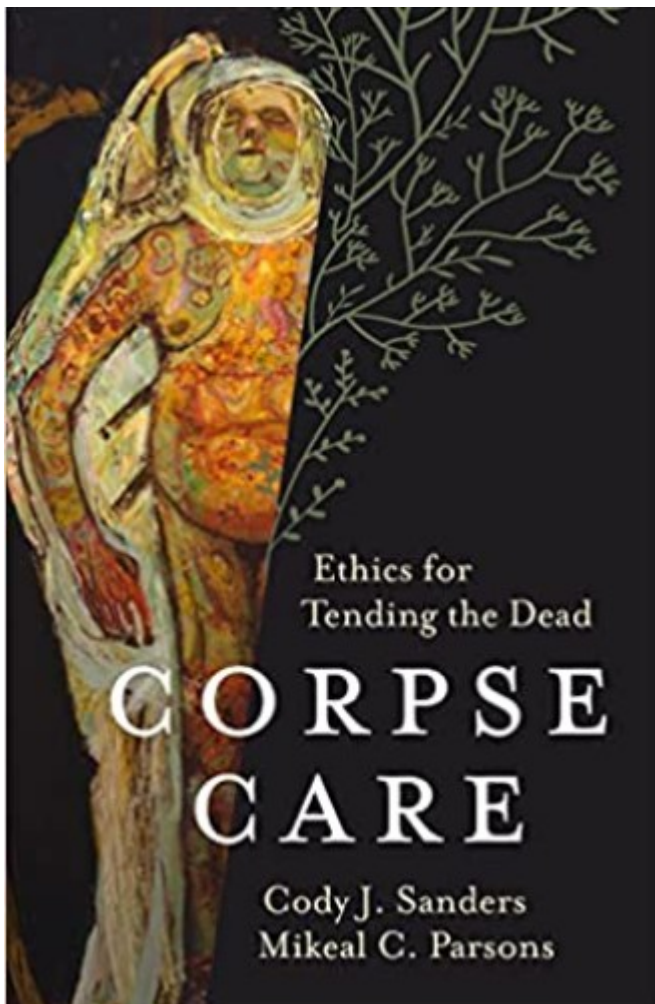


How we care for dead bodies—or don't

Cody Sanders and Mikeal Parsons yearn for a better theology around death, dying, and the body.

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

In Review



Corpse Care

Ethics for Tending the Dead

By Cody J. Sanders and Mikeal C. Parsons

Fortress

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When Michael Brown was shot by police in Ferguson, Missouri, his dead body lay on the ground for four hours before city authorities attended to it. Members of his community stood vigil by his body the whole time, and they followed it to the police station after the coroner arrived to take it away. In Black communities, Cody Sanders and Mikeal Parsons explain, there is often a deep spiritual and emotional attachment to the body of a person who has breathed their last breath. A common question asked after hearing about a death is “Who’s got the body?”

White Americans tend to have more indifference or even antipathy toward dead bodies. For Christians, this may stem from Jesus’ hyperbolic admonition to let the dead bury their dead—or from Puritanism, which regarded the body as a mere husk and elevated the soul as the essential and immortal element of humanity. Whatever the cause, Sanders and Parsons believe that a culture’s slighting of corpses reveals a diminished regard for bodies, dead or alive—and that this points to an underdeveloped theology of the body.

Practices in handling dead bodies have long differed between Black and White communities, but they have one important thing in common: for many centuries, most deaths happened in homes. A death was considered good when the dying person was at home, surrounded by family and other loved ones, while breathing their final breaths. Once death arrived, the body was prepared for burial by family members. Usually the women in a household would wash and prepare the dead body for burial. Men would build a coffin and dig the burial hole.

This domestic pattern began to shift with the Civil War. Suddenly thousands of soldiers were killed hundreds of miles from home. Usually they were buried near the battlefield en masse. But some came from families that were wealthy enough to pay practitioners of a burgeoning enterprise to embalm the body and ship it back home for burial in a family or church graveyard. Those who could afford it would travel to the battlefield themselves to retrieve their war dead, but the bodies would still need embalming for the long journey home.

