

DEATH

Assuming that you have been conscientious in preparing your last will and testament, and, of course, a living will, otherwise known as a directive to physicians, you may have overlooked the one document that can prevent innumerable problems and considerable expense to those who survive you. I'm speaking of instructions concerning the disposal of your body. Neglecting this relatively simple matter can produce the kind of experience described by Mrs. Ann R. Merchant and quoted in Jessica Mitford's book, "The American Way of Death":

"My husband died very unexpectedly 6 weeks ago in Cleveland, Texas, at 43 years of age. There are only 2 funeral homes here, both owned by the same huge corporation. We have 2 small children that heard him fall when he had his heart attack, therefore you can see what kind of state I was in when I went to the funeral home the next morning to make arrangements. I thought the arrangements would take approximately 30 minutes, instead of the 3-1/2 hours it took, by which time I was begging them to let me go home. But no, I had to go out to physically pick a cemetery plot because of state law (so they said, I would really be interested in knowing if Texas has such a law).

I only have one receipt the funeral home gave. The first charge on it is for professional services of \$1990. Embalming was \$525, dressing & cosmetology \$225, visitation \$255, funeral ceremony \$425 (this was held at the church we attend, but the funeral home said the price was the same whether it was held there or elsewhere, that doesn't sound right, does it?), transfer remains to funeral home \$125 (they told me that the county paid for transportation and autopsy fees, doesn't that sound like a double charge?), hearse driver \$275, Flower van and driver \$95, casket-18g. Ocean Blue steel crepe lining \$2095(it was one of the least expensive in the casket room...), concrete box \$425, memorial register \$25..., memorial cards \$25 per 100..., death certificates \$18, for a grand total of \$6503. But that is not all, I signed an insurance assignment to them for \$9097, so apparently there is \$2594 worth of cemetery expenses

The cemetery sales manager and a sales rep. came out 2-1/2 weeks after the funeral for a "condolence" call, but which was actually to sell a headstone. They called me the next week with a price for what I wanted of \$2700. They called back the next week to tell me they had gotten a new price list in and the prices had gone up.

I just received their check from the life insurance 2 days ago, made out to me and Pace-Stancil Funeral Home. I haven't taken it by there yet, because I want to know what my legal rights are and if I am entitled to some kind of refund...

I'm am going to ask for a refund of \$2200...I really need to take this check in to them next week before they dig up my husband and cremate him (that's what the cemetery rules say will happen for non-payment)."

Those figures are a decade old, so you can imagine what the charges might be today. The fact is embalming has no value as a sanitary measure, but is of immense importance to the funeral industry, as this excerpt from the magazine "Funeral Monitor" indicates: "If embalming is taken out of the funeral, then viewing the body will also be lost. If viewing is lost, then the body itself will not be central to the funeral. If the body is taken out of the funeral, then what does the funeral director have to sell?"

Ms. Mitford quotes William Manchester's account of how John Kennedy's body was handled by a Dallas funeral home in spite of Robert Kennedy's efforts to avoid the kind of travesty experienced by Mrs. Merchant:

"Arthur Schlesinger and Nancy Tuckerman went in through the Green Room. "It was appalling," Arthur reported. "When I came closer it looked less and less like him. It is too waxen , too made-up." Nancy echoed faintly that the face resembled "the rubber masks stores sell as novelties."

Schlesinger urged Robert Kennedy to close the casket. William Walton, an artist friend of the President, "looked as long as he could, with a growing sense of outrage. He said to Bob, "you mustn't keep it open. It has no resemblance to the President. It's a wax dummy." And so Mrs. Kennedy kept the casket closed while his body lay in state.

Although the Federal Trade Commission has promulgated rules dealing with funeral homes and their practices, they have had a negligible effect in reducing costs and eliminating deceptive practices. Your best protection is to contact one of the nonprofit funeral consumer groups in this area. Just click on www.funerals.org, the website of the Funeral Consumers Alliance which maintains a directory of these nonprofit memorial societies.

Nor is cremation offered by one of the profit-making funeral homes a low-cost option these days. But you'll probably see some new, but hardly unfamiliar,

players in the funeral business. Although you can't go to Walmart, Costco or Home Depot yet to pick out a casket, be aware that Sears in Canada earlier this month, according to the Globe and Mail, "launched a test of a funeral insurance package for its 50 plus club members that covers the costs of everything from cremations to funerals, along with planning advice...In a bid to boost its credit card business, Sears teamed with Everest Funeral Package LLC of Houston, Texas, to provide \$5,000, \$7,500 or \$10,000 packages for Sears' 400,000 Mature Outlook members who have Sears credit cards. The offer will be extended to all seven million active Sears card holders if the pilot is successful."

