

The holy fire

Cremation: A practice in need of ritual

by [Thomas Lynch](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

"When I'm gone just cremate me," Hughey MacSwiggan told his third and final wife as she stood at his bedside while the hospice nurse fiddled with the morphine drip that hadn't kept his pain at bay. The operative word in his directive was *just*. He wasn't especially fond of fire. He hadn't picked out a favorite urn. He saw burning not so much as an alternative to burial as an alternative to bother. He hadn't the strength to force the moment to its crisis. He didn't know if he was coming or going. He just wanted it all to be over—the cancer, the second guessing, the wondering whether he'd done irreparable harm, what with the years of drinking, the divorces, all of that carrying-on.

It's not that he lacked faith. On the contrary, after long years of sobriety in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, he had *sought through prayer and meditation to improve his conscious contact with God as he understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for him and the power to carry that out*. He was, in extremis, ready and willing, grateful and gracious. He'd had enough. He just wanted whatever was going to happen to happen.

Loosened from his own ethnic and religious traditions, which were lost in the shuffle of postmodernity, he hadn't any particular sense of "the done thing" when it came to funerals. He just didn't want to be a burden to anyone, least of all the ones he loved. So when pressed by his family for some direction, "just cremate me" is what he told them all. And so they did.

They dispensed with the presbyters and processions, with casket, graveside and monument. "Never mind the marines," they said, when I told them that his service during World War II, from Cape Gloucester to Peleliu to Okinawa, entitled him to military honors. "Daddy wouldn't want any of that." Neither flag nor flowers, hymns or limousines, obits or an open bar. His son-in-law put the charges on a credit card which earned him frequent flier miles.

And Hughey was just cremated, which is to say his body was placed on a plywood pallet, covered with a cardboard carapace and, after the paperwork and permits were secured, loaded into the hearse and driven to a site toward the back of an industrial park where a company that makes burial vaults operates a crematory on the side. The line of boxes along the wall—a couple dozen of them—contained the bodies of other pilgrims, dropped off by discount cremation services and other mortuaries. They were waiting, like planes on the tarmac, for a clear runway, an open retort.

Because our funeral home's protocols require us to see the dead all the way into the fire, just as we see the dead who are buried all the way into the ground, the crematory operator lets us jump the line. We arrange this by appointment, same as for burials. It seems the last if not least that we can do.

When I invited—as is also our policy—any and all of his family to come with us to the crematory, or to designate one among them to come along, “just to see that everything is done properly,” they winced and shook their heads as if I'd invited them to a root canal or public stoning, to wit: a necessary but noxious procedure, the least said about which the better, thank you.

So it was one of the crematory staff who helped me roll Hughey out of the hearse and onto the hydraulic lift and stood by wordlessly while I recited the Lord's Prayer, which Hughey would have heard at AA meetings, and set the little numbered metal disk atop the cardboard box and helped me push it into the retort, closed the door and pushed the red button that started the fire that turned Hughey MacSwiggan's corpse into his ashes. Three hours later after everything had cooled, the remnants of his larger bone structures were “processed” into a finer substance and all of it placed in a plastic bag inside a plastic box with a label that bore his name, the date and the logo of the crematory. This greatly reduced version of Hughey was given to me to take back to the funeral home to await a decision from his family about what would be done with what remained.

“In a funeral we are carrying the body of a saint to the place of farewell,” writes Thomas G. Long in his study of American funeral practice, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Westminster John Knox).

In short, we are carrying a loved one to the edge of mystery, and people should be encouraged to stick around to the end, to book passage all the

way. If the body is to be buried, go to the grave and stay there until the body is in the ground. If the body is to be burned, go to the crematorium and witness the burning.

Ask any gathering of your fellow Americans—students at university, clergy or hospice workers, medical or mortuary sorts—how many have ever been to a graveside or watched a burial, and 95 out of every 100 raise a hand. The hillside and headstones, the opened grave and black-clad mourners are fixtures in our commemorative consciousness. If not in real life, then on TV, we've seen enough burials to know the drill.

Next ask how many have been to a retort or crematory or witnessed a cremation and roughly the reverse is true: less than 5 percent have been there, done that.

Forty or 50 years ago, when the cremation rate in the U.S. was still in the low single digits, this would have made perfect sense. But today, when the national rate is approaching 40 percent and is predicted to be over 50 percent halfway into the coming decade, it represents a kind of disconnect.

How is it that so many people claim a preference for cremation but so few have any interest in knowing more about it?

As a people we have thoroughly embraced the notion of cremation as an exercise in simplicity and cost efficiency. But we remain thoroughly distanced from the fire itself and all its metaphors and meaning, its religious and ritual significance as a station in our pilgrimage of faith.

