

Why Jessica Mitford was wrong

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“It cost only \$475 to cremate Jessica Mitford.

She would have been pleased by that, of course, delighted to know that in death as well as in life she had deprived the local undertakers of their usual profits. Indeed, when Mitford died at 78 in July, 1996, she was working on a new edition of her journalistic pipe bomb, *The American Way of Death*, a savagely witty and enormously influential blast of the American funeral industry. Mitford's book, which this year observes its thirty-fifth anniversary of publication, left morticians with concussion shock and dramatically impacted both industry practices and general cultural attitudes toward death and funerals. People would ask her what she planned to call the revised version. "Death Warmed Over," she would say.¹

Jessica Mitford was part aristocrat, part fellow traveler, part comedian, part crank, part revolutionary, and a full-blooded, thoroughly delightful eccentric. Her quirkiness came honestly. Born in 1917 in Gloucestershire, England, she was the fifth of six daughters of a pair of dreary, right-wing aristocrats, Lord and Lady Redesdale, who somehow managed to breed a gaggle of colorful social nonconformists. One sister, Diana, in a masterpiece of bad timing, married the leader of British Fascists just in time for the outbreak of World War II and was imprisoned for Nazi enthusiasm. Another sister, Unity, known as "the Nordic goddess," emigrated to Germany where she became a passionate disciple of Hitler, attempting suicide when her romantic entreaties to him went unrequited. Sister Pamela spent her childhood yearning to be a horse. By contrast, yet another sister, Deborah, glided through a fairy tale life as a duchess, having wed the Duke of Devonshire. Nancy Mitford, the oldest of the sisters, turned the bizarre inner workings of the Mitford household into a series of quirky novels, and the family peculiarities were on full display in *The Mitford Girls*, a wacky musical comedy that played London's West End.

Jessica, or "Decca" as she was known by her family and friends, was the most defiant of the "Mitford Girls." Though her father leaned toward fascism, Jessica ran away from home at age nineteen to fight fascists in Spain. She was the child of aristocratic privilege but eloped with a nephew of Winston Churchill to escape the confines of nobility and, consequently, was disowned by her parents. Shunned by family in Britain, Decca, with her husband and young daughter, left England for America in 1939 to make a new life. After her husband was killed in the war, she married Robert Treuhaft, a left-leaning California labor lawyer, drifted into the American Communist Party, and was rewarded by being hauled in front of the California Senate Committee on Un-American Activities. (Ever the wit, Jessica refused to say whether she had been a member of either the Communist Party or the Berkeley Tennis Club.) A woman of regal bearing who never lost the British lilt in her voice, she nevertheless lived in a modest, middle-class home even after her public success. (To snobbish sister Nancy, who was scandalized that

Jessica preferred plebeian Oakland to fashionable Berkeley, Jessica snorted, "We live on Regent Street. Does that make you feel better?")

She was at various times in her life a clerk in a dress shop, a door-to-door hawker of silk hosiery, a Miami bartender, a union organizer, a reporter for the Soviet-sympathizing *People's World*, an investigator for the federal government, a member of the Black Panthers' defense team, an actress in Woody Allen's movie "Play It Again, Sam," and, in her seventies, lead warbler for a band dubbed "Decca and the Dectones," whose last madcap album included Beatles' tunes and was called "Inappropriate Songs for Special Occasions."

But mainly Jessica Mitford was a muckraker. In fact, she loved the label, embraced it, and was openly pleased when a critic sniffed that she was "the queen of the muckrakers." *Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking* was the proud title of a collection of her essays. She said she took up writing because, "I figured the only thing that requires no education and no skills is writing." She took up muckraking because, as San Francisco columnist Herb Caen noted, "Like Upton Sinclair and Frank Norris before her, she was merely reporting the truth about abominations waiting to be exposed."

