Corpses and the Protestant cult of the dead

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Abstract

Scholars of the body and religion readily acknowledge that corpses have agency. ‘The work of the dead,’ as Thomas Laqueur puts it, includes everything from sacralizing the landscape to creating imagined communities. Scholars have been less successful, however, in documenting the continuing relations between ordinary Protestants and their departed loved ones. In their focus on cemetery designers and political leaders, historians have overlooked the spiritual journals – mostly by women – that document relations between the living and dead. This article argues that corpses were central to such relations, even for mainstream Protestants whose ministers insisted otherwise. This argument challenges the way most scholars think of Protestantism. Rather than considering it as a religion of internal beliefs and creeds, I emphasize the material and tactile foundations of Protestant belief. And rather than seeing a religion dedicated to maintaining the Reformation’s divide between the living and dead, I put relations with the dead at the heart of lived Protestantism.

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Elizabeth Pierce did not stop communicating with her grandmother after the aged woman died. Rather, Sarah Tappan’s corpse inspired four days of intense interaction between Pierce and the dead woman. When Tappan died in her eightieth year in 1826, the twenty-one-year-old Pierce was living with her in Northampton, Massachusetts. As a result, Pierce shared the house with her grandmother’s corpse from the moment of death until the burial four days later. During that time, Pierce experienced something like religious ecstasy.

Pierce was enraptured by the body’s physical appearance. ‘I never saw so beautiful a corpse as was Grandma’s on Sunday morning,’ Pierce recorded in her diary. ‘She died just about the time that her Lord & Saviour rose from the dead, on Easter Sunday.’ Like the crucified Christ, Tappan’s corpse inspired religious adoration. As the body awaited burial, the open coffin ‘remained in the north room,’ where Pierce ‘spent the greater part of my time contemplating it, with unmingled pleasure.’ Even when she was not viewing the corpse, its presence in the house increased Pierce’s spiritual fervor. At night she could barely sleep, as ‘a most delightful series of texts & verses of hymns, like a golden chain between me & heaven, came into my mind.’ Tappan’s corpse forged links between Pierce and heaven; it was an object as palpable as a golden chain, and just as effective in connecting Pierce with both her Savior and her grandmother in heaven. This connection even led Pierce to communicate with her grandmother’s soul. When the young woman looked at the corpse, it was almost as if Tappan were alive: ‘A sweet smile was upon her countenance, & I never saw any thing so heavenly as her appearance when she was placed in the coffin. She seemed to smile & say “Now I am going to sleep sweetly in the grave, as I told you before.”’

This imagined conversation with the departed demonstrates that for many antebellum American Protestants, corpses were the locus of continuing relations with the dead.

Scholars of the body and religion readily acknowledge that corpses have agency (Sørensen 2009; Williams 2004). ‘The work of the dead,’ as Thomas Laqueur puts it, includes everything from sacralizing the landscape to creating imagined communities (Laqueur 2015; also Kammen 2010; Verdery 2000). Historians, however, have been less successful in documenting the continuing relations between Protestants and their departed loved ones. This sets historians apart from scholars from a wide range of disciplines who focus on the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have demonstrated that for many contemporary Protestants, the dead remain an active presence for the living (Bennett and Bennett 2000; Irwin 2015; Klass 1993; Klass and Goss 1999; Stringer 2008:35–7; Walter 2016).
Historians, by contrast, have missed the continuing bonds that existed between some Protestant mourners and the beloved departed in the more distant past. In their focus on cemetery designers and political leaders, historians have overlooked the spiritual journals and published sentimental poems – mostly by women – that document relations between the living and dead. I argue that corpses were central to such relations, even for mainstream Protestants whose ministers insisted otherwise. In the words of Rev. William Bentley of Salem, Massachusetts, ‘I have a most settled enmity to all ceremonies for the Dead. Let their memories live but let their ashes be forgotten.’ But most people could not forget the ‘precious dust’ of their loved ones, as Elizabeth Pierce referred to her grandmother’s remains. For Pierce and many others like her, corpses were too powerful to be forgotten.

Maintaining relationships with the deceased was a central goal of what I call the Protestant cult of the dead. The cult of the dead began to emerge in the second half of the eighteenth century and fully flowered in the nineteenth. This was a transatlantic phenomenon, but this article will confine itself to the northern United States, and within that geographical range to middle-class, Euro-American Protestants. It is important to note that most participants in the cult of the dead were female. Women and adolescent girls cared for the dying and prepared their bodies for burial. They also wrote most of the sentimental poems and diary entries that document the cult’s existence. Historically tasked with doing the physical labor of caring for the dying and dead in addition to the emotional work of grieving, women and girls shaped antebellum Protestantism in their insistence that the dead were at the heart of their lived religion.

