Fordham Center on Religion and Culture

UNTO DUST: A LITERARY WAKE

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Panelists:
Alice McDermott
National Book Award-Winning Novelist and Author of Charming Billy, After This, and Someone

Thomas Lynch
Undertaker, Poet, Essayist and Author of The Good Funeral: Death, Grief and the Community of Care (with Thomas G. Long) and The Sin-Eater: A Breviary

JAMES McCARTIN: Good evening. Welcome to Fordham. I am Jim McCartin, Director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture.

I have to say that it is a particular thrill for me tonight to welcome here all of you, to be part of this conversation between the two very best people I could think of to discuss our mortal end. It is a topic that, I have to admit, I can never get enough of.

It was at the tender age of eight that I began one of my still-favorite pastimes, which is to say, scouring the obituaries. In my perhaps somewhat peculiar point of view as a fully grown adult now, I contend that there are few things more satisfying than a proper funeral. Some will say — and perhaps McDermott and Lynch will agree with this — that my interest in death and in its many permutations runs deep in my Irish American heritage. But for me I gather it is something more than just the peculiarities of my ancestral identity.

In studying the death notices as a young kid, what I was really trying to figure out, I think, was how the families of my hometown of Troy, New York, formed webs of relation with one another — how they were connected, who they married or loved, what institutions and organization formed them into the ordinary and sometimes, rarely, extraordinary people that they were. In this sense, death revealed to me a great deal. It became an occasion for me to make some sense of the people and the place where I was.

And my belief about a proper funeral — where else except at a good funeral are we expected to have truly complicated emotional responses, sadness or even devastation, mixing with joy and consolation at reconnecting with old friends, anger at the shortcomings or tragic turns of a life, tinged with a dose of gratitude that may just make way for forgiveness or acceptance to enter in?

It seems to me that in facing our mortality, that of our beloved and certainly our own mortality, there is something so necessary and instructive within these kinds of complex emotional states that death conjures in us. They help tell us a little about who we are, what we truly value, what we truly believe.
Now, having said all that, I can’t guarantee any particular takeaways from tonight’s conversation, but on the basis of who will be on stage, I can say with great confidence that you will be moved, if not to cry, then certainly to laugh. Maybe you will even be moved to go to a good funeral tomorrow.

Two quick points of business before introducing our speakers. One, please, please shut off your electronic devices. Two, please write out your questions on the pieces of paper provided to you, hold them up, and a student will come and collect them and bring them forward for posing to our guests.

Tonight’s first speaker is Alice McDermott, the Richard A. Macksey Professor of the Humanities at the Johns Hopkins University, where she teaches creative writing. The author of seven books, she has been a three-time finalist for a Pulitzer and she has won both the American Book Award and the National Book Award for fiction for her 1998 book *Charming Billy*. Among her other works: *A Bigamist’s Daughter, At Weddings and Wakes, After This*, and *Someone*, her most recent book, which was released in 2013. Alice has published fiction and nonfiction in an array of settings, but I urge you to read her short story, quite relevant to our conversation tonight, “These Short, Dark Days,” which was published in *The New Yorker* in the August 24th edition.

Our second speaker is Thomas Lynch, poet and essayist and a proprietor at Lynch & Sons Funeral Directors, a family business in eastern Michigan. His 1997 collection of essays, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*, won the Heartland Prize for nonfiction and the American Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award. He has published five books of poems, by my count, including most recently a terrific collection, again relevant to our discussion tonight, a book called *The Sin-Eater: A Breviary*. Among his other fine works are *Bodies in Motion and at Rest, On Metaphor and Mortality, The Good Funeral*, coauthored with Thomas Long, and *Booking Passage*, a terrific book on the Irish and the Americans and the bridge between them.

We will begin with some short remarks from each of our guests, before moving on to the conversational portion of our program. Now please welcome Alice McDermott.

**ALICE McDERMOTT:** Good evening. Thank you, Jim. Thank all of you for being here tonight. It is always a pleasure to come back to Fordham.

I was just thinking as Jim was speaking, when I was trying to prepare some remarks for tonight, I found myself getting really depressed. When Jim was speaking, I just had a flashback. There was a scene in *The Simpsons* where Lisa Simpson is on her saxophone playing the blues beautifully and Homer starts crying and says, “Stop playing that music. It makes me so sad.” I suppose when you have a title like “Unto Dust: A Literary Wake,” a little sadness is appropriate.

I thought maybe I would approach the entire subject from a slightly different point of view, maybe a happier one.

Some years ago, I was interviewed on a call-in radio show out of the Midwest. Well into the hour, a woman called to ask why my novels dealt so exclusively with the concrete details of everyday life, details every reader can recognize. This struck me as not an entirely unusual question, until she added, “Why don’t you use your powers of observation to write about the details of the afterlife instead? We need someone to show us the details of heaven and hell.”

Before the radio host moved to cut the woman off, I said something about Dante having
covered that material pretty well. Then, apologetically, I promised the caller that whenever I had the opportunity to observe the details of the afterlife, I would indeed include them in my work.

In literary fiction, death scenes abound. There is Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, Flaubert’s Felicité in “A Simple Heart,” Flannery O’Connor’s Hazel Motes in the last pages of Wise Blood, Katherine Anne Porter’s jilted Granny Weatherall, only to name a few. But scenes of heaven and hell, not so much. The dead, if they have any congress at all, are most likely depicted as eavesdroppers or hangers-on. I think of the opening pages of William Kennedy’s Ironweed or that Irish-language masterpiece, The Dirty Dust, or the dead in Our Town, or even No Exit, Christopher Tilghman’s In a Father’s Place or Alice Sebold’s The Lovely Bones.

If, as Tom Stoppard writes in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, every exit is an entrance somewhere else, then serious novelists have for the most part left the details of that somewhere else — to the genre writers, to the zombies and the ghosts and the vampires of commercial entertainment — although a striking exception to this may be Stanley Elkin’s 1979 novel, The Living End, where heaven is depicted as “everything they say it is” — pearly gates, streets of gold, manna, ambrosia, fond reunions, and endless beauty, and hell is “the ultimate inner city,” with stinking, sulfurous streets and endless pain. It is a portrait that Elkin manages to make both hilarious and touching, both a mockery of but also an acknowledgment of the impossible substance of things hoped for — a literary sleight of hand that perhaps can be performed only once a millennium. Because who can blame our novelists for avoiding any literal portrait of the afterlife? Any such depiction, after all, risks, on the one hand, sentimental cliché and, on the other, existential darkness and despair, which is its own cliché.

Thinking about tonight’s theme of a literary wake — and hoping that the literary life we are here to mourn isn’t mine — I have been wondering if the stylistic pitfalls that face a novelist who tries to turn her observational skills to the afterlife and the wise decision most of us make to avoid the subject has a parallel in the larger community of non-writers, or what I like to call normal people. Among normal people, it seems to me, death scenes also abound, not only in our entertainment, whether they be the walking dead, the dramatically diseased, or the hastily and violently dispatched, but in our everyday exchanges as well. War, gun violence, terrorism, accident, illness, daily obituaries remind us that death is general, whether we pause to philosophize about it or not. Death is general, and in the twenty-first century we accept this fact like grownups, with a cluck of the tongue or a shake of the head or a shrug. We routinize mourning.