For Christians, in particular—who, along with secular humanists, account for most of the nation's increase in cremations—this disconnect is even more telling.

In *Accompany Them with Singing* Long documents a troublesome shift in religious practice. In the place of funerals—the full-bodied, full gospel, faith-fit-for-the-long-haul and heavy lifting of grief events our elders were accustomed to—what has evolved, especially among white suburban Protestants, is a downsized, “personalized,” user-friendly, Hallmarky soiree: the customized, emotively neutral and religiously ambiguous memorial service to which everyone is invited but the one who has died. The dead have been made more or less to disappear, cremated as a matter of pure function and notably outside the context of faith. The living gather at their convenience to “celebrate the life” in a kind of obsequy lite at which therapy is

dispensed, closure proclaimed, biography enshrined and spirits are, it is supposed, uplifted. If not made to disappear entirely, the presence of the dead at such services is minimized, inurned, denatured, virtualized, made manageable and unrecognizable by cremation. The “idea” of the deceased is feted for possessing a great golf swing or good humor, a beautiful garden or well-hosted parties, while the thing itself—the corpse—has been dispensed with in private, dispatched without witness or rubric.

Even when the cremation follows a wake or visitation and a public service in the church or elsewhere, we rarely process to the crematory, not least because the retort is often housed in an industrial park, not a memorial park. This disinclination to deal with the dead we burn has something to do with our conflicted notions about fire, which Western sensibilities and Western religious traditions still often associate with punishment and wastefulness.

“If there is a problem with cremation in regard to a funeral,” says Long, “it is that the cremated remains are required to stand in for the whole body of the deceased, which at its worst could be like asking Ralph Fiennes’s hat to play Hamlet.”

This minimization of what Long calls a “worshipful drama” suggests more than a shift in religious fashion. The issue is not cremation or burial but rather the gospel, the sacred text of death and resurrection, suffering and salvation, redemption and grace—the mystery that a Christian funeral ought to call us to behold, the mystery of life’s difficult journey and the faithful pilgrim’s triumphant homegoing. The memorial service, by avoiding the embodied dead, the shovel and shoulder work, the divisions of labor and difficult journey to the grave or pyre, too often replaces theology with therapy, conviction with convenience, the full-throated assurances of faith with a sort of memorial karaoke where “everyone gets to share a memory.”

Thence to the fellowship hall for “tea and cakes and ices,” having dodged once again those facts of death that, as Long says, “force the moment to its crisis.”

“The fact is,” writes Long, “that many educated Christians in the late nineteenth century, the forebears of today’s white Protestants, lost their eschatological nerve and their vibrant faith in the afterlife, and we are their theological and liturgical heirs.” Long is citing not a change of fashions but a lapse of faith in the promise of eternal life: a core principle of Christianity.

The crisis presented by a death in the family has not changed since the first human mourners looked into the pit or cave or flames they’d just consigned their dead to

and posed the signature questions of our species: *Is that all there is? Why did it happen? Will it happen to me? Are we alone? What comes next?* The corpse, the grave, the tomb and fire became fixtures in the life of faith's most teachable moment. We learned to deal with death by dealing with our dead; to process mortality by processing mortals from one station to the next in the journey of grief. The bodiless obsequies that have become the standard practice in many mainstream Protestant churches represent not only a shift of mortuary fashions from custom and tradition toward convenience, but also a fundamental uncertainty about eternal life. They lack an essential task and manifest—to assist all pilgrims, living and dead, in making their way back home to God.

Abject grief, spiritual despair, anger at God and serious doubt are common responses to suffering and loss. And while doubt is unexceptional in the life of faith, and most certainly attends a death in the family, the role of pastor, priest, minister and congregation, indeed the *raison d'être* of the Christian community, is to uphold and embolden believers, shaken in their bereavement, with the promise of the gospel. This is how the faithful bear both death in the abstract and the dead in the flesh. It is by bearing our dead from one station to the other—deathbed to parlor, parlor to altar, altar to the edge of eternal life—that we learn to bear death itself. By going the distance with them we learn to walk upright in the faith that God will take care of God's own, living and dead.

But how, Long asks, should the living take seriously a church from which the dead have been gradually banished, as if not seeing were believing? If dead Christians are redeemed saints bound for heaven, oughtn't we accompany them with singing? Oughtn't we bring them to church and go the distance with them, proclaiming the gospel on the way to the grave or tomb or fire, and there commend our dead to God?

To the extent that cremation has become an accomplice in the out-of-sight and out-of-mind nature of memorial services, it is at cross-purposes with the life of faith and the mission of the church.

Of course, the problem is not with cremation, which is an ancient and honorable, efficient and effective means of disposing of our dead. Nor is the fire to burn our dead any less an elemental gift of God than is the ground to bury them in. The problem is not that we cremate our dead, but how ritually denatured, spiritually vacant, religiously timid and impoverished we have allowed the practice to become.

