

GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN: A Page from My Death Autobiography

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As a practical theologian, I consider practices (religious and everyday) to be a fruitful starting point for theological reflection. Engaging in a practice, offering a thick description of and reflection on such a practice, yield a different and valuable knowledge base for theological study. The following creative writing essay is the “page” out of my “death autobiography,” which narrates and reflects on the practice of building my own casket. While I am an academic devoted to intellectual inquiry around topics such as death, I am also an ordained Lutheran pastor who is called to accompany people in times of death and, therefore, must not lose sight of people’s stories of actual experiences. My intellectual inquiry regarding death is also inevitably shaped by my awareness that I, too, will die one day. I am a mortal human being who hopes and trusts that the Christian funeral liturgy’s opening biblical proclamation is true:

Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4).

Finally, I am a seminary professor who tries not to ask students to engage in exercises I have not engaged in or am not willing to engage in. Because one of the assignments in the interdisciplinary seminary course I teach (candidly entitled, “Death”), is to begin the lifelong process of writing one’s own death autobiography, I have begun this process with them. What follows is a section from that work offered for the sake of considering how personal experiences around death might be a conversation partner in a critical exploration for “Christian-Muslim Perspectives on Death, Dying & Eschatology.”

Tuesday, September 11, 2001

The memory of that day is as clear as walking out to get this morning's newspaper. I first heard that an airplane had flown into the World Trade Center while seated in a nook of a breakfast spot in Duluth, Minnesota. Since I was passing through the city on Lake Superior's North Shore, I had decided to stop and take my brother, a sophomore at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, to breakfast. We were both confused by the television newscaster's announcement about the second hit. Second? Wait, when was the first? Was this some kind of joke? It was not. We did not even finish our caramel rolls before returning to Brent's college apartment to call home. "Mom, did you see the news? It doesn't seem real." Then the unthinkable happened (as if it hadn't already): a third wayward plane had just crashed in Somerset, Pennsylvania and we hadn't even digested our partial breakfast.

I began to process the series of events on a long solo, open road drive from Duluth to my home in Moorhead, Minnesota. National Public Radio kept my mixed emotions company, even added to the confusing mix of reactions.

- Hundreds, if not thousands feared dead.
- What did we do to deserve this?
- We deserved this.
- Speculation around who was responsible for this world war that lasted no more than a few hours but would affect us all for generations to come.

Even as we were piecing together the morning's events, we were bracing for what might come next like earthquake aftershocks. As the suppositions and assumptions about murder, mayhem and mortality prattled through the tinny speakers, I was acutely mindful that my newly chiseled casket lay at attention in the back of my parents' van, which I had borrowed for the week. The

long, lonely drive was made longer and lonelier by the surreal experience of transporting my own casket on the day that will forever be remembered by those three SOS numbers: 9 . . . 1 . . . 1. Not one moment in the four days I spent building that casket did I imagine so many caskets would be needed in such a short period of time.

No longer did building my casket seem to be the macabre and gratuitous project some thought it to be. I wasn't so crazy after all. Death could happen to any of us, at any time. I recognized on that day, 9/11, that planning for the inevitability of death can be a gift for one's loved ones and oneself.

Thinking Outside the Box

I did not have a terminal disease. Though, comically, I discovered later that when a co-worker found out I was building my casket, she remarked, "You know, she hasn't looked well lately." Despite this perception, I was not sick. But I knew I would die . . . some day. Everyone knows that. At that time, I was a congregational pastor; I was accustomed to accompanying people in their dying and in their grief when others died. I had conducted numerous funerals for people who had not planned for the inevitable, thereby leaving family members "in the dark" and, at times, quarreling over funeral preparations, including which casket to choose for the deceased. A variation of "Uncle John deserves the best" more often than not led to regret when the four-figure bill arrived. One of my roles as a pastor was to model best practices as a Christian—especially at life's transitions, such as death. And what better way to do this than to follow up my encouraging words, "for your family's sake, plan for your funeral," with the deed of building my own casket as a gift to my loved ones.