I confess to being both comforted and dismayed by my recent encounters with the hospice industry, sincere and professional women, well-versed in the details of the dying, who reminded me nevertheless of the real estate agents I have known, with their clipboards and their informational binders and their brief, well-scripted role as friend and supporter at this difficult time.

In the twenty-first century, we take leave of the dead with anecdote and celebrations of life, supermarket flowers tied to lampposts or helium balloons released into the air, and if we speak of an afterlife, we do so with vague piety — “he is with God,” we say — or cautious facetiousness, tentatively suggesting reunions with loved ones and somehow-no-longer-annoying relatives. Normal people, it seems, like writers, are well aware of the constant procession of exits that life entails, but few of us, normals and writers alike, broach the details of that corresponding entrance into somewhere else. This is
understandable. As I said, clichés abound. Language and imagination fail us. No observer has yet to report back with the facts, and any claim to the contrary risks superstition or betrays wishful thinking.

The prose of the Catholic Church itself grows flat-footed in the attempt. Here is the Catholic encyclopedic dictionary on heaven: “The place and abode of God and the blessed, where all the faithful shall see God, the Blessed Virgin, and all the saints face to face. Where it is, is not known.”

And hell: “Here the damned suffer primarily the pain of loss by being deprived of the sight of God face to face,” and secondly, “the pain of sense, a positive physical punishment which we call fire.” Descriptions that are neither eloquent nor particularly convincing.

Yet there is this: “I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, but they died. But the bread that comes down from heaven is of such a kind that whoever eats it will not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If you eat this bread, you will live forever. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.”

Thinking about this literary wake of ours, I have begun to wonder if it is not death that we are reluctant to acknowledge here in the twenty-first century, but the awkward outlandishness of the notion of eternal life; if even among Christians the foolishness of the claim that “heaven is somewhere, we just don’t know where,” and “hell has this thing we call fire” compels us to shelter in the less detailed and far less risky notion that the promises of Christ are actually metaphorical, not literal; that what we mean when we say eternal life is “forever in our hearts” or “as long as we have our memories” or “the spirit of our ancestors resides within us all.”

As a writer, I am okay with this. I like metaphor. I believe our language is rich enough to convey through metaphor more than we intend or know about the substance of things hoped for. But as a Christian wrestling with faith, I often find myself on the side of that lady who called in to the radio show. “I would like someone to provide more detail, please.” When it comes to the outrageous promise of eternal life, I am with Flannery O’Connor in her famous reply to Mary McCarthy’s words about the Eucharist: “If it’s a metaphor, then to hell with it.”

As a struggling Christian, I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, but as a writer and as an occasionally normal person, I wonder what our reluctance, all of us, to say, to imagine, to wrestle with precisely what this afterlife business might mean indicates. Is it a failure of our faith or a triumph of our reasonableness? Do we sensibly resist being deluded by the proposition of eternal life or do we shyly stand speechless before the glory of the gift? Is it literal? Is it a metaphor? Do we believe it?

Thank you.

THOMAS LYNCH: I want to thank Jim not only for that tastefully hyperbolic introduction. It is nice to hear such fine things said about you in the present tense, I often say to myself.

I also want to thank him for the invitation to be here, because it fulfills a long-held hope that I would meet you in actuality, not in the passing that we met some years ago at a conference called the Calvin Festival of Faith and Writing, an enterprise of Dutch
Reformed good Presbyterians, who every once in a while would bring in Catholics, devout or only partially lapsed, to disabuse them of their notions of aptheists, I suppose.

In any event, I want to stand underneath and hold up my end of the sign that agrees with you that we have, as a culture and as a community of faith, sort of lost our eschatological nerve. The stories we tell ourselves about what happens when we die have lost their sinew and certainty and assurances. This is why you may have noticed that we have replaced the good funeral, which used to be sort of a one-size-fits-all liturgical event during which we would say aloud the things we believe as a culture, and thereby embolden the normally shaken faith of the bereaved — we have replaced that with a celebration of life in which the life being celebrated is the one that belonged to the corpse. Because the narrative on which we used to depend to uphold us through these times has gotten shaky and uncertain, now we use a narrative that probably fits best into the term “funeral karaoke,” a Japanese term for “empty orchestra.” This is where Uncle Lenny stands up to tell you the facts of the life of his sister or niece or his departed spouse. And the notion that Jesus died for our sins and earned for us eternal life no longer being currency, we replace that with “Aunt Sally really did chocolate chip cookies well,” or “Dad really knew how to golf,” or “after a few drinks, he made a mess of everything.”

Everybody gets a good laugh, which we approve of more than we approve of the good cry, and to really assure that the wince is replaced by the grin in what we now call good funerals, we have devised, for the first time in our species actually, and only in the last fifty or sixty years — we are the first among our species to have devised commemorative events where the finger food is good, the talk is uplifting, the music is life-affirming, the poems are bespoke and well recited, the stories are lovely, and everyone is welcome but the dead guy.

Have you noticed? The corpse is the one who has gone missing the most. We call folks like me with a cell phone and a gold card, and we disappear the dead from our liturgies of loss, because to have a corpse around is troublesome. Their stillness is off-putting. And then there is the matter of odor. We have a history of sciences and floral tributes to help with that — candles at wakes, etc., etc.

But, in fact, we have lost our nerve in the realm of faith when it comes to last things, final details. We now cremate, I think, somewhere on the order of 50 percent of our dead in this country, but whereas most of us have been to a graveside, few of us have been to a retort. We are not as comfortable with the flame as we are with cremation. We like the notion of cremation. Actually, we like the notion of “when I’m dead, just cremate me,” the operative word being “just” — the emphasis upon minimalization and straight order and industrial efficiency, which makes sense because oftentimes it happens in an industrial setting or an industrial park.

But we don’t go watch, because even though the uraeuses[?] over the heads of the apostles on Pentecost were those of flame, we do not see flame as purifying and releasing. We see flame a punitive. I wonder why. Dante spent a long time on this. I know that the priests and nuns of my youth did, too. It is true that the real punishment was that we would not see God face to face, but it burned there. Fire we have mixed feelings about.

I always feel, especially when I have had such a generous introduction as you are after giving us, that I should say that one of the reasons I wanted to see you again, Alice, is because I recognized even in passing those good few years ago now a tribeswoman of my tribe, someone of the same sept of mostly pagan islanders. I know I grew up in the same
type of culture that you articulate so beautifully in your sentence making. It was a culture in which at least the men in the house were expected to grow up and become either priests or alcoholics. I feel like I should always begin by saying, “My name is Tom and I’m not a priest.”