Abominations were waiting to be exposed everywhere, it seemed, and Jessica smoked them out in the practice of medicine, in prisons, in the celebrated political trial of Doctor Benjamin Spock, to name a few places. But nothing else she wrote rivals the stunning effect of her masterpiece, *The American Way of Death*. Rejected by several publishers as "too morbid" and viewed as a certain flop, the book instead touched a social nerve. It sold out its initial print run the day of publication, became a runaway best seller for months, and staggered the funeral industry by landing punch after punch on its ethical glass jaw.

Decca pummeled away at every vulgarity, cheap sentiment, and greedy manipulation she saw in the funeral establishment, and she saw plenty. Morticians in America were the robber barons of death, she was convinced, mercenary bottom feeders preying on the vulnerabilities of the griefstricken. She attacked "Beautiful Memory Picture" euphemisms for embalming, cosmetically treated corpses, caskets with innerspring mattresses, the hawking of "comfortable" burial footwear, and especially the price gouging commonplace among funeral homes. Almost singlehandedly, Mitford roused the moribund Federal Trade Commission to examine funeral service practices, and the slate of Federal Trade Commission regulations of funeral homes in place today is, in significant measure, a legacy of *The American Way of Death*.²

Mitford's ambush left many funeral professionals trembling with rage. "These dames that write these books-they don't want to hear anything good," sputtered one New York mortician. "If you kill sentiment you're a dead pigeon. The world runs on sentiment." Undertakers began to snarl out both her first and last names. *Mortuary Management*, a major industry journal, called their well-known nemesis simply "Jessica." ("Ah ... famous by first name only," responded an amused Mitford. "Rather like Madonna."), and to this day funeral service insiders sometimes refer to public relations setbacks as being "Mitfordized." One vault salesman, who had been riled by Jessica's caustic criticisms of unnecessary funeral vaults, scoffed at her in a public gathering, "I listened to Mrs. Mitford's speech," he sniffed, "and she never said that when Jesus Christ our Lord was crucified, a rich man gave him his vault."

"Perhaps so," she retorted, "but he couldn't stand it for more than three days." Needless to say, the unlucky mortician had been "Mitfordized."

THE MITFORD CRUSADE

What is quite clear is that, as an irreverent evangelist, Jessica Mitford was on a decades-long crusade against the typical American way of doing funerals. What is not so clear, however, is whether or not she much liked her converts. As a renegade and a thoroughgoing contrarian, Mitford was disinclined to approve of popular causes, even if they were her own. She preached against irrational and costly American funerals, but she also once described a group of admirers who had come to shout amen at one of her public jeremiads as "Unitarians, Quakers, egg-heads, and old farts." Even so, her congregation swelled with the faithful and continues to overflow today. Without a doubt, Jessica Mitford changed the way Americans view funerals, morticians, and the rituals of death. Even those who have never heard of her have inherited her rhetoric and her biases as a part of the general cultural discourse and many hold to her creed that the standard funeral is a greedy ripoff of the public and a vulgar, cosmetic-caked, and illogical waste of time and money.

Recently, I was interviewed on a public radio talk show, along with two other clergy, about contemporary funeral practices. After the interview, listeners called in their questions and comments. Although we clergy had focused in the interview on theological issues in current funeral practices, the callers were mostly not interested in that. They were mainly angry at funeral directors, raging away at their avarice and taking swipes at the idea that one ought to make much ado about a funeral anyway. The emotions were their own, but the language, the arguments, the tone of disdain were vintage Mitford. Coincidentally, a few weeks later, I was contacted by a reporter from a news magazine wanting information for an article on the funeral industry and death customs in America. When I asked what approach she was taking, she replied, "I'm trying to do something of what Jessica Mitford did." Just raise the question of funerals today, and the spirit of Jessica Mitford immediately flutters overhead. There is no question that The American Way of Death continues to set much of the agenda popular attitudes about funerals today-no small achievement for a 35-year-old muckraking book.

THE TWO FACES OF JESSICA

Given her record of reform, it seems wrongheaded, even churlish, to criticize Jessica Mitford's stance on funerals. After all, virtually by herself she called an entire service industry to ethical heel. When, for example, The American Way of Death was first published in 1963, many funeral establishments hid their pricing policies like state secrets. Today, anyone can ask a funeral home for a detailed price list of goods and services and, as a right of law, receive it. More important, a whole consumer culture is now on guard when dealing with the funeral industry, and a network of not-for-profit funeral and memorial societies has bloomed. More than anyone else, Jessica Mitford is to be thanked for this.

