

In six years in Youngstown, Ohio, we went to four weddings and 18 funerals. Death is now the principal community activity.

Contemporary funerals are different from those of my youth. Then funerals were solemn affairs. Everyone wore black, spoke in whispers and walked on tip-toe. The family sat in a chilly funeral home for days, accepting condolences amid fading flowers.

There were no guitars, no speeches and no slide shows. This has all changed.

My mother vowed to haunt me if any old photographs of her appeared in the newspaper when she died, but many prefer to be remembered as they looked in the prime of life. Snapshots of the departed in better, younger days were on display at most of the events I attended, along with those of family, friends and various pets. Apparently, the newly bereaved spend their first hours of grief pasting photos onto poster board. The deceased is nearly crowded out of the coffin by stuffed animals and mementoes. I've seen people interred with bits of Doulton china, Pillsbury doughboys and other intriguing collectibles. Which reminds me of the story of Mrs. Hudzik's leg.

Decades ago when I worked at a hospital, Mrs. Hudzik's family gave instructions that her amputated limb be sent to a funeral home in lieu of incineration. The undertaker arrived at my desk to collect the completed paperwork. (The leg, thankfully, was still in the morgue.)

"What will you do with it?" I asked. "Will you open her grave to bury the leg?" Seemed creepy to me. But not as creepy as his answer.

"No," he said. "We'll include the limb with our next interment."

This leaves me with the strange knowledge that when I die, I might not be alone in there.

Today calling hours are much abbreviated. And often the guest of honor does not even put

in an appearance, having been cremated days or weeks before. This might explain some of the photo displays, slide shows and remembrance videos. In spite of these theatrics, contemporary funerals lack the pomp and ceremony of old. Few involve processions to the gravesite, for instance. The stately gladiola of days gone by have given way to silk

arrangements. And wheeled trolleys have all but eliminated the need for six good men and true. Where would you find six men fit for the task who own black suits anyway?

Modern clergy have adopted a standard spiel and none seem to own a King James version of the *Bible*. Mourners who have them, bring guitars. In lieu of pipers, soloists wail *Amazing Grace*. But most traditional hymns have been replaced by melodies I don't recognize with lyrics I've never heard. Lots of people want to talk and do. It's "Final Night at the Improv" as friends and relatives tell stories designed to turn tears into laughter. Mary Richards, where are you when we need you?

The practice of bringing home-made, comfort food to the bereaved household has been replaced by deli trays. Some enterprising funeral directors own catering companies, encouraging people to eat on-site and run. When my turn comes, I hope my pals will wander along to a nearby pub, lift a jar and sing that beloved Irish ditty:

Let's not have a sniffle.

Let's have a bloody good cry.

And always remember the longer you live,

The sooner you'll bloody well die.

Four Weddings & 18 Funerals