

T H E A M E R I C A N
W A Y O F
D E A T H

A MEDITATION ON DYING, GRIEF AND
THE BODIES WE LEAVE BEHIND

by Will Kennedy

About four years ago, my stepdad walked down a garden path in the backyard of the house he shared with my mother. It was springtime. He locked himself in a small cottage at the back of the yard, neatly arranged a sealed envelope on his desk, and took off his glasses. My stepfather then sat down on a futon, stuck a pistol in his mouth and shot himself.

I haven't had much death in my life but, by some cruel twist of fate, most of the death I've experienced has come from suicide. A young friend took pills and suffocated himself, another friend jumped in the Columbia River, and then there's my stepdad and the pistol.

If you've been through a suicide, it's a peculiar kind of grief. Simply waking up in the morning enters us into an unspoken contract with every other living thing on the planet.

This contract states: Life, which nobody asks for, is often unbearable. But just keep living, not just for yourself, but for us. The alternative is not an option.

When someone breaks that contract, it sends those left behind into a spiritual free fall. The rules have changed. That contract entered upon unwittingly at birth is suddenly null and void. The architecture of your will to live must be rebuilt. Copycat suicides are common, and I believe this is why.

Jeff Musgrove of Musgrove Family Mortuary says that, in the Western world, we tend to view death as unnatural — as “something weird,” he says. Musgrove Family Mortuary has been in business since 1888, making it one of the oldest continuously operating businesses in Lane County.

Musgrove looks at the mortuary business as part of the health care industry, or, as he calls it, “the caring profession.” At one time, families cared for their own dead, burying them in pine and cedar boxes.

After the Civil War, with the preponderance of death, funeral rituals became more elaborate, and in many ways the mortuary business was born.

Musgrove says that in his time he's seen funeral services change dramatically. “Back in the late '70s and '80s,” he says, “a lot of the services were still religiously oriented. That kind of turned people off; the funerals were kind of cookie cutter. That left people saying, ‘If that's it, then count me out.’”

The trend brought about a pendulum swing toward no service at all, Musgrove says. “That was not the answer,” he adds. “The pendulum has swung back to, we're going to have a service, but it's going to be much more focused on the person: what their life was.”

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As far as dealing with the bag of bones we all leave behind, cremations are on the rise. You can have your ashes pressed into a vinyl LP; some services will compost you. In Crestone, Colorado, you can be burned on an open-air pyre.

Later, on the evening my stepdad killed himself, a cleanup crew came to my mother's house. A well-meaning

woman did all the talking while some surly men in the background smoked cigarettes. They cut out the portion of drywall in the cottage damaged by bullet holes, and they removed carpet stained with blood and brains.

The car they arrived in said, “It's like it never happened.”

A few days later I sat at the mortuary with my mom. A kind, gray-faced man with long fingers adorned with fancy rings asked if I'd like to see my stepfather's body. He'd endured quite a bit of trauma, the man said, so some things would have to be “disguised.”

I said no. I buckled. I chickened out. I folded. I, too, am weird about death.

My mother asked, “Are you sure? I understand seeing the body can really help with closure.”

I couldn't do it. But now, four years later, I often think about that moment.

I ask Musgrove if I made a mistake. “It's a personal decision,” he says. “I can't say having a visitation or viewing is right in every circumstance.”

In cases of sudden or unanticipated death, he adds, people tend to say “no” to viewing bodies. People want to “deny it,” Musgrove explains. “It can't be. There's some mistake. All of these games we play in our mind.”

But he says there can be a lot of value in visiting the body of a loved one, calling it the first step in the journey toward recovery. “Because you can't start the grieving process if you refuse to admit there's something to be grieving about,” Musgrove says. “If you can see them and they're in peace, they're not struggling anymore. To see them and say, ‘Yes, they really did die,’ can have huge benefits.”

We cremated my stepfather. There was a small memorial service. Nobody talked about how he died. A red goblin of anger inside me wanted to march up to everyone and say, “You know he killed himself, don't you.” But I didn't.

In a spiral of confusion and grief, my family never did anything with the ashes. Maybe someday we will. ■

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