But, for all the good she did, Jessica Mitford was also wrong about funerals-wrong in ways that really matter, wrong in ways

detrimental to the human spirit and to the deep rituals of faith communities. Because of Jessica Mitford-or, more precisely, because of the way her attitudes about funerals have been taken over into popular opinion, Americans are in danger of losing the capacity to mark ritually the profound significance of the experience of death, to place our losses into a larger framework of social and religious meaning.

Precisely where Jessica Mitford has done damage can best be understood if we discern that The American Way of Death incorporates **two distinct intentions**, two separate methodologies, in a way, two different Jessica Mitfords. **First, there is Jessica Mitford the consumer advocate**, the muckraker, the junkyard dog on patrol, suspicious, vigilant, sharp-toothed. This Jessica is eager to dig up evidence of industry wrongdoing and to rip into any funeral director foolish enough to pad the bill, to lie to the grief stricken, to cheat the innocent, or even to mutter empty euphemisms in the face of death. **This Jessica was feisty, controversial, unrelenting, and, insofar as she made an unwary public more alert and informed, is worthy of the praise she has received.**

But there is another Jessica at work in the pages of The American Way of Death-Jessica the secular rationalist, Jessica the anti-ritualist, Jessica who remained at heart the stiff-lipped Edwardian aristocrat with little tolerance for "folk" ceremonies of mystery and wonder. The first Jessica, the consumer advocate, thought funerals were too costly; **the second Jessica, the rationalist, thought they were just plain silly and sentimental. Jessica the consumer advocate thought American funerals were based on the greed of morticians; Jessica the rationalist thought American funerals were based on nothing but gullibility, foolish illusions, cotton-candy euphemisms, and groundless religious myths.**

Like her fellow countryman Evelyn Waugh, who sent up the American funeral in his satirical novel *The Loved One*, the second Jessica found in funerals the ideal target for social mockery of American folkways, the occasion to engage in some British tut-tutting over the shallowness, sentimentality, and vulgarity of American culture generally-a sport that continues to this day. Indeed, the emotional catharsis in England surrounding the death of Princess Diana, with

sobbing crowds milling around outside Westminster Abbey while Elton John crooned "Candle in the Wind" inside, caught the British intelligentsia off guard. Many groused that they no longer recognized their own country and that the media induced display of showy public grief seemed "all too American" in its hysterical intensity.³ Particularly galling to British traditionalists was the criticism levied toward Queen Elizabeth, and the royals generally, for failing to loosen up and to place their grief, Gerald-like, on public display. Commenting on this trend of measuring the royal family by American cathartic standards, Adam Gopnik notes that one of the established political roles of the modern monarchy has been precisely "to resist popular emotion" and that before "no one ever thought that the British monarchy could come under attack for looking insufficiently irrational."⁴

That regal restraint was precisely the role of the second Jessica. She could never look past the surfaces of the American funeral, could never forgive Americans our fondness for cluttering funeral rites with pastel casket liners, rubber sealed vaults, funeral hosiery, and artificial graveside grass. **She lacked the patience to ask if anything deeper was going on beneath the emotion drenched surface. She attacked the American way of death, but Mitford's real distaste was for the American way of life.**