Participants in the cult of the dead held five beliefs: corpses deserved adoration, the souls of the dead became angels, those souls could return as guardian angels, cemeteries were alive with returned souls, and prayers to the dead were legitimate (Seeman 2019:189–262). This article focuses on how the adoration of corpses helped the living maintain relations with the dead. My argument about the cult of the dead is a significant departure from the many historians who see a broad trend toward secularization in antebellum deathways. According to these scholars, the corpse was ‘transformed from a sacred object exclusively within the interpretive jurisdiction of religion into a symbolic commodity on the marketplace of ideas’ (Laderman 1996:50; also Halttunen 1982; Kammen 2010:10, 18; Linden-Ward 1989).

But, in fact, corpses retained deep religious significance, and it was their very physicality and tactility that proved so powerful for women and men. Antebellum Protestants kissed and caressed their loved ones’ corpses, and while doing so they sometimes prayed to the dead. They snipped hair
from corpses to provide ‘precious relics’ of the deceased. And the physical reality of corpses buried in the earth gave people a place where they could commune with their departed loved ones. The work of the dead in antebellum America – of their corpses in particular – was to provide the material focus for continuing postmortem relations. In this sense, corpses had agency by shaping lived religion.

The corpse in the parlor

Whether placed in the parlor, Elizabeth Pierce’s ‘north room,’ or simply the most presentable room in a humble house, the coffined corpse before burial was a locus for communion between the living and dead in antebellum America. This was not what Protestant theologians had imagined three centuries earlier during the Reformation. Casting a wary eye on ‘superstitious’ Catholic prayers for the dead, reformers insisted that burials should avoid explicitly religious rituals. Funeral masses were out; simple burials were in. Reformers went so far as to argue that churchyard burial was of no use to the dead. Martin Luther famously said that his body could be buried in a forest or stream for all he cared (Koslofsky 2000:40–77).

Much had changed by the start of the nineteenth century. In America, ministers had long since stopped worrying that funeral sermons might encourage the bereaved to pray for the soul of the dead. Furthermore, at some point toward the end of the eighteenth or beginning of the nineteenth century – the evidence is unclear – it became increasingly common to leave the coffin open between death and burial. Families usually waited two or three days before burying the dead; at four days, Elizabeth Pierce’s period of viewing her grandmother was a bit longer than most. When excessive heat or an unusually noisome corpse made hasty burial necessary, loved ones found this troubling because during the time between death and burial they hoped to use the corpse as a way to commune with the dead. They did so either by leaving the coffin open or by relying on new coffin features such as a hinged or removable panel that allowed mourners to view the deceased’s face and upper torso (Laderman 1996:31).

For participants in the cult of the dead, looking at the corpse blurred the line between life and death, helping to create relationships between heaven and earth. For example, in 1832, Sarah Connell Ayer of Eastport, Maine, mourned her husband’s unexpected death. The day after he died she wrote, ‘I went down into the parlour to look at all that was now left of my dear husband. There was a smile on his countenance, he look’d pleasant and natural.’ Several decades before the Civil War made chemical embalming widely available, mourners hoped that their loved ones would look
‘natural,’ which helped to sustain the illusion that the person was not quite dead. Ayer continued, ‘I felt as if he was conscious I was near him, that he would open his eyes once more upon me, and speak to me. I could not realize that he was dead, that he would never again look upon me, that I should never hear his voice again.’4 Confronted with the deceased’s familiar face and hoping to commune with the dead, some mourners sensed that the corpse might come back to life. Thus did the corpse exert its influence on lived religion.

Seventeen-year-old Mary Ware Allen of Northborough, Massachusetts, had a similar response when her close friend Lucy Gassett died of consumption in 1836. Allen wanted to view the corpse, so she headed to her friend’s house: ‘I went and saw the lifeless remains of one who was once dear to me, & who still is, for I do not think she is dead, but sleeping, and she looked as if she was in a sweet sleep, so calm and so free from distress.’ She knew the truth but couldn’t keep herself from writing, ‘I do not think she is dead,’ so intense was her continued connection with Gassett. Like Ayer, Allen also commented on her friend’s appearance, observing that ‘her countenance was very natural.’5 This was the same word that Margaret Jocelyn of New Haven, Connecticut, used to describe her brother Isaac’s corpse: ‘he never looked more natural than when he died.’6 For some mourners, a corpse was even more ‘natural’ than a living body.

