

Flush My Ashes

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In the 2002 movie *About Schmidt*, Schmidt, played by Jack Nicholson, is lambasted by his daughter for choosing the second cheapest casket, the one just above a pine box in price, for his wife. The daughter comments that her mother deserved something better than that while also pointing out that everyone at the funeral took note of her father's frugality.

The scene hit home, as not many months before I saw the movie, I had to choose a casket for my father, who made his transition at age 94. As the funeral parlor representative showed me the selection of six or seven caskets available, I recalled reading somewhere that workers relocating cemeteries in Great Britain reported finding scratch marks on the inside covers of many caskets, indicating that the body was not yet "dead" when the cover was closed. Of course, the cemetery victims were likely buried before embalming became commonplace, but that only leads one to wonder if embalming may now begin before bodies are actually "dead."

I also remembered some of the things I had learned in my metaphysical studies. To begin with, I wondered if my father had actually "given up the ghost," i.e., his spirit body had left his physical body at that point in time. When Allan Kardec, a pioneering French psychical researcher, asked an apparently high spirit if the spirit body separates from the physical body immediately at the time of physical death, he was informed, "No, the soul disengages itself gradually. It does not escape at once from the body, like a bird whose cage is suddenly opened. The two states touch and run into each other; and the spirit extricates himself, little by little, from his fleshy bonds, which are loosed but not broken." (Kardec, 116).

In his 1916 book, *Raymond or Life and Death*, Sir Oliver Lodge, an esteemed British physicist and radio pioneer, in a séance with medium Gladys Osborne Leonard, discussed the subject with Raymond, his deceased son. Raymond told him that the body doesn't start mortifying until the spirit has left it. He went on to tell his father that he had witnessed a scene several days earlier in which a man was going to be cremated two days after the doctor pronounced him dead. "When his relatives on this side heard about it, they brought a certain doctor on our side, and when they saw that the spirit hadn't got really out of the body, they magnetized it, and helped it out," Raymond explained through Feda, Leonard's spirit control. "But there was still a cord, and it had to be severed rather quickly, and it gave a little shock to the spirit, like as if you had something amputated. But it had to be done."

Raymond suggested that there should be a seven-day waiting period before cremation. "People are so careless," he said. "The idea seems to be 'hurry up and get them out of the way now that they are dead.'" (Lodge, 195)

Leonard, a clairvoyant as well as a trance medium, discussed the separation issue in her 1937 book, *The Last Crossing*. "Now, the etheric cord, or astral cable, is the medium used for conveying the life force to the body during its earthly existence," she wrote concerning embalming and other means of keeping a corpse lifelike, "and whatever conduces to the retention of this force after death must necessarily maintain the existence of the etheric cord." (Leonard, 73)

She recalled an occasion during which she saw a body which had obviously been "treated" and realized that the soul was still connected to it

by the cord. She prayed for help to be given in breaking the cord and then sensed the presence of discarnate beings, who encouraged her to make passes over the body, especially between the solar plexus and the head. After about 10 minutes of such passes accompanied by prayers, the cord was broken.

Some eight months after he died in his 1924 attempt to climb Mount Everest, George Mallory, an Englishman, communicated with Beatrice Gibbes through the mediumship of Geraldine Cummins, a renowned Irish automatic-writing medium. Mallory said that he slipped, caught hold of something, then slipped again, and while he didn't fall very far something in his body broke, he wasn't sure what. "It was all a muddle at first, you see, I took a long time getting clear of my body," he communicated. "It didn't decompose rapidly in that great cold. I found myself outside it, watching the man that was myself and yet not myself, tied to him still by threads ... it took a long time to snap, perhaps because I was a pretty strong chap and died hard. You know, I believe people don't die when doctors pronounce them dead, they are still very often only just outside their bodies, as I was." Mallory added that other spirits came and broke the last threads holding his spirit body to his physical body. (Fryer, 65)

The distinction between the so-called silver cord and the threads is not always made clear in spirit communication, but if I am interpreting various metaphysical teachings correctly, the "threads" are magnetic currents, not the silver cord, which is the connecting link between the physical body and the spirit body. The silver cord might be severed at the time of death or within a few days, thus liberating the spirit body, but the magnetic currents can still keep the spirit body close to the physical body for some time. The more materialistic the person when alive in the flesh, the stronger the threads and the longer it takes to sever them.

I finally told the funeral parlor representative that I wanted the casket that would deteriorate the fastest, explaining to him that there are indications

that the faster the mortal remains are turned to dust, the quicker the materialistic soul lets loose of his attachment to the physical body. The representative gave me a very suspicious look. When I told him that, for the same reason, I did not want my father embalmed, the eyebrows really raised.

Out of fear of appearing cheap, not only to the funeral parlor representative but also to those who would be attending the funeral, I also opted for the casket just above the pine box in price. If it were entirely up to me, I would have chosen cremation for my father, but he had already purchased his plot and clearly preferred burial. My one attempt to discuss this subject with him when he was alive and lucid was met with immediate resistance, and so I did not further pursue it.

I welcomed the opportunity to delay burial for two weeks, not so much to permit friends and relatives to attend but to allow as much time as possible for my father's spirit to achieve full separation and not be traumatized by the burial.

I had asked myself whether I could impose my own beliefs, vague and muddled as they are, on my father and opt for cremation rather than burial. My conclusion was that if I were *absolutely* certain that my beliefs are correct then I should override his wishes and choose cremation. But in the absence of *absolute* certainty, I had no right to disregard his wishes.

Silver Birch, the eloquent and apparently high spirit who spoke through the entranced British medium Maurice Barbanell for some 50 years, was asked if cremation is the preferred method of disposal. "Yes, always, because essentially it has the effect of putting an end to the idea that the spirit is the physical body," Silver Birch replied. (Ballard, 140)

"By the use of fire, all forms are dissolved; the quicker the human physical vehicle is destroyed, the quicker is its hold upon the withdrawing soul broken," medium and mystic Alice A. Bailey recorded, adding that the etheric body is apt to linger for a long time on the 'field of emanation'

when the physical body is interred, and it will frequently persist until the physical body has completely decayed. (Bailey, 55)

According to the Rev. Don Rose, a Swedenborgian minister, many Swedenborgians prefer to wait until after the third day for burial or cremation. "Personally, I have very little concern as to what happens to the body," Rose continued, mentioning that both he and his wife are donating their bodies to science. "There is a place where Swedenborg says that we are gently taken care of regardless of what has happened to our bodies. It could be blown to bits, as so many are in the war, or crushed or mangled. Think of those astronauts. I have the sense that it is not something to worry about."

Rose added that the funeral homes near the Swedenborgian community of Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania know very well that folks will want a simple pine box. (personal interview)

I understand that all popes are encased in special airtight caskets and concrete vaults. Is it possible that the Catholic Church, like Schmidt's daughter, has failed to recognize that when it comes to caskets and vaults, less may very well be more?

As for me, I have asked my wife to wait three or four days, have my physical shell cremated, and then flush the ashes down the toilet.

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