However, cultural condescension was not the only force at work in the second Jessica. **Mitford also had a naive, almost nineteenth-century reverence for "hard" science, for not merely the social desirability of rationality but the power of it and the ability of logic and the "scientific method" to sweep away the cobwebs of myth and superstition. To Mitford's mind, a clear-eyed gaze at death yielded little more than the biological facts. When people died, they were dead ... period ... and funerals were little more than pathetic attempts to cover up this bare truth with winks, lies, make believe, cosmetics, and mumbo jumbo.** When Mitford interviewed American funeral directors, she was irritated at least as much by what she deemed to be their irrationality and their willingness to coddle people's illusions as by their greed. She despised that they were, in her opinion, purveyors of myths-unclear, illogical, sentimental, and ridiculous. Such American nonsense would never take root in British soil, Mitford observed, because of what she called the "relentless English common sense"⁵ (pity she wasn't around to catch Elton John). Her villains-funeral directors and their friends-were babblers of unscientific absurdities; her heroes-scientists, physicians, and clinicians-were paragons of cool level-headedness. When, for example, she sought the counsel of a hospital pathologist in order to debunk the alleged health aspects of embalming, she knew the minute she walked into his office that she was on congenial turf. It had, she cooed, an "atmosphere of rationality and scientific method in refreshing contrast to that of the funeral homes."⁶ When Mitford was told of the opinion of a certain minister who dared to venture the

thought that viewing the body could sometimes be helpful to the mourners, Mitford sniffed that "no qualified psychiatric reference was forthcoming."⁷

One irony in Mitford's appeal to rationality and bedrock scientific truth is that both she and her primary target, the funeral industry, flow from the same nineteenth century positivistic spring. Today's funeral directors are not the lineal descendants of ancient Egyptian artisans of the dead but of nineteenth century chemical technicians, riding the crest of the scientific inventiveness of the industrial revolution. Ironically, the funeral industry carved out a place in American commerce precisely by presenting itself as a more rational and "scientific" alternative to prevailing burial customs. People in the nineteenth century well knew that unembalmed bodies laid out in family parlors tend to decay quickly, despite the use of cooling boards and ice, and last century's undertakers, equipped with chemicals and anatomical techniques, promised new treatment of corpses that was "scientific, rational, and hygienic." Those are precisely Jessica Mitford's intellectual goals and vocabulary, and it is small wonder that the 1960s battle between her and the funeral industry was so pitched; Jessica with her tight notion of rationality and her awe of empirical science was simply doing in the 1960s what nineteenth century undertakers, with their dubious claims of sanitation and hygiene, were doing in the 1860s—both of them dinosaurs clanking the tusks of an outmoded science and lumbering in combat over the same ideological turf.

"BEHOLD, I TELL YOU A MYSTERY. . ."

We know what Jessica Mitford did not like about the American funeral, but what would she put in its place? It's hard to say. In nearly 250 pages of scathing critique there is very little in *The American Way of Death* to indicate what Mitford thinks a "good funeral" ought to be. Mitford probably wished that rational human beings would evolve to the point that funerals would, like phrenology or mesmerism, simply disappear. Jessica was a secular Puritan, finding common voice with her more theological Westminster forebears, who chided that funerals "are in no way beneficial to the dead and have proved many ways hurtful to the living." **However, she was realistic and savvy enough to know that societies will probably always mark death in some way, and there are glimpses here and there of what Mitford would allow as a fitting funeral.**

First, and perhaps foremost, there would be a deemphasis on the actual body of the deceased. Preferably, the body would not even be present for the funeral, and it would certainly never be viewed, a practice Mitford found to be altogether barbaric and unseemly. She cites with approval a London undertaker's remark that such a custom is "contrary to good taste and proper behavior."⁸

Moreover, the service would be ritually and symbolically spare and focused on remembering the life achievements of the deceased. In a revealing passage in *The American Way of Death*, Mitford briefly but approvingly describes a memorial service for a local judge that her husband attended in San Francisco. The service was held in a symbol-free environment where there were "no decorations" save a bowl of flowers and a "single, store-bought wreath." After an organ prelude, four men, friends of the deceased, walked up to the platform and gave "warm and vivid" addresses on the judge's life and character. "When the last speaker had concluded, all four rose and descended from the platform, indicating that the service was over. There being no casket `to view,' we in attendance filed directly out into the lobby."⁹

In other words, Mitford here gives the nod to exactly the kind of funeral that is rapidly coming into vogue today. In many parts of the country, especially among educated middle and upper class whites, the typical funeral today is simpler, smaller in scale, and less well attended (that is to say, less important to the wider community) than a generation ago. **A ritual liturgy may be used out of custom, but the real energy in a funeral often lies elsewhere, frequently in the anecdotes about the deceased by friends and relatives.** There is no "viewing" of the body (indeed, the trend is to insist on the absence of the body), no tramping through the mud to the cemetery, no table full of casseroles waiting for the family back at home, and there are no prolonged communal rituals of mourning, storytelling, and eating so prevalent in previous generations.