Antebellum Protestants most frequently described natural-looking corpses as ‘beautiful,’ especially when the deceased was an infant, child, or young woman. This tendency led the historian Philippe Ariès to dub the nineteenth century the ‘Age of the Beautiful Death’ (Ariès 1981:409–74; see also Tarlow 2002). Thus, it is unsurprising that when Mary Allen saw the corpse of a neighbor’s infant son in 1838, she declared that he was a ‘beautiful picture of death.’ Gazing at him was nothing but a pleasure: ‘I could have looked at that sweet picture all the afternoon.’7 Hannah Syng Bunting of Philadelphia similarly described her reaction to seeing the body of her young cousin, Eliza: ‘On Saturday I called to take my final look at her corpse. Never before did I gaze on a countenance so serenely beautiful in death!’8 Emotions were more complex when the deceased was one’s own child, but nonetheless most parents likewise considered their children’s corpses beautiful. When Fanny Appleton Longfellow’s eighteen-month-old daughter died, the mother declared the corpse ‘a most holy and beautiful thing’: a religious object, or, as Jamie Brummitt persuasively argues, a relic.9 But while infant corpses were the ones most likely to be described as beautiful, they had no monopoly on postmortem beauty, as Elizabeth Pierce’s description of her grandmother makes clear.
A reciprocal relation existed between the beautiful corpses of middle-class lived religion and the ones people read about in women’s magazines and Gothic novels. In sentimental fiction, beautiful corpses abounded; the most famous was Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) (Roberts 2007). But this is not to say that mourners simply took their cues from imaginative literature. People’s private expressions of belief were indeed shaped by what they read in magazines and books, but authors also wrote about what they believed and experienced. Ordinary middle-class readers, not some distant literary elite, wrote most of the sentimental poetry and short fictions that filled antebellum American magazines and newspapers. Imaginative literature thus demonstrates how widespread were beliefs in the corpse as a locus of religious contemplation.

Much of the period’s sentimental poetry explicitly connected corpses with religious devotion. In this literature, corpses had a great deal of power. In one Presbyterian magazine, a poem entitled simply ‘The Corpse’ referred to the body’s location on ‘this shrine, the bier.’ The speaker – like many Protestants – considers the spot where the dead body lay to be a shrine, that is, ‘a place regarded as holy because of its associations with a divinity or a sacred person or relic.’ Likewise, a Philadelphia Quaker magazine published ‘Thoughts Beside the Corpse of a Beautiful Child’ in 1831. The poem’s speaker states, ‘Ay! let me gaze – how strange that death should wear / So bright an aspect! such a holy air!’ Unlike Martin Luther and generations of Protestants theologians, the speaker considers corpses to be ‘holy.’

As the title indicates, the poem also employs the trope of the Beautiful corpse, which was so widespread in the ‘Age of the Beautiful Death.’ In the poem’s first lines, the speaker addresses the dead child directly: ‘Image of rest! how beautiful art thou / In the fixed quiet of thy marble brow?’ The key point here is that beauty was connected with holiness. Like Elizabeth Pierce, Hannah Syng Bunting, and many others, the speakers of these poems see beauty as a representation of the dead person’s nearness to Christ, an indication that the person’s soul is in heaven. Consider ‘A Mother’s Soliloquy over the Corpse of Her Child,’ published in *Zion’s Herald*, a Methodist magazine based in Boston. In this poem, the grieving mother stands before the corpse and remarks, ‘Every feature is lovely though pallid and cold.’ But the loveliness of the corpse is not just an aesthetic judgment; it is a religious one. Two lines later, the speaker asks, ‘And must I resign her, no more to behold— / Resign her for ever to part?’ The answer is, simply, yes: ‘I must – for her Saviour has called her to come, / And she has obeyed his behest.’ Christian resignation is the only possibility for the bereaved mother, and this is connected to the corpse’s ‘soft lips’ and ‘soft bosom’ and...
‘dear hands.’ These bodily features are material evidence that the child’s soul ‘has flown to the regions of immortal day.’

This language of beauty and holiness helped poets to express the cult of the dead’s most important belief: that it was possible to maintain a post-mortem relationship by speaking to the deceased person’s soul. Most of these poems employed apostrophe, a figure of speech in which the speaker addresses a dead person or other absent figure. But this was no empty literary gesture when employed by participants in the cult of the dead. Take, for example, the prayers to the dead that mourners sometimes uttered when gazing upon a portrait of the deceased. Here, a representation of the deceased, rather than the corpse itself, facilitated postmortem communication. But the intense emotions were similar. The clearest example of this dynamic comes from the pen of Sarah Brown Ruggles, a Baptist from North Providence, Rhode Island. Alongside her mainstream Protestant beliefs, she behaved as if a portrait allowed for communication with the deceased. Her husband, George, died in December 1833, not yet thirty years old. Two months later she continued to use her diary as an outlet for grief and to record prayers to her dead husband: ‘My George, my love. As I gaze upon thy portrait & cannot refrain from calling upon thee, how thankful amidst all my sorrow, do I feel that thou art at rest, where no sorrow can assail thee & where thou art I humbly hope, at rest.’ As grief-stricken Sarah gazed at the painting, she could not ‘refrain from calling upon’ her husband and addressing his soul.

