

# Let's Talk

Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

Issue 22.1, Lent 2017

## Death and Dying

## **Table Of Contents**

<b>Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory? . . . . .</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>On the Way: The Last Enemy to be Destroyed . . . . .</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>As I See It: Born, Dying, Dead, Buried, and Resurrected . . . . .</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Identity in Place: A Matter of Life and Death . . . . .</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Where Does the Stepfamily Sit? Pastoral Dimensions of Funeral Seating Arrangements . . . . .</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Green Burial and Spiritual Communities: One Earth, One Movement . . . . .</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Minister in the morgue: A reflection on the caring for the bodies of the dead . . . . .</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Review of Thomas W. Laqueur's The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains . . . . .</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Review of Dale C. Allison's Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things . . . . .</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>An Excerpt from "Peace at the Last: Visitation with the Dying" . . . . .</b>	<b>33</b>

## Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?

<http://mcsletstalk.org/deaths-sting-grave-thy-victory/>

No one captures the squeamish nature of this issue's topic better than Woody Allen, whose quote tops a (shamelessly) googled list of famous quotes about death: "I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

The duty of showing up to the sites of death—hospice centers, bedsides, funeral homes, church parlors, to name a few—falls, in part, upon the church. Church professionals are there when *it happens*, or at the least are called into conversation with death and all its sting. A minister's identity and relationship to the craft is intricately woven into the reality of death.

As our writers articulate the over the course this issue, meaningful pastoral presence within these spaces is important, and the effects of such a presence last well beyond the immediate events. Invitation into these spaces is among the most privileged components of pastoral identity.

What follows, then, is a series of arguments for serious theological examination and intention employed within these death-spaces. This particular constellation of articles orients and affirms the reader *toward* death, which is the opposite of the innate human response known in the discomfort of Allen's quote.

In addition to approaching this issue as scholars and theologians, our writers pursue death and its implications from the perspective of those who've occupied these spaces over time in a seasoned capacity.

Our regular columnists, Ben Dueholm and Frank Senn, lay the foundation for the material that follows. Articulating what is at stake at the core of this issue, [Dueholm writes, "death, it must be admitted, is on a pretty impressive run versus humanity"](#). The all-time record stands at roughly 100,000,000,000 - 1 (I'll leave the cases of Enoch, Elijah, and the Blessed Virgin Mary to the experts)." He examines the ways we do and don't—and should and shouldn't—control death, reminding us that we are always suspended between freedom and contingency.

[Senn, likewise, wades through 20,000 years of burial rituals and death practices](#), drawing encyclopedic attention to the historic realities of dealing with decaying human bodies. "When it comes to death," Senn writes, "we tend to focus on the soul, about which we know little, and ignore the body, about which we know a great deal."

[Gordon Straw offers a reorientation of death's finality by examining the importance of place within the identities of Native American communities](#). Straw writes, "It is a fundamental belief that the continuity of a place is founded in the interplay of relations of history, peoples, nations, geography, spirituality, and living in a good way in that place. To isolate any of these relations and give priority to it destroys place and replaces it with an isolated, abstract conception." Expanding the implications of death into the realm of place, Straw demonstrates the disruption of identity that takes hold after death. Death's sting is felt when not only human lives are ended, but also when physical places are disrupted.

Church professionals know that rituals surrounding death can have lasting impacts on the relationships of the living. [Amy Zeittlow draws on her research with blended families and their experiences of funeral seating arrangements](#). Details such as where step-children sit at a funeral are easily underrated but of terrific consequence. Zeittlow's insights prove an invaluable tool in dealing with the seemingly innocuous yet ongoing realities of the living as they ritualize the dead.

Suzanne Kelly, whose experience includes rigorous academic examination of our topic and the daily hands-on perspective of running a green burial ground, explores the untapped opportunities arising between the aims of green burial practices and spiritual communities. [“The green burial movement is, of course, about redirecting our deathcare practices in an attempt to mend them,” she argues](#). “But the movement is also a repair at the level of meaning.”

While Kelly locates repair in the points of connection between the sacred and the secular, [Nathan Corl Minnich calls into question the insidious way in which cultural expectations and personal discomforts can dislocate theology from death practices](#). Minnich's experience as a fifth-generation funeral director and an ordained pastor lends him unique perspective into the junction between funeral practices and ministry. The way we care for our dead shapes how we live together in Christian hope, he reminds us. “Helping to express our grief by remembering one who has died—publicly within the church, and with the body present—may revive the community's participation in mourning. Interacting with the body acknowledges that death is real, upsetting, disrupting, and full of chaos; yet, by proclamation of the church, it is defeated!”

Two reviewers examine recently published texts that dig even more deeply into the sting of death, reveling in the conclusions of authors who employ curiosity and ambiguity in their search:

Seth Moland-Kovash, reviewing *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* by Thomas W. Laqueur, asks, [“What meaning do we give to life by our rituals?”](#) This text, he argues, demonstrates the tangled nature of ritualization surrounding death and the way in which life proceeds for the living thereafter.

[Erin E. Clausen reviews \*Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things\* by Dale C. Allison](#), an eschatologically oriented, and imaginatively driven, text which conveys the challenge of evidence in death examinations. Wading into this work, which the author states is “intentionally and necessarily incomplete” from the outset, requires patience and the occasional risk of ambiguity. Our reviewer offers advice for those readers seeking methodological clarity: “Allison's guiding principle is that which offers hope.”

Finally, in an introductory passage from [Peace at the Last](#), graciously provided for reproduction here by Augsburg Fortress, [Paul Palumbo reflects on the often-underestimated power of accompaniment of the dying](#) in a church that, itself, is experiencing a sense of loss in these days of declining membership. He writes, “I also believe this: if the church dedicated itself to just one thing, to accompanying the dying well, it would not be wrapped up in the anxiety of whether or not the church itself was going to survive.” Written as a liturgically and artistically oriented resource for use by laypeople and pastors during the visitation of the dying, *Peace at the Last* may be one of the least assuming, yet most timeless, books recently published for pastoral use.

All of the articles in this issue are provocative, and we anticipate that their differing viewpoints will give rise to fruitful conversations about Christian responses to the reality of death. We invite you to join in that conversation. Let's talk!

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## On the Way: The Last Enemy to be Destroyed

by Benjamin Dueholm

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/way-last-enemy-destroyed/>

The works of Belinda Carlisle were preserved for just this moment: As the credits roll, “Heaven is a Place on Earth” sparkles to life; a sundrenched California is glimpsed in long view; in close-up, a dose of lethal chemicals course through an IV and a coffin descends into the earth, as the consciousness of the euthanized appears in that California landscape as a young woman, ready for a new life in the digital hereafter. The protagonists dance in an eternal youth, and the camera pans back on a server farm glowing with thousands of encoded souls of the departed, like candles in a vast cathedral. Heaven, a place on earth.

The anthology series *Black Mirror* is alarmingly astute on many aspects of our rapidly changing relationship with technology, and perhaps never more than in this episode, “San Junipero.” Like all science fiction, it is most arresting when it is most plausible. The near-future setting of “San Junipero,” with its routine euthanasia and digital immortality, is closely continuous with our world. And within that setting, it explores significant questions of meaning, loyalty, life and death. Crucial to the story are two modes of death: the first is bodily, administered by a medical facility. The second is digital, available by request of the translated soul that has tired of life in its virtual environment--a second death, as it were. In both cases, death is administered at will; contingency in dying has been eliminated.

That this would be a sort of progress is hard to deny. In the Great Litany, we beseech God to free us “from an unprepared and evil death.” I remember catching on those words when I was new in church, and when I was reading Dante’s depictions of the late-repentant and unshriven in Purgatory. Those folks had a long, long climb ahead of them. The threat of an unexpected, unplanned, unworthy death was a threat to the very coherence of life, the classic moment of crisis that could obliterate so much godly effort. The ancient Stoics proposed suicide as a way out of that evil. If you can’t beat the world’s evils and misfortunes, you can at least deprive them of the humiliation they will impose on you. Perhaps we will be in a position to learn from them again. What bodily evils could be endured when leaving them is so simple? What pains of soul--what anger, dissipation, let alone boredom--could be so great as to inspire anyone to delete themselves from eternal youth and sunshine?

Death, it must be admitted, is on a pretty impressive run versus humanity. The all-time record stands at roughly 100,000,000,000 - 1 (I’ll leave the cases of Enoch, Elijah, and the Blessed Virgin Mary to the experts). Death racked up some more wins in the 2016 elections, as Colorado voted to allow medical euthanasia and three states affirmed capital punishment. We’ve managed to create some very impressive adaptations in the course of this rather dismal record--cave paintings, the aria, blackjack, etc. But it is hard to guess what will happen to these adaptations as we progressively remove contingency from death. What will life look like when death has become instrumental? What would death look like if it were to become the therapeutic step into the Singularity?

The second question is hypothetical. The first, increasingly, is not. Having gained the means to rationalize death, even if we can’t defer it past a certain point, we are accountable for how we will use those means.