Thus, today's typical memorial service looks, in many ways, remarkably like Mitford's downsized ideal. **In fact, many clergy have the opinion that moving their congregations in this direction is one of their ethical and theological responsibilities, feeling as though they have struck a blow for the gospel if they can minimize the funeral by lowering the cost, simplifying the ritual, closing the casket, eliminating the viewing, and getting people to have festive memorial services that "focus on the resurrection rather than on a dead body."**

Readers of *The American Way of Death* were left with the impression that there were only two choices. One could have the funeral-home style ceremony, a plastic, costly funeral with "beautiful memory pictures," slumber rooms, Cadillac coaches, Ever-Last burial vaults, floral tributes, and cosmetically treated, embalmed corpses lying in polished copper caskets. Or one could have the Mitford-style funeral: sane, commonsensical, spare, and economical. No fuss about the body, no floral perfume clogging up the olfactories, no sentimental myths choking the intellect, just a few warm and straightforward remarks from friends at a brief memorial service and a dignified retreat to the normal rhythms of life. If these were indeed the only choices, what sentient, frugal, reasonable, ethical person would not choose Mitford's way?

But these are not, in fact, the only two options. Indeed, what is often missing in the tug of war between the funeral-home-style service and the Mitford style is **a thoughtful consideration of what a funeral-particularly a Christian**

funeral-could and should be. Obviously, a genuinely Christian funeral is not about the evils that Mitford found so easy to satirize-the vulgar, conspicuous consumption, the mawkish sentiment-but, strangely **a Christian funeral is also not primarily about many of the good things that its friends claim for it: the facilitation of grief, helping people to hold on to memories of the deceased, or even to supply pastoral care and comfort to the bereaved.** A Christian funeral often provides these things, of course, but none of these is its central purpose. **A Christian funeral is nothing less than a bold and dramatic worship of the living God done attentive to and in the face of an apparent victory at the hands of the last enemy. Though the liturgy may be gently worded, there is no hiding the fact that, in a funeral, Christians raise a fist at death; recount the story of the Christ who suffered death, battled death, and triumphed over it; offer laments and thanksgivings to the God who raised Jesus from the grave; sing hymns of defiance; and honor the body and life of the saint who has died.**

1.

Thus, one measure of the veracity of a funeral is its capacity to face, without euphemistic smoke and mirrors, the reality of death. Death is, of course, the brute fact that occasions a funeral. Astonishingly, for all her talk about the funerals and the funeral industry, Mitford hardly mentions death at all, not real death. In Mitford's world, people do not die painfully or peacefully, well or poorly, blessedly or tragically, in despair or in trust, nor do those left behind have seasons of grief, memories to be cherished or forgiven, or faithful meaning to be wrested from sorrow, just a series of consumer choices. The American Way of Death and The American Way of Death Revisited cover many topics, but, ironically, death as a human experience, death as a force that robs life, death as a knife that severs bonds of love is not one of them. Mitford jibes and smirks and hurls sarcastic witticisms at the blowhards among the morticians, and some of them, like clowns at a carnival pie-throwing booth, make themselves into easy targets, but one cannot help but see, lurking over her shoulder, the immense and terrifying mortal reality she will not turn to confront. To produce two books about death that do not actually speak of death is so strange, so inexplicable, that the sheer fact of it seems clear confirmation of **William May's conviction that the unwillingness to name death betrays a repressed acknowledgment of its fearsome sacral potency.**

Contemporary people, he argues, "find it difficult to bring the word death to our lips in the presence of its power. This is so because we are at a loss as to how to proceed on the far side of this word. Our philosophies and our moralities desert us. They retreat and leave us wordless."¹⁰

By contrast, **the Christian funeral, at its best, speaks plainly of death.** It does not shy away from naming death's power to pierce the human heart, to steal gifts of love, and to create empty places at the table of fellowship, **and the Christian funeral bravely claims the victory over death won by Jesus Christ, and dares to trust the promise of the gospel's great mystery, "We shall not all die, but we will all be changed."**

2.