It is not *that* we do it, but *how* we do it that must be reconsidered.

It was back in the Gilded Age that the first modern cremation in America took place. In Washington, Pennsylvania, in 1876, the corpse of Baron De Palm was burned in a retort built by a local doctor. A hundred years later, cremation remained very much the exception to the general rule—still less than 7.5 percent. But the past 30 years has seen a steadily growing acceptance of cremation. Across the nation, more than a third of all deaths are now followed by cremation. Among Protestant Christians the numbers are even higher, if we consider that Jews, Muslims and Orthodox Christians almost never cremate their dead and Catholics still bury the large majority of theirs.

The reasons for this change are manifold. For our ancestors in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the land remained foundational. Borders, boundaries, beliefs were all fixed and settled. But modern American culture seems in constant transit and flux. We are more mobile, more modular, less grounded than our grandparents. Our ethnic, religious and family ties do not bind so tightly as in former times. We multitask and travel light through lives that seem to be in constant states of revision. Careers are a series of five-year plans. Communities have become virtual entities—social networks—as home pages replace home places as a key to identity. Marriages and families have been “blended” and reconfigured. Cremation seems to suit many of us better—making us more portable, divisible and easier to scatter. But while technology has made the process odorless, smokeless and highly efficient, the culture remains ritually adrift when it comes to fire, consigning it most often to private, industrial venues rather than public, ceremonial ones.

In cultures where cremation is practiced in public, among Hindus and Buddhists in India and Japan, its powerful metaphoric values—purification, release, elemental beauty and unity—add to the religious narratives the bereaved embrace. The public pyres of Bali and Calcutta, where the first-born brings fire from the home fire to kindle the fire that will consume a parent’s body, are surrounded by liturgical and civic traditions. Elsewhere, however, cremation is practiced in private, the fire kept purposefully behind closed doors. Whereas the traditional funeral transports the corpse and mourners from parlor to altar, then to place of disposition, cremation, as it is practiced in the U.S., often routes around, not through, such stations in the pilgrimage. We miss most if not all of the journey, the drama and metaphor.

Of course, some of this has to do with consumer dissatisfaction with a mortuary marketplace more interested in sales than in service, more inclined toward the stuff

than the substance and toward Hallmark sentiments rather than real meaning. Still, a death in the family is not a retail event, rather a deeply human one. It involves essential duties, not accessories; fundamental rather than fashion concerns; core values rather than commodities.

For persons of faith the essential elements of a good funeral remain few and familiar: the dead pilgrim, the living to whom the death matters, and someone to broker the mystery between them—priest or pastor, rabbi or imam, venerable master or fellow pilgrim—and enunciate the new status of the soul. Last but not least among the essentials is the task at hand: to get the dead and the living where they need to be. For the former that means the tomb or fire or grave or sea. For the latter it means to the edge of the life they will be living without the deceased, whose blessed body is consigned to the elements and whose soul is commended to God. Everything else is accessory. Coffins and flowers, obits and eulogies, bagpipers and dove releases, organ music and stained glass windows, funeral homes and funeral directors—all accessories; though helpful certainly, comforting sometimes, maybe even edifying, whether costly or bargain priced, they are but accessories. Corpse and mourners, gospel and transport: these are the requisites. Everything else is incidental. To Christianize cremation requires only that Christians—clergy and people—treat it as an alternative to burial, rather than an alternative to bother. The fireside, like the graveside, is made holy by the death of saints, the witness of faithful pilgrims, and the religious context in which the living take leave of their dead.

Long writes:

Resistance to going the full distance with the dead will occasionally be encountered from some crematoriums, which are not accustomed to people who want to stay for the firing up of the retort, and some cemeteries, which view trudging to the grave as an inefficient use of employee time or don't like the idea of families being present for the dirt being placed on the coffin in the grave. These cemeteries much prefer for funeral processions to end not at graveside but in some plastic pseudo chapel where the ceremonies can be peremptorily put to an end and the worshipers dispatched without delay, thus freeing up the burial crew to get on with their business unimpeded. These so-called chapels—why mince words?—are Chapels of Convenience and Cathedrals of Funeralia Inter

ruptus. Tell the cemetery owner or crematorium manager, kindly of course, to step out of the way, that they are impeding the flow of traffic. You have been walking with this saint since the day of baptism; the least you can do is go all the way to the grave, to the end, with this child of God. They may refuse, but if enough clergy demand to be able to go the last few yards with the dead, change will happen.