The same dynamic played out in sentimental poetry, although it was more frequently the corpse itself rather than a portrait that inspired conversation with the departed. The entirety of ‘Written After Seeing the Corpse of a Young Lady,’ for example, is addressed to the dead woman. Upon viewing a corpse, the speaker is inspired to describe his own continuing relationship with the ‘young lady,’ and those of others who see the body:

I saw thy mother bend o’er thy bier,
While her eye glanced up to Heaven;
I heard no sob – I saw no tear –
But her inmost heart was riven!

Like the previous poem in which the bier is a ‘shrine,’ in this one the bereaved mother makes a connection between the corpse and the heavenly location of her daughter’s soul. This bier is indeed a shrine: a place for communion with the dead. Similarly, in 1832 a Universalist magazine published ‘Thoughts Beside the Corpse of a Young and Deeply Lamented Cousin,’ which is entirely addressed to the deceased woman. Such communication
with the dead appeared in religious magazines of every sort – Quaker, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and more – demonstrating that the Protestant cult of the dead found adherents across the denominational spectrum. In this Universalist magazine, the author, a reader in Sheshequin, Pennsylvania, has the speaker commune with the corpse:

Farewell, meek, faded blossom,
   A holy rest is thine;
Thy calm unruffled bosom—
   Oh! would its peace were mine!
Farewell – for other hands are near
   To fix thy last repose,
And o’er thy dear remains, the dark,
   Unyielding grave to close.\(^{17}\)

The ‘dear remains’ are inert but worthy of adoration. Their physical presence reminds the speaker that the young woman’s soul enjoys a ‘holy rest.’ This sense that the corpse deserved adoration led many mourners to kiss the corpse, as does the speaker in a different poem: ‘Yet still beside thee, feeling that ’tis thee, / I press my lips to thine.’\(^{18}\)

Kissing the corpse was an action that many participants in the cult of the dead reported in their diaries. The corpse represented the final opportunity on earth to have a physical interaction with a loved one, contact that could prefigure continuing communication with the dead in prayers, poems, and graveyard visitations. Louisa Jane Trumbull of Greenfield, Massachusetts, was only ten when her four-year-old brother Johnny died, but she was already an avid journal-keeper who wrote often about death. In this she was not unusual; in one study of forty-four antebellum children diarists, ‘no single theme appeared as frequently as death’ (Holifield 2007:767). Even though Johnny did not look as ‘natural’ as Louisa hoped, she still wanted to kiss his corpse: ‘He was dreadfully pale, and his lips were very white. I kissed his sweet forehead, it was cold, and felt like marble, and a sweet smile was on his pale lips.’\(^{19}\) Susan Huntington’s recollection was more uniformly positive after her husband died in 1819. She had been led out of the room during his final hours to shield her from witnessing anything too upsetting. ‘When the intelligence was brought me that the conflict was over,’ she wrote, ‘it was good news; I kissed the clay, as pleasantly as I ever did when it was animated by the now departed spirit.’ This physical contact with his ‘clay’ – his mortal remains – led Huntington into a reverie about how his spirit now resided in heaven.\(^{20}\)
But perhaps the clearest example of the corpse’s hold on the imagination appears in the diary of Louisa Park of Newburyport, Massachusetts. In 1799, she married John Park, a physician; the very next year he left on an extended tour of duty aboard a US Navy sloop-of-war. Dr Park left behind his young wife and ailing infant son, Warren. For five months the child battled illness after illness until finally he succumbed, just a week past his first birthday. Immediately, Louisa missed her son’s physical presence: ‘At bedtime, instead of my charming boy, my lovely babe, to clasp me around the neck and kiss off the silent tear that would fall for the absence of his father; all that remained was his corpse. She was determined to touch him, but there was no response: ‘Though I wept & pressed him, he could not look at me.’

Over the next several months, as if to compensate for the lack of physical interaction with her son, Park began to focus ever more attention on his corpse and what she imagined was happening in its tiny coffin. One day she walked past the crypt that held the body: ‘It wrung my heart, and I would have given anything to have unlocked the door, and once more beheld my little Warren.’ Park imagined her son’s entombed body as if it were an object of veneration inside a chapel: ‘What a satisfaction it would be to me, how much pleasure I should take if I could, every day, enter his gloomy mansion and there indulge in meditation and give vent to the feelings of my heart.’ Park’s emotions were not the same as a Catholic’s in the presence of holy relics; she hoped for ‘meditation,’ not intercession. Nonetheless, thinking about her son’s lifeless body stimulated Park’s religious fervor.