A second measure of the Christian funeral is the degree to which it treats the body of the deceased as the body of a saint. Mitford saved her strongest invective for the custom of embalming, restoring, and viewing the body, which she claimed is virtually unknown outside of North America and which she saw as utterly unnecessary, yet another sign of American bad taste, and an expensive trick pulled by funeral directors to con the gullible. She has a point, of course; the practice of paying someone a lot of money to put eyeliner and face powder on an embalmed corpse so that it can be viewed under colored lights is difficult to defend. Nevertheless, two objections to Mitford's attitude toward the treatment of the body need to be raised. **First, it is not simply that Mitford has no use for chemically-treated bodies gussied up and on view in slumber rooms; she has little use for the body at all.** As for the three women whom the Gospel of Mark reports were on their way to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body with spices, Jessica would undoubtedly have said, "Don't bother." Beneath her righteous consumerist rhetoric breathes the spirit of a gnostic who, like many educated people in our society, views the body as a shell, finally an embarrassment, part of what Geoffrey Gorer has called "the pornography of death." What to do with the dead body? It can be burned or buried, donated or disposed, but, like all pornography, it should be done out of public view. **The theological anthropology that defines human beings as embodied creatures**, that calls for the honoring of the body in life and in death, is out of Mitford's range.

In his fine book *The Undertaking*, poet and funeral director Thomas Lynch, comments on the "just a shell" theory of dead bodies. "You hear a lot of it," he observes, "from young clergy, old family friends, wellintentioned in-laws-folks who are unsettled by the fresh grief of others." He remembers a time when an Episcopal deacon said something of this sort to the mother of a teenager, dead of leukemia, and promptly received a swift slap. "I'll tell you when it's 'just a shell,' she retorted. "For now and until I tell you otherwise, she's my daughter." Lynch goes on to say,

So to suggest in the early going of grief that the dead body is "just" anything rings as tinny in its attempt to minimize as if we were to say that it was "just" a bad hair day when the girl went bald from chemotherapy. Or that our hope for heaven on her behalf was based on the belief that Christ raised "just" a body from dead. What if, rather than crucifixion, he'd opted for suffering low self-esteem for the remission of sins? What if, rather than "just a shell," he'd raised his personality, say, or The Idea of Himself? Do you think

they'd have changed the calendar for that? . . . Easter was a body and blood thing, no symbols, no euphemisms, no half measures. II

Second, Mitford's broad axe attack is not nuanced enough to look beneath a cultural custom like viewing the body to discover its underlying motivations. Why would people want to view the body of the deceased? For Mitford, the only possible answer is morbid curiosity. **What she cannot understand is that, in many religious traditions, death dramatically changes, but does not utterly destroy, the relationship with the deceased, and the rituals of the funeral serve in part to make the transition between one form of relationship and another.** In this transitional period, the body of the deceased takes on an iconographic quality. More directly, when a grieving family wants "mama to look nice" it is not because they want to satisfy anyone's need to leer at the dead, but because they have the deep sense, shared by people in virtually every culture, that something of the relationship endures beyond death and they have the heartfelt desire to treat their dead with dignity and respect.

