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Life in death (Melinda Johnson)

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USS John C Stennis next to USS Arizona, Pearl Harbor

There were two deaths in my world this week, one a beautiful elderly man who

attended my church, the other a beautiful young woman who was the friend of my godbrother. During the homily this morning, our priest talked about how often in modern American culture, people shrink from death or try to make it smaller by disrespecting it. Many people, he said, replace the traditional funeral with a life celebration or some other form of memorial that feels more like a reunion and less like the commemoration of an actual, permanent death.

This month in Navy Times, I read an article about the remains of a soldier who died in World War II. His body was just found, now, in the fall of 2010, 65 years after the war ended, and the military not only found it, they carried it carefully home, halfway across the world, so he could be buried with honor, as he deserved.

Sixty-five years later, they were *still looking*. For what? The man himself has long since gone on into eternity. And there was nothing notable about this one soldier, that they should be scouring the planet for him. They weren't even looking for him specifically. They were looking for anyone, for any American man or woman who died in battle and was never taken home. In fact, there are entire military commands devoted to this purpose. (See, for example, <http://www.navytimes.com/news/2010/08/ap-marine-tarawa-search-for-remains-082810/>)

Why? Why does it matter if they are already dead?

It matters because there are family members still waiting to hear the end of the story, all these years later, but I think there is something more to it even than that. The fact that our military organization formally ensures that it will make every effort to bring every service person home, alive or dead, is about something more than closure for the families.

The simplest way to think about this is to turn it around. Who would we be if we did not bring home our dead? What would we be saying to the human beings who serve in our armed forces? "You may lose your life in service to us, and if you do, we will only bring home your body if it's convenient."



Why is this such a slap? Why is it so important to honor and care for a dead body, even one that is terribly broken or long-since decayed?

Before I was Orthodox, it just made me sad to see so much care and attention spent on the dead. It made me think, “If only there had been some way to protect you *before* you died. It’s too late now. It’s too late to comfort you, to give you back what you have lost. We’re taking you home now, but you won’t be home when you get there. You won’t ever be home again.”

As an Orthodox Christian, I believe that Christ lifted up all creation in His resurrection. All of it. Every molecule. Even the cells and sinews of our physical bodies. I believe that when a person becomes a saint, even the person’s body becomes holy, and it is for this reason that we cherish the relics of saints, that we touch them, seeking that tiny contact with transformative grace. The early Christians hiding in the catacombs were often right next to their own dead, and glad to be so. In Orthodox Christian funerals, the casket is open and the body is present. Our church fathers and saints teach us never to forget our own death, inevitably before us from the moment of birth.

To me, the military is protecting the humanity of its living members by searching for and honoring its dead. The effort reminds them that nothing, not even death, removes the value of a human being. Though dead, the body remains human. Refusing to detach the humanity from the body is a way of teaching and guarding the value of human life. In an organization designed expressly for the purpose of

ending human lives, if necessary, this cherishing is essential. It is the underpinning of their sanity, a talisman against the dehumanizing influences of war. It is a reminder of the intangible something that matters more than whatever horrors are in front of them. It is the earthly sign that the soul remains intact.

By Melinda Johnson

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Melinda Johnson is the blog chief of [The Sounding](#) at [Orthodox Christian Network](#) and the author of [Letters to Saint Lydia](#) released by Conciliar Press in 2010. Melinda created the popular "Orthodox Writers, Readers, and Artists" series, which first appeared on her blog, Saint Lydia's Book Club, before moving to The Sounding in early 2012. The Sounding features daily posts by more than 20 Orthodox writers, exploring every aspect of our Orthodox faith at work in everyday life. Melinda earned a Master of Arts in English Literature from The College of William and Mary and worked as an editor specializing in projects for non-native English speakers before becoming a full-time writer.