

# PLAIN TRUTH<sup>®</sup>

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION<sup>®</sup>

## Ashes to Ashes

*"...for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."*

*(Genesis 3:19, King James Version)*

*by Monte Wolverton*

**T**he late Irma Nelson had put up a valiant battle against cancer. Forty-five years old and unmarried, she had a sparkling personality and plenty of friends—active in her church and civic organizations, and was a respected professional at the mortgage company where she worked as an underwriter. Her many nieces and nephews were crazy about their Aunt Irma.

Irma's parents, in their mid 80s, were devastated by their loss, so it fell to Irma's brother Doug to make the arrangements. Never having done anything like this, he didn't know where to begin.

The family's pastor seemed like the logical choice to officiate, but he was in Borneo on a two-month mission, and family members weren't happy with the assistant pastor. The funeral home offered

three referrals, but finally Doug decided to have no one officiate. The funeral director offered to help him organize a memorial service to celebrate his sister's life.

Over 150 people attended. Doug welcomed everyone and introduced a video summarizing Irma's life on earth. The funeral director handed a microphone to attendees, who shared memories of Irma.

Cousin Army took more than his share of time, with an opportunity to "witness" to the group, adding his hope that Irma had prayed the Sinner's Prayer before she died, otherwise there might be complications in the afterlife.

Cousin Peggy offered less traditional thoughts, assuring everyone that Irma had transmogrified to another plane of existence.

Finally, attendees were treated to a recorded medley of Irma's

favorite songs by Depeche Mode, Bon Jovi, Devo and the Cars.

In a garden outside the funeral home, attendees wrote messages for Irma on slips of paper, attached them to small helium balloons and released them skyward—much as some imagined Irma's soul had floated off into the blue.

Some thought it was the best service ever. Others were confused because of

the non-traditional format. Yet others walked out less comforted than when they walked in, but they couldn't say exactly why.

Irma's Uncle Larry commented: "It was a nice memorial service, but you know, it wasn't really a funeral, as such."

Aunt Alice was shocked to learn that Irma had been cremated and that the urn containing her remains was not present at the service.

While there was not a thing wrong with any of the arrangements Doug made to honor his sister's life, Irma's service wasn't much like the funerals of 50 years ago. And she's not alone. *Funerals and memorials just aren't what they used to be.*

### Morphing Memorials

When my mom and dad were still in their 40s, they wisely bought plots


inside

The Center of the Gospel **p2**

When Your Time Comes **p5**

Between Eeyore and Pollyanna **p7**

Quotes & Connections **p8**



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*Continued from page 1*

adjoining those of my dad's parents and his sister, just a few steps away from the graves of my mom's parents and family. Decisions were relatively simple then.

Some six decades later I made arrangements for my late wife. I was shocked to learn the price of a traditional plot—in addition to the hefty expenses of casket, vault and embalming. It would have been enough to give me a fatal heart attack (conveniently right at the mortuary) had my late wife not been okay with cremation.

Her earthly remains are in a columbarium niche in a beautiful memorial garden with the Cascade Mountains in the distance.

No wonder that in 2016 over fifty percent of Americans and over seventy percent of Canadians chose the less costly option of cremation. By contrast, in 1960 less than four percent of Americans were cremated.

Economy is not the only factor driving the move from burial to cremation. Funerals and memorial services are featuring less Christian content and less religious content in general. Hence, people are less adamant about holding to traditional "Christian" burial. For

example, in traditionally irreligious Oregon, in 2015 over 74 percent chose cremation, whereas in traditionally church-going Mississippi, only 21 percent opted for the urn (statistics from the Cremation Association of North America).

Okay—it's understandable why we might shy away from an overtly "religious" funeral. Friends and family may identify with a wide range of metaphysical perspectives, and so we try to make the services more inclusive. After all, who wants to see atheist uncle Gary or Buddhist cousin Ethan rushing out the back door, dismayed by a hard-line Bible-thumping preacher. Fair enough.