Until quite recently, Christian funerals, like many human death rituals, were built on the underlying metaphor of the journey of the deceased from this world to the next. In the case of Christianity, the deceased was traveling not to the land of the dead but into the presence of the living God, not over the River Styx but across the Jordan into the land of promise, flowing with milk and honey. **For Christians, the deceased was not a ghoul to be feared nor an evil spirit to be warded off, but a saint to be respected, honored, loved, and accompanied with psalms, hymns, and prayers the last steps of the way (in the earliest Christian funerals, even given the kiss of peace). The dead body was neither a mere shell to be discarded as rubbish nor the totality of the person to be clutched and preserved in desperation, but a tangible sign, like the eucharistic bread, of God's gift of life.**

Christian rituals of death have varied from age to age and from culture to culture, but in all times and places they have expressed the conviction that a saint is "traveling on." Some Christians-but not all-dress the deceased in a white baptismal robe for the journey. Some Christians-but not all-stay awake with the body in the hours before the funeral, telling stories and sharing memories, not so much to guard the body or to shoo away the forces of evil, but as fellow pilgrims on the path, as a symbol of the communion of the saints and the unbroken connection with the saint who is "passing on," not just passed away. Some Christians-but not all-open the coffin and look at the face of the deceased, perhaps several times in the course of the funeral and burial, not because they are morbidly curious about death but because they are saying farewell to a sister or brother. Some Christians-but not all-carry the coffin into the sanctuary, pausing at stations to recount the liturgy of baptism. Some Christians-but not all-walk or march or ride in procession to the place of burial, giving shape to the conviction that the deceased is journeying to the other shore, to the "land that is brighter than day." Some Christians-but not all-sing "From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host" and

others sing "When we meet on that beautiful shore" and still others sing "O when the saints, go marchin' in," but all Christians, in their own ways, mark the milestones of the saintly journey and the progress of a pilgrim toward "a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last."

The point here is not to argue that a Christian funeral should include, somewhere in the process, a viewing of the body. That is not the case. The claim rather is that Christians, through a variety of customs, honor the body. Honor can still be paid to the body of the deceased whether or not the body is viewed or even if the body is cremated or not physically present at the service. But many Christian groups do include the custom of viewing the body as a matter of tradition, and this practice must be understood in its larger ritual and theological contexts. It is quite common, for example, among blacks generally and among whites in rural areas like Appalachia, and the custom connects firmly, as we have seen, to the religious imagery of the journey of the deceased from this world to the next. Mitford wrinkles her nose at all viewing of the dead, not only because she incorrectly identifies the practice as unquestionably vulgar and pagan but also because she has a poor feel for ritual action and she misunderstands the meaning of customs outside the narrow range of her ethnicity and class.

But Mitford's view has begun to gain traction. There is mounting evidence that the metaphor of the journey of the deceased no longer grips the imagination of many American Christians, especially suburban, white Protestants. The image of the deceased on a journey from this world to the next is now being replaced by the image of the mourner on a journey from grief to restoration. The view currently gaining ground is that it no longer the dead person who is traveling—the dead person is, after all, dead; all dressed up and nowhere to go—it is the mourners who are traveling, and the journey is an intrapsychic one. "The once publicly supported process of mourning," observes David Wendell Moller, "has now become defined as the private trouble of the individuals involved, in the resolution of which lies their personal coping and adaptive skills." ¹² **Deprived of the ritual of a saint marching into glory, we replace it with the psychically useful notion of a good, or at least somewhat interesting, person we will remember from time to time as life returns to normal. The Christian kerygma tends to fade in favor of biographical comments about the deceased, often delivered by a number of people, such anecdotes seemingly far more useful to the stabilization of the ego in grief than are comments about discipleship, eschatology, and mission.** In a genuinely Christian service, stories and memories of the deceased are told as well, but such stories are not ends in themselves; they are stories of the grace of God refracted through a human life. In today's funerals and memorial services, less attention is paid to the body, since the body is going nowhere and the presence of a tangible dead body, or a box of ashes, tends to be something of a "downer" if psychological adjustment to grief is the only issue at hand.

The most important measure of a Christian funeral is its capacity to place the event of a person's death into the larger context of the Christian gospel.