Before the Civil War, embalming was restricted to medical training facilities to preserve bodies for exploration and teaching purposes. The practice of embalming caught on after the war years, and Sanders and Parsons trace how it developed into what we now know as the funeral home. The first national meeting of funeral home directors took place in 1882, and in due time, embalming by deathcare professionals became a nearly universal practice. It became the norm for bodies to be taken out of homes as soon as possible after death and handled by professionals, who became known as undertakers.

As the medical profession advanced in the 20th century, sick and dying people increasingly were hospitalized. As a result, fewer deaths took place in homes. The corpse became farther removed from the living, even though there continued to be a deep interest in being able to view the body one last time.

The next change in the handling of dead bodies was the increasing use of cremation in place of traditional burials. In the late 19th century, the emergence of this practice smacked of xenophobia. Public crematoriums were built in some cities to dispose of the bodies of immigrants who died of infectious diseases. A century later, many funeral homes advocated cremation for the remains of gay men who died during the AIDS crisis. But cremation has now reached such a level of public acceptance that it is the choice of a majority of Americans. Within a decade, the authors predict, three-quarters of Americans will likely choose cremation.

Racism is an important theme that runs through *Corpse Care*. White Americans have a history of shamelessly desecrating the burial grounds of Indigenous folks in order to prompt them to move, thus denying them access to the land they deem holy. The lynching of Black folks in the South was a horrible method of social control, and Sanders and Parsons detail some of the appalling ways the bodies of lynched people were treated by their White killers. A reckoning with corpses in our own time demands coming to terms with this shameful history and calling for the bodies of all people to be respected while alive and honored in death.

Sanders and Parsons yearn for a better theology of the body, and they want families and communities of faith to take more responsibility for the handling of dead bodies. But *Corpse Care* should not be read as just another takedown of the funeral-industrial complex. The authors are pursuing something deeper and richer. They want to restore the natural rhythm of birth, death, decay, and renewal. "It is from the dust of the ground, *ha 'adamah*, that God forms the human, *ha 'adam*," they

write. “From humus to human to humus again. That is the theological cycle of the body.” From dust we’ve come and to dust we go again: this is the connection between dead bodies and the earth, and its restoration is the impulse behind the book.

There are ecological issues at stake. Cremation uses 92 cubic meters of natural gas per body, producing as many emissions as a 500-mile auto trip. The bones that are pulverized after cremation consist mostly of sodium, with a very high pH level that is harmful to plant growth. Traditional burials take up too much space, and the use of vaults thwarts the deterioration of bodies and their return to the soil. Both cremation and traditional burials deny the reality that human remains (so long as they aren’t injected with toxic chemicals) enrich the soil naturally, without doing damage to the ecosystem.

Sanders and Parsons advocate natural burials: those that use biodegradable shrouds or containers without vaults or burial liners and no embalming fluids. Four options that Sanders and Parsons outline are green burials, conservation burials, human composting, and water cremation (alkaline hydrolysis), each of which has varying degrees of availability from community to community and state to state.

Natural burials typically don’t include permanent stones or monuments. Conservation burials use only natural markers, which eventually are taken over by nature. Water cremation uses less energy than fire cremation, although it consumes a great deal of water—another conservation issue. Because it involves washing much of the remains down the drain, it has been condemned by the Roman Catholic Church as failing to respect humans’ creation in the image of God.

New creative methods of disposing of human remains may yet emerge. The authors advocate three criteria for the handling of corpses: practices that take our embodiment seriously, even in death; means that work with the earth and its natural processes rather than against it; and methods that encourage an ethic of communal care in death as in life. This is, at least in part, the work of the church: “It is time for churches to care about our deathcare choices again. What is done with our corpses is a theological concern with implications for how we see ourselves as human beings within a context of belongingness to the rest of the planet.”