



*Schuler-Lefebvre*

FUNERAL CHAPEL

Dedicated To Those We Serve

## *Caring Connections:*

### *Mourning without a body*

Losing a loved one is a difficult and emotional experience.

When a death occurs, the manner in which the remains are cared for is of critical importance to surviving family members. Most people believe human remains should be treated with dignity and respect and laid to rest in a religious or tranquil setting befitting the individual's beliefs or wishes. Although there are many ways to mourn the loss of a loved one, the focal point in the grieving process traditionally centers around the deceased with the body or cremated remains present. Most of us take for granted that, should a death occur within our family, the remains would be present for preparation and final disposition. However, this is not always the case. In our society, there is a loss of life almost daily when the body is unlikely to be retrieved or located. Sailors and fishermen are lost at sea; children and adults are abducted and murdered; during times of armed conflict soldiers are designated as missing in action when they fail to return from battle. However, none of these events have impacted people throughout the world more than the senseless loss of thousands of innocent civilian lives following the September terrorist attack on the United States. Due to the severity of these attacks, many more lives have been affected forever. One of the most difficult tasks undertaken following the attacks was the retrieval of bodies. Although several hundred were found and identified, over 2000 others were never recovered.

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Unfortunately, without the body, many survivors believe a funeral service cannot or should not take place. Noted author, educator and grief counselor, Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt advises, with or without the body, a meaningful funeral ceremony remains an important aspect of the grieving process because it provides a focal point for the family with the opportunity to gather, support one another and celebrated the life of the loved one who died.

When it became apparent that few bodies would be recovered from the World Trade Center ruins, victims' families searched for some type of symbol to commemorate their loved one. Under the direction of the former mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani and his officials, dust and soil from the ruins, referred to as Ground Zero, were placed in three 55-gallon drums, blessed by a chaplain and taken by police escort to a room at police headquarters.

The contents of the drums, which were draped with an American flag, were treated with the utmost reverence and dignity. First the dust and soil was transferred from the drums into two casket-like wooden containers with side handles. Then members of the NYPD ceremonial unit, dressed in their ceremonial uniforms, including white gloves, placed the dust into 3,000 solid mahogany keepsake urns. Each urn was filled with meticulous care and solemn detail as it passed from one station to the next. At the first station an officer scooped some dust from the casket-like container and placed it into a small plastic bag. Another officer then secured the bag with a tie, making sure it was compact and neat. The bag was then taken to the next station. Here it was placed in a solid red mahogany urn and covered with pure white cotton. As the urn was filled from the bottom, a brass metal plate attached by screws was used to seal the opening. It was then hand-carried to the final station. At the final table each urn was carefully inspected to ensure it was free of nicks, scratches and dust. Once it passed final inspection, the urn, which had the date 09-11-01 engraved into the mahogany wood, was placed in a blue velvet bag awaiting presentation. The urns were presented to families following an hour-long memorial service at Ground Zero. For those who will never have a body over which to mourn, the urn will provide a focal point for their mourning and will live on as a special symbol of their loved one.

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Following the September 11 attack, another example of how families coped without the presence of a body was by using an empty casket as the visual focus during visitation and at the funeral ceremony. In many cases, the families used photos and mementoes to personalize their surroundings and augment the casket.

As demonstrated by the presentation of the keepsake urn and the use of an empty casket, it is not only acceptable to have a funeral service without a body, it is also helpful to select a focal point for your mourning. The focal point may come in the form of a stained-glass window donated by the family in memory of the missing deceased, a park bench or sculpture with a suitably engraved plaque or even a piece of jewelry.

Sometimes a nation will choose to honor their missing soldiers as symbolized by the establishment of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Canada. Fold of the Sea, a choir started by 80 fishermen and plant workers during the cod moratorium, have championed a project to build a monument to Newfoundland fishermen lost at sea - a fitting symbol to honor our lost citizens and loved ones and for surviving family members to use as a focal point for their mourning.

*(Written by Geoff Carnell)*