"Funerals," says Thomas Lynch, "are the way we close the gap between the death that happens and the death that matters. It is how we assign meaning to our little remarkable histories." 13 The Christian funeral is a liturgical drama, a piece of gospel theater, with roles to play and a time honored, if flexible and culturally varied, script. To understand Christian funerals as drama is not to say they are theater in the sense of Broadway entertainment, of course, but rather that they are community enactments of a formative narrative. It is to claim that they have more in common with Greek drama than with individualistic psychotherapy. A Christian funeral is, to the church, what Martha Nussbaum states Greek tragedy was to ancient Athens:

To attend a tragic drama [in ancient Greece] was not to go to a distraction or a fantasy, in the course of which one suspended one's anxious practical questions. It was, instead, to engage in a communal process of inquiry, reflection, and feeling with respect to important civic and personal ends. The very structure of theatrical performance strongly implied this. When we go to the theater, we usually sit in a darkened auditorium, in the illusion of splendid isolation, while the dramatic action-separated from the spectator by the box of the proscenium arch-is bathed in artificial light as if it were a separate world of fantasy and mystery. The ancient Greek spectator, by contrast, sitting in the common daylight, saw across the staged action the faces of fellow citizens on the other side of the orchestra. And the whole event took place during a solemn civic/religious festival, whose trappings made spectators conscious that the values of the community were being examined and communicated. To respond to these events was to acknowledge and participate in a way of life-and a way of life, we should add, that prominently included reflection and public debate about ethical and civic matters. To respond well to a tragic performance involved both feeling and critical reflection: and these were closely linked with one another.14

Likewise, a Christian funeral is itself "a solemn civic/religious festival," and the texts and symbols of the dramatic rite should make us conscious that "the values of the community [are] being examined and communicated." As for "the values of the community," Christians take their cues about the meaning of death not primarily from psychological theories but from the Gospels, which are, after all, attempts to place the death of Jesus into a narrative context, to set Jesus' death into a framework of meaning.

What Mitford pictured as a suitable memorial, of course, is precisely the kind of sterile, ritually impoverished, symbol-deprived, meaning-starved, anecdotally based service that finally reduces the rich drama of a Christian funeral, with its bold claims about life and death and mystery, to its lowest common denominator, a psychotherapeutic "sharing time." Mitford growls at funeral directors who advertise that their restorative methods produce "Beautiful Memory Pictures," but can a memorial service that consists entirely of "Beautiful Memory Pictures," painted not with cosmetics but with eulogizing words, be all that different?

SISTER DECCA

There are a few fleeting clues that, nearing the end, Mitford may have gained a somewhat broader perspective on the rituals of death. *The American Way of Death Revisited*, is still a piece of yellow journalism, like its predecessor, but there are some interesting revisions. For example, the account of the spare memorial service for the judge has been omitted, and new material has

been added pointing readers to consumer groups who both help people avoid funeral excess while respecting the wide variety of religious and local funeral customs in America. Mitford herself seems not much changed, but there are at least a few places set for others at her table.

The final paragraph of the original book, *The American Way of Death*, states, Whether the narrow passageway to the unknown, which everybody must cross, will continue to be as cluttered and as expensive to traverse as it is today, depends in the last analysis entirely on those travelers who have not yet reached it.¹⁵

Alas, Decca Mitford, curmudgeon and muckraker, eccentric and secular saint, has now reached and crossed over that narrow passage herself. Now that she is looking at matters from the other side, we can only guess what wisdom about death and funerals she would provide. But we can be assured that it would be witty, blunt, and designed to save money. Sail on, dear Decca, sail on.

¹It was published in August, 1998 as *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

²In *The American Way of Death Revisited*, however, Mitford is critical of the way that industry lobbyists have, over the years, systematically pulled the teeth from the Federal Trade Commission funeral regulations.

³Adam Gopnik, "Crazy Piety," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 29, 1997, 36. ⁴*Ibid.*, 367.

⁵Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Crest Books, 1963), 164. ⁶*Ibid.*, 66.

^{*}*Ibid.*, 74 (emphasis added).

⁸*Ibid.*, 173. ⁹*Ibid.*, 214.

¹William F. May, "The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience," in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, eds. Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 175.

"Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 20-1.

¹²David Wendell Moller, *Confronting Death: Values, Institutions, and Human Mortality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 111. ¹³Lynch, *The Undertaking*, 21.

⁴Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15-6.

⁵Mitford, *The American Way of Death*, 228.

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