But I was named for a priest. In many ways, I return to the photograph — possibly you had one in your home — an icon in our family home on both sides of the Atlantic all the days of my youth. It remains so. It was a picture of the first Solemn High Mass of Thomas P. Lynch, a young priest who was ordained in 1934 out in New Mexico. He was sent back to his home parish in Jackson, Michigan, to say a mass for his own people. The picture shows men in straw bowlers, women in print dresses and nice hats and sensible shoes. These are immigrants or sons and daughters of immigrants from the boggy, soggy parishes of West Clare and Mayo and Cork and elsewhere. One of their kind has been elevated to “big medicine” priesthood.

The day after the picture was taken, he was sent back out West, because as a survivor of the Spanish flu when he was a boy, which was correlated to his vocation, his calling, he was a chesty boy all the rest of his life, and so they thought the high, dry air of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains would help him survive his priesthood long enough to pay back the bishop for his education. It didn’t work out that well. He spent most of his time with the Pueblo people in Ranchos de Taos teaching them how to play baseball and how to say the Confiteor. He eventually got sick and died of pneumonia. The Native American women took him down the mountains and along the basin of the Rio Grande into Santa Fe, where he was presented in the cathedral, and the bishop gave him a good requiem mass, then put him in a box on a train bound east to Jackson, Michigan, and Detroit. He sent him collect, as bishops do. When he got there, the poor corpse, he was met by agents of the Desnoyer Funeral Home in Jackson, Michigan, a business I believe that still is there.

For reasons I am not entirely sure of, the ten-year-old boy in that picture on the wall was by now twelve years old, and his father, the priest’s brother, took him on the day to make the arrangements for the mum plants and the requiems and the grave diggers and the stipendiums. While the men were talking these commemorations, my father — the twelve-year-old boy now — wandered through the old house of the Desnoyer Funeral Home until he came to a room with a door ajar. Looking inside, he saw two men in white shirts and gray-striped ties and wingtip shoes and striped pants carefully vesting the dead priest in his liturgical vestments. Then, in silence, as if on signals that they had worked out years in advance, they reached underneath the corpse and rolled the dead boy’s body to themselves and then carefully sidestepped their way to the wall of the room where a box awaited the dead priest’s body.

It was to this moment in August of 1936 that my father would ever after trace his intention to become a funeral director. “Why?” I would sometimes ask him. “Why didn’t you want to be a priest?” “Ah,” he said, “the priest was dead.”

My father, not given to metaphor, simply noticed that the men that walked out of the room were in better shape than the one that didn’t.

But his sense that he was called to this was unshakable all of his life. It must have been a calling sufficient for a couple or three generations, because of his nine children, seven found their way into work between the quick and the dead, and of their thirty-some children, more than a few — nieces and nephews and sons and daughters — turned up as funeral directors or funeral workers, too.

I am not sure whether this calling is the silence or the summons, but we got it. We got it
in a way that is unshakable. I keep thinking, as I have watched, over fifty years, that the funeral has become a steady estrangement of the living and the dead. How long will it take to restore us to a sort of order about our obligations to the dead?

Last month it was announced that someplace northeast of Johannesburg in South Africa paleoanthropologists had found in their travels a couple Septembers ago the fossil remains of people with brains the size of navel oranges and with bones that would assemble to a five-foot height. But the thing that bedeviled their inquisition was that these people seemed to dispose of their dead with purpose. I often think of that first Neanderthal widow waking to the lump of dead protein next to her in a cave someplace in Uzbekistan or Mesopotamia, some fifty or sixty or five million years ago — depending on what channel you are watching at night — and trying to figure out what she would do with this now-still person that she had been biding with.

Think of it yourself. Something on the order of 6,500 of your fellow citizens today will have to deal with this — what to do with the dead guy on the floor. Possibly she said, “I'll leave the cave to him,” in which case it would become his tomb. Or “Maybe I'll see if I can get some help and I'll drag him out by the ankles into a ditch or a pond or prop him in a tree.” Or “Maybe the scavenging birds will come. I'll call them holy if they do and pick his bones clean, as birds do.”

I don't know if she committed him to the fire or the pond or the grave or to the tree. But whatever abyss, whatever oblivion she consigned him to, I think she formed what became the signature questions of our species. You can try this at home. Rock bass don’t do it. Rhododendrons don't care. If you have two goldfish, kill one and see what happens. Very little. But among humans, we look into the void and ask ourselves these silly questions, like, is that all there is? Why is it cold? Are we all alone? What comes next? Can it happen to me?

I think in shaping these questions, she put every poet and every storyteller into business. We have been fashioning stories ever since, have we not? And she put all the funeral types into business, all the priests and pastors and poets and poobahs and shamans and rabbis and imams and the like — somebody who could say, “Behold, I show you a mystery,” or words to that effect.

The trouble with us as a generation is that we have gone for the convenience rather than for the heavy lift. We get away from the shovel-and-shoulder work. We have that done by someone like me. We have a fee. We do it quietly. We do it in private. We never see it, while we spend our time with good finger food and stories of golf, where heaven seems like a nineteenth hole, and if you didn't take too many mulligans and you raked out the sand traps and kept an honest score, your trophies are laid up for you in someplace like a clubhouse.

That will be enough for now.

JAMES MCCARTIN: Thank you to both of you.

The next part of our program is a bit of a conversation between our two guests. I have asked each of them to think about some questions they might want to ask each other, either from their trade as writers or from the broader questions that were engaged with tonight. We will spend a bit of time, before we get to some questions from the broader audience, having Alice and Tom talk to each other a little bit.
If I may, Tom, would you start us off?

**THOMAS LYNCH:** Why, sure.

First of all, I have questions about *Someone*. I love the title only because in that word is the problem I think we find ourselves in so often. Are you “someone”? “Someone” is either one of a kind or just one of a kind. We are either part of the many or the one and only.

Of course, the Irish are always good at asking if someone is actually someone. But I am really, really interested in Fagin. I want to know about this person, because I think I have met several people like him. I love the fact that Marie, after she gets her fine dresses from a department store, arranged for by her new employer, feels as if she has been transfigured and transformed.

Can you talk to us a little bit about that? Tell me a little bit about Mr. Fagin. The name choice is interesting, because I think of the Fagin, the teacher of dark arts.

**ALICE McDermott:** Absolutely. Fagin is a character, for those of you who don’t know, in my last novel *Someone*. He is an undertaker in Brooklyn. I have to say, there were many times I thought about sending you the manuscript, just to make sure that there was enough realism to get away with all the rest.

I suppose tied in with the idea of being someone — is that unique or is that obliterating, that concept?

I have to begin with the reason for being for the novel itself, which I discovered only after I began it, because I thought I was just after giving voice to a character, a woman who didn’t have much voice in her own life, a middle-class woman of no particular beauty or no particular talent coming of age through the twentieth century, pre-feminism, in a patriarchal — they only think it is patriarchal; all Irish families are matriarchal, but we let them think it is patriarchal — family. So I thought that was my intention, to just do something that I felt not enough novelists were doing, and that is giving the entire novel over to the voice of a single woman.

Yet I realized not too far into it that what I was really trying to establish is, is our singularity significant? As much as we want to say every life counts, do we really believe that? Do we accept that? That simply arose out of — Marie, the character who I had given the novel to, has a very pious older brother, who is the trifecta for an Irish family: He is good-looking, he recites poetry, and he is going to be a priest — and he doesn’t drink. I guess that is the fourth.