Our experiments with execution and euthanasia, while they are promoted on different places in our political spectrum, should be judged together in this regard, and they are ominous. We promise ourselves something antiseptic and rational--the swift purging of a defective cell in the social body, the painless exit from degenerative disease, depression, or even addiction--and end up revising our picture of humanity in the process. It is not an accident that advocacy against both capital punishment and medical suicide focus heavily on disability, poverty, and racism. Where our society diminishes the humanity of people, the legal and medical systems all too frequently oblige. The lives taken and forfeited in these ways will, and already do, shift our notions of what kinds of lives are worth living. More to the point, they will shift our notions of what kinds of lives are worth collective effort and sacrifice to preserve. Our long-term care system is already approaching crisis and our retirement programs are continually threatened with cuts. Physician-assisted suicide will eventually appear to be a responsible way to manage the fact of an aging population. Capital punishment can easily be promoted on budgetary grounds as well, after the legal rights of the convicted are adequately pruned back.

That this deployment of death will move slowly, rationally, and perhaps inevitably, is not a reason for Christians to make peace with it. Fear and suffering exist to be borne together, not privatized. Life, however threatened or prolonged, needs a shape and a purpose, even if it is one we can only fully grasp in the face of contingency and a world that will never be under our command. The hopes and fears written into our scriptures and our liturgies will risk seeming quaint, as they always have. But perhaps that is what will leave those hopes and fears open to people who are threatened in very fundamental ways by our brisk and efficient use of the machinery of death. Contingency is the ground of fear, but also of freedom. And heaven will still have to be heaven before it can ever be glimpsed as a place on earth.

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## **As I See It: Born, Dying, Dead, Buried, and Resurrected**

by Frank C. Senn

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/see-born-dying-dead-buried-resurrected/>

This issue of *Let's Talk* is about death. As I see it, when it comes to an open discussion of death, which affects us all in a most direct way---in our bodies---we practice avoidance. The church participates in this avoidance by not paying enough attention to the body in our ministries to the dying and to the dead. We give little attention to our bodies generally, in spite of the fact that we are using them constantly. Perhaps this is why there is currently so much interest in “embodiment” in our society, especially in somatic psychotherapy. We have neglected to pay attention to what is going on in our own bodies that affects our minds (what we think) and our souls (who we essentially are).<sup>[1]</sup> When it comes to death we tend to focus on the soul, about which we know little, and ignore the body, about which we know a great deal.

In this column, I focus on the body. As concerns our life in the body and our life before God, death is the midpoint on a continuum between being born and dying, and being buried and raised up in the resurrection. I offer here some brief reflections on each of these stages. I will reference the ritual acts that accompany each of these stages. Rituals provide ways of dealing, among other things, with the threats to life and the overcoming of these threats. Our capacity to ritualize is a neurological function generated by the reptilian brain stem.<sup>[2]</sup> One might say that it is our nature to ritualize as a way of dealing with major issues in life. I will not comment in detail on the rites in this brief article, since commentary is readily available in liturgical manuals.<sup>[3]</sup>

### **Being Born**

The origins of life are a mystery still being probed in evolutionary biology. What we can know with some certainty is that water and oxygen are needed for microbes to flourish. This applies to all life forms. In Genesis 2 the Lord God sculpts the man from earthen materials, but only after ground water is provided from a spring in the desert. Water must be added to shape the clay. And then the Lord God breathes life---oxygen---into the inanimate object he has created.

The science writer Tyler Volk writes, “Although the when and where of life’s origins remain enigmatic, the origin of biological death is quite certain. It began with life. Simply put, life’s very fecundity made it impossible for every microbe to live forever.”<sup>[4]</sup> The unlimited growth of life would completely overtake the planet and life would eventually be unsustainable.

There are various ways for bacteria to be killed by agents outside themselves. But microbiologists have proposed that cells sacrifice themselves through programmed death so that life can continue to flourish on this planet at a sustainable level. Death is written into all life forms, from the simplest amoeba to the most complex primates. It is thus true, as the medieval hymn says, “*Media vita in morte sumus*” (“In the midst of life we are in death”). Martin Luther emended this popular medieval hymn in his chorale version, “In the very midst of life/ snares of death surround us” (*Lutheran Service Book* 755). This is the condition of life in the body, from the simplest to the most complex life forms, including human life. We harbor death within us from the moment of conception.



We wonder: wasn't there some original immortality, at least for our primal parents? Actually, according to biologist William Clark, programmed cell death seems to have arisen at about the same time as cells began experimenting with reproduction.<sup>[5]</sup> Perhaps one legacy of this original immortality is the so-called immortality enzyme telomerase, which is found in the cells of testes and ovaries. Absent the normal cells that age and die, telomerase allows cancerous cells to reproduce without limit. The unlimited growth of cells would obstruct the vital organs in the body, causing death without medical interference. Programmed cell death ensures that we will not be immortal, and also that runaway cancerous cells will be held in check. All this death in our bodies functions in support of ongoing maintenance of normal life.

This also means that death is connected with sex. In the insect world there are examples of copulation leading to death. The female praying mantis bites off the head of her mate. The penis of the honeybee, who mates the queen in midair, breaks off inside her body, blocking the entry of the next horny honeybee, and he plunges to his death. Human beings have more opportunities for sex and reproduction than most other animals. But not every sperm fertilizes every egg. As Dorion Sagan writes, "Of the trillions of cells of our bodies, only a few sperm and eggs survive into the next generation. In coming together in reproductive sex, the sex cells leave male and female bodies to grow a fresh being."<sup>[6]</sup>

Programmed cell death shapes our human form in the womb. The most celebrated form of this is the death of cells in the embryo that sculpt human hands from paddles into separate digits that form fingers. Tyler Volk reports that as life develops in the womb there is an overproduction of cells and they need to be culled. The large and complex human brain is especially blessed with an overproduction of cells, some of which need to be eliminated. Also, neurons compete to reach particular cells in the brain. Volk reports that we grow about twice as many fetal neurons as the brain needs. The targeted cells secrete survival chemicals to help the neurons reach them. Some neurons reach their targets; others don't and they die.<sup>[7]</sup> This shaping of the body in the womb continues until we are fully formed and ready for birth.

It is nothing short of miraculous that the formation of the human fetus safely occurs and the baby thrives in the womb. But awareness of all the cell death going on during the gestation period reminds us that pregnancy is a risky business, both for the mother and for the child. Prenatal care has reduced the risk but not eliminated it. Death rates for mothers and babies in many parts of the world are still high.

The pregnant woman needs to be surrounded and supported by the faith community, especially in situations where she is separated geographically from extended family members. She and the father should know that they are included in the prayers of the church. Thanksgiving should be offered for the safe delivery of the child but also for the life of the mother. This was the rite of the "churching of women" forty days after childbirth, a form of which is still provided in *The Book of Common Prayer* ("Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child," pp. 439-446).

## Dying

Once we are born, our cells continue to die. It is estimated that one hundred thousand cells die every second in the adult human body, which also means that another one hundred thousand cells are born every second to replace the ones that die. This contributes to our growth and to the many changes in our body over a lifetime. We retain some familiar features as we mature, and our minds are archives of memories. But our bodies are changing constantly.

But we will not continue to evolve forever because there is the issue of senescence or aging. As we get older our physical changes include the loss of muscle mass and the wrinkling of the skin. It takes more effort to fight gravity. Body parts begin to wear out. In some species life senescence and death happens as soon as reproduction has occurred. The Pacific salmon fights upstream to lay eggs and die. This is not true of all species. Mammals in particular must hang around to nourish and wean the young. Their reproduction is strung out one or two births at a time over a longer period of time. The higher primates live to see several generations of offspring.

Humans are in the upper echelons of longevity among the earth's creatures, although not the longest. Psalm 90:10 suggests, "As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years." This pales in comparison with the lifespans of the patriarchs and matriarchs in the Book of Genesis, much less the original immortality, but it is the psalmist's estimate of the actuarial tables of his time, and it is close to accurate.

Human longevity of 80 and 90 years is not unknown in past ages. There were simply more circumstances that kept humans from attaining that age (e.g., disease, natural disasters, warfare), so the average lifespans were briefer. Well did the Great Litany include the petition, "From a sudden and evil death, deliver us, good Lord." A good death was one in which there was time to prepare to die, surrounded by family members, and making last will and testament provisions for the living. Today advances in medicine, hygiene, sanitation, combined with better diets and exercise, give many of us the possibility of attaining the Bible's fourscore years. But eventually the Grim Reaper comes calling, and the experience of dying shows that, when the end comes, our body goes downhill fast.

Cedric Mims has described the science of the body's process of shutting down in great detail,<sup>[8]</sup> which I have summarized in my book on *Embodied Liturgy* and won't repeat here.<sup>[9]</sup> But essentially the body begins to die when it is deprived of oxygen. Different cells in different parts of the body require more or less oxygen. If the heart stops, circulation stops and oxygen is not distributed throughout the body. This is clinical death, and it is potentially reversible if CPR is performed quickly enough. The brain requires a lot of oxygen and has little in reserve. Deprived of oxygen the brain shuts down in a matter of 4-6 minutes. This is biological death, which is not reversible.

