

Horizontal mysteries

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

*Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality*, by Thomas Lynch

For as long as I can remember, I have been uneasy around undertakers. Part of it, I am sure, is because I do not look forward to requiring their professional services. Accepting the inevitability of death is one thing, but handling the details is another. I dread deciding between burial and cremation, steel coffin and pine box, for myself or for anyone I love. My appointment with some undertaker somewhere is only a matter of time, but until then I am trying to keep my distance.

Since I am an ordained minister, this is not always easy to do. I have taken part in a lot of funerals, which means that I have spent a lot of time with undertakers. I have sniffed the tiled rooms where they embalm the dead, and peered into the cosmetic kits they use to make the face of death look as calm as possible. I have walked with undertakers through rooms full of caskets, and run my hand over the satin linings as they have invited me to do. I have handed them a dead person's last suit of clothes, along with a pair of polished shoes that will never touch the ground again.

On such occasions my unease has been all the more apparent because these unordained ministers do not share it. They really are at home in funeral homes. Dead people do not frighten them any more than grieving live people do. Like Zen masters whose path to enlightenment includes contemplation of a corpse, they seem to have made peace not only with the idea of death but also with its physical realities. I have often wondered how life looks to someone so at ease with death, but I have never had the nerve to ask.

Now Thomas Lynch has answered all of my questions, plus some that never occurred to me. *Bodies in Motion and at Rest* is the second collection of essays by this funeral director from Milford, Michigan, who is also a poet published on both sides of the Atlantic. His first collection of essays, *The Undertaking*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, and it is difficult to imagine that this present volume will not follow suit.

Hailed as "a cross between Garrison Keillor and William Butler Yeats," Lynch is living proof of his thesis that familiarity with the facts of death improves one's capacity for the wonders of life. The son of a funeral director, he grew up in a funeral home where he learned that "there is nothing like the sight of a dead human body to assist the living in separating the good days from the bad ones." Lynch is the first to admit that he has known both. The essays in this book contain wrenching accounts of his and his son's battles with addiction as well as luminous tales of love between husband, wife, parent and child.

In a provocative essay called "Wombs," he compares the tender sex education he received from his mother when he was 12 to the more graphic version given him by Sister Jean Therese, one of the "blue nuns" responsible for his Catholic education. When the good sister had finished her explanation, Lynch recalls, "she pulled me to herself and hugged me--my face buried deep in the space between her breasts, my cheek pressed against the heavy crucifix her order wore--I was not scarred for life but was, ever after that, a fool for love."

He goes on to write one of the most intriguing essays on abortion that I have ever read. Pointing out that he is the father of one daughter and three sons, he says that he favors both life and choice. Above all, he wants justice for all of his children. While he is inclined "to march in favor of a woman's right to choose a safe, legal and affordable medical procedure to abort her maternity," he wonders why his sons do not have a similar right. Should they become fathers, he observes, they will be required by law to support their children for at least 18 years. With unsettling logic, Lynch wants to know why they too may not "choose a safe, legal and affordable legal procedure to terminate, for reasons that range from good to not so good, their paternity? Is choice good for one and all or only one and a half of the population?"

Sex is a frequent topic in this book, since for Lynch sex and death are "difficult twins." Bordering the voids between human being and human ceasing to be, sex and death are both over before you know it, he says. "Both leave you wide-eyed, blinking back your disbelief, out of breath, fumbling for a cigarette and something to say. Both bring you face-to-face with your maker. Both are horizontal mysteries."

A true incarnationalist, Lynch understands that bodies are God's chief way of getting to us. The revelations that come to us through birth, love, illness, sex, hunger, longing and death are the ones that raise the eternal questions for us: Who are we? Why are we here? Why must we die? What's next?

Since Lynch is a poet (and a good one), readers need not fear lumbering answers to such questions. Instead, they may expect a poet's eye for image and a poet's ear for language, as well as a poet's ability to hold open the door to meaning without shoving anyone through. While the irony of Lynch's dual careers is not lost on him, he does not find the combination as strange as some of his colleagues do. The quiet truth of the matter, he says, is that

the arrangement of flowers and homages, casseroles and sympathies; the arrangement of images and idioms, words on a page--it is all the same--an effort at meaning and metaphor, an exercise in symbolic and ritualized speech, the heightened acoustics of language raised against what is reckoned unspeakable--faith and heartbreak, desire and pain, love and grief, the joyous and sorrowful mysteries by which we keep track of our lives and times.

This book not only ended my unease with undertakers; it also deepened my ease with my own end.