Faith and farewell

Last rites help people say 'I was here'

BY THOMAS LYNCH

All that Michael's father would ever say, whenever he had anything at all to say about it, was, "When I'm dead, just cremate me."

Michael had heard this as a boy fishing with his father, and he heard it when his Uncle Larry died, driving his sobbing father in the funeral procession; and he heard it again as a man after his father had the first of several heart attacks. He heard it more and more, as his father's life seemed to be constricting with age and infirmity and the inevitable. "When I'm dead, just cremate me."

Over the years Michael had figured out that the operative word in the directive was not "cremate," but "just." His father did not so much want his body burned as he didn't want to be a bother to his son. He didn't want to "cost" him anything — emotionally or financially.

Like many Americans, Michael's father mistook a quick disposition of the corpse for an easier, more convenient grief, as if getting rid of the body meant getting rid of the pain, as if death need not be dealt with if the dead quickly disappeared.

And, like many Americans, Michael's father thought cremation was an alternative to "all that funeral bother" — the roses and limousines and a three-day wake, a casket with all the bells and whistles, a preacher and music.

"Just throw a big party, Mike. I want everyone to have a good time, drinks on me. None of that weeping and carrying on," he'd say.

Years ago, his father, responding to the "You-don't-want-to-be-a-burden-to-your-children-do-you?" sales pitch from a telemarketer selling cemetery plots, had paid for all of his arrangements in advance — the box, the burning and the urn.

"It's all taken care of, Mike," his father had said. "You won't have to do a thing."

Michael, being a loving son, would never argue. And, anyway, he didn't like to think about his father being dead.

He would cross that bridge when he came to it.

When he came to it — that Sunday evening last October when he found his father slumped in the wing-back chair, the Weather Channel on the TV, the Sunday paper on the coffee table, the lights from passing cars outside mixing in the room's half-light — he didn't have a clue. He had planned for the fact but not the feeling: the overwhelming helplessness, the vexing sense that he should do something.

But here he was, his father dead at 75, and Michael had nothing to do.

Every day, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures, 6,300 Americans die. The families of the dead face the ever-widening options in caskets or services or music or urns. Most of the dead are buried, some are entombed, one in four are cremated. The average funeral costs nearly $5,000. Some cost five times that much, others one-fifth.

And there seems, of late, across North America, a greater pressure to "pre-arrange" it all on the hopeful notion that to pre-plan the funeral is to pre-grieve the grief. Funerals have been pre-planned since the pyramids and pre-paid since folks stuffed money into mattresses or put aside a little something against the inevitable day. But the pre-selling of funerals — the hard-sell, junk-mail, telemarketed, door-to-door, bargain-in-a-brief-case brand of mortuary sales common to the current marketplace — is something new. It is driven less by consumer interest than by the sales quotas and commissions of the large mortuary and insurance companies that want to secure the future market share of aging baby boomers.

But while the fashions in funerals are various and changing, and the social, ethnic and religious contexts ever in flux, the fundamental obligations remain. At their best, funerals provide a forum for the healthy expression of grief and faith, family history and forgiveness, witness and remembrance.

Ever since the first Neanderthal widow buried her mate, funerals have served the living by seeing off the dead. Every culture known to humankind has devised rituals and ceremonies to deal with the troubling facts of mortality: that grief is the tax paid on attachments; that love hurts; that a death in the family, like a birth, must be observed. Funerals define and affirm the changed status of the dead and the survivors. The deceased and the bereaved are brought, by these last rites of passage, to the brink of whatever new reality the society assigns: heaven, oblivion, bereavement or release.

In the end, Michael decided the value of a funeral was not in how much it cost. It was not about the boxes or the bargains or the insurance. His father's death belonged not only to his father, but to him and to his children and to his father's friends and neighbors — those who his father had worked with, lived with, grown up with and grown old with.

And he figured that as much as he had to live with the decisions, he would make some.

He figured his father would understand.

In a sense he had to re-invent the funeral, borrowing a little something from various traditions and memories. The priest came to say the old prayers, which had their comforts, though his father had grown distant from the church. The U.S. Army sent soldiers to fold the flag and play taps. Though it was years since his dad had marched off to war, their presence was important to Michael.