Because of the uncertainty of how imminent death may be, at the first signs of decline into the pattern of dying, the pastor should be with the one who is dying, offering an opportunity for confession and absolution (in private), the reception of Holy Communion if the dying person can swallow (also offered to family members), and the commendation of the dying (which brings great comfort to both the dying and the living).

## **Death**

Upon death, the body cools down to room temperature and begins to decompose quickly. The millions of living organisms that live in the intestines began to break down their host by feeding on other organs in the body. The skin changes color, bloating occurs, and gas is emitted, causing odors. In ancient societies without refrigeration the body had to be disposed of as quickly as possible. Embalming, which was developed by the ancient Egyptians to preserve the body for more extended funeral rites, removes the body fluids and the intestinal organs, the sources of corruption. Athanasius of Alexandria, an Egyptian,

understood this process when he wrote, "You must know...that the corruption which had set in was not external to the body but established within it."<sup>[10]</sup>

Burial practices are probably the oldest human or humanoid rituals. There is archaeological evidence of elaborate Neanderthal burials 28,000 years ago! At a site called Sungir in Russia, objects were interred with the bodies of an elderly man, an adolescent boy, and a younger girl---beads made of mammoth tusks and polar fox teeth, and ivory pins and carvings. Perhaps many had been attached to clothing that has long since decomposed.<sup>[11]</sup> In the study of diverse human societies, the most important archaeological finds come from tombs. Human beings have lovingly prepared their dead for burial and made provision to keep the body intact as long as possible, unless cremation was practiced. But there were more reasons for cremation than simply the practical. Among the Hindus destroying the body encouraged the soul to move on to its next incarnation. The Egyptians, on the other hand, wanted the soul to find its body.

In traditional societies, the family prepared the body for public viewing before burial or cremation by washing it, anointing it, and dressing it. This is what the myrrh-bearing women intended to do with the body of Jesus when they went to his tomb early in the morning on the third day after his death. Today we turn over those preparations to the funeral director. But there is no reason family members cannot deal with the body of their loved one themselves, at least with the guidance of the mortician. Families usually provide clothing, jewelry, and other objects that might be placed in the coffin. When my father died, his grandchildren placed several of his favorite objects in the coffin, including his TV remote control.

Christianity developed funeral liturgies that retained some aspects of the pagan practices of the societies from which Christians came, but added its own unique practices related to the hope of the resurrection and the expectation of eternal life.<sup>[12]</sup> Psalms and alleluias accompanied the funeral procession, rather than dirges and laments. Like pagan Romans, Christians gathered in cemeteries outside the cities to remember their dead with a funeral meal. This was not the *Refrigerium*, but the Eucharist---celebrated on the *mensa* of the grave. But Christians also scandalized pagans by bringing dead bodies into their places of worship. Basilicas were erected over the graves of martyrs, and the remains of saints were entombed in altars or in the floor of the church building or in the surrounding cemetery. Churches now offer columbaria for the repose of ashes of the deceased. Christianity's focus on the body has been as pervasive in death as in life.

## **Burial or Cremation?**

The normative Christian practice has been a funeral liturgy in the church followed by burial. A funeral liturgy, as opposed to a memorial service, requires the body to be present. There has been a growing preference in our society for cremation and memorial services, rather than inhumation (burial) and funerals (the body present). This is because cremation is cheaper, and memorial services can be arranged at everyone's convenience. Funerals are usually arranged within days of the death, since the body of the deceased cannot be preserved indefinitely.

Actually, funeral/burial or cremation/memorial is a false alternative. The body can be cremated as well as buried after a funeral liturgy. Churches and some funeral homes are making available coffin shells in which a wooden casket is placed that will be burned with the body (or buried). Barring this coffin shell, an ample funeral pall can cover the entire coffin. Anyway, what's shameful about a simple pine box,

perhaps with a cross carved into the cover?

Some people are interested in “green” burials in which the body is allowed to return to the soil via worms and microbes and “planted” under trees whose roots will be nourished by the decaying corpse. This means rejecting the use of (expensive) concrete vaults and metal coffins in favor of a wooden box put into a hole in the ground. This may not doable in every cemetery, but one can find cemeteries in which it is allowed. I’ve attended two burials (one in Indiana, the other in Virginia) in which the deceased bodies were buried in pine boxes in a hole in the ground. The mourners at the burials also took turns shoveling spades of dirt onto the coffin and filling the hole. The proclamation in the Order for the Burial of the Dead that the body of so-and-so is “laid to rest in the sure and certain of the resurrection to eternal life” is all the more powerful if the body is actually being laid to rest.

## **Resurrection**

When it comes to the so-called “afterlife,” people have all kinds of notions about this. Some people believe in reincarnation—that after death our soul migrates into another body, perhaps some other animal form. Christians do not believe in reincarnation. Nor do we believe in an immortal soul, about which the Bible is mostly silent. The Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds express the biblical and Christian hope of the resurrection of the dead, specifically the resurrection of the body.

This hope and expectation grew in the history of ancient Israel. Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones is a great vision of the resurrection of the body in which the Spirit or Breath of God is breathed into the raised bodies by the prophet to reanimate them (Ezekiel 37). We Christians do not believe that we have a divine spark within us that gives us immortality. There’s no immortal part of us waiting to be rid of the shell of the body. We do have a soul (*psyche*). The soul is who we are as a person---our personality, one might say. But who we are is inseparable from the body---this tangible but ever-changing body that has borne our scars and tears, and inevitably affected our souls with its traumas.

Eternal life is a gift of God. It is also an expression of love that God does not want to lose the creatures made in God’s own image. The God who created us in the first place will recreate us in the last place, with a glorified body and a purified soul joined together.

We have a hope in the resurrection of the body, but no experience of it. The only resurrection we know of so far in human history is Christ’s. People have been resuscitated. Even Jesus’s friend Lazarus was resuscitated. But resuscitation is not the same as resurrection. One of the interesting features of the resurrection stories is that Jesus’s friends and disciples did not always immediately recognize him until he did something familiar, like calling Mary Magdalene by name or breaking bread with the two disciples at Emmaus. These stories suggest that our resurrection bodies will be in continuity with our present bodies but also in discontinuity. Something about our physical appearance will be familiar to those who knew us, but, as St. Paul says, when the archangel blows the trumpet and the dead are raised, “we shall all be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:50).

Whatever the change will be for each of us, it will not be incorporeal. We will not enter eternity or inhabit a new earth without a body.<sup>1131</sup> We get ready for eternity not by ignoring the body, but by tending to its basic needs here and now. That means also according honor to the body when it expires, when it

surrenders the breath of life for lack of oxygen. We should do no less for our deceased today than ice age humanoids did for their precious dead.

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## Notes

1. [^](#) One of the best discussions of the move away from Cartesian mind-body dualism to embodied mind theory is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy on the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
  2. [^](#) See Eugene d'Aquili, "The neurobiology of myth and ritual," in Eugene d'Aquili, Charles D. Laughlin, and J. McManus, *The Spectrum of Ritual* (New York: Columbia University Press, 19679).
  3. [^](#) See Dennis L. Bushkofsky and Craig A. Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages. Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 149-81; still valuable is Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Occasional Services* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 139-64.
  4. [^](#) Tyler Volk, *Death* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2009), 16-17.
  5. [^](#) William Clark, *Sex and the Origins of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xi.
  6. [^](#) Dorion Sagan, *Sex* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2009), 5.
  7. [^](#) Volk, 34-35.
  8. [^](#) Cedric Mims, *When We Die: The Science, Culture, and Rituals of Death* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).
  9. [^](#) Frank C. Senn, *Embodied Liturgy: Lessons in Christian Ritual* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 242-43.
  10. [^](#) Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 44 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1953), 80.
  11. [^](#) See Nigel Barley, *Grave Matters: A Lively History of Death Around the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 54-55.
  12. [^](#) See Senn, *Embodied Liturgy*, 243-48.
  13. [^](#) See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 147-63.
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## Identity in Place: A Matter of Life and Death

by Gordon J. Straw

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/identity-place-matter-life-death/>

This past summer, I went slightly out of my way to visit Oak Grove Cemetery, near Detroit Lakes, MN. This cemetery is known to my mother's family as one of the "family" cemeteries. I'm not even sure how many of my relatives are buried there, but it's a lot. My grandparents are buried there. My parents will be buried there. Great aunts and uncles are buried there. As a local friend, upon realizing to whom I am related, remarked, "You can throw a stone in any direction and hit one of your relatives around here." I was on my way to visit the father of a close friend, whose roots in that area are also strong. There is a road named after him in the area. Needless to say, my connections run deep in that place.

So, I arrived at the cemetery, drove through the front gate, went to the part of the cemetery where I was sure my relatives are buried, and I walked and walked and walked. I never found the plots. I left frustrated. No, I left feeling lost, not simply directionally-challenged, but lost -- without identity.

