Opinion
Guest Voices



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When my father died on Ash Wednesday four years ago, following the cultural norm would have involved a stranger arriving soon after his last breath to zip his body in a black bag and take him away.

But in our rural Wisconsin community, family and friends are learning to care for our beloveds in death ourselves, as our ancestors did. And so not long after Dad's last breath, my mother led relatives, including my children, in saying the rosary while my wife and our friend washed Dad's body, a votive candle with Our Lady of Guadalupe lit near his head.

Meanwhile, some friends lined the hallway of the memory care facility where Dad spent his final 2 ½ years, and after the washing and changing of Dad's clothes, we carried his covered body out to Mom's mini-SUV while everyone sang "Be Not Afraid." With his body lying on the folded down seats in the back, we brought him home and laid him in a bedroom for a round-the-clock vigil before his funeral four days later, when we'd lay him to rest in a hand-dug grave on our family land.

While considered unconventional, such community tending of the body after death is what many of our ancestors practiced, and what many — including the Amish communities in our rural area — continue practicing today.

Why has such communal tending become culturally rare? Why, for that matter, has almost all of our most holy work, from the birth of our babies to the growing of our food to the care for our elders, been removed from the community and given over to institutions and professionals?

As Christians, other questions yield more fruit: What is the body? What is a human? Do we have any responsibility to the bodies of our beloveds, in life and even in death?

Who, in the end, will tend your own body?

We need not answer such questions with haste. Within a culture that has commodified our basic responsibilities to each other, answering such questions takes time. To begin, we can simply note that what secular culture offers is not the only way to tend our dead.

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My own family is fortunate to live in a community where the Threshold Care Circle, a group of volunteers, has been supporting families in doing home vigils and family-directed care of their dead since 2006. Without them, I'm not sure how we would have cared for my father. With their guidance, we felt comfortable tending to all of the practical and legal dimensions of care without a funeral director — and we came to see how simple it was. Of course it is more work than paying a professional, but the work offers an abundance of healing.

Instead of spending thousands of dollars, our primary cost was doughnuts, which Dad loved and which we served after the burial. Instead of embalming him — a practice a former embalmer who now does natural care said no family would want to see — we kept his body cool with ice packs. Instead of handing him over to a stranger for the days before his funeral, we never left his side and prayed with him around the clock.

As Catholics prepare for All Souls' Day, it's worth noting that how to tend one's dead is not an ancillary question, but central to a people who pray for their deceased; who know the human to be the very image of God; who understand creation as holy; who remember how the myrrh-bearing women went to anoint the body of Christ; and who profess each week the resurrection of the body.

While my family of origin is Roman Catholic, I have become Eastern Orthodox as an adult; though I am no theologian, it seems clear that the call to tend our dead is a call with ancient roots.

At my Antiochian Orthodox church, we have started a burial society, where we are learning about these roots to inform how we can care for our own dead as a parish community. To grow our capabilities, we look to the practices of burial societies at other Orthodox churches, as well as to the wonderful book *A Christian Ending: A Handbook for Burial in the Ancient Christian Tradition*.

Even if families or communities decide not to take on all care of the deceased, they can still make many meaningful choices: not rushing after the last breath, telling the funeral home to wait while loved ones pray with the body of their beloved, helping hospice nurses wash the body. The point is not purity but faithfulness, like those followers of Christ who, not knowing of the resurrection that was to come, prepared spices and perfumes, then early in the morning, went to the tomb to anoint their beloved's body.