The seed had been planted years earlier. I recall my dad telling me as a young girl that casket building was somewhat of a tradition in our family. The subject had been broached once again the Sunday when he leaned over to me in church and told me he wanted the hymn we were singing at his funeral. And then he suggested we not spend the money to rent a hearse: “Use the van.” It was a proposal I could have predicted given my parents’ practicality. [He was referring to our 1987 Dodge Ram Van, which, not incidentally, was the same vehicle that I had borrowed from my parents on that devastating day in September 2001.]

A number of years after that Sunday, I read the following announcement from the North House Folks School in Grand Marais, Minnesota:

Bury Yourself in Your Work: Build Your Own Casket

None of us are [*sic*] getting out of this alive, so we may as well bury ourselves in our work! Put your hands to work making something truly useful while also building a strong base of woodworking skills. The above-ground applications of your resulting project are numerous – a bookshelf, coffee table, storage container or entertainment center, not to mention a great conversation piece. Beginning woodworkers will enjoy acquiring new skills, while more advanced participants will have ample opportunity to apply their talents. Chop saws to block planes, screw guns to dovetail joinery - this course covers a range of important skills while offering the opportunity to manage the key details such as proper sizing, joinery, handle construction, hardware and design options. Students will develop woodworking skills that will last a lifetime (and beyond). The casket materials include cabinet-grade pine, birch for handles and bronze fastenings. You may bring a partner to work on one casket for the single tuition rate.¹

“Hey, I need a bookshelf,” I thought. I’ve always wanted to visit Grand Marais. I could be a part of the family penchant for woodworking. More, specifically, I could resume the family tradition of building one’s own casket. Admittedly, the practicalities of the ad caught my attention first (the apple does not fall far from the tree). I was drawn to the line, “Students will develop woodworking skills that will last a lifetime (and beyond)” and to a project that defies

the “you-can’t-take-it-with-you” logic. Right, I won’t take it into the sweet bye and bye—it will take me! I couldn’t resist. And, again, I need a bookshelf.

But soon I was thinking professionally about how this conversation piece might serve as an object lesson for the workshops on funeral planning I led for congregation members. I can’t say that “Your Faith and Your Funeral” was the most popular set of sessions offered in our congregation’s adult education program, but it was always appreciated. In addition to funeral service suggestions (hymns, scripture verses, pall bearers, for example), we discussed other practical wishes that, if shared, could ease the decision-making burden on loved ones. Organ donation. Advanced directive. Cremation. Pre-pay funerals.

Now, on the long drive home across northern Minnesota, I reflected on the deeper theological and existential questions that we explored in the workshop, questions that outweigh the practical: What is a soul anyway? Why do we confess that we believe in the resurrection of the body? What if I don’t want this body? In what way(s), if at all, do my life decisions affect my next life? Is there a next life? Will I see my loved ones in heaven? Could hell be any worse than “ground zero”? How does a loving God factor into all of this?

“Burying Myself in My Work”

While I imagined such philosophical questions would pervade the casket building process, they involuntarily gave way to the idyllic setting and the practicalities of the task at hand. Who would have thought that planning for one’s funeral in this way would be such a sublime experience? The North House Folk School is a staple in the small (population 1400), coastal town of Grand Marais, Minnesota, which sits along the cobblestone shore of the world’s largest fresh water lake, Lake Superior. Located 40 miles from the Canadian border, the air

temperature is late to warm up and early to cool down. September could go either way. It's the perfect month to experience the change in color of the fall leaves. This was most certainly true that year, 2001; the trees offered a painter's palette of rust, terracotta, marigold, pumpkin, burnt orange and apple red. The fresh, crisp air and lake breeze required flannel, the patron fabric of the *Lumber Jane*. And so, with my flannel donned, I set up my small tent in the lakeside municipal campground—steps from “North House.”