In a society that treasures rugged individualism, mobility, and innovation, this story perhaps wouldn't seem to connect with many people. But, I have a feeling that it might for those who live in small towns and rural areas. And more than that, I've discovered a strong sense of identity related to place, even in an urban area like Chicago, a city built around historic neighborhoods. My immediate neighbor lived all of his life in the neighborhood in which his own parents grew up. We used to stand out on our front steps together. He would point to physical landmarks in the neighborhood and tell stories about the "mafia" who once lived nearby. As an interim pastor, I heard many stories of families that had never moved further than a couple of miles from where they were born in Chicago. I knew that to be true in rural areas, though I didn't expect it to be the case in a metropolis like Chicago.

Yet, as the nation becomes more and more urbanized, and more and more people move from urban center to urban center, the sense of identity-to-place seems more transient. When asked, "Where are you from?" most people answer with their current address.

In American Indian and Alaska Native communities, when you ask, "Where are you from?" they respond (at least to each other), "I am a [fill in the name of the person's tribal identity]." I say, "I am a member of the Brothertown Indian Nation." However, identity-in-place is not a monolithic reality among tribal nations. Many nations still live in their ancestral lands. And their sense of identity is quite strong. Many others have been sent on their own "trail of tears," not unlike the Cherokee or the Potawatomie. It's only a matter of degree.

My own nation, whose ancestral lands are in Rhode Island, Connecticut and Long Island, were forcibly "nudged" out by White encroachment three times before they settled in eastern Wisconsin, then lost their sovereign status with the federal government (terminated) because we refused to move once more, to Indian Territory in Kansas. White settlers pushed us out of southern New England, so we went to live in the Finger Lakes region of New York, at the invitation of the Oneida Nation. Then we were forced to Indiana, by White encroachment. Then our lands were sold out from under us to farmers by the federal



government, even before we reached the White River area. So we quickly purchased land from the Menomonie Nation along the eastern shore of Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin, where our tribal headquarters is located and where we meet as a “non-recognized” tribal nation.

If you aren't sure about the effects of historical trauma on a people, just ask any American Indian or Alaska Native. They will tell you about a loss of identity, closely tied with the loss (through stealing) of their ancestral lands. These are lands that were given them by the Creator and taken away by people who seem to have little or no knowledge of, or respect for, the land.

The historical and generational trauma experienced by tribal nations does not have its source in nostalgia, or a sense of loss of private property: its source is in the loss of their place of deeply rooted identity in a specific place. This is a place which was given to them by the Creator thousands of years ago, a particular place where the Creator covenanted with their ancestors to live in this specific place; relation to the land cannot be *moved* to a different place, since the knowledge is meant for the specific relations which abound in that specific place.

In short, the identity of tribal nations and their peoples are directly and unambiguously tied to the cycles of life and death that have transpired in these specific places over thousands of years. As one tribal elder described it, “I understand why the White people do so much damage to our Mother, the earth. They have not lived long enough on the land. They keep moving around. They don't feel the blood and the bones of their ancestors beneath their feet as they walk daily on the land.”

## **Covenanted Place and Identity**

When comparisons are made between the modern West and indigenous cultures, a dichotomy between spatial and temporal categories is most prevalent. Specifically, it is noted that the modern West thinks in temporal categories, and indigenous communities think in spatial categories, primarily as abstractions. I respectfully disagree. Vine Deloria, Jr., dean of American Indian intellectuals and an alumnus of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, argued that the uniqueness of indigenous thinking is that it refused to split space and time into separate categories at all. Indigenous thinkers did not use either category as the sole analytical tool for understanding the world. If anything, Natives use the awareness of, and the interpretation of, the intensity of one's emotional experiences on the land, over time.

This more relational view of space-time is what I refer to as “place.” Place is both a detailed sacred geography (stories about specific landmarks of historical or spiritual significance to a people) and extended duration on a specific area of land (*old* stories related to living on the land). Place is not synonymous with space, territory, or private property. Place is a deeply emotional and spiritual connection to a specific land base, which comes from an extended duration on that specific land by a specific people, covenanted to maintain these “right-relations” for the flourishing of all in that specific place.

It is a fundamental belief that the continuity of a place is founded in the interplay of relations of history, peoples, nations, geography, spirituality, and living in a good way in that place. To isolate any of these relations and give priority to it destroys place and replaces it with an isolated, abstract conception (such as private property). Instead, place is always covenanted place.

Covenanted place does not mean an exclusive right to possession of a specific land by a specific people (as it seems to mean in the West). Rather, covenanted places are given by the Creator to a specific people who have the knowledge of the land (because of their long duration on that land), so that right-relations are maintained for the benefit of all in that place. The covenant is for the physical and spiritual survival and flourishing of all the inhabitants of that place, not for exclusive possession. No one owns land, but everyone lives on the land, which has been given by the Creator. The Creator makes the covenant with a specific people, so that there is an intimate knowledge of the land and the relationships within it, and that there is an extended memory of what is required to maintain right relations in that land.

The covenanted way of life by this specific people is the sacrificial contribution, or gift, to all the inhabitants on the land. In this manner, sacrifice is acting (living) in such a way that the actions performed contribute to the well-being of *all* the relatives in a particular place. Sacrifice means more than “doing without something” (as we characterize each season of Lent); it is “to contribute to the benefit of the whole.” So, this covenant is maintained through the continuous cycles of the life and death of a people in a specific place, as a sacrifice.

This, perhaps, is the reason why the people of the Seven Council Fires are literally willing to die to protect the water of the Missouri River, a vital relation in the place of their ancestors.

These cycles of life and death are the covenant of sacrifice, or gift, that create a place. The traumas that tribal people experience have multiple origins, but the primary source of trauma is the spiritual exile of a people from the land in which they covenanted with the Creator to live and die on, to maintain all the relations of a place in a good way. Tribal nations have been chased off of these lands. These lands were stolen from them, bulldozers plow through them, and oil pipelines are dug in them.

All the while, they are told that this is not their land, because someone bought it as an isolated, abstract piece of property with an abstract thing called money.

Dying and death have many aspects, as is clear in this issue of *Let's Talk*. But, for the indigenous nations of North America, death and dying are a covenanted responsibility to maintain right relations in a specific place. And in fulfilling this covenant, the indigenous peoples maintain their identity. Moving these nations off their lands, shelving their ancestors' remains in boxes in museums, and bulldozing their sacred burial grounds for a parking lot, a shopping center, or an oil pipeline is a genocide—a destruction of the identity of a people who, like you, are children of the Creator.

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## Where Does the Stepfamily Sit? Pastoral Dimensions of Funeral Seating Arrangements

by Amy Zietlow

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/stepfamily-sit-pastoral-dimensions-funeral-seating-arrangements/>

Bill was a long-time member of the ELCA congregation I serve as pastor. Prior to pronouncing the benediction at his memorial service, I watched the honor guard play taps and present the flag to Mary, Bill's widow and second wife. While part of me was – as always – moved by this sight, another part of me thought: “Oh, nelly!”

It was at this point when I noticed that Bill's daughter, Brenda, sat in the second pew, behind her stepmother and stepsiblings. Her stepmother, Mary, like most widows, sat in a place of honor: the first pew. Her two daughters, Bill's stepdaughters, and their spouses sat to Mary's right, also in the first pew. Bill was a beloved husband and stepfather.

However, Brenda was his only daughter, and she sat in the second pew. Brenda's mother, Bill's first wife, also attended the service but sat in the back. Thus, Brenda sat alone at her father's funeral separated from her mother and her stepmother.

This stepfamily's seating arrangement is one that I should have picked up on before the service even started. I have spent the last five years studying modern families, caregiving, and mourning. Naomi Cahn, a law professor at George Washington University, Elizabeth Marquardt, a divinity school classmate, and I conducted and analyzed over 60 in-depth interviews with mid-life adults one year after the death of their mother, father, or stepparent.

Interviews followed the natural chronology of care and grief:

- the news of a diagnosis or accident,
- the medical, financial, legal and spiritual choices made during the provision of care,
- mourning practices,
- settling the parent's estate, and
- the adjustment to how life has changed in the year since the death of the parent figure.

Drawing upon our collective experience in hospice care and parish ministry (me), children of divorce (Elizabeth), and elder law, modern families, and trusts and estates (Naomi), we studied their narratives to better understand how the marital and nonmarital choices of a parent shape the experience of elder care and loss. We concluded that many tweaks could be made in the practice of today's lawyers, clergy members, and family caregivers to better serve the new normal in American families.

One lesson we learned is that seating arrangements at funerals matter. Overall, the interviewees' narratives about the funerals were told in broad sweeps. They described snapshot memories of specific moments during the wakes and services. Unless they brought the service bulletin or remembrance card with them to the interview, they struggled to recall what scriptures were read, who spoke (unless they

gave the eulogy), or what songs were played or sung. They remembered most clearly the faces of those who attended the ritual, and the family seating arrangement for the service.