So much of what I know of final things I have learned from the reverend clergy. These men and women of God drop what they're doing and come on the run when there is trouble. These are the local heroes who show up, armed only with faith, who respond to calls in the middle of the night, the middle of dinner, the middle of already busy days to bedsides and roadsides, intensive care and emergency rooms, nursing homes and hospice wards and family homes, to try and make some sense of senseless things. They are on the front lines, holy corpsmen in the flesh-and-blood combat between hope and fear. Their faith is contagious and emboldening. Their presence is balm and anointing. The Lutheran pastor who always sang the common doxology at graveside: "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow," his hymn sung into the open maw of unspeakable sadness, startling in its comfort and assurance. The priest who would intone the Gregorian chant and tribal Latin of the *In Paradisum* while leading the pallbearers to the grave, counting on the raised voice and ancient language to invoke the heavenly and earthly hosts. The young Baptist preacher who, at a loss for words, pulled out his harmonica and played the mournful and familiar notes of "Just As I Am" over the coffin of one of our town's most famous sinners. "Between the stirrup and the ground," he quietly promised the heart-sore family and upbraided the too eagerly righteous, "mercy sought and mercy found."

My friend Jake Andrews, an Episcopal priest, now dead for years but still remembered, apart from serving his little local parish, was chaplain to the fire and police departments and became the default minister, the go-to guy for the churchless and lapsed among our local citizenry. Father Andrews always rode in the hearse with me, whether the graveyard was minutes or hours away, in clement and inclement weather, and whether there were hundreds or dozens or only the two of us to hear, he would stand and read the holy script such as it had been given him to do. When cremation became, as it did, the norm among his townspeople and congregants, he would leave the living to the tea and cakes and ices in the parish hall and ride with me and the dead to the crematory. There he would perform his priestly offices with the sure faith and deep humanity that seems to me an imitation

of Christ.

It was Jake Andrews's belief that pastoral care included care of the saints he was called on to bury and cremate. Baptisms and weddings were, he said, "easy duties," whereas funerals were "the deep end of the pool." I think he had, as we all do, his dark nights of the soul, his wrestling with angels, his reasonable doubts. His favorite studies were on the book of Job. But still, he believed the dead to be alive in Christ. He met the mourners at the door and pressed the heavens with their lamentations. It was Jake who taught me the power of presence, the work of mercy in the showing up, pitching in, bearing our share of whatever burden, and going the distance with the living and the dead. He taught me that a living faith founded on a risen corpse and empty tomb ought not be estranged from death's rudiments and duties.

In the end Hughey MacSwiggan was scattered in Scotland. "He never made the trip but always wanted to go" is what his family told me. They knew my writerly duties often took me to the British Isles. "Take him with you the next time you go," his third wife said. And so I did. I'd been invited to launch a book at the Edinburgh Festival.

When the x-ray at the airport showed "some dense packaging" in my carry-on, I told the security guard it was Hughey MacSwiggan's cremated remains and asked if she'd like to inspect them further. She shook her head and let me pass. I did not declare Hughey at customs in Heathrow and kept my own counsel on the train ride north and checking in at the Channings Hotel. I considered the gardens off Princess Street or maybe some corner of the castle grounds, but the mid-August crowds made those sites impossible. I toyed with the notion of leaving him in a public house near Waverley Station on the theory that heaven for Hughey might mean that he could drink again.

But it was the view from Dean Bridge, the deep valley, the "dene" that names the place, the river working its way below under the generous overhang of trees—the valley of the shadow of death, I thought—that beckoned me further in my search. I worked my way down into Belgrave Crescent where I found an open, unlocked gate to the private gardens there. But it was a little too perfect, a little too rose-gardenish and manicured, and I was drawn by the sound of falling water. So I went out and around past the Dean Parish Church and the graveyard there.

I made my way down to the water by the footpath, and working back in the direction of the bridge I found a wee waterfall, apparently the site of an old mill. Kneeling to

my duties, I poured Hughey's ashes out—some into the curling top waters and the rest into the circling pool below. I remember the quick pearlescent cloud, the puff of white it made in the rush of current, almost like you'd see when salmon spawn. And watching what remained of him disappear downstream, what I thought of was the thing they said whenever the masked man rode off at the end of the cowboy show I watched as a boy: "A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and a hearty 'Hi-yo, Silver!' . . . The Lone Ranger!"

There goes Hughey now, I thought—hi-yo, Silver, away. The little bone fragments, bits and pieces of him, glistened in the gravel bed of the Waters of Leith while his cloud of dust quickly worked its way in the current downstream to the eventual river mouth and out, I supposed, into the Firth of Forth and the North Sea and the diasporic waters of the world. One with all of the elements now—the earth, wind and fire, the water and air—Hughey was like the Holy Spirit of God: everywhere or nowhere, in everything that lives or in nothing at all, endlessly with us or always alone; blessed and blissful, nonetheless I prayed, at his first glimpse of whatever is or isn't.