Early on in the novel, in order to comfort his family when the teenager next door dies very suddenly, he opens up his Bible and he reads from Matthew. He tells them, “You are worth more than many sparrows. Even the hairs on your head are counted. Do not be afraid.”

When I gave him that little speech — because this is the kind of thing I thought this character would do — as the author, I sort of had to sit back and say, what a crazy proposition. Talk about the afterlife as a crazy proposition. The proposition that throughout history, since your poor first widow woke up in that cave and had to figure out what to do with the dead husband — throughout history, we are proposing that every single life matters as much as any other — a brief life, an inconsequential life. To say that
every single human being is of value is a ridiculous, nonsensical proposition, and yet, if we don’t believe it, then we can say this life is more valuable than that life, and then morality goes out the window. Then you can have a holocaust. Then you can have terrorism. One life is more important than the other.

This is a long way around to get back to Fagin. Once I realized that, I realized that my obligation in this novel about a so-called ordinary woman, who would not do anything extraordinary in her life to merit this novel, would have to be looked at with great care, and so would every other character in the novel, because every single one of them would have to be like no other. So when my undertaker showed up, I had to make sure that he was in no way what we would expect of an undertaker. I gave him the name Fagin because he loves to read Dickens. But he is as opposite to Fagin as possible. As a matter of fact, he is out to redeem the name. My undertaker is a warm and lovely and life-affirming character, as I think maybe some of them are in real life.

THOMAS LYNCH: Thank you for that. Some of them are.

But you do set up very well, I think, the tension that exists on a day-to-day basis — and I often see it — between a character like Fagin, the undertaker, who sees herself or himself as sort of the honest broker of family wishes, who oftentimes in conversation with the reverend clergy will say “the family would like to do this,” or “they would like this one to say that,” “they would like this music.” Of course, the church’s obligation is to affirm the fact that we are all one and the same children of a loving God, that that is the remarkable thing about us, and nothing more — not our golf score, not our appetites, not our habits or pastimes. None of these things separate us from the love of God or make us anything particularly special.

The Irish have always found a way around that. They have —

ALICE McDERMOTT: It’s called “who do you think you are.”

THOMAS LYNCH: They have these constructs — the same but different. Ah, well, they’re the same but different. And everybody nods, like, “Oh, yeah, we get that.” It sounds absolutely idiotic, the same but different. It’s like tall but short, this but that. Just like America Town; the same but different.

ALICE McDERMOTT: Isn’t it embodied in the “will not see his like again,” although we are all alike? His like is coming around the corner, but we will not see his like again.

THOMAS LYNCH: Yes, that “unto dust” part. The numbers are really convincing on this, because they hover right around 100 percent of the people who are born die.

But the language plays such a strong part in this, don’t you think, the way “grave” and “gravity” and “gravid” and “gravitas” are on the same page and they all come from the same root word? I suppose this is why Yeats was always saying sex and death are the only things we should talk about.

ALICE McDERMOTT: I wonder if, a little bit, that speaks to what you were talking about, that there is in contemporary culture a fear of gravitas and a fear of the grave, literally and figuratively, but also I think that move toward more party, celebration of life and let’s not be sad, let’s be glad, and then let’s stop thinking about it as soon as we can. I wonder if it isn’t that sense of seriousness that we are afraid of.
THOMAS LYNCH: It is a heavy lift in all ways. My friend Alan Ball said to me once, in the early years of Six Feet Under, “I got the formula, Tom. Once you put a dead man in the room, you can talk about anything.” Of course, that is the genius of a good funeral, that it includes the essential elements of a funeral, which is “we’ve got to do something about this dead guy.” First of all, we have to notice that there is someone who has quit breathing forever. That is the one that we first dispatch now. But if you keep them there, it ups the existential ante so much that people really will talk about anything, like reconciliation, or they will have wrestling matches in the back — I loved the narration of Marie overhearing everything going on in the room where people are having their wakes. I especially like all the conversation that took place upstairs with Fagin’s mother and her soiree of nuns and widows and gossips. I thought that was a brilliant chapter.

ALICE McDERMOTT: Thank you. I think there is also that sense of the sort of sanitized stories that people tell in place of eulogies, without enough time to say what we need to work out.

THOMAS LYNCH: The way you handle suicide, both in Someone and in the story that came out in The New Yorker this summer, I thought was really powerful. I think Fagin gets a good line in the story, where he basically accuses the church of getting the idea of the thing right, but the thing itself they don’t have a clue about. I have to say that my own experience with the clergy — and I am not speaking just about Catholic clergy here — so often the idea of the thing and the thing itself are at odds in their own understanding, which is why I think if we can get to the essentials about a good funeral and we can acknowledge that a lot of what we really take as important are really just the accessories — the dove releases, the bagpipers, the mum plants and fruitcakes and the rest of it — there should be some essential elements of a good funeral where we should be able to say, without this, you don’t have a funeral. You might have something else, but it is not a funeral.

I would like to hazard the notion that a corpse is essential. It is not optional. I think someone to whom the corpse matters is really important. Mourners are important. If no one cares, no one cares. I think story is, some narrative on which to hang our expectations about what comes next. Then you have to get rid of the dead guy, and not in a virtual sense, in an actual sense. We have to put these humans back in the humus or into a fire. We have to go the distance with them. I think our hesitation — and the questions that you formed, Jim: Why are we hesitating to talk to one another about the thing that we all share in common, our mortality? I think it is because we don’t go the distance with one another.

ALICE McDERMOTT: Yes, and I think that does come out of a discomfort that we have. I think you have written this, that we have become comfortable about talking about everything, the most intimate details of our physical lives — it is right out there — but when it comes to death, we back away. We are tight-lipped. We want to get it over with.

I was thinking as you were talking — and I have had this thought in reading your work as well — that I can hear probably my own children, because they are so in my head, being contrarians for everything I say with any assurance — I am sure most of you who have children understand that — I hear the “so what’s wrong with not being sad? So what’s wrong with getting over it quickly? So what’s wrong with not looking at the body and just having a nice party and having pretty balloons?” As my kids always say, “Why do you always have to watch a sad movie where somebody dies? There are good movies. Why do you always want to cry?”
I hear a younger generation, who maybe are not as accustomed to the customs of death, saying, “No. The way we do it is much less morbid, and we get over it. Here you guys are, sitting around talking about death all the time.”

What do we say to that generation about what gets left out, what gets lost in that rush to be comforted? I think it was just after the shooting out in Oregon — it must have been just a day or two afterwards — The Washington Post actually had an article about how people were moving on. Kids hadn’t even been buried yet. “The town is healing.” Maybe these were the people who were objecting to Obama coming or objecting to talking about guns, but “the town has begun to heal.”

How do you explain what gets lost?