In chapter six of our book, *Homeward Bound: Modern Families, Elder Care and Loss* (Oxford University Press 2017), Naomi and I give extensive space to analyzing the seating positions at the funeral. Spatial arrangements assumed great importance for all those interviewed. For stepfamilies, especially, subsequent disputes over the deceased's estate, and a general fraying of emotional connections, could often be traced to tensions over where they sat (or didn't sit) at the funeral. A negative experience at the funeral often foreshadowed the stepfamily's low level of adaptation and reorganization after the ritual.

In contrast, within family systems where the parents had been in their first and only marriage at the time of death, role clarity continued from before death to after. The absence of the deceased parent caused pain and sadness, but mothers remained mothers, children remained children, and siblings remained siblings. While death may have affected their connections, no member risked losing his or her place in the family. At the funeral, grown children sat with the surviving spouse in the front row for the service. Minus the deceased, the family was a coherent unit.

For most stepfamilies, the death of the parent seemed also to mark the death of that expression of the family. Without the mediating presence of the deceased, the role of the stepparent became fuzzy or conflicted. Grown children wondered, "Am I still a stepdaughter? What does that mean?" These feelings of confusion were magnified when children felt the stepparent had not invited them to sit together in the front row at the funeral or stand next to them during the visitation. They took offense and began to put distance between themselves and the stepparent.

For example, one daughter, Candace, recalled arriving at the funeral services for her father and reaching out to her stepmother, Susan. The two had historically had a negative relationship marked by ill will, but Candace wanted to try to connect over the death of her father. As a gesture of compassion, she asked her stepmother, "Do you want us to sit with you, like, as a family?" And Susan replied, "Yeah, that would be nice because I really feel like an outsider with your family." However, as soon as other people started to arrive, her stepmother "never talked to us again. Never asked us to come sit up there with her—nuthin.'" In defiance, Candace stood in the back.

Even in stepfamilies who had worked smoothly together during the illness of the parent, the kin relationship began fraying during the funeral. Rhonda and her siblings, half-siblings, and stepmother of thirty years, Judith, became a caregiving team in her father's final months of life in hospice home care. However, the funeral service began to dredge up past hurts. Judith's extended family attended the funeral but, according to Rhonda, they "never accepted us, because our dad was divorced, and Judith's family didn't like that. We were the stepchildren." When they sat down for the service, Rhonda believed that she and her siblings belonged in the front row, with Judith. Instead,

"Judith's family and her sisters sat in the front row, and pushed us to the back, and that really upset me....I'm sure Judith didn't think about it, but why? It's huge—it pushed me back, it pushed my children back. And we're his first family. It made me feel so divided because we were shoved to the back."

Occasionally stepfamilies did work well together; a history of warmth in the relationship between the surviving stepparent and the grown child set the stage for subsequent interactions. One component in our

definition of positive stepfamily relations lies in those who, a year after the death, still considered each other “family,” as evidenced by continuing to celebrate holidays and significant events together, including the anniversary of the parent’s death.

For example, Phillip’s parents divorced when he was in elementary school, and his parents were able to foster a good relationship with each other, even though his father quickly remarried. His father even left part of his inheritance to his first wife. Over the years, Phillip grew to appreciate his stepmother, Cheryl, and described how she was the one he turned to for advice on his finances. When his father was diagnosed with congestive heart failure, Cheryl kept Phillip in the loop through text, e-mail, and phone calls concerning different treatment options. They were both with his father in the ER after his heart attack when a blood clot killed him. Cheryl included Phillip in making decisions at the funeral home about the service and the burial.

This stepmother and stepson sat together in the front pew at the funeral services and remained in touch in the year since his father’s death. Whereas the emotional connections of stepfamilies who sat apart at the funeral services tended to fray in the year following the death, sitting together reinforced the warmth of Phillip and Cheryl’s previous relationship and built a foundation for on-going support as they grieved his father and her husband, together.

Stepfamilies fill the pews of our congregation, and mid-life stepchildren, like Candace, Rhonda, and Philip, are beginning to step into the caregiving and grieving role for their parents and stepparents. When I forgot to apply our insights to Brenda and her stepfamily, I sought to rectify my mistake. During the repast in our fellowship hall, I sat with Brenda over a Jell-o square and a ham sandwich. I acknowledged that she did not sit in the front row, and I apologized if she felt slighted. She confessed that she did not actually want to sit up front because, “I am more of a backstage person.” Also, she didn’t feel especially close to her stepmother or stepsiblings, so she preferred having her own space to mourn. Regardless, I wanted her to know that her pastor noticed.

Discussing where we sit during a ritual matters. Pastoral directive in planning and conducting the funeral service with a family, with a keen eye to where family members sit, has ramifications for family systems beyond the ritual itself in profound ways. While the discussion can be awkward for all of us and it might bring various tensions to the surface, it might also prevent hurt feelings and loneliness, and serve as a subtle reminder to everyone that they are family.

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## Green Burial and Spiritual Communities: One Earth, One Movement

by Suzanne Kelly

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/green-burial-spiritual-communities-one-earth-one-movement/>

Over the last two decades, the Green Burial Movement has worked to mend U.S. deathcare ways by advocating for simple dust-to-dust human burial. Rejecting the trio of practices that have come to make up the American Way of Death – chemical embalming, the modern casket, and the burial vault – the movement calls for the earthly return of the body by way of simple containers made from biodegradable materials with minimal impact to the environment. We once buried our dead in this way. But that was before public health reforms in the 1800s swept through towns and cities and turned the dead body into a menace to be managed, before the Civil War introduced embalming in the names of preservation and sanitation, and before the creation of the manicured-lawn garden-cemetery that imposed an in-ground burial vault requirement separating the dead from the soil.

Today, that trio of practices – and the modern crematory, too – drive a polluting, resource-intensive and unsustainable deathcare industry. But the industry's effects run deeper than environmental harm, augmenting human alienation from the earth, and a growing disaffection from one of life's few shared experiences. The Green Burial Movement is changing that.

While the movement has a critical eye on the industry, I'm one of many advocates who recognize the need to balance critique with the call to work with industry players. If we are to grow this movement into the strong one it has the potential to become, advocates must build bridges with those who have long cared for the dead.

Of course, industry folks are not – even today – the only caretakers of the dead. Another bastion of care for the dead, one which has been around longer than this century-and-a-half old industry, resides in spiritual communities.

Even as the family's hold on the dead began to evaporate by the early part of the twentieth century, and give way to the industry model, some spiritual communities held fast to their dead. There's the Jewish Holy Society, the Hevra Kadisha, who are still responsible for overseeing the dead prior to burial, including the hands-on work of washing and dressing the body. In other spiritual communities, where such societies have not been common practice in the U.S., and where body preparation once mostly fell to familial inner circles, the dead were, and still are, ushered out of life by way of rituals meant to carry them and their families over the threshold.

Given these past and present connections, it would seem likely that spiritual communities would already be an integral part of this movement to green our deathcare. But, despite a number of faith-based green burial grounds that have opened in recent years, spiritual communities remain on the margins of the movement.

What will it take to change that?

## Reconciling the Secular and the Spiritual

There are many reasons why people are drawn to the idea of green burial. Some of them look strictly practical, material, or matter-of-factly secular: the rejection of toxins that pollute the earth, the promise of decreasing one's carbon footprint, spending less money on funeral arrangements, and the fact that in some cases green burial conserves, preserves, and restores land.

But for all the secular reasons, just as many that we might call philosophical, immaterial, or spiritual are coursing through the movement. I mean *spiritual* in the broadest sense, in the way that anthropologists Hannah Rumble and Douglas Davies have defined it “as a good word for those folks who may or may not be religious, but who foster a sense of depth and meaningfulness about life.”<sup>[1]</sup> Unfortunately, those secular and spiritual reasons are very often talked about in such distinct and compartmentalized ways that we sometimes miss their resonance.

While it's true that the trio of practices that make up the American Way of Death have been resource-intensive, polluting, expensive, and not good for the land – all environmentally practical reasons to reject them - they've also fundamentally distanced humans, especially human death, from the earth. This distance has a material basis: chemical embalming, the modern casket, and the burial vault all create barriers that literally separate the body from the land, and thwart the direction and flow of decay. But that material basis is, at the same time, compounded by an immaterial one where human death, and thus human life, becomes figured outside the realm of nature.

Even green burial grounds that have the goal of conserving land in perpetuity, which is most often pitched as environmentally practical in nature, are also tied up with spiritual significance. Their mission may be conservation, but they're also turning on its head the idea of human death's place within the land by burying bodies in an environmentally protected land area. This practice bears out a deep reversal in meaning that's about much more than mere land use.

Prior to the Green Burial Movement, the prevailing environmental position on human burial was that it was a poor use of land. Championed with slogans like “Save the Land for the Living,” this belief helped to offer up cremation as the only answer to the question of how best to deal with the dead, on a planet saddled with endless environmental problems. Unfortunately, this thinking was spiritually shortsighted, as it effectively fortified mounting divisions between human beings and the land. Green burial grounds, especially ones with conservation goals, turn this around.

Indeed, no matter what reason people offer for preferring green burial, its practices are—burial by burial—literally and figuratively reconnecting the dead to the earth.