Not that this is all bad. As Vincent Power of Sears Canada puts it, "This will allow a customer to have access to many funeral homes, or have a party working for them who can find them the best arrangements that suit their needs." In some ways Sears acts as a consumer advocate in negotiating with funeral purveyors, achieving projected savings of between 25 and 50 percent on items such as caskets.

But let's just step back for a moment and ask what it is we've accomplished when we accede to the funeral director's entreaties for displaying the corpse. Episcopal Bishop James Pike once referred to the body of the deceased as nothing more than discarded clothing. For what the embalmer and the funeral director, once simply called an undertaker, are offering to the bereaved friends and relatives of the departed is a counterfeit human being. It may bear some faint resemblance to a human being, but it isn't a human being. In fact, it partakes much less of the nature of a human being than a dog, or a tree, or even a blade of grass. They at least still burn with the fire of life. Are not the flowers which surround the funeral bier far more eloquent than the doctored facsimile of a human being lying within the coffin. Can we honestly say that the person we treasured in life is in any way represented by the embalmed corpse? Does not the spirit abide in living things?

Believing, as I do, in a spiritual reality, the remains of a deceased person mock that reality and substitutes lifeless matter for the ongoing vitality we identify with that person. By spiritual reality, I refer to phenomena containing elements totally incapable of a material, physical explanation. This is the reality not merely of the theologian, but of the artist, the poet, the philosopher and indeed the reality we all experience at one time or another. It is the reality we perceive with our aesthetic sense when we observe a striking sunset, or listen with enchantment to the genius of a Bach, Mozart or Beethoven, or wonder at the magic wrought on canvas by a painter of consummate insight. It is the reality of

love, truth, justice – abstract ideals which no person has ever seen or touched, but which millions have believed in and many have died for. We do not live by bread alone, and it is our hunger for ideals and experiences which transcend the physical that reveal our vision, however imperfect, of a spiritual life.

Most of us, it is true, have only a limited vision of this spiritual reality, but I.A. Richards finds that certain writers and artists organize life's experiences in a truly revelatory way. Irish mathematician J.W.N. Sullivan, writing of Beethoven's spiritual development, views art as having a transcendental function, referring to a movement from one of Beethoven's late string quartets as "indicative of more than the peculiarities of Beethoven's neural organization. The perceptions which made that experience possible were in no sense illusory; they were perceptions of the nature of reality, even though they have no place in the scientific scheme. Beethoven does not communicate to us his perceptions or his experiences. He communicates to us the attitude based on them. We may share with him that unearthly state where the struggle ends and pain dissolves away, although we know but little of his struggle and have not experienced his pain. He lived in a universe richer than ours, in some ways better than ours and in some ways more terrible. And yet we recognize his universe and find his attitudes towards it prophetic of our own. It is indeed our own universe, but as experienced by a consciousness which is aware of aspects of which we have but dim and transitory glimpses." Or as Emerson once declared, "Music takes us out of the actual and whispers to us dim secrets that startle our wonder as to who we are, and for what, whence, and whereto."

Just as our own physical universe has within it dual systems of matter, namely the traditional atomic particles and an entirely complementary set of particles known as anti-matter, so, too, we may speak of a spiritual universe as complementing the physical universe of our usual five senses. It is the universe, not of matter, but of ideas and of ideals, as revealed through human experience, both intellectual and emotional. What is our relation to the spiritual universe? Are we but passive observers, or does not the very nature of spiritual experience render us participants?

The writings of Martin Buber perhaps best describe our role as we confront phenomena of the spiritual universe. Many of you must be familiar with his celebrated work, "I and Thou." I know of no title which more accurately befits what lies between the covers. "I", of course, represents each one of us. "Thou" represents what we could conventionally call God or whatever

there is in our fellow humans which partakes of the divine. According to Buber, and I quote:

“Spirit in its human manifestation is a response of man to his Thou. Man speaks with many tongues, tongues of language, of art, of action; but the spirit is one, the response to the Thou which appears and addresses him out of the mystery. Spirit is the Word. And just as talk in a language may well first take the form of words in the brain of the man, and then sound in his throat, and yet both are merely refractions of the true event, for in actuality speech does not abide in man, but man takes his stand in speech and talks from there; so with every word and every spirit.

Spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe. Man lives in the spirit, if he is able to respond to his Thou. He is able to, if he enters into relation with his whole being. Only in virtue of his power to enter into relation is he able to live in the spirit.”