A month later, the feelings persisted. Park focused simultaneously on her son’s corpse and his soul. Thinking about the tomb in which her son lay, she composed a prayer spoken directly to his spirit: ‘Oh, how I long to visit that sacred repository, and shed the bitter tears of disappointed affection on thy cold cheeks!’ Louisa Adams Park was a mainstream Protestant: daughter of a Congregational minister, she adhered to her father’s teachings and once wrote of Universalism that ‘I can have charity for all professions, excepting this.’

Moses Adams must have taught his daughter that once the soul departed the body, the corpse was nothing but inert matter, food for worms. Nonetheless, Park and many other middle-class women (and some men) found in corpses inspiration for meditation, adoration, prayer, and communication with the departed: in short, for relationships between heaven and earth, to use Robert Orsi’s phrase (Orsi 2005:2). Corpses thus had power in antebellum America.

To be sure, some writers (usually men) criticized what they saw as excessive attention to corpses. Their arguments varied. For William Bentley, the Unitarian minister of Salem, it was an ominous sign of religious enthusiasm...
when people showed up to view the exhumed remains of a charismatic preacher in nearby Rowley. Four months after the preacher died in January 1801, the town disinterred his corpse to make way for a monument: ‘A new kind of zeal was displayed. The Bell was tolled & the assembly were invited of all ages to come & see the corps which was exposed to public view, in a high state of putrefaction. This is a new kind of curiosity, & a new way of exciting it.’ Another man, a Boston sexton writing in the late 1840s, worried that women who looked at decomposing corpses – the way Louisa Park wished to do – would be emotionally scarred by the sight. ‘There is a morbid desire,’ the sexton wrote, ‘especially in women ... to descend into the damp and dreary tomb – to lift the coffin lid – and look upon the changing, softening, corrupting features of a parent or child – to gaze upon the mouldering bones; and thus to gather materials, for fearful thoughts, and painful conversations, and frightful dreams!’ (Sargent 1856:1:45–6; see also Dwight 1835:88). However, such complaints did not stop participants in the cult of the dead from adoring corpses or opening coffins to commune with the remains.

The corpse in memory

After a loved one’s corpse was buried, mourners generally did not ‘let their ashes be forgotten,’ as Rev. Bentley advised in 1804. Participants in the cult of the dead used several strategies to remember the corpse, which facilitated postmortem relations with the dead. Hair was one material commonly used to remember the departed, and in this way human remains exerted agency, even after burial. Euro-American colonists brought from their home countries traditions of using hair for memorial purposes. By contrast, almost all African and Native American groups had religious prohibitions against using hair in such a way (Sheumaker 2007:xiii). Among Euro-Americans, hairwork’s popularity increased with the rise of sentimental culture in the late eighteenth century and grew even further as the nineteenth century’s cult of the dead took root. Mourners invested these bodily remains with powerful symbolic meanings.

Family members occasionally snipped locks from a dying person, but more frequently the bereaved took hair straight from the corpse. Sometimes, the hair was simply kept in a safe place; because hair could be obtained for free, this was a good option for the less affluent. But middle-class women preferred the security and beauty of incorporating it into jewelry, and they also liked how such pieces kept their loved ones’ remains close to their bodies. Rings, breast-pins, and brooches all could be purchased with small enclosures for holding the hair of the dead.
the hair was woven into a bracelet, if there was enough of it. This pains-
taking, time-consuming project was ordinarily undertaken by professional
hairworkers who advertised in newspapers and magazines, but occasion-
ally mourners did the work themselves or sent it out to a skilled neighbor.

Hair bracelets became so popular that by 1844 a women's magazine could
note that ‘sentimental bracelets, composed of hair … are now considered
indispensable’ (Sheumaker 2007:20). In fact, one of hair’s attractions was
its versatility as a medium of expression. When Mary Wallace Peck was
attending Litchfield Female Academy in the 1820s, her friends 'Maria' and
'Clarissa' died (those were likely the literary names the girls used amongst
themselves). Peck glued their hair into intricate patterns surrounding the
mourning poetry she wrote for them in her friendship album (Brickley
1985:675 n.73).