## What Moves Us

Given the West's long history of situating human life and death outside and above nature, the environmental feminist philosopher Val Plumwood rightly understood how it was a “major challenge,” for us “to reconceive and reinterpret both death and the significance of human life in ways which are both life- and nature- affirming and death-accepting.”<sup>[2]</sup> This challenge was clearly a call to an earthian identity, a call to discern what it would take to lead us back to the earth. But, it was also a call to

recognize the necessity of the spiritual component of both our lives and our deaths, and how our attempts to repair the world ultimately depend upon it.

The word *movement* means “to effect with emotion, to impel toward some action.” And, so, what in us is being stirred? What in spiritual communities? What in secular ones? And what if these stirrings look more alike than we might imagine? Yes, there are practical reasons like pollution, contamination, money, and resources. But something more consequential has also captured the human imagination: the possibility of interrelationship, of the interconnection between human and earth.

Expressions of this connection find voice in the midst of secular chatter, showing just how hungry people are for meaning. We hear it when folks say they want green burial because they want to return to the earth. This claim is a recognition of origin, that they want to become part of the flora and fauna of the land, to nourish the roots of a tree. It’s a claim that we ought to acknowledge our debt to what has sustained us, that we ought to give something back, that we are all “stardust.”<sup>[3]</sup>

These expressions can also be found in emerging green burial rituals, some of them long abandoned by the deathcare industry and taken away from families. In these rituals, human death’s connection to the land is laid bare: journeying to grave with a simple burial container, facing the open hole, shoveling the dirt back into the hole, and creating the burial mound.

The green burial movement is, of course, about redirecting our deathcare practices in an attempt to mend them. But the movement is also a repair at the level of meaning. If, as Plumwood said, “death in the modern western context is a nothing, a void, a terminus whose only meaning is that there is no meaning,” the green burial movement is doing the work of turning that around.

## **A Good Fit**

Given these meanings, spiritual communities – especially established religious communities who are already expert at doing the work of connecting human life back to something larger than the self – are a good fit for the movement. In dominant U.S. culture, death has long been swept under the rug. But spiritual communities have never walked away, providing care and rituals for making meaning around the end of life.

Another powerful element that spiritual communities have brought to movements in the past, such as the Civil Rights movement, is the holding of two necessary points of opposition. One is recognition of what’s wrong, and the other of what ought to be. This is precisely what Green Burial Council founder Joe Sehee learned from the Jesuits: that we are apt to “bring about change when we can get behind a vehicle to make things right.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Some integration of spiritual communities into the movement has already been underway in the development of faith-based green burial grounds. Other signs of spiritual communities’ engagement include the work of theologians and congregational leaders who find support for green burial within their own traditions, and offer that back to the communities they serve. Congregational leaders are expert at building community, as well as fostering the kind of communal fellowship that can give life to hard-won projects, such as growing a green burial ground.

Still, obstacles are likely to get in the way. Some may be theological in nature. Christian rationalism has a history of setting spirit apart from matter, leading to the denigration of nature and the body, and the privileging of a transcended soul with continuity beyond the earthly plane. How will spiritual communities who engage in such splitting find entrance into a movement that's clearly trying to bring those things together? We saw this obstacle nudge to the surface in late 2016, when the Vatican issued new guidelines for cremation disposition that urged parishioners to "bury" rather than "scatter", saying that the church could not condone attitudes, or permit rites, that involve erroneous ideas about death, "such as considering death as the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or the universe, or as a stage in the cycle of regeneration."<sup>[5]</sup>

It's also not clear to what extent green burial grounds grown from spiritual communities will welcome outsiders. A number of Jewish green burial grounds have emerged in the last decade or so – seemingly paradoxical developments, given that Jewish burial grounds have always been "green." Unfortunately, the industry's mandate for the burial vault has increasingly intercepted these laws, and many Jewish cemeteries have begun requiring some kind of burial vault or liner. Vaults are marketed on two promises. First, that it protects the dead from the elements, and, second, that it prevents subsidence of the grave, making it much easier to mow the lawn. While the first contradicts Judaism's strict laws around a swift return to the earth *sans* obstruction, the second does not. Many Jewish cemeteries have adapted to industry pressure by drilling holes in the bottom of vaults, inverting vaults, or placing soil inside the vault. While the development of Jewish green burial grounds is clearly resistance to this industry practice, many of these burial grounds are only open to people of the Jewish faith. How will questions of access be negotiated against histories of shared suffering and the need for religious distinctiveness, within a movement that seems to be all about extending borders and growing relationships?

No doubt, particular histories will bear out unique problems guiding congregational leaders as they seek to understand the social forces that have shaped the funeral industry, and the intersection of spiritual traditions with the racial, ethnic, economic, and gendered histories of care for the dead. Spiritual communities are uniquely positioned to take on these histories in ways that can help bridge the gap between who has access to green burial and who is not yet being reached.

Bridging this gap is key to movement wholeness. But such wholeness will remain a dream without the integration of spiritual communities. As spiritual communities navigate the waters of this growing movement – deciding where and when they might enter – advocates must do more than extend their reach. They must share in the vision. Indeed, there is one earth to which the dead belong. One movement will take us there.

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### Notes

1. <sup>^</sup> Davies, Douglas and Hannah Rumble. *Natural Burial: Traditional-Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation* (London: Continuum, 2012), 124.
2. <sup>^</sup> Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge: London, 1993), 102.
3. <sup>^</sup> Rehagen, Tony. "[Green Burials are Forcing the Funeral Industry to Rethink Death](#)," Bloomberg, October 27, 2016.
4. <sup>^</sup> Kelly, Suzanne. *Greening Death: Reclaiming Burial Practices and Restoring Our Tie to the Earth* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 6.
5. <sup>^</sup> Povoledo, Elisabetta and Gaia Pianigiani, "Vatican Clarifies the Rules for Cremation: Bury,

Don't Scatter," *New York Times*, October 25, 2016.

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## Minister in the morgue: A reflection on the caring for the bodies of the dead

by Nathan Corl Minnich

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/minister-morgue-reflection-caring-bodies-dead/>

After sixteen years of licensure, the funeral director part of my identity is woven deeply into the fabric of my being. Even prior to these career years, I have been around the dead. My birth placed me in a line of five generations of embalmers and funeral directors. Although much of those preceding generations make up who I am, my ordination as a pastor has marked me as different from those who came before me. At least I thought it marked me as different.

I would imagine, if it were possible to interview a few of those preceding generations, that they would see a less defined difference than I do. In fact, as I have observed over the years, there are several similarities between the pastor and the funeral director. Many funeral directors define their careers as *callings*, and I think that they would consider much of what they do as *ministry* in some form.

Distinction, however, arises in the difference between the funeral director serving many families and many faiths, on the one hand, and a theological definition of *Christian* care of the dead, on the other. The former serves well the people of a community who rely on their own understanding of wants and needs. The latter ought to be instructing the community on their faith, the actions appropriate to that faith, and what those actions mean. I've talked with many funeral directors who note that a growing number of families lack this direction and understanding. Funeral directors are trained to serve, not to instruct. The typical response to whatever is asked of them—*of course we can do that for you*—has opened the flood gates to providing any requested service at all, regardless of how it aligns with a belief system, and with no concern for how the public views such ceremonies.

For the funeral director, serving the wants and needs of client families is paramount. For clergy, however, leadership, direction, theological teaching, preaching, and pastoral care should be paramount. Yet, many clergy opt for serving wants, rather than leading and instructing in what is best for the faith of those who mourn, and the presentation of that faith through the actions and rites of caring for the dead.

I call to mind the words St. Paul wrote in the sixth chapter of the letter to the Romans. There I find an affirmation of hope that is deeply rooted in a resurrection like Christ's, since we have been united with Him in a death like His. Therefore, there must be deep concern in how we care for the dead. Our actions must comprise a visible living out of Christian hope. The responsibility of clergy begins with asking simply, "how can we remain authentic to every aspect of our faith in the presence of death?" This question, posed to families when planning the details of a funeral, reminds them of the significance of death in the life of the church. Their loved one's life, death, *and resurrection* are significant. If these elements are meaningfully authentic in presentation, the community of believers—and even those whose faith is not yet firm—should recognize that importance. If we start in any other place, the changing trends of society will dictate to the church what is done at death.

So where does the discussion begin? Start with Holy Scripture. Scripture gives no account of the nuances

of the resurrection: the night yielded to the day, and yet we know not the hour when Jesus rose. The Bible has no timeline or physiological description of how Jesus Christ took up life again in his entombed body, the same body that bore the marks of crucifixion and death. But faith assures us of the truth contained within that mystery.

Yet, death was real. It was God the Father's way of joining us in the most sorrowful consequence of sin through the real flesh joined in both God and Man, Jesus Christ. Aside from this mystery, the record becomes more clear. Paraphrasing the details, we can account for the taking down of Christ's body from the cross, his preparation for burial, the involvement of men like Joseph of Arimathea and others per the Jewish timing and customs. Myrrh, oils and linen were used in accordance with the practice of the day, as recorded in John 19:39, and they weighed 100 pounds.

