

A long drive with ashes

By [Larry Patten](#)

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My older sister drove. I sat in the front passenger seat, sometimes cradling my mother, sometimes resting her on the floorboard at my feet. It wasn't a long drive, but it felt like forever.

In the fall after Mom's death in August of 2013, we took her ashes to the Sacramento Valley National Cemetery, located between Sacramento and San Francisco along the Interstate 80 corridor. Her ashes would be buried beside her husband's ashes. Dad, who'd voluntarily joined the Army Air Corps before Pearl Harbor, had been in the ground at the military cemetery since mid-2012.

As a young adult I had start-and-stop chats with Dad about cremation. At first, he was against it. He was raised on conservative Christian values, which included a belief that cremation wasn't an acceptable option. When, as the biblical book of Revelation promised, believers would be raised from their graves, you better have a body available for the divine action. Somewhere along the line, Dad changed his mind. I have no idea when or why. Maybe Mom influenced him. Maybe—since struggling through the Great Depression was a lasting influence on all his financial decisions—he realized cremation could save a few bucks (even after death).

What about you? Will you be buried or cremated? Or have you avoided thinking about that? If you're Muslim, there is no discussion. The Islamic faith, like the Eastern Orthodox (a Christian church) and Orthodox Judaism, doesn't believe in cremation. What do you believe?

Perhaps burial of the body versus cremation doesn't matter to you. Mom, especially later in her life, said variations of, "I don't care what decisions you kids make, since I'll be dead and you can do whatever you want." Mostly, she said that with a smile. But she, like Dad, was influenced by those terrible, lean years of Depression and war, and where you spent money and how you saved money were strong influences. She chose which funeral home would handle her cremation because she liked the guy who came to her home to explain his services. His fees were also, let's be polite,

reasonably priced. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. No fuss, no muss. A penny saved is a penny earned.

Mom's cremains rested in a plastic-sided container about the size of two Kleenex tissue boxes. The forms prepared by the funeral home were taped to the sides. I don't recall crying, but I do recall wanting to keep a back-and-forth banter going with my sister as we drove to the cemetery. I didn't want to think; I just wanted it over with. When my sister stopped to buy flowers for Dad's gravesite near the cemetery, I resented—and was impressed by—her thoughtfulness. My resentment was based on desiring to get from Point A (acquiring the container at the funeral home) to Point B (handing the container to the proper authorities at the military cemetery) as quickly as possible. But I'm glad we stopped, and glad that we were able to place flowers at Dad's headstone. Soon enough, it would also be Mom's headstone.

In my work with hospice, I've known those that keep the ashes of their beloved on the mantel, or stored in a closet ("We'll be buried together when I die"), or in the bedroom on the dresser.

There are businesses that help people make "diamonds" from ashes. Sometimes, bits of the ash are nestled in a locket or other jewelry. There are families that divide the ashes among siblings. Ashes are spread in the mountains or on the ocean. Many of the grieving carefully follow legal guidelines as they honor a loved one's wishes while others casually skirt regulations—because they too are honoring final wishes.

[According to archeologists](#), the earliest known ceremonial cremations occurred at Lake Mungo in southeastern Australia about 40,000 years ago (give or take a bunch of centuries). Two discovered bodies—one female, one male—were nicknamed Mungo Woman and Mungo Man.

These early humans also had ritualistic burial practices; Mungo Woman was cremated, the remaining bones smashed, burned again, and then buried. Mungo Man's body had been covered with red ochre prior to burial. Anthropologists consider burying the dead an indicator of a spiritual belief system and a hallmark of modern humans.

Cremation is ancient. But it's also today's decision. I believe we honored Mom and Dad's wishes when we placed their ashes together. While I will never know the reasons Dad changed his views, I do know my parents were intentional with their "final" requests. It was one of the many ways they honored their children. Mom may

have joked about not caring what we did, but that was a lovely lie. She—and Dad—helped us every step of the way, in life and in death.

So, I return to my questions: what do you believe and what do you want done with your remains?

A lot of folks, just like me, have driven or will drive toward a cemetery. For all of the sadness that journey held, knowing we were doing what Mom wanted brought just enough comfort.

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