Historians generally emphasize the claims on gentility that middle-class
women made when they displayed finely wrought mourning jewelry (Halt-
tunen 1982:139). There is undoubtedly truth to the assertion, but one must
also recognize the religious power of these tokens of the dead. Indeed, the
art historian Marcia Pointon argues that human hair used for mourning
‘constitutes a fetish according to the anthropological definition’ (Pointon
1999:42). The language that some mourners used to describe physical
remains could make hair seem like a sacred relic. When Fanny Appleton
Longfellow’s infant daughter died, the bereaved mother described how she
‘cut a few locks from her holy head.’ It bears repeating that Protestant
theologians insisted that human remains were not ‘holy.’ Even mourners
who did not describe corpses as ‘holy’ behaved in ways indicating that this
was how they thought of human remains. After the death of Louisa Jane
Trumbull’s grandmother in 1832, the young girl reported the intelligence
she received from two female cousins: ‘We have had 2 or 3 letters from
them, they said they had cut off all her hair as almost every one would
wish for a lock.’ It is a striking image: the old woman’s corpse left almost
entirely bald after eager grandchildren sought tokens for each member of
a large family.

Such behavior makes sense in light of hair’s ability to evoke a sense
of religious connection with the dead. On the twelfth anniversary of her
mother’s death, Eliza M. Spencer of Sandisfield, Massachusetts, remem-
bered the powerful moment when the dying woman ‘requested me to cut
off her hair.’ As Spencer wrote, ‘O I shall never forget the calm and mourn-
ful manner in which she said, “My children, remember me when I am gone
– each one reserve a lock of my hair and as often as you see it, think how
you all stood around my bed this evening.”’ Spencer took that charge to
heart, and when she looked at that lock of hair twelve years later she was inspired to compose a poetic prayer to her mother:

Yes Mother, dear Mother, I'll remember thee long;  
Thy joys and thy sorrows, thy smiles and thy frowns,  
I'll remember thy prayers and thy rapt moving lays [i.e., songs]  
That oft broke the silence of happier days.27

Spencer continued to communicate with her mother, even though the elder woman's prayers and songs lived only in memory.

Indeed, the meaning of hair could change over time in the eye of the beholder. Locks were snipped not only from the dead; they were sometimes taken from the living, likewise to serve as tokens of memory. But if the person from whom the locks had been cut died, the hair suddenly became more precious. Rachel Van Dyke of New Brunswick, New Jersey, expressed such sentiments in 1810 after the death of her grandparents. A close family friend visited to pay her respects, and Van Dyke noted in her diary that 'Mama intends to give her a mourning ring with Grandpapa's and Grandmama's hair in it.' Van Dyke's mother was going to allow her parents to live on – to exert influence from beyond the grave – by gifting their bodily remains to a friend. This caused Rachel Van Dyke to reflect on her own relation to their remains: 'My ring – which I cared very little about, a month ago – I would be very sorry to lose now. Their hair is plaited in it.'28 Before they died, it would have been possible to get another lock of their hair had she lost her ring. Now the jewelry-as-reliquary was the only tangible connection that remained between her and the dead.

What explains hair's power to maintain relations with the dead? Partly its tactility: long after a person died, the mourner could touch the springy, silky locks. Furthermore, as the leading historian of American hair-work argues, nineteenth-century mourners believed that hair, unlike the buried corpse, 'promised to remain forever “alive” and active' (Sheumaker 2007:54). Receiving such a token, therefore, was a long-term commitment. In the words of a mother describing the hair bracelet she was going to send to her deceased daughter's friend, 'I am sure you will value it, and always wear it for her sake.'29 There was something numinous in what had once been part of the living person's body, and then became part of the corpse. Hair was more than simply an aide-mémoire; for that purpose it was a fairly impoverished source, as all it provided in a literal sense was evidence of the deceased's hair color and texture. More than that, though, hair offered a physical connection – wrapped around one's wrist, pressed against one's chest – to the corpse's 'holy head' from which it had been taken.
Physical interactions with the hair of the dead, however, did not satiate all of mourners’ desires for communion with human remains. In addition to caressing locks of hair, participants in the cult of the dead wanted to go to the places where their loved ones were buried to maintain relationships with them. Corpses, despite being buried deep in the earth, retained their hold on mourners’ imaginations. As the English poet Felicia Hemans represents a parent speaking to a dead child in the 1820s, ‘Thy grave shall be a blessed shrine.’ Using the same word that the bereaved used to describe the location of the corpse before burial, Hemans demonstrates the corpse’s continued power long after interment.