THOMAS LYNCH: Almost every time we have a horrendous event of that sort, one of the reports will be about the fleet of grief therapists who have been dispatched to the scene to talk people out of whatever craziness the death occasions for them. Ever since Kübler-Ross, we let that notion that we can morph dying, first of all — and then we borrowed it for the notion of surviving a death — that grief can take the form of stages, so that on Monday we are in denial and on Tuesday we are angry and by Friday we accepted this. And all to the good, except that anybody who has ever been through that knows it is codswallop. It just is not the way it works.

The notion of closure is probably one of the great stupidities that we foist on one another. It is not the way it works.

I guess that is why I have much more faith in a process that requires — I have always said a good funeral is one in which by getting the dead where they need to go, the living get where they need to be. If you just do the job, the rest will fall in place.

We used to see the dead as journeying from one station to another, out of the life that they inhabited with us into a life that we imagine for them or have faith in for them and our faith makes claims about. We no longer see the journey of the dead as such. The dead are dead, full stop. They are not going anyplace. I am borrowing this from my coauthor Thomas Long, a theologian. Now the journey is from my grief-strickenness to my closure, to my wellness. The funeral no long is about the dead guy or about the claims that we make on behalf of the dead. Now the funeral is about — in the case of my funeral, it is about my “Tomness,” how cute I was, how eccentric, how crazy I was on certain days — or if he took a drink, you couldn’t rely on him to — that type of thing. It is all these foibles and funny habits, hence the “funeral karaoke.”

But the bold claims of faith — that even though we don’t know the mystery, we know that this is mysterious — and whether we assign the fullness of life to love in the case of St. John or however we organize it, the great agnostic was right when he said, “Every cradle asks us, Whence? every coffin, Whither?” We want to know whence they came and where they go. If we are not willing to ask those questions full of gravitas, then the rest seems like thin gruel, light duty.

ALICE McDERMOTT: And is that notion of getting over it — on one hand, of course that seems to be a healthy hope, but on the other hand, it is the acknowledgment of a full life, the acknowledgment of the power of love. To say that this person whom I loved is no longer in my company, that is a terrible thing. That rends my heart. I am not going to let go of that, that sense of loss and outrage, because that seems the healthy — I guess this
goes back to my sense of our hesitation to talk in any real way about an afterlife. Without
the afterlife, then there is only the outrage. So if you don’t have the afterlife and you are
left only with the outrage, then you have to temper the outrage. Then you have to say,
“Oh, I’m feeling better. I’m getting over it. The pain is less.”

I created a character going on twenty years ago, I guess, who I thought was a real old guy
when I wrote about him. He was in his sixties, and he was an alcoholic. But his refrain
was “death is a terrible thing and don’t let anybody talk you out of that.” If you ever
talked about that, then Christ didn’t need to die on the cross to redeem us, if death is not
a terrible thing.

It didn’t work out so well for him because he couldn’t get on with his life — at least the
story that grew up around him was that that was the source of his alcoholism — but in his
tenacity, to say, “Death is a terrible thing and it has taken the woman I love and I’m not
going to forgive it.”

THOMAS LYNCH: Here again, the Irish have hedged some of these bets. They are
very good around corpses. Depending on the weather, they will keep them for two or
three days.

There is this wonderful term that is constantly used in Ireland about the removal. The
removal is quite literally when the corpse is removed from the house and now goes en
route to a public place, usually to the church, oftentimes stopping at a mortuary where
the parking is close to pubs. But the Irish then, after death and after the burial and after
each of them has played their part — and these are communities in which they haven’t
come to the point where people’s value is attached to how they stand out from the
community — are you someone? — but how you fit into the community. Are you
someone? Do you do your part? The Irish keep the dead alive by speaking of them
always afterwards in what I always call the “possible tense.” “God bless her, Nora Lynch
would have loved a night like tonight — the old songs and the way she sang ‘Amazing
Grace’ or ‘The Boys of Kilmichael’ or ‘The Rose of Tralee.”

But she is as alive in that conversation now as she was before she died in 1992, whereas
we, you are exactly right, will not mention the name of the dead for fear that someone
might break out in a rash of grief or bereavement, and we don’t have a prescription to give
them right away for this. We are much better at pharmacy than empathy.

I should remember that line. [Laughter]

But it is true. We get a pill for that.

But in communities where people are as accustomed to mortality as they once were,
where everything dies eventually — cows die, horses die, crops fail, people die. They die
in their own beds and they continue to occupy the parlor, their place by the fire. They
happily haunted the community ever after. I think we could do with some more of that.

ALICE McDERMOTT: I think you are talking, too, about having custom, not just the
religious part of it, but to have a custom to rely on, to have something that is modeled
after what you have seen so that when you are at these crossroads in life, then you don’t
have to think about it.

THOMAS LYNCH: You don’t have to reinvent the wheel.

ALICE McDERMOTT: You don’t have to reinvent it, yes. Of course, that is across
cultures. That is the thing that I see being swept aside — “we’ll have a party like nobody else has had.” It is theatrical. It is a performance piece. Again, I can hear a whole younger generation saying, why not? It is unique. This is exactly who this person was, and they shouldn’t have — but then there is also the comfort of community that is familiar with the custom and can participate in it fully.

THOMAS LYNCH: You are so right. There was a picture in the paper a spring ago of people gathered around a wooden coffin in a room someplace in southeastern Pennsylvania. All the people around the semicircle that was photographed for the local paper were blowing bubbles out of those little things that you get for your grandkids. If you read the story, you found out that the reason they were blowing bubbles over — and they looked a little bit like, exactly what are we doing here? There was one fellow there that I identified with, who looked like “and I’m paying a mortgage on this?” But anyway, they were doing it. If you read on, you found out that the reason they were blowing bubbles over the coffin was that the person inside the coffin, a woman, whose name was given, was very fond of Lawrence Welk music. So that makes sense.

ALICE McDERMOTT: I am reminded of when my father-in-law — my husband’s family is all originally Evangelical Brethren and then United Methodist — when my father-in-law passed away, he was cremated. We went out to a memorial garden when we had the ashes just behind their church, just the immediate family, and we scattered his ashes. Then everyone sort of stood around after the ashes were gone, kind of awkwardly, saying, “Well, it’s not quite time for brunch yet. Should we say something?”

My son, who was five years old at the time and, when I was in charge, in Catholic school, very innocently looked up and said, “How about we say a nice Hail Mary?” The Methodists were not too pleased.

THOMAS LYNCH: I had a grandmother who was a Methodist, but that is another story.

I do spend a lot of time in Ireland, where I go to a lot of funerals. You must make your call to the house, because the body is usually laid out in the bed or in the kitchen on the table until a coffin can be fashioned and they bring it in the hearse. But that is part of the removal process. They will be removing them to town or they will interrupt the priest, who will move from his tea to do a decade of the rosary on the night before the mass.

But I was there when J.J. Carmody died and I made my visit to the house. He was laid out on the table, his grief-stricken family all around him. I was in earshot when Father Culligan came to make his pastoral visit. He said to Moira, “Whatever happened with J.J. was very, very sudden.” She said, “Ah, Father, it was gonorrhea swept him.” [Laughter]

The priest, who looked a little bit like me, had a bald head, and I could see the sweat glistening on the top. He blushed, as priests used to. He said, “Well, maybe it was that time he went up North and fell in the wrong crowd. Anyway, we’ll have mass in the
morning, and we’ll have no more about that other thing,” and he walked away.

