to preach the gospel and to trumpet the news that “death shall have no dominion.” Two, as presider, to enable the whole service to move symbolically from “here” to “there,” from the place where we are to the place where we let go of the dead and return them to the God who gave life.

Lynch: To uphold often badly shaken faith; to proffer hope in what most seems a hopeless case; to reflect God’s love for the dead and the bereaved by calling the community of faith to assist the living and the dead in their journey.

8. *What do you see as the primary role of the funeral director?*

Long: In one sense, both the pastor and the funeral director have the same role; they are both “undertakers,” in that they pledge to undertake to help other people do what they need to do: lovingly to prepare the bodies of their dead and to carry them, with prayer and song, to the place of farewell. This is an ancient responsibility, repeated at each death, and it takes the whole community to do it well. The funeral director is a member of the community with special abilities and capacities to help in this time of need.

Lynch: To serve the living by caring for the dead. To meet the mourner where they are and assist and embolden them to go the distance with their dead.

9. *How would you characterize a “good” funeral?*

Long: Good funerals are those in which the deceased are taken to the places of farewell by those who love them, and, as they are taken, the mourners sing, speak, pray, and act out what this means—both what this specific life and death mean and also the meaning in all life and death.

Lynch: It provides a vehicle for deeply human responses to death—faith and doubt, hope and desolation, love and grief. By getting the dead where they need to go, the living get where they need to be.

10. *While considering the grief process, Lynch writes, “the living who do best in grief are those who do their part for the dead.” Why do you believe this is the case?*

Long: When a child cries out in the middle of the night in fear or in fever, good parents are those who do more than think comforting thoughts toward the child, but who, in fact, get up and go to the child’s bedside. Just so, when someone is dead, there is a need, a task to be done. Those who actually put themselves into motion and accomplish these tasks not only have the satisfaction of having performed a deeply human act, they also discover that there is much meaning—about love, about suffering, about hope—in the doing of these deeds. The most profound response to grief over death is not, “There, there, you’ll feel better soon,” but to find ourselves walking, however haltingly, toward the possibility of meaning.

Lynch: Because grief is a kind of work and those who pitch in and do their part feel better, more human, for having done so. Witness, remembrance, reconciliation and redemption, cooking and caring, lifting and bearing, digging and filling, prayer and petition—these are all part of the “heavy lift” a death in the family or community occasions. A good funeral is often the opening chapter in the narrative of good grief.