That Hemans was a poet is fitting, because imaginative literature shaped and was shaped by the lived religion of antebellum Protestants. In this period, which also witnessed the beginning of the rural cemetery movement with the 1831 founding of Mount Auburn Cemetery, the genre of graveyard poetry and prose exploded in American magazines. With titles such as ‘Our Parents Sleep There,’ ‘My Mother,’ and ‘My Mother’s Grave,’ poems and essays explored how burial grounds could help the living maintain relationships with the dead. As one man wrote in *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book*, America’s highest-circulation magazine in the 1840s,

Amid a sculptured sylvan scene,
Where silence reigned profound and dread,
I stood, and ‘neath the willow green
Held sweet communion with the dead.31

The dead were not distant and unreachable but immediately present around their graves, insisted cult-of-the-dead poets. For example, an anonymous writer in the *New-York Mirror* describes a man standing beside his mother’s grave. The speaker asks the dead woman, ‘Wilt thou not hover round my path, and bless thy suppliant child, / And guide me while I yet may roam

world’s unfriendly wild?’ He answers his own question definitively: ‘I know thou wilt!’32

Considering only the poems and essays inspired by Philadelphia’s rural cemetery, Laurel Hill, one finds dozens of examples in the late 1830s and 1840s, most asserting the site’s religious power. These pieces appeared in outlets ranging from *Mechanics’ Magazine* to *Godey’s*, from the working-class *Subterranean* to the *Episcopal Recorder*. Such poems and essays ranged along a spectrum, from those that merely described a sense of religious solemnity and contemplation in Laurel Hill, to those that insisted that communion with the dead took place there. Authors of the latter were certain that visitors to rural cemeteries could experience the presence of
the dead. In a poem called ‘Laurel Hill Cemetery,’ the speaker says that one can interact with the spirits of the dead there:

Say, doth it not appear more proper far,
In such a spot as this to place the dead;
Than 'midst the turmoils of the crowded street?
Here may you sit, secluded from the world,
And commune with the shades. Here, as the eye
Gazes upon the urn that marks the spot
Where rests the dust of those we fondly loved,
Fancy may quick restore their wonted forms.33

Another writer, taken by Laurel Hill’s natural beauty, asks the reader why burial grounds are so gloomy: ‘Ought we not, rather, to inquire, how may the living be most pleasingly invited to hold communion with the dead?’ The answer: a place of ‘delightful seclusion’ like Laurel Hill.34 No wonder that when an upper-middle-class tourist such as Sarah Brown Ruggles visited Philadelphia, she, like many others, ‘hired a carriage’ and visited Laurel Hill.35

In diaries such as Ruggles’, written by middle-class girls and women, one finds evidence of intense graveyard encounters with spirits of the dead. Several months after Ruggles’ husband died, his remains – like a magnet – drew her again and again to the cemetery. This earned her a rebuke from her physician, who feared her grief endangered her health. As Ruggles wrote, ‘unable to go to Church, but ride to the Burying Ground, with cousin Susan & my boy. There is a loadstone [sic] to draw me there, that I know not how to resist, tho the Dr. warns me to avoid it. Oh! my George, my husband! thy grave, thy grave!’36 How could she resist, when a cemetery visit promised an experience of George’s presence?

When a graveyard visitor encountered the deceased’s spirit, it could lead the mourner to worry that her experience was heterodox. Such was the case with ten-year-old Louisa Jane Trumbull, who thought she might have experienced her deceased brother’s presence at his funeral, but then reconsidered: ‘Wednesday it was very unpleasant; it snowed all day until Johnny’s coffin, was let down into the ground, when the sun broke through the clouds, and everything looked beautifully.’37 Trumbull evidently felt she should not believe that her brother’s spirit was there in the graveyard to brighten the proceedings.

Others expressed no such concerns. In 1831, Eliza M. Spencer taught school in Sandisfield, in western Massachusetts. She was twenty-eight years old and engaged to Chauncey Hawley from Norfolk, Connecticut. Against all of Spencer’s expectations, her fiancé sickened and died. Spencer
never married, throwing herself into teaching, religion, and a lifelong interaction with Hawley’s spirit and memory. She could not, however, visit his grave as often as she wished; Norfolk was a fifteen-mile horse ride from Sandisfield and required an overnight stay to make the trip worthwhile. Therefore, when she did visit Hawley’s remains her experiences were especially powerful. A year after his death, she recorded one such visit in her diary: ‘Last Friday rode to Norfield and Saturday went to visit the grave of Chauncey.’ She had little desire to join her friends in their ramble around diminutive Pond Town Cemetery: ‘While my companions wander from stone to stone, I felt irresistibly chained to one little spot. O how strong the tie that binds the mourner to the clods of the burial sod.’ Lying on the ground above her lover’s corpse, she thought of Jesus and Hawley: ‘While reclining upon the grave of my friend musing upon life’s broken dreams, many, many a mournful sweet remembrance rushed upon my mind and I felt that I had at least one example which I was not afraid to follow, by indulging the swelling grief. “Jesus wept.”’ Either while she lay atop his grave or when she returned home, she composed a poem addressed to his spirit:

Forgive, blest shade, the undissembled tear,
Which falls above thy couch of lowly sleep,
Forgive the charm which holds me captive here,
Forgive – and let me weep!

