Changing habits in the disposal of human ashes

Although legalised in 1884, cremation only became wider practice in the 1960’s, following which ashes were normally scattered in the crematorium’s Garden of Remembrance. However a study by Professor Jenny Hockey of Sheffield University and others (2007) shows that while in the 1970’s only 10% of ashes were removed from the crematorium by relatives or a friend, by 2004 over 56% were removed for disposal elsewhere. The interesting factor for clergy in this study comes from Hockey’s discovery of two issues arising from this removal. Firstly, the belief by the person removing these ashes for a more appropriate disposal will assist with their own wellbeing. Secondly, their belief that finding an appropriate last resting place for these ashes will affect the continuing wellbeing of the deceased.

As Hockey is a sociologist, it is not surprising that the major part of the study is sociological, given that cremation provides a means for disposal taken out of the hands of professionals. The aspects I concentrate on here, nearer home for clergy and bereavement support workers, are the claims, firstly of better feelings of wellbeing and recovery from grief for those disposing of remains, secondly the belief that it affected the continuing wellbeing of the deceased.

Hockey does not suggest that the action of removing these ashes and the subsequent feelings of wellbeing correlate in some way with any of the accepted psychological models of grief processes. She does raise the question as to whether those involved would have expected any difference had the ashes remained in a municipal or religious setting. One funeral director Hockey interviewed expressed doubts as to whether removal helped the survivor. “I think it hinders actually” he commented “they don’t quite get over that last hurdle of placing the ashes in the ground and walking away…it’s the final goodbye and they can’t do that” He suggested it may help older clients short term but not in the longer term.
Hockey also talks about tensions that occur when the bereaved experience feelings of guilt or the risk of being seen as rejecting the dead by quicker recovery. I well remember one of my first experiences at a carol service for a bereavement care organisation, overhearing three widows laughing together before the service started and one of them saying “Just think, it’s only a year ago I thought I would never smile again, yet I can laugh now without feeling guilty”. It helped me appreciate the value of such groups.

On the second issue it is clear from Hockey’s findings that the sense of doing something that would please and enhance the wellbeing of the dead arose from anxieties raised by undertaking a task for which the only cultural and ritualistic precedents were in the hands of professionals. So, for example, a humanistic officiant at a loss over the disposal of the ashes of his gay friend eventually scattered them around some trees despite having been refused permission for this by a local authority. He felt that there was some congruency in this action since some of the things his friend had done around these trees had been ‘pretty dodgy’ Like others, this action made him feel better.

Another man scattered the ashes of an elder sea-going brother at sea, saying ‘He’ll be quite happy where he is’, while a Sunderland lady placed her mother-in-law’s ashes on her child’s grave ‘because we didn’t want her to be lonely’. So the location of ashes also seems important, with implications of sentimentality and other issues that transcended mere duty.

There is a clear implication from Hockey’s findings of the majority of people having some notion if not of a continuing existence for the dead at least an active continuing relationship with them. The latter issue reflects the shift that has occurred in bereavement theory and therapeutic support described by the sociologist Tony Walter and others as ‘Continuing Bonds’ which gives weight to the needs of the bereaved to nurture an ongoing relationship with the dead, rather than the former purely therapeutic notion that grief involves a journey towards closure.
A case study with a Catholic family highlighted a number of actions taken that will evoke memories of experiences for many clergy. Hockey’s notes are helpful in that they not only notate the actions taken but the possible rationales behind the actions of a daughter (Carol) who had the responsibility for the cremation of her father (for whom she had been sole carer) and the disposal of his ashes. In brief the main points are:

- Having his body clothed in both jumpers after a second was delivered by mistake, saying ‘He was always on about his back being cold’ Hockey identifies this as a metaphor for the carer role that she felt continued after his death
- Dressing him in a blazer with regimental tie and badge, and Union Flag socks – the social reinstatement of someone who went into rapid decline following a burglary and loss of his wallet and photographs (including those of himself in uniform)
- Placing his ashes under a bird bath in her daughter’s garden, reflecting the emphasis on her father remaining with his family. ‘There was nobody at the Garden of Remembrance that he knew. I wanted him with me’

Carol also experienced the tension between personal choice and expert authority when her mother-in-law criticised her for not giving her father a Catholic ceremony, although she had masses said for him. She responded by berating her mother-in-law for leaving her husband’s ashes at the crematorium, but having her dog’s ashes to hand on the mantelpiece.

Many of these actions and reactions will be familiar to those of us who have seen similar situations and perhaps been bemused by them. One lady whose husband’s funeral I took scattered a small portion of his ashes at each of the places in the UK where they had spent holidays together. Her reasoning was that this would be a comfort to him and also help her whenever she went to these places. On her death she was found to still have some of his ashes – under her pillow.
There is an element of ritualization in such actions just as in religious ceremonies, which Hockey is not attempting to dismiss in offering scope for the wellbeing of the bereaved. Her view is that Carol, like my parishioner, opened up a way of grieving and working on her own wellbeing outside of any institutional requirement by believing she was also sustaining the wellbeing of the loved one for whom she had been an active carer. She created a continuity at a time of a familiar rupture by attending to the wellbeing of the deceased, in the process overcoming any tension between seeming to recover from grief and caring less about her father.

There are some important challenges here for the church and bereavement support workers. Hockey’s is the first academic study to suggest disposal of ashes being used for the purpose of ‘Continuing bonds’. Walter, mentioned earlier, cautions about the tensions that can arise between a healthy use of artefacts and such tools as ‘memory boxes’ encouraged for bereaved children, and unhealthy clinging to the deceased. ‘Continuing Bonds’ puts the emphasis on changing and adapting the relationship with the deceased rather than on loss and detachment so that while their presence is not here physically the sense of their presence and continuing influence in everyday life is acknowledged.

This acknowledges that the idea of a ‘single severance’ makes little sense since memories emerge, friends or even strangers may communicate some aspect of the character of the deceased or an event that happened of which those closest knew little or nothing. It means trying to transform the relationship rather than lose it.

But other writers also caution about the need to distinguish between a healthy expression of the positive impact of the deceased and a continuing bond that is merely an attempt to deny reality. I agree with the funeral director quoted above, that unhealthy retention of ashes is a failure to ‘let go’ While Hockey’s example of ashes buried at sea would be a healthy disposal from this point of view, her example of ashes retained in the garden, or my experience of the lady taking her husband’s ashes to all their holiday resorts look to me much
more like acts of denial. Hockey however points out that some professionals hold that choice can often help in the business of bereavement (as expounded by Joan Bakewell in The Guardian in 2004), and sees Carol not as denying her father’s death, just living with a sense that he was part of her everyday world.

Another challenge is whether the church has or needs a policy on this issue that could be used as a guideline for such requests. I understand that the Church in Wales has forbidden clergy to distribute ashes in deference both to the way early church martyrs had their ashes scattered so that no memory of them would remain on the earth, and the statement in Psalm 34.16 that ‘to blot out their memory from the earth’ was the fate reserved for the enemies of God. Perhaps the Welsh church could expound on this so that those of us who are asked to participate or condone this act can respond with authority and confidence? Such prohibition does not imply any continuing effect on the wellbeing of the dead, as implied in the responses to Hockey’s research, (certainly not a Christian concept), it does imply reverence and respect for their remains.