Since this experience was 17 years ago, photographs and a recent visit (the first time I had returned since 9.11.01) have aided my memory. As I walked into the building hospitably designated as “Blue South,” I could see in my mind's eye the five of us gathering at eight o'clock in the morning with coffee in hand. I could smell the combination of sawdust and smoked salmon, which lingered from the neighboring Dockside Fishhouse. There we were, our instructor, Mark Hansen, three students, and Richard, a journalist from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, who had acquired our permission to join us for the long weekend in order to write a feature story for his newspaper.

Although there were three students, only two caskets were being built. The other casket was being made at the request of Ed, a 30-something who was dying of a debilitating and fast-progressing case of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease). The pain of the experience for Ed's two buddies was so palpably heavy at the beginning that my little adventure seemed unjustified, almost embarrassing. But by the end of the first day all attention had turned to the life of the wood and its forthcoming repurposing. We were working with recycled wood from white pine trees on the Gunflint Trail that had been blown down in a storm two months earlier. This fact itself felt like a kind of new life, a reincarnation of sorts. While the

life—death—new life progression of the wood and of humans was never wholly lost on us, for the most part by day two our language was not about larger-than-life philosophical ideas such as eschatology or resurrection; it was about chop saws and block planes, screw guns and dovetail joinery. I might as well have been building a dresser and not my coffin.

I recall the simple beauty of whittling the handles one notch at a time. It was like an unplugged singer-songwriter performance. No noisy machinery allowed; just the modest knife guided by the craftperson's imagined final product. I am especially proud of those handles and the joinery—two of the stages that secured for me carpentry's rightful place in the arts. The black ash edging on the lid offered an artistic finishing touch that made the piece feel almost alive. Our instructor reflected on this phenomenon a number of years later in an interview that appears in a video that honors the 20th anniversary of North House Folk School (1997-2017).

The idea of craft . . . is making something with your hands that has intrinsic value. . . . It's not only a spoon or a spreading knife, it's an object that you've created with your hands that now has a soul. There is something in it that is alive because you've made it. And as peculiar as that sounds these things become important . . . it's a mystical thing going on there. How to describe it, I don't know.²

When both caskets were nearly finished (the only step remaining was staining), we all unceremoniously carried the caskets outside and placed them on the picnic tables that were awash with the colors of dusk by the harbor. We celebrated with a photography session that included an Addam's Family-like rising out of the caskets. Ghoulish yet lighthearted. Neither ALS nor grief, neither death nor fear were guests at this party. Little did we know that the next day too many airplanes would crash our party with unspeakable malevolence.

Tuesday, September 11, 2001

The very next day the memory of lying in my casket and waving for a photo seemed discourteous. Those carefree quips about death (“I’m glad I’m not going to die twice; this is a lot of work.” “You can stop sanding, it’s going in the ground.” “I hope I don’t gain too much weight.”) now seemed vulgar. Mocking death does not work when one is wondering if the plane overhead will stay its course.

I had noted to Richard, the reporter, “I wonder what it will be like, driving down the road with the casket behind me in my big Dodge Ram hearse.” Now I knew, yes. But given the unexpected and still-unfolding tragedy to the east, the weight of the pine box following behind me was unpredictably relentless. One mile to the next mile. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. I learned to lament on Minnesota’s Highway 200. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken *us*? Have you?” I was physically alone on that drive, but I wasn’t really alone. This was the communal lament of a nation . . . as it turns out, a world.

When I arrived home and pulled the casket from the back of the vehicle, I noticed the knob on the lid. I had carved it into the shape of a cross. Though mourning would not turn to dancing for some time, I did sense the profound relief of trusting the promises of baptism, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5). This piece of furniture, like no other in my home, expresses a paradoxical mix of lament and hope.

The global lament of 9/11 silenced those who had questioned my project. People’s reactions to my intentions had been mixed. There were those who thought this plan was crazy at best and creepy at worst. Parishioners thought I was a bit young to think about my death. My

parents seemed to think it was a good idea, though not fun to think about. Beginning September 12th, 2001, however, peoples' peculiar reactions turned into inquiries about how they might go about building their own caskets.

