

On thoughtfulness and reunions

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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My friend told me a lovely story today. Over the weekend she received a letter from a stranger, and the opening line read, "I hope this is not intrusive." The letter was from a person working with the state hospital; the hospital has hundreds of containers of people's cremated remains, and they are attempting to return them to the family of the deceased.

My friend learned that the hospital had her great-grandmother's remains; would she like them? She said yes, and plans to take them to the cemetery where her mother and grandmother are buried. She will go with her daughter and granddaughter to the graveside, and there will gather six generations of strong, beautiful women.

As my friend told me this story, I got a little teary. Maybe it was the thoughtfulness of the gesture. I think that's part of it, but part of it too is this strange thing I have about reunions, even beyond the grave. (Or at the grave, in this case.)

Now I don't believe that those cremated remains or any decaying body of flesh and bone have any power in them. There is no life there; they are going back to the dust from whence they came. The souls that inhabited those bodies have gone on, I believe, and while the soul makes its home in skin and sinew, it is not confined there. The souls of my friend's mother and grandmother and great-grandmother have gone on.

And yet. And yet there is a poignancy to reuniting these ashes with those of a daughter and granddaughter. I have no idea what happens when we die. Maybe this faith thing has been one big crap shoot and when it's over, it's over. Or maybe we fall asleep for a while, and wake up when Gabriel blows that horn. Or maybe we die, and boom we go to heaven, and the reunion is instantaneous.

If we die and sleep for an eon, imagine the waking up. Imagine my friend's great-grandmother waking up, and those ashes and pulverized bones coming together again, kneaded back into vibrant form; imagine her waking up and seeing her daughter and granddaughter with her.

Wouldn't that be something.

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