I was still nearby as the widow and her daughter came around to upbraid her for what she had heard reports of, saying, “Mammy, why did you ever tell Father Culligan that daddy died of gonorrhea? It was diarrhea that took him.” [Laughter]

She said, “Don’t scold me, my darling. I’d rather your father be remembered for the great lover he never was than for the big shit he always seemed to be.” [Laughter]

The Irish know how to do these things. They really do.

That is a true story. That happened. I know you know that. When I read your book, I know you know that. Poor Walter limping in after Billy Corrigan died, the blind umpire. Oh, that was so good.

If any of you haven’t read this book Someone and you are beset by people who seem to have everything when it comes to be their birthdays or Christmas, I think we might have that book Someone. Why don’t you go get it for him? Pay retail. And see if it doesn’t improve their lives.

Or that story about Billy Lynch. It would take your breath away. It really does.

**ALICE McDERMOTT:** Thank you.

I have one quick question for you. A poet friend of mine, who happens to be Episcopal and very conservative, is reaching that stage in his life where he is asking it of everyone, and when he knew I was going to be talking to you, asked me if I would ask you: Do you have a story to tell about an encounter with the mystical?

**THOMAS LYNCH:** I don’t know if I have one as good — I always think of some of the scenes in fiction. One of the things that your book reminded me of was that poor man recently dead, Oscar Hijuelos, who wrote *Mr. Ives’ Christmas*.

**ALICE McDERMOTT:** Wonderful book.

**THOMAS LYNCH:** He walks out of his office on 50th Street or Park Avenue and he has a beatific vision. I see that a lot. I see it at gravesites. I see it, oddly enough, at the crematory, when I see people who have been trying to just take this in stride, when you lean the duty towards them, when you say, “Okay, now, lift” to a son or a daughter and say, “You can put your father’s body in that retort. I’ll help you. Let’s lift.”

My job, so far as I see it, is not to do for, but to embolden them to do it themselves. I think one of the great mistakes the mortuary marketplace made — and about this, Mitford was part right. She was mad because it cost too much. Oh, well, what doesn’t? The worst thing that the mortuary customs in this country did was they took away from the bereaved the duty to take care of their dead, to do the heavy lifting, to do the digging, to do what humans do for one another.

I have to tell you, when I see a granddaughter kneel to a grave with a box of ashes full of her dead grandfather, I don’t know if it is mystical, but it would make you believe in a loving God.

I am in one of those programs where I have to keep telling myself that the only article of faith is, if there is a god, I am not it. And that works. I don’t steal lawnmowers or make passes at the wait-staff or anything, as long as I keep reminding myself of that. But I can
tell you, around a grave or around a fire, if burning is what we are doing, or a tomb, I have seen what looks like God emboldening people.

The clergy do this, too. I will never forget a Presbyterian minister, a woman, Deborah Kerr — I buried her later — she had good instincts for how to help. We were burying a child who had died quite horrendously, and her mother could not close the casket. Debbie just took the mother by the arm and said, “Come on, let’s do this.” It was the slightest motion towards tucking this precious baby into the box, which is a heartrending experience. But that little motion emboldened that mother to do it, and, for the first time in the days that I dealt with her, she took charge of her daughter’s death. She prayed about it, because she needed God’s help. She kept saying, “God help us.” How do we know who hears that? But she is still walking upright and she is talking in sentences. So I say, if there is a god, it’s not me. But she was doing a good job that day.

ALICE McDERMOTT: Thank you.

JAMES McCARTIN: We have a lot of terrific questions from the audience. Are you ready for some?

The first question is on categories of death. Alice, you referred to the notion that each person is equal, but we know that not all deaths are equal in some way. There are different kinds of death — say, death by suicide as compared to the tragedy of a death by mass shooting. Then compare that to the death of a soldier in the war. Then compare those things to death by natural causes at old age. These are not the same. What do these different categories of death, if you will, tell us about our approach to mortality? What do they say? What does the fact that they are different say to us?

That is for either of you.

ALICE McDERMOTT: Tom, I would be interested to know if, for lack of a better word, protocol is adjusted, given unusual circumstances or more usual circumstances.

THOMAS LYNCH: I am particularly interested in the deep humanity with which you write about suicidal deaths. That has been consistent with my experience. The biggest fear I have ever had is walking into a room where the mother and the father of a young person who has killed himself, usually with a gun, but fatally — of course, we were raised to think of suicide as the sin that could not be forgiven, that despair was the — and I just reject that, in the same way the birth of my first child disabused me of the notion of original sin. It just did. It just did. If we don’t know God’s grace when we see it, shame on us.

I have buried people who have done horrendous things to themselves. But I think sometimes it was an exercise of hope, that the pain with which they lived, whether it was psychic or spiritual or emotional or mental illness — whatever pain they lived with for which the only repair for them was not to be alive tomorrow — I just think if God is who she is cracked up to be, that poor fellow pilgrim saw the open arms of a beckoning God saying, “Come to me. I can help you.”

ALICE McDERMOTT: End of pain.

THOMAS LYNCH: I have encouraged families, who usually want to keep this quiet or give it another narrative, to say what happened out loud and notice how the sky doesn’t
fall. When the sky doesn't fall, when you are dealing with what actually happened, it leaves room for the goodness that humans can do to one another and for one another and their willingness to bear their portion of this hurt and the sorrow — and, really, this break in the fabric that offends us all. It is why we used to bury suicides at the intersections, so we could run them over because they had done something — and we took their property, because we saw it as a sin that could not be forgiven.

I don't think that anymore. I haven't thought it since the first time I had to meet with a family of a suicide.

I do worry about the quick heroification of the war dead. I think this is a mistake. I think it is bad currency. It takes the pressure off the people who declare wars and wage wars, and puts it on the people who die doing war. I am suspicious of that and wary of it. I have seen a lot of parents being handed medals in trade for their sons' or daughters' lives.

**ALICE McDermott:** And even the way we have stopped looking at the war dead. Certain people decreed that photographs would not be taken of returning coffins, that we wouldn't see the ceremonies —

**Thomas Lynch:** It wasn't certain people. It was President H.W. Bush and George W. Bush, following in his father's footsteps. The reason was because the former looked ridiculous when he was caught golfing on a split screen, and it was an embarrassment to him. This is a good-hearted person, who knows war.

But I think the wrong decision was taken then. It was reversed in the current administration.

**James McCARTIN:** There is a question here, and I want to add my own piece to it. The question from the audience member is, how has aging or how has your sense of your own mortality informed your writing? Or has it?

Then, to sort of piggyback on that, I want to take it in a different direction. As a parent, I am aware of my own mortality. My job is to kind of make my children capable of living on without me. I wonder, how does your sense of your aging or your own mortal end shape your approach to being a parent? Or has it?

So writing and parenting.