And he had his father laid out because he figured seeing was believing, hard as it was, and because a funeral without his father's body there made no more sense to him than a baptism without the baby or a wedding without the bride. When he looked at his father there, so still, in his blue sport coat and button-down plaid shirt, with his fly rod tucked in beside him and the grandchildren's pictures, the range of feelings was breathtaking — from sadness to thanksgiving and everywhere in between.

And then he had his father's body cremated, not because it was less bother but because it was what he had asked for. He took some of the ashes to the river where they'd fished together and scattered them. He took some to the grave where his father's people were, back in Ohio, and buried them there. He put some in an urn and gave it to his father's woman friend.

And he kept some of the ashes in his father's tackle box against the day, somewhere in the future, when after his mother died, he'd bury some of his father's ashes with her in a grave over which he would put a stone that might read: "Mother & Father — Together Again."

■■■

For more resources and contacts on end-of-life issues, go to www.findingourway.net.

LEN GRANT/COURTESY OF THE PARTNERSHIP FOR CARING

Planning for the inevitable

The numbers are fairly convincing on this: 100 percent of us will die. Here are some tips to help make this event as neatly planned as possible for you and your family:

Plan for age and illness, death and bereavement. Talk openly with your family about your concerns and preferences. Get information about funerals, cremation and expenses.

■■■

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Your pastor, rabbi, priest, imam or shaman can help you shape the important questions. Often it is the asking, more than the answers, that helps us the most.

■■■

Rely on faith to allay your fears. Whether you are devout or lapsed in your religion, your faith — with its doubts and wonderments and uncertainties — or your spirituality will help you through the darkest and most difficult hours.

■■■

Make the acquaintance of a licensed funeral director, someone who is accountable by name and reputation. Ask around. Get referrals. Deal with someone who has more than a commission or sales quota at stake in the transaction. Find a professional you could call in the middle of the night if someone you love died and you needed help.

■■■

Let your family take part in the decisions that they will have to live with. You can pre-plan the funeral, but you cannot pre-grieve the grief.

■■■

Don't confuse a casket for a funeral. The most expensive casket will not get you into heaven — or keep you out.

■■■

Be wary of "memorial counselors," "death care professionals," and telemarketers who call you in the middle of dinner trying to sell you something.

■■■

Keep the difficult vigils with the dying, the dead and the bereaved. The gift of presence, the ministry of listening, the human kindness of being there, the power of witness — these are essential exercises in humanity.

■■■

If you've lost someone, make time to mourn. Go the distance. Weep, laugh, pray, love, give thanks and praise, comfort, mend, honor and remember.

— Thomas Lynch

Around the world, many ways to say goodbye

"For many tribes of the plains, it was customary to expose the corpse on a platform above ground or to place it in the limbs of a tree. This form of burial not only hastened the decomposition of the body, it also helped spread the soul's journey to the spirit world. Later, the sun-bleached skeleton would be retrieved for burial in sacred grounds. As Old Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce lay dying, he told his son, 'Never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and mother.'"

— From "Native American Traditions" in "The Last Dance — Encountering Death and Dying," by Lynne Ann DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland.

■■■

"The Muslim view of death, as of life, is uncompromisingly earthy and concrete, allowing for no evasion of the reality of what is experienced as real. Angelic interventions and other impositions on reality notwithstanding, the facts of death and putrefaction are accorded great respect. Cremation of the body is unthinkable, and medical students can only study anatomy using cadavers of non-Muslims, who are already damned in any case."

— From the introduction to "The Eternal Pity — Reflections on Dying," by Richard John Neuhaus.

■■■

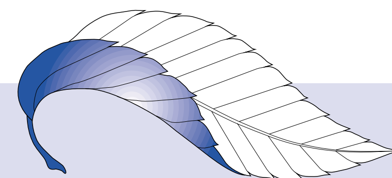
"Most rabbis gently try to dissuade mourners from leaving before the coffin is lowered, for both religious and psychological reasons. The idea of leaving the mitzvah of burial entirely in the hands of paid strangers deprives the family of its last act of kevod ha-met, respect for the dead. Even more important, helping to fill the grave means you have left nothing undone. After you have emptied a shovel onto a loved one's casket, there is no denying death — which makes it possible for healing to begin."