Jesus was unbelievably focused on making all things new, fulfilling that which could not be fulfilled, and expanding the kingdom of heaven to all those who would believe. In his life and his death, he honored what was, loved what is, and modeled what is to come. Jesus died, was prepared, was buried, and took up life again. In this very model, reflected in the rites of death and preparation, he revealed the hope of the resurrection. By honoring the body that was broken, and loving those whose relationship was built upon the recognition of that flesh, He walked from death to life in a newness that revealed what was yet to come for all creation.

Why is it that clergy hesitate to proclaim this truth of our Lord, ignoring his hallowing of the tomb? As we stop proclaiming the hallowed tomb, society quickly discards the place of rest. And what has taken its place in the absence of solid theological proclamation? A survey of just a few of the trade journals for funeral professionals shows that there is commonly discussion of "returning to the earth" or "becoming a tree" or "being scattered upon the winds"—all acts which proclaim not a resurrection, but rather a secular view of the life cycle. Clergy who start anywhere other than the gospel accounts of Jesus' burial as they plan a funeral miss a grand opportunity to proclaim life in the face of death.

Recognizing that the rites of death speak volumes about people and their beliefs, the British Prime Minister William E. Gladstone [said](#), "Show me the manner in which a nation or a community cares for its dead. I will measure with mathematical exactness the sympathies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals." When a society cares for the dead in ways that resemble disposal, sympathy is surely on the decline. If the swiftly-changing trends of the world have eroded the funeral and its rites, I ask the question "who failed?"

How we care for the bereaved, as seen in how we care for the dead, speaks volumes of our commitment to one another. Helping to express our grief by remembering one who has died—publicly within the church, and with the body present—may revive the community's participation in mourning. Interacting with the body acknowledges that death is real, upsetting, disrupting, and full of chaos; yet, by proclamation of the church, it is defeated!

The funeral director is a crucial component in this process, and communication is paramount as the church and the funeral director plan the details of what can be done to present in action the church's faith. Well-trained funeral directors see their careers as callings to *serve the community*, and that community has many facets. They serve well, but they are in desperate need of the teaching and directing that religious leaders provide.

But clergy lack some knowledge as well. Many agree with people's plans to quickly cremate and scatter remains because it is cheaper. Others push parishioners away from embalming and viewing, saying that it is unnecessary or too difficult to see. Embalming and viewing serve the needs of the family, the community, and the liturgy. In the nine years that I've been facilitating grief support groups, an overwhelming majority of those who skip the viewing have later reported that they regret not seeing the body of their loved one. It haunts them. Some people say of their deceased loved ones: "I want to remember them as they were rather than lying in a casket." But the most immediate "as they were" memories may include declining in a hospital with many tubes, or lying in a hospice house unresponsive due to medications.

Understanding the embalming portion of a funeral director's work helps to unravel the mystery of preserving "as they were" in people's memories. Embalming is a three-fold procedure that includes disinfection, restoration, and preservation. The first element, disinfection, is rooted in a concern for public health. The second element, restoration, aims to produce a present picture. This facet of embalming can be as simple as closing the eyes and mouth, or it can be as extensive as repairing damage from a tragic accident. It also involves dressing and wrapping, so that a loved one is readily visible as having been cared for in a manner that speaks of the value attached to the body. The third element of embalming is preservation, a temporary extension of time that allows people to gather, view, and lay the body to rest without worrying about decomposition and decay. Embalming is not permanent, nor is it meant to be. It is not eternal preservation for the sake of being able to get up and walk, as is the stereotypical image of ancient mummies.

In my conversations with clergy, they often admit that they find it easier to hold fast to traditional norms when planning weddings, baptisms, and confirmations than they do when planning funerals. In the context of these sacred acts, many pastors guard their actions and words carefully, knowing how instructive they can be to the community at large, both believers and non-believers. Yet, when it comes to funeral planning, many clergy stop instructing families and instead find ways to accommodate requests to remove the body from the liturgy. In my experience, there is great value in the Christian funeral when the body is brought to the church. At that moment, the most meager container, or the most opulent casket, calls to mind the baptismal promise: it contains a body covered by the pall, as it once was dressed with the baptismal garment. Is it not easier, for the young and unchurched alike, to comprehend death when they gaze upon a casket—which reminds us of the fullness of the body present—rather than a small box that contains nothing resembling a body?

I maintain that those who wish to reclaim the sanctity of the body must consider its sanctity from conception to tomb. The body that rests in the womb awaiting birth will be just as precious when it rests in the tomb awaiting the resurrection. There should be no point at which the body is no longer regarded as holy. All life-passages are intimately connected to the body in its form and being, and death should be no different.

To reclaim these nuances, we must be careful with our actions and language. Terms like *celebration of life* are contrary to liturgies that speak of the resurrection of the body, as they undermine confidence in the church's burial of the dead, committal, and commendation. These terms seem to give the greatest honor to a life lived, rather than to faith in Christ and the promise of resurrection. We have countless opportunities to celebrate a person's life while they are still living. The funeral is the place where we celebrate the hope of resurrected life, found alone in Christ Jesus. The nature of the liturgy (in both

actions and words) must speak of resurrection and hope, not simply of past times—as pleasant, joyful, easy, or fun as they may have been. The only life we celebrate at death is the one promised in resurrection with Jesus. H. Richard Niebuhr asked, “Does this signal salvation in any way other than Christ?” I ask the same question, and so should all clergy when planning the words and actions associated with the liturgy at death. Do our rituals give more attention to the earthly or bodily cares of life than to the one who gives life even beyond this death?

Given the finality of the funeral liturgy, it is crucial to examine what matters and what does not. There may be tensions: the future of hope vs. the past of remembrance; the faith of the bereaved vs. the likes or dislikes of the deceased; words and actions vs. material objects. In all these tensions, the choice should reflect that faith of the deceased and those who grieve.

Presence is the key to understanding the things we do with the dead. When we carry together the physical burden of death, we find the burden to be light and the pathway easy, because God first walked this pathway for us in the flesh of Jesus Christ. That hope, acted out and spoken, teaches generations what we believe. We enact that hope each week in the sacrament of the Eucharist. We hold fast to the real presence of the body and blood, which leads us to a fullness of faith in the resurrection of Christ Jesus, who was given and shed for us and is still fully present in spirit and flesh. The funeral is witnessed by many beyond the weekly gathered people, and it is a poignant opportunity to teach the foundations of our faith.

When confusion is present in the church, and when words and actions do not align, the world sees a denial of real presence. Using urns where people should be, or celebrations of life where burials of the dead should be, breaks down that solid foundation. When the same people who would argue against the language of “Memorial Meal” use the language of “Memorial Service,” the world sees confusion in the place where a solid hope of the bodily resurrection should be kept most sure.

Funeral directors are ready and able to serve as requested. In contrast, clergy must instruct, so that each request reflects faith and proclaims the resurrection that we share with Christ Jesus.

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## Review of Thomas W. Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*

by Seth Moland-Kovash

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/review-thomas-w-laqueurs-work-dead-cultural-history-mortal-remains/>

*The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains.* By Thomas W. Laqueur. Princeton University Press, 736 pp., \$39.95.

This is a monumental work of history—the history of an idea as much as the history of a physical thing. In this massive book of 557 pages (not including the extensive notes), historian Thomas W. Laqueur recounts the ways in which varieties of human cultures have dealt with human remains. More than just a history of burial and cremation (and many more) customs, however, this work delves into the idea of death itself. We see how varieties of cultures across religious spectrums have dealt with human remains as reflective of their own views of death. Laqueur's ultimate thesis is this: the dead have power over the living.

At the outset, the author quotes Diogenes (ca. 412-323 BCE) as telling his students that when he dies, he wants his body flung over the city wall to be devoured by beasts, because he won't need it any more.

This book is about how and why Diogenes was right (his or any body forever stripped of life cannot be injured), but also existentially wrong, wrong in a way that defies all cultural logic. It is about why the dead body matters, everywhere and across time, as well as in particular times and particular places. It matters because the living need the dead far more than the dead need the living. It matters because the dead make social worlds. It matters because we cannot bear to live at the borders of our mortality.

The dead—and how we, the living, feel about them—have influenced art and architecture. They shape culture and community. Meaning is given to life through reflection on death and on the dead.

While Laqueur pays some attention to non-European cultural practices, the focus of this book is the European and “Western” traditions. In particular, he focuses on shifts beginning during the Enlightenment and continuing into the modern era. Part II, entitled “Places of the Dead,” traces the primary shift from churchyard burial to cemetery burial as reflective of a secularization of society. No longer is death and the “keeping” of the dead the purview of the church for its parishioners. Death has been democratized and, in a way, secularized with a locus into public cemeteries that are more like city parks.