**ALICE McDermott:** It's funny. I had a very similar conversation just last week with a writer who is an atheist, a dear friend and a lovely writer. We were driving together and he started talking about how, now that he is looking at sixty, he envies religious people, because he feels himself being so consumed by the fear of death, now that it seems like it is in the somewhat foreseeable future. I sort of laughed at first. Being raised Roman Catholic didn't ever make me feel real good about dying. I still want to hang on.

But I think maybe, having spent so much time as a writer and working out and questioning, but at least dealing with the gifts that my faith has tried to give me and I have tried to both refuse and contradict, and then maybe eventually see the sense of it — I probably feel less afraid of death, here in my early sixties, than I ever have in my younger days. In some ways, it makes me look back at the writing that I did when I was assuming that people in their sixties really must be terrified, because it is coming. Thank God I'm never going to be that old.

I suppose I am delighted and puzzled by reaching this age and fearing death so little. I
guess that is something that then makes me worry less about my children. I think that when your children are first born, there is that sense of “what will they do without me,” how much they need me, and how much you have to live for them. I also see a kind — maybe it is because both my parents are now gone, so I understand both how devastating their loss was for me and yet how instructive it was for me to watch them both have good deaths. Maybe that is the thing that makes me calm about facing my own. I hope that I can model that — which is a horrible word, but it is the only one I can think of — for my own children.

THOMAS LYNCH: I can remember, when I turned fifty-two, I calculated that the oldest person I had ever buried then was 104. I thought, “I am irreversibly middle-aged now. This could happen to me.” So I resolved that I would write a sonnet every year on my birthday for the rest of my life, a resolve that I kept for exactly one year. As you know, a sonnet has fourteen lines or, as Billy Collins says, well, thirteen now.

So here it is. Let me see if I can remember it. I say this because tomorrow I will be sixty-seven. For those of you who are past that — and I see a good few of you are — I say, go for the 100. There is a little discount if you make it. It ain’t much, but it is worth living for.

At fifty-two years, the way I thought — my dad was sixty-seven, my mother sixty-five. I occupied this last year between their mortalities thinking — anyway, I am a little haunted by all this. But at fifty-two, here is the jaunty little song I made after the sonnet turned out to have fifteen lines, which is an affirmation of “the older we are, the less we count.”

It is called “Refusing at Fifty-Two to Write Sonnets.” After I came up with fifteen lines, I thought I had better fix it. But it still has fifteen lines.

*It came to him that he could nearly count*
*How many Octobers he had left to him.*
*In increments of ten or, say, eleven, thus:*
*Sixty-three, seventy-four, eighty-five.*
*He couldn’t see himself at ninety-six,*
*Humanity’s advances notwithstanding in*
*Health care, self-help or New Age regimens.*
*What with his habits and family history,*
*The end, he thought, is nearer than you think.*
*The future thus confined to its contingencies,*
*The present moment opens like a gift,*
*The bulbing month, the bright week, the blue Morning, the hour’s routine, the minute’s passing glance,*
*All seem like godsend now.*
*And what to make of this.*
*At the end, the word that comes to us is Thanks.*

[Applause]

JAMES McCARTIN: Here is an easy question for Thomas Lynch. Does that story about diarrhea appear in any of your books? And if so, which one?

THOMAS LYNCH: I think, of the ten books, it is only in one. It is in *Booking Passage*.

JAMES McCARTIN: And here is a tougher question. I think this one is for Alice
McDermott. In your talking about the afterlife, there is one phrase that didn’t come up. It is the idea of the resurrection of the body, an old-time Christian doctrine, which boils down to the belief that our physical human bodies, formed beloved by God, will one day be reconstituted and perfected, but reconstituted as bodies. You mentioned outrageous beliefs. This is pretty outrageous.

Realizing that neither of you is a theologian, what is your response to the notion of the resurrection of the body?

ALICE McDERMOTT: My mother lived in assisted living, a lovely place down the block from where our house is, for five years. I would go over every Thursday for their mass. It was always very interesting. Fortunately, she was intact. She was on the good floor. But people would come up from the memory floors. Our pastor who came and said mass was very wry and wonderful at responding sometimes to strange questions that would be shouted from the congregation while he was saying the mass.

He was giving a sermon. I am not a good enough Catholic to know what the feast day was, but he brought up the resurrection of the body. Here are people in wheelchairs, people in all stages of senility, and then, like my mother, people in their nineties or into their hundreds, and then me. But that was who he was addressing. He started saying, “Think how wonderful it will be when we get our bodies back. There will be no pain. Especially for you men out there, we’ll have our hair back.” One man sitting in the back of the room, who was given to shouting out things, but usually things you couldn’t understand, in the silence that followed “and we’ll have our hair back,” said, “Bullshit!” [Laughter] And I was like, I’m with that guy.

But metaphorically, it is a lovely thing to think about.

JAMES McCARTIN: Anything, Tom?

THOMAS LYNCH: No. I am with Alice on that.

JAMES McCARTIN: This one is for you, Tom. Can you say anything more about care of the dead in our evolution as human species, especially what seems like religious practice? What can you say about this?

THOMAS LYNCH: Our religious practice came out of our theology, our eschatology. I can remember my cousin Nora in her bed with pennies on her eyes and a prayer book under her chin to keep her mouth propped shut.

The Romans were buried with money in their mouths to pay the boatman, the Viaticum — the way across the river. The Viaticum became very much like the — well, it is the communion brought to the dying as the way across the divide.

In real life, I see that played out by a woman — and I see incarnations of her through the room — she came to the funeral home to pick up the ashes of her dead sister because the ne’er-do-well children wouldn’t pick up the ashes. They were in our “closet of memories,” as we call it tongue-in-cheek. She came to liberate her sister’s ashes from the closet of memories, and I said, “You stay here. I’ll go up.” I unlocked the closet and got her sister’s ashes out. It is usually about a fifteen-pound box, in this case a plastic box. I put it in a velvet bag, because this was a lace-curtain sort of woman, and I took it down to her. I handed it to her, and she held it very much like I imagine people taking Viaticum to the sick and the dying in the old days, when they used to do it almost orally to be sure that they had the way across on their tongue. She held them. She walked out the door. Her
car was parked right in front. She popped the key fob to open the trunk. She looked at it and she closed the trunk. She went around to the back door, opened the back door, holding the box like a football now, and she closed the back door, then opened the front passenger door, put the ashes on the seat, and buckled the seatbelt.

I thought, “There is the care of the dead.” But it is something we learn by doing what we had to do, as Recki [phonetic] said.

We have a version of that play itself out every time someone dies. It is the highest and best use of the corpse, I think, to have them around for that.

**JAMES McCARTIN:** You both talked this evening about changing cultures of mourning. Both of you, I think it is fair to say, grew up in a world where at requiem masses priests wore black vestments and recited the “Dies Irae” before the reading of the Gospel about the coming day of wrath, the day when the searching judge will come and sift all hearts and so on — kind of terrifying. Then what we have seen over the past fifty or so years is a movement toward masses of the resurrection, which are chosen over the mass of Christian death and burial. And you have both spoken critically about some of the changes in a more, let’s say, festive or positive direction that we have seen in contemporary mourning practices.