But another, more disquieting reason, may be that in our increasingly escapist, fantasy-based culture, we just don't want to face and process the stark reality of death. This may explain why the remains of the deceased are often not present at services, or have already been interred. For some, the presence of remains casts an awkward cloud over a celebration of life.

Yet as Thomas Long observes in *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care*, "A funeral

is, by definition, what we do with the body....It is not a sing-a-long, a prayer meeting, a therapy session, or a memory exercise. It may include elements of all these things, but funerals are about bodies and movement. Funerals are occasioned by a great human necessity, namely that the body of the deceased must be taken from among the living to a place among the dead. This movement of the corpse is the central and inescapable reality, the unavoidable fact at the center of all death rituals."

### **Passing Away in Ages Past**

Death is physical life's great common denominator. The author of Hebrews informs us that "...people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Throughout history, human beings have acknowledged some form of this truth. Until a century or two ago, incurable diseases ran rampant and lifespans were much shorter. Infants and children commonly didn't make it to adulthood. Death was always real, always present, always knocking at the door.

For millennia, various modes of burial, cremation and exposure went in and out of style, almost



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always driven by religious dogma about the afterlife.

Even Neanderthals seemed to have had some kind of funerary rituals. The precise way in which one's body was prepared was thought to have eternal consequences.

If you happened to be among the nobility in some civilizations, you could afford much better preparations than the common people, with confidence that you would take your status with you into the afterlife. Egyptians embalmed their dead, with prescribed protocols to ensure a successful journey into the beyond. Early Europeans, Hindus and Central American civilizations among others seemed to believe that the ascension of the soul was facilitated by cremation.

Ancient Israel, like their surrounding cultures, preferred burial. While the Old Testament gives little or no instruction, it contains plenty of accounts of burials, especially in the Old Testament. It was a disgrace to die and be unburied—possibly to be eaten by wild animals. It was preferable to be buried in one's hometown with one's own family. Wealthy families had family tombs. Bodies were laid in the tomb, and after a time the bones were gathered and piled with the rest of the long-deceased family members in another chamber of the tomb, to

make room for incoming bodies.

In Europe, with the advent of Christianity, cremation rapidly went out of style, largely because of its association with non-Judeo-Christian religions. The institutional church encouraged burial, teaching that God preferred to resurrect intact bodies, rather than ones that had gone up in smoke. In the Middle Ages, cremation was made illegal in Europe—except for heretics who could be burned at the stake, as they were thought to be destined for hell anyway. In the late 19th and early 20th century, as cremation gained popularity in the Western world, the church reconsidered its policy, admitting that there was no supporting Scriptural injunction against cremation. Even so, cremation was not accepted by the Catholic church until 1963.

### **Why Do We Even Need a Service?**

I once asked a friend if he was going to attend the funeral of a mutual friend. He answered, "No—I don't like funerals." He had a point. No one likes funerals (except maybe morticians). But, beyond disposing of the body, I can think of four other reasons why we need some kind of funeral or memorial event.

1. To honor the deceased.
2. To exchange emotional support with friends and family.
3. To share memories of the

deceased, reminding ourselves that the life of our loved one counted for something—that his or her life made a difference.

4. To be reminded that our loved one is in the care of God, and that we are destined to be reunited with him or her.

Most western funerals or memorial services cover the first three items well. But sad to say, the fourth aspect is increasingly conspicuous by its absence. Yet perhaps it is the most compelling reason of all for attending a funeral: *we need spiritual reassurance in the face of death.*

After the remains of the deceased have been laid to rest, after the memorial service, after the friends and relatives have gone home, after we begin to adjust to life without the loved one, the questions linger—keeping us awake at night. Death—the cessation of life that seems like it ought to go on forever—demands our attention and pulls our minds like some powerful magnet toward thoughts of eternity. And that's a good thing.

Compared to these issues, questions of burial or cremation, music, venue and flowers become far less significant. That's why, with the passing of each life, we need more than ever to be reminded of the context—the eternity that is Jesus Christ. □