Going Against the Grain

My casket has put on many miles. From Grand Marais to Duluth to Moorhead, all in Minnesota. From Minnesota to Columbia, South Carolina. From South Carolina to Berkeley, California. From Berkeley to Richmond, California, where it now stands at attention in our home office as a daily reminder not only of death, but of life; that is, how precious life is in all of its precariousness.

Despite a recent green burial movement that seeks to offset the carbon-intensive practice of horizontal burials, caskets typically do not stand upright. (Standing for eternity would be exhausting.) So, for now, I've added two "feet" that function as a stabilizing platform. Perhaps it is this upright posture and the base that give the coffin its ordinariness. So much so that it is almost unrecognizable as a coffin. In fact, I've had visitors to our home who know that I've built it ask about it.

"Could I see your coffin?" they ask.

"Sure, it's right there?"

"Where?"

"There."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

I think people's confusion results from their imagination of a tapered hexagonal shape of Count Dracula fame, understandably dubbed the toe-pincher style. But as it turns out, I fit just as well in a rectangle as in an anthropoidal-shaped box. There are no softly angled edges on my casket; only straight edges at right angles in order avoid the tendency to soften death.

There is no satin interior. And the door is one solid piece instead of having a divided upper body and lower body lid. You'll see all of me and not just a primed upper half.

When one notices the handles, the piece appears more casket-like. When one carries it from one place to another by those sturdy, hardwood handles, the intended use is unmistakable. Imagine the looks on the faces of those professional movers who have found themselves in the unforeseen position of being my practice pall bearers!

Some have ventured to make a distinction between the words *coffin* and *casket*, suggesting that one refers to a more simple, rectangular pine box and another to the more anthropoidal-shaped one. But I use the terms interchangeably. I appreciate etymological elements of each. For example, the mid-15th-century use of the word *casket* suggests a diminutive box used for jewels. One could only hope that my corpse would symbolize a treasured life. The word *coffin* is connected to *coffer*, suggesting its contents are valuable in some sense. Again, one can only hope.

At least for now I know that the piece itself as well as the contents are valuable. Inside there are four shelves, which now house remnants of my life in the form of photo albums, scrapbooks, diaries, high school and college yearbooks. The casket holds memories for me, memories that need jogging with visual artifacts. (I knew right where to go to find the 2001 photo album in order to recall my memories of the week in Grand Marais.)

The experience of building my casket, and the uncanny coincidence that the project was completed and brought home on 9/11, and, of course, its presence in my home, all keep me on high alert for others who recommend "going against the grain" when it comes to death. I am

especially drawn to articles with titles such as “Pre-planned funerals can ease the burden for survivors,” “A Gift of Love: The value of pre-planning your funeral or memorial service” and “Funeral Pre-Planning: Your Final Act of Love.” The gift of planning is not just a funeral home tagline or a catchy title. It’s true. As significant as the experience has been for me, it is also a gift to my loved ones who, for starters, will save thousands of dollars for what was less than an \$800 experience of a lifetime.

<i>Class registration:</i>	<i>\$200</i>
<i>Materials:</i>	<i>\$375</i>
<i>Campsite:</i>	<i>\$100</i>
<i>Petrol and food:</i>	<i><u>\$100</u></i>
	<i>\$775</i>

There is no need to argue over my value relative to a casket price. \$775 is just fine. The simple pine and black ash casket is ready and makes for one less complicated decision out of many that my family will have to make when I die.

My “bookshelf” has been filling up in the past 17 years. My life just keeps getting richer and richer even as I become closer and closer to my death. While my parents, and now my spouse, have been asked to replace the scrapbooks and photo albums which recount my life experiences with . . . well, with me, they just might have to wait a bit longer. I’m good with that.

¹ Course Information, North House Folk School, Grand Marais, MN. www.northhouse.org/courses/bury-yourself-in-your-work-build-your-own-casket. Accessed 12 October 2018.

² Layne Kennedy, filmmaker. “North House Folk School: Celebrating 20 Years (1997-2017). www.northhouse.org/about-us/videos. Accessed 12 October 2018.