Thus, for Buber it is our relation to the eternal, whether in God or in another human being, which really counts. Relationship implies participation, giving of oneself, going forth to meet, to confront actively someone or something. We may say with good reason that no spiritual universe exists for those of us unwilling to commit ourselves to relationship. This commitment is a denial of the primacy of things material and of our self-centeredness. It is a recognition of spiritual values and the constant search for, and awareness of, these values within our lives.

Saint Augustine wrote of the City of God and the City of Man. As you might surmise, this dichotomy is not a congenial one for me. There is something of God in every person. I would much prefer to contrast the spiritual universe with the physical world. Obviously, humans cannot live their whole lives in the spiritual universe. Our existence here on earth is for the most part a physical existence. We are born into a world of things, and I am a thing among things. But, by virtue of our capacity to gain insights into a realm not dependent on the purely physical, we transcend our limited physical existence and are to a degree at one with the eternal.

As we have observed earlier, this state is not achieved by passive contemplation of some abstract spirituality. The spiritual universe is experienced and becomes real only through doing, or more accurately, only through giving.

This is a logical consequence of all we have said. We greet the spiritual universe only in the act of relation. That is, we must relate ourselves, our lives to the values we perceive to be a part of the spiritual universe. Relation necessarily requires of us that we go forth to meet that to which we relate. In turn, this going forth requires that we give of ourselves, that whatever there is of value within us be released into the world which surrounds us. This act of releasing our talents and energies for the benefit of those around us constitutes our true confrontation with the spiritual universe.

What does all this have to do with death? To ask if there is a life beyond death is almost as meaningless as asking if there is a God. The very way these questions are framed makes them incapable of an answer. If, instead of asking, “Is there a God?”, we ask, “Is there more to this world than the physical universe?”, and if instead of asking, “Is there a life beyond death?”, we ask, “Can an individual human being’s existence be measure in terms other than those which relate only to his physical existence?”, we are hitting closer to the mark.

Perhaps this is why I object so strenuously to the public display of corpses. Is not that lifeless body saying to us, “Here lies the person”, when, in fact, no person lies there at all. That human being, if he has lived some of his life in the spiritual universe, lives on in that realm. The ideas and the ideals of the spiritual universe are not, as with the human body, bounded by time and space. The body may serve as a vessel for spiritual values and ideals, but when that vessel is shattered, its eternal contents are not destroyed. There will always be other vessels to shelter and to nurture them. Indeed, you must have observed how with Jesus or with Socrates or even with some people of our own day, such as Mohandus Gandhi or Martin Luther King, the shattering of the vessel serves only to make more luminous its eternal contents. In this sense, physical death merely heralds an even greater renewal of spiritual life.

Although not universally accepted, several contemporary thinkers condemn our ego-centered concept of “self”, viewing it as a barrier to a broader universal consciousness. Ken Wilber asserts that “we have to “die” to our false, separate self in order to awaken to our immortal and transcendent self”, quoting the sayings of the mystics that “no one gets as much of God as the one who is thoroughly dead.”

In the same vein David Darling argues that “death is the breaking of a spell, the waking from a dream. In this alternative paradigm, consciousness is there all the time, all around us---in the trees, the earth, the sky, the emptiness of

space. It is there waiting for us to rejoin it. Consciousness is like the world outside a bubble. From within the bubble all images seem broken and distorted. Only when the bubble breaks is the true appearance of things revealed. At death it is as if “we” move from one side of our senses to the other---from the highly filtered, highly processed world inside the brain to the true, unbounded universe, where subjective and objective coalesce. We step out of the dense fog of introverted human perception to the clear air of reality.”

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross adopts a similar view when she writes: “We shouldn’t nail the dying to the threshold between two states of consciousness. We shouldn’t prolong their lives with medication, injections and life-support machines. We should let them go. They’re not going into nothingness. They’re entering another state of being. We must let our dead go into that world.”

Perhaps we can analogize the spiritual universe to a stream. Insofar as a person during his physical lifetime gives of himself to contribute to that stream, flowing into it as does a rivulet into a river, his true existence has become a part of that stream and will continue to flow on far beyond the day of his physical demise. Conversely, insofar as a person chooses to ignore that stream or attempts to divert it up blind canyons of self interest, he forsakes his opportunity for joining this endless flow, and shamefully permits his existence to be bounded by the space and time of a human body. For in the final analysis only the spiritual is real. Pity the person who, calling himself a realist, has been too busy or too ignorant to venture toward the banks of that stream.

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