Part III, “Names of the Dead,” focuses on the modern (19th century and beyond) focus on remembering the names of the dead, also known as necronominalism. This term refers to the kinds of practices that happen at soldiers' memorials, on gravestones, and at memorials which carefully list names of those who disappeared in tragedies like the Shoah, Argentina's Dirty War, or the attacks of September 11, 2001. Laqueur places focus on necronominalism within a democratizing context: just as each person's name is worthy of remembrance, each person's life has the same value as another person's life. The 20th and 21st

centuries are characterized by memorials with many names on them rather than memorials to the one great general or leader.

Laqueur closes his book with a history of the modern practice of cremation. He argues that cremation, as it is practiced and conceived in the modern era, is a culmination of the secularization of death. Dead bodies are now conceived of as belonging to the realm of medicine rather than the realm of religion. As the prevalence of cremation and private distribution of ashes is rising, Laqueur indicates that there is more work to be done on helping our culture to understand the relation of this phenomenon to our life. He leaves us with a lingering, if not disturbingly important question: What are we saying about living based upon how we dispose of the remains of our dead?

For pastors who encounter these questions on a daily basis, it's helpful to think on a historical scale, and to understand the place of ritual and practice in meaning-making. What meaning do we give to life by our rituals? In what way are our rituals around the dead tied up with prior understandings of life and death? To what degree do we want to maintain those connections or conversely, to what degree would we benefit from challenging them? Laqueur's historical study provides the framework for asking those questions, and arriving at some suggested futures for the work of caring for the dead as we make meaning for the living.

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## Review of Dale C. Allison's *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things*

by Erin E. Clausen

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/review-dale-c-allisons-night-comes-death-imagination-last-things/>

### **Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things.**

By Dale C. Allison, Jr. Eerdmans, 184 pp., \$18.00 paperback.

What happens to our bodies and souls when we die? Is heaven real? What about hell? Can I be Christian and not believe in an afterlife? Questions about death and the hereafter—or if there is something after—occur to most people. In *Night Comes: Death, Imagination and the Last Things*, Princeton Theological Seminary professor Dale C. Allison Jr. addresses such eschatological questions. Having had a near death experience as a young man, Allison uses his experience and subsequent fascination with people's post-death destiny as a jumping-off point for this work.

Well-researched and thorough, *Night Comes* investigates cultural and theological ideas about the last things. Throughout the book, Allison wades through a vast amount of literature spanning from Greek playwrights to St. Augustine to contemporary theologians. In several places he also includes anecdotes from his own life experience. Allison's near-death experience informs his arguments, and he includes near-death experiences more broadly as a resource for imagining answers to some of the most perplexing eschatological questions.

Allison divides the book broadly into 6 themes: Death and Fear; Resurrection and Bodies; Judgment and Partiality; Ignorance and Imagination; Hell and Sympathy; and Heaven and Experience. As he addresses each topic, Allison lifts up a variety of (often conflicting) viewpoints. The structure of each chapter points to an evolution of belief over time. Rather than attempt to choose one argument over another, though, the author instead shares his own opinion about where he does or does not resonate with each viewpoint. Because each chapter is self-contained, the reader can easily agree with Allison's conclusions about one theme while disagreeing completely on another. The result is a thought-provoking work that encourages readers to engage in further reflection, research, and conversation.

*Night Comes* intends to be “a miscellany, a book of thoughts” (ix). The work claims to be intentionally and necessarily incomplete. After collecting arguments from a variety of sources, the author does not form a cohesive argument of his own. Nor does he offer any strongly-argued conclusions. Rather, Allison's guiding principle is that which offers hope. He writes, “If... death can separate us from the love of God... then love doesn't endure all things but finally fails. Which cannot be” (18). Regarding each theme, Allison concludes with a statement of hopeful conviction.

At times, these convictions appear to be rooted in the theological arguments presented in the chapter. At other times, though, these convictions rely heavily on evolving cultural beliefs with which the vast majority of theological work presented does not resonate. Thus, the argument behind Allison's convictions can be challenging to navigate. It feels at times as though, despite the obvious research that went into this book, the author's conclusions were based more on experience and instinct than a well-

researched argument.

Based on the book's description, I had expected this to be the case. On the other hand, I had also expected to hear more about near-death experiences. Some of the challenge of navigating Allison's argument comes from his reluctance to use his experience as a primary argument for his own beliefs. The few highly personal vignettes shared by the author appear to lack true vulnerability. That is, the author shares stories without drawing lines directly to his beliefs. While he uses these vignettes as a resource, he does not fully invite the reader into similar engagement. Rather, he cautiously invites the reader to consider his and others' near death experiences without requiring conviction about their validity. A stronger and more hopeful argument would be made by fully embracing the validity of these experiences as a resource for eschatological imagination.

Another challenge for this book is the intended audience. Written as a collection of incomplete thoughts based on a lecture series, the book intends to be informal in style. However, Allison's academic writing will stretch the average lay reader. While the arguments are thought-provoking and interesting, I found that I needed to restate many of the viewpoints in order to enter into conversation with them. At the same time, Allison sometimes reverts to informal language and displays a *laissez faire* way of coming to convictions without strong supporting arguments.

In spite of these challenges, *Night Comes* is a well-researched introduction to historical and current thought around eschatological themes. It addresses pressing questions about what happens when we die. It also raises interesting historical and creedal arguments that few people today speak aloud, whether inside or outside of the church. And in suggesting near-death experiences as a resource for this conversation, Allison bridges a gap in currently available literature between experience (of the [Heaven is for Real](#) variety) and sound academic scholarship. While I would caution the reader to consider the book a conversation starter rather than a cohesive argument for a particular viewpoint, I recommend *Night Comes* as a solid resource for theological imagination about post-death hopes.

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## An Excerpt from "Peace at the Last: Visitation with the Dying"

by Paul Palumbo

<http://mcsletstalk.org/death-and-dying/excerpt-paul-palumbos-peace-last/>

*Peace at the Last* was birthed out of congregational need and experience in a specific time and place: Lake Chelan Lutheran Church in Chelan, Washington, beginning in 2007. A member said to me “Pastor, it feels like people are coming to us to die!” For a long stretch of time our little congregation was facing the deaths of so many. The last of our charter members were lingering at death’s door. At the same time, several younger people—so vibrant and alive—faced chemotherapy and radiation, rising hopes dashed by the relentless diseases that afflicted the body.

Through this time of travail, the ministry of accompaniment was born. Our congregation has continued to be called upon to walk with people who are sick and facing death. People in our congregation and in our larger community have asked us to join them in their journey. Over the years, we have gathered a group of people who go to visit the dying, the sick, and the elderly. One of our people put it well when he said, “I’m completely afraid of being with people who are dying. So I know I have to go to them.”

This honest expression of fear sparked a conversation about *why* people are afraid to visit nursing homes, hospitals, and sickbeds. What we found was that people are reluctant to go into such situations for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. “Should I talk about death? Do I touch the person I am visiting? Should I pray? What do I pray?” These are all real issues for people who would like to bear witness to Jesus in the face of mortality, but who do not have what they need to do so.

From this came the idea of creating a liturgy for the visitation of the dying. Of course, pastors have prayers and liturgies at their disposal in pastoral care resources, but we wanted to create something that was accessible to *everyone* and that was visually beautiful.

For several months our group of eight or nine people met to gather resources that would be appropriate for such a liturgy. Our musician, Rolf Vegdahl, wrote several of the musical pieces in the liturgy. Others found or wrote prayers and blessings. We chose psalms by asking members of the congregation which ones they found most meaningful and reassuring. From start to finish, the liturgy is completely grounded in the experience of our congregation. We believe that truth rooted in a particular congregation can carry truth for the wider church. Indeed, isn’t that what art itself makes clear?

While the liturgy was being compiled over 18 months, Wendy Schramm, the artist, was busy honing her watercolor craft. Lake Chelan Lutheran has a room dedicated to art and Wendy spent hours and hours in the art room and in the natural world around the Chelan area, painting and praying over the liturgy. When we finally had a complete draft of the liturgy, she went to work painting the frame for each piece. Restful and comforting beauty was her goal as she painted. What she found was that not every piece of the liturgy, and, of course, not every moment of dying, is restful. There are stark pieces in the liturgy that she has matched in visual art. Restful, stark, reassuring; it is all beautiful. And, as is proclaimed in the Akathist of Thanksgiving, “All true beauty draws the soul to You.”

Beauty is at the heart of the Christian faith. We may discuss whether beauty is necessary or not, affordable or not, but as Alexander Schmemmann points out, “Beauty is never ‘necessary,’ ‘functional,’ or ‘useful.’ And when, expecting someone whom we love, we put a beautiful tablecloth on the table and decorate it with candles and flowers, we do all this not out of necessity, but out of love.” I would add that what the liturgy makes clear is that this beauty is an expression of *extravagant* love!

We who follow Jesus use this and all kinds of beauty to express the love of God to the least among us. It’s a fool’s errand in one sense—to create such a work of beauty for dying people. But I also believe this: if the church dedicated itself to just one thing, to accompanying the dying well, it would not be wrapped up in the anxiety of whether or not the church itself was going to survive. It would have no time for such anxiety. It would be too busy ministering to people who knew where to come to die and to live in the beauty of extravagant love.

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## **Let's Talk**

### **Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod**

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