What do you make of the changes in our own community, if I am able to call it that, the Catholic community?

**THOMAS LYNCH:** I think the difference is fashion difference between white vestments and black vestments. I think they should have a committee someplace work on those vestments, full stop. Maybe if they let women be priests, the vestments would improve immediately. I’m just saying.

But the other thing is, I don’t have any trouble with any of that. Affirming the resurrection is the biggest, boldest thing we do. God be with the days when it is done boldly.

But the attendant pressure to make the bereaved grin and bear it I think should be blighted[?]. They should be allowed room within the mass of the resurrection to weep like the suffering people they are. The community provides the buffer for all that. If you have ever been to an African American funeral, you will often find a couple rows of women dressed as nurses. They are there because the expectation is that there will be a physical outpouring of grief that needs good strong medicine, and often the good strong medicine is what the president called down at Reverend Pinckney’s funeral, “Amazing Grace,” just amazing grace. Accompany them with singing, Long says.

**ALICE McDERMOTT:** And I think some of it, too — and maybe this is a professional bias on my part — I think we have this mistrust of already-formed words, prayer, poetry. And we shouldn’t. Our words are insufficient. Our individual words are insufficient when we are faced with grief and sorrow.

I recall again and again how, after September 11, poetry was being recited on the airways, the evening news, in ways that I couldn’t remember in my own lifetime. It is when things happen to us for which we have no words. We should rely on those words that are provided to us, and not try to scrape together our own.
Maybe it is too much of a throwback to say, for heaven’s sake, be silent. Let these words speak for you. Your words are going to be temporary. You will say them and, at the end of it, you will say, “I didn’t say what I meant to say. I couldn’t quite put it into words.” I want to say, yes, you can’t. So rely on the words that are formed for you. No, they are not saying exactly what you mean. That is the point. It can’t be said. Our grief can’t be spoken of. Language fails us if we are seriously confronting life and mortality and love. Language always fails us. So don’t even try. Use poetry. Use prayer. Use the customary forms so that you can be silent amidst it.

That is the thing that I wish we could reassure people of.

THOMAS LYNCH: Amen.

PARTICIPANT: That is why it is called sacred scripture.

ALICE McDERMOTT: Yes, that is why it is called sacred scripture.

PARTICIPANT [not at microphone]: [Inaudible] after all the funerals and the wake services and everything else.

ALICE McDERMOTT: Right, because we don’t have the words ourselves.

JAMES McCARTIN: We are almost over, but I want to offer one last question. The late Phyllis Tickle, a writer, thinker in the realm of religion, when she received her cancer diagnosis, blogged that “dying is my new career.”

What does that say about the possibility of good death? What does that phrase mean or evoke in you? Does the kind of good death that that sort of attitude might bring also bring with it a good funeral?

THOMAS LYNCH: I do think people who are willing to confront the verities are willing to confront them all the way through. That has been my experience. But there is much that estranges us from the dying nowadays. The hallmark of intensive care is that anybody who really cares can’t be there except for ten minutes on the hour. We installed something called hospice care, which is an improvement on that. But too often that has become another way of dispensing medical resources more than anything else.

When Nora Lynch was dying, I brought her out of the Ennis Hospital on Ash Wednesday. She had cancer and she was going on ninety. I said to her on the way back, “Well, they say you’re dying, so I’m taking you home.” She said, “We’re all dying, Tom. At least I’m going home.”

But within the town where she lived it was as if the good death required neighbors who had had grudges over land issues or animal issues or somebody who said something to somebody sometime years ago — all of that was washed away, everything forgiven, everything tilting towards reconciliation. They came into the house. They would sit with her by the fire. They would tend to her. They would have tea with her. They would talk to her about whatever she wanted. This went on for two weeks, until one day she couldn’t get out of bed and she died.

I think she had a good death. I think she had a really good death. It was much like the life she led. And her funeral — she left money after her. As I told the lawyer, who was carping about how much I had spent on the funeral — I said, “Well, it was you or the other guy, and the other guy is one of my own.”
We had a great wake and a great funeral. We had the children from the school sing for her, pipers and tin whistlers. Someone did affirm the belief that she held to, and it was not always easy, because at ninety she would put her hands in front of the fire and say, as I think all of us do, “I wonder if there is anything at all. I wonder if He hears us when we pray.”

These are essential questions. They are not so much doubt as hope. We deny nothing. We know nothing. We believe what we can, and we live in hope.

Yes, I think there is a connection between the good death and the good funeral.

ALICE McDERMOTT: I was just thinking, my mother passed away in February at ninety-six. She had a good death. I can’t say that she was ready. She probably would have liked to have hung around. She loved life. She loved to party. She would have loved the party that she missed when we all gathered for her good funeral. And it was a good funeral as well.

But when she was dying — it was just a few days — we knew that there wasn’t anything to do. My brother had come down from New York and we were taking turns spending the night with her. I have a coterie of friends my own age. Most of them are parents from Catholic school days of my kids. I had an email from one of them when this was going on, who was a little bit too Catholic for me. I love her. She is great. But she really takes the whole thing very seriously. She sent me an email and said, “I put your mother in our forty-eight-hour prayer cycle.” I said, “Great. Thanks.”

But I was thinking — I didn’t say this to anyone — my mother and I were very close. We had spent lots and lots of time together. It was all good. But I didn’t want to be there when she died. I wanted my brother to be there when she died. If she was going to die at night, I wanted her to die the night he was there. It happened that my very unsentimental, Irish Catholic, bachelor brother at 3:45 in the morning went to check on her and was just putting some water on her lips, as you do, with a sponge, and she opened her eyes for the first time in three days. She looked right at him and she smiled at him and she died.

After the beautiful funeral — of course, all my way-too-Catholic girlfriends were there, being supportive — the friend who had written and said, “We put your mother on the cycle” said to me, “What time did your mother die?” I said, “She died at 3:45 in the morning. My brother was there, and it was wonderful. It was just what I wanted.” She said she had the 3:00-to-4:00 slot.

THOMAS LYNCH: I hate it when that happens.

ALICE McDERMOTT: But it happens. So I got what I wanted.

THOMAS LYNCH: There is a woman over there who has been very patient.

PARTICIPANT: I just wanted to say that there is grace there. You just have to be patient until it comes to you. And then you don’t mind.

ALICE McDERMOTT: That is wonderful. Thank you.

JAMES McCARTIN: Before we thank Alice and Tom, I just want to say this. Watch
out for America magazine. I see in the audience tonight one of the editors at America, the literary editor, Father Ray Schloth, who will assume duties of editing out the best portions of tonight’s conversation and putting them in America magazine at some point in the future. So you will be able to revisit the conversation this evening there.

Let me also invite you to come back to this room on November 3, when we will be doing an event called “Our Planet’s Keeper: The Environment, the Poor, and the Struggle for Justice.” Our ads are out on the table. Please grab one on your way out and come back.

Before you leave, can you please join me in thanking Alice McDermott and Tom Lynch.

[Applause]

Thanks to all of you. Have a good night.