



[bwebster@GriefJourney.com](mailto:bwebster@GriefJourney.com)

**ICCFA MAGAZINE  
AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT**

► Webster is a grief counsellor, author and internationally recognized seminar speaker. He has an interactive web site at [www.griefjourney.com](http://www.griefjourney.com), and offers many resources to the funeral profession and to grieving people.

[www.GriefJourney.com](http://www.GriefJourney.com)

*Editor's note: This story is reprinted with permission from the March 2010 issue of Canadian Funeral News.*

## CREMATION AND GRIEF

Some people who take their loved one's cremated remains home don't hide them in a closet and forget them. The urn and its contents become a substitute for the person. If someone took their casketed loved one home after the funeral, we would be alarmed, so why don't we worry about the people holding onto those urns?

# Holding on too long to what remains

**Y**ou could have blown me over with a feather. The scene was my monthly grief support follow-up session. Most of the participants experienced a loss six months or more ago and meet on the second Wednesday of every month to discuss the issues affecting them on their ongoing grief journey.

It came Wilma's turn to speak: "I am so looking forward to the start of the hockey season, because every Saturday night, I make some popcorn, I get Mike's urn from the dresser, and we sit together on the couch watching the game."

I was flabbergasted. "Tell me more," I asked her, uncertain of what else to say.

"Well, Mike always used to love watching hockey, and when I sit him on the couch with me, it feels like he is still right there with me."

That is exactly what had bothered me about the comment.

Mike died two years ago, but to Wilma, he is still around, eagerly awaiting the new season for them to enjoy and watch together.

### What the funeral does

A funeral is intended to provide three benefits:

1. To help separate the deceased from the living.
2. To help the grieving individual reorient themselves.
3. To help the social group adjust to the loss of one of its members.

The goal of the grief process is to help the bereaved adjust to life without the deceased. Wilma, with her hubby on the dresser for easy accessibility, seems to have inadvertently managed to thwart all the benefits of having a funeral, finding her comfort in the fact that Mike is there for her, waiting for hockey night in Canada to allow them to spend their evenings together.

Does anyone else see what's wrong with this picture?

But since then, I have learned of similar practices, including people sleeping with the urn or taking it on holidays, and a number of other things that border on the bizarre.

I asked some of my funeral director friends for their thoughts on this topic. While not a scientific poll, most surmised that fewer than 50 percent of people bury, scatter or otherwise place the cremated remains. A surprisingly high percentage either leave the remains at the funeral home or take them home.

One wonders what the reaction would be if, after the funeral, someone requested that they be allowed to take the body home in the casket instead of proceeding to burial.

Ridiculous, I know. But, without taking health and legal issues into account, and just for argument's sake, let's follow the issue to its extreme. On one level, the only difference at the end of the day between cremation and full-body burial is the timeline. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" is the eventual outcome of both, is it not?

So let me pose this absurd question: What would be the difference, psychologically speaking, between taking home the cremated remains and taking the actual casketed body itself to decorate the family room like a piece of furniture?

Maybe caskets could come in double recliner versions to allow the deceased and the griever to watch the game together on TV. Sorry; I don't mean to be facetious. But I do want to make an important point.

Think about what we are doing to grieving survivors when we send home cremated remains without any conversation, education or option as to what they could or should do with those remains.

Cremated remains are still "the body," and from the bereaved person's perspective, taking them home gives them the opportunity to keep "the body" (and thus the person) around. Grief is supposed to offer people a ritual transition between "life as it was" and "life as it is now." And anything that thwarts or hinders that process is not psychologically healthy.

Of course, people have the right to make their own decisions regarding both funerals and their choice of a final resting place.

When they decide on burial, they have several

Cremated remains are still “the body,” and from the bereaved person’s perspective, taking them home gives them the opportunity to keep “the body” (and thus the person) around. Grief is supposed to offer people a ritual transition between “life as it was” and “life as it is now.” And anything that thwarts or hinders that process is not psychologically healthy.

options as to where that place will be. But when cremation is the choice, it is important to help people understand that the cremation itself is not final disposition.

### Families need more education about choices and effects

I believe we all need to be more diligent in educating people regarding what to do with the cremated remains. I suggest three good reasons for this:

**1. Lack of closure.** As long as people live with the idea that they can “watch the game with my hubby” or “take my wife on holiday,” it will be difficult for them to admit the sad reality that the person is gone and is not coming back.

A good grief process encourages the survivor to realize that the person is no longer in the present. That realization is made all the more difficult if the grieving person feels they are still able to “do” things with the deceased.

Of course we wish the person could still be there. Of course we would like to be able to do things with them. The most demanding challenge of all is realizing that the person is no longer here, and finding ways to adjust from life as it was, to life as it now is.

**2. Lack of “a place.”** One advantage of burial or inurnment is that it gives people a place to mourn. You symbolically “leave” your loved one at the cemetery and you go back and visit whenever you want. People need to say, “That’s where they are,” or “This is where it was.”

Numerous studies show how complicated grief can be when there is no body after an accident or disaster. All the roadside memorials on our highways are people saying “This is the place.” People need a place, and while they have the right to choose that place, maybe they need help to understand that “at home” or “in travel luggage” may not be the best place.

**3. Lack of permanence.** Truth be told, I would like my cremated remains scattered across the 1st and 18th fairways of the Old Course at St. Andrews, though with my golfing history, I would probably end up in a bunker! I know it is illegal, but it is done.

However, my wife doesn’t like that idea, so out of respect for her and what she might need, other arrangements have been agreed upon.

It is understandable that people might want to be scattered at a favorite place such as a fishing hole, cottage, backyard or holiday spot. One woman asked me to officiate as she scattered the cremated remains of her husband over the side of a cruise ship into the Caribbean Sea, which he loved. I wish we had been more aware of changing wind directions that evening, but there you go. It was what he wanted and she was happy.

But I have spoken to others who disposed of ashes somewhere at the request of the deceased and then were unhappy because they were unable to get to “the place.”

People need to consider all the consequences of their actions. They should understand that if they bury or scatter the cremated remains on their property, they may not own that property someday, and be denied access to “the place.” Often permanent memorialization is not possible, nor would there be a permanent record of the final resting place. Genealogists of the future will be upset.

At the end of the day, there are many things that families do that we personally may not agree with, and that is certainly their choice. But those of us in the helping professions around death and bereavement

have an obligation to make sure families have the tools to make healthy, informed decisions that take their ongoing well-being into consideration.

I was concerned about Wilma and decided a few weeks later to approach her about it. She was open to the conversation and told me she had actually been wondering what she should do. Evenings spent with Mike’s remains were becoming less satisfying, I guess, and she realized she had to move on.

I asked her if there had been any suggestion about a permanent place for the remains. “Oh yes,” she said, “We bought a niche at the cemetery when we arranged our funerals. It has our name on it and everything. It’s just that I haven’t wanted to leave him there when I can have him at home.”

On December 22, which would have been Mike’s 58th birthday, a day Wilma felt was appropriate, a group of her friends and family gathered at that cemetery and we had a simple but meaningful ceremony during which Wilma placed the urn in the niche and symbolically said goodbye.

She now has a place where she can go and remember Mike, and while watching hockey alone has not been easy, she is getting there.

And 30 months after Mike’s death, we promised to help support her through her “first Christmas” without him at home. □