— From "Saying Kaddish — How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead and Mourn As a Jew," by Anita Diamant.

■■■

"The body is dressed in fresh clothes, and verses are chanted reminding the dead person to give up the old clothes and remember good deeds that were done. The hair, beard and nails are trimmed, and the thumbs are tied together and bound to the funeral bed. Then the body must be carried to the cremation ground. Ancient ritual prescribed a cart drawn by two bulls, but in modern times blood relations carry the body on the funeral bier themselves, with the eldest son in the lead carrying a torch lit from the home fire. The cremation is understood as a sacrifice to the gods, and mantras invoke the blessings of heaven. The god Pushan is asked to accept the sacrifice and guide the soul of the dead, and the god of fire, Agni, is asked to consume the physical body but create its essence again in heaven. The funeral party then proceeds home, extinguishes the old family fire, kindles a new one and celebrates the end of the period of impurity with a funerary feast."

— From "Funeral Customs, Hindu" in "Death and the Afterlife — A Cultural Encyclopedia," by Richard P. Taylor.



FINDING YOUR WAY

WEB SITES

National Public Radio's series **"Exploring Death in America"** is an exceptionally wide-ranging and well-balanced collection of "voices" and resources, including bibliographies, interviews, sample chapters from important texts and personal stories; www.npr.org/programs/death/

■■■

Last Acts is a national outreach program for end-of-life issues, including hospice care, public policy debates and funding issues. A comprehensive site, it is a wonderful resource for individuals and communities seeking better care for the dying and bereaved; www.lastacts.org

■■■

"Funerals: A Consumer's Guide" is published by the Federal Trade Commission; www.ftc.gov/bcp/conline/pubs/services/funeral.htm

■■■

The National Funeral Directors Association Web site has useful consumer guidelines, demographic information and helpful links to other national and international organizations; www.nfda.org

■■■

Billing itself as the "source for spirituality, religion and morality," **Beliefnet** is an online community that offers comprehensive information on death, grief, bereavement and funerals. Especially worthy are this site's comparative religion features; www.beliefnet.com

■■■

The American Association for Death Education is a professional organization dedicated to promoting excellence in death education, bereavement counseling and care of the dying; www.adec.org

■■■

The Funeral Consumers Alliance is the watchdog agency of record; www.funerals.org

■■■

"On Our Own Terms — Moyers on Dying." This groundbreaking PBS series, first aired in the fall of 2000, spurred an ongoing program of community outreach; www.thirteen.org/onourownterms/

BOOKS

"Fatherloss: How Sons of All Ages Come to Terms With the Deaths of Their Dads," by Neil Chethik (Hyperion, 2001; $14)

■■■

"Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss," by Hope Edelman (Delta, 1995; $11.96)

■■■

"At Journey's End: The Complete Guide to Funerals and Funeral Planning," by Abdullah Fatteh, Naaz Fatteh and David R. Pearson (Health Information Pr.; $14.95)

■■■

"A Child's Book About Funerals and Cemeteries," by Earl Grollman (Centering Corp., 2000; $4.95)

■■■

"The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade," by Thomas Lynch (W.W. Norton & Co., 1997; $18.40)

■■■

"The Perfect Stranger's Guide to Funerals and Grieving Practices: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies," by Stuart M. Matlins (Skylight Paths Pub; $16.95)

■■■

"The Eternal Pity: Reflections on Dying (The Ethics of Everyday Life)," edited by Richard John Neuhaus (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000; $15)

■■■

"Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America," by Stephen R. Prothero (University of California Press 2000; $22)

■■■

"Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death," by Sarah York (John Wiley & Sons, 2000; $16)

■■■

For more resources, go online to www.findingourway.net

■■■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBERT TURNEY

Thomas Lynch is a poet, essayist and funeral director. Lynch is an adjunct professor of creative writing at the graduate writing program at University of Michigan. He has written extensively on end-of-life issues. His collection of essays, "The Undertaking" (W.W. Norton, 1997), won an American Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award. His most recent book is "Bodies in Motion and at Rest."

KRT DYING-LASTRITES
KNIGHT RIDDER/TRIBUNE