Forgive the secret wish that now would wake
Thy peaceful relics from their tranquil rest,
Forgive the prayer that would have kept thee here
O spirit blest.38

As in a prayer to Jesus, Spencer addresses Hawley as ‘O spirit blest.’ And she has a ‘secret wish’ for him to return, all inspired by his corpse, a ‘charm’ indeed.

The following year, Spencer made another Friday ride to Norfolk for a Saturday visit to the graveyard. This time she ditched her lighthearted companions: ‘On Saturday, I repaired alone to the gloomy burial yard, and spent the pleasantest part of the afternoon in that mournful, yet chosen seclusion.’ Again she lay on top of the grave, separated from Hawley’s corpse by only a few feet of soil, and this time she wrote explicitly about the impact of his presence: ‘The conscious proximity of that dear friend who slept beneath the turf on which I was reclining made everything seem familiar, and completely banished from my bosom that undefinable and unpleasant trepidation which almost invariably pervades it, when treading
the soil “where human skulls are lodged below.” Here, Spencer made a literary allusion worthy of a Massachusetts school mistress. The quotation is from a classic of the eighteenth-century Graveyard School of English poetry and prose, James Hervey’s ‘Contemplations on Night,’ in a passage where Hervey gently chides those who fear ghosts but who don’t fear God. If a school boy has to ‘cross the spot where human skulls are lodged below,’ he ‘scarce touches the ground’ as he speeds through the allegedly haunted acre (Hervey 1748: vol. 2, 51). The feeling that a graveyard might be haunted is what explains Spencer’s ‘undefinable and unpleasant trepidation’ when she enters a burial ground, even if she agrees with Hervey that one should pay more attention to God than to ghosts. Ironically, it is the ‘conscious proximity’ of her lover’s corpse that brings her to that realization.

Eliza Spencer was atypical only for the detail with which she recorded her emotions when in ‘conscious proximity’ with her ‘dear friend who slept beneath the turf.’ Judging by the popularity of the imaginative literature that filled religious periodicals and women’s magazines, Spencer’s views were widespread among American Protestants in the antebellum period. Corpses retained their religious power long after they had been consigned to the earth.

**Conclusion**

Participants in the Protestant cult of the dead used a variety of strategies to maintain relationships with their deceased loved ones. They wrote poetry representing the dead as speaking or being spoken to. They commissioned gravestones with epitaphs that likewise included the imagined words of the dead. In their hands they held daguerreotypes or watercolor miniatures that showed their loved ones either dead (in the case of postmortem photographs) or alive (in portraits). Sometimes, while they sat with these images, they prayed to the deceased’s soul.

And above all, they kissed, caressed, adored, imagined, and visited their loved ones’ corpses. The forms of memorialization described in the previous paragraph ultimately derived their power from the corpse. Sentimental poetry frequently portrayed the speaker addressing the corpse or gaining inspiration from viewing it. What I call ‘talking gravestones,’ with epitaphs that represented communication with the dead, were especially powerful because the carved words stood atop human remains. Cemeteries became shrines that inspired pilgrimages because of the numinous presence of human remains. Postmortem photographs – sometimes framed with a lock of hair, an actual piece of the corpse – represented the lifeless body as
beautiful and natural, sweetly sleeping in Jesus. In all these ways, corpses exerted agency before and after burial.

The cult of the dead presents historians with a form of religious practice that departs from outdated stereotypes about Protestantism. Whereas scholars have for centuries described Protestantism as an interior religion of beliefs and tenets, separate from the messy world of the flesh, my description of the cult fits with newer work that emphasizes Protestantism’s material, visual, and tactile aspects (Houtman and Meyer 2012; Morgan 2010; Promey 2014). Even though early Protestant reformers tried to rid their religion of the divine ‘presence’ in material objects, and they attempted to stop the adoration of corpses so as to sever the relationship between the living and dead, they were never fully successful (Orsi 2016). By the nineteenth century, a mainstream Protestant such as Elizabeth Pierce could be inspired by her grandmother’s corpse to imagine the dead woman saying, ‘Now I am going to sleep sweetly in the grave.’ Participants in the antebellum Protestant cult of the dead thus maintained postmortem relationships largely through the agency of the corpse.

In its broad outlines, this dynamic has experienced a resurgence in recent decades, as documented by numerous scholars from a variety of disciplines. Whether expressed through ‘Chatting with Gran at her grave,’ as Martin D. Stringer puts it, or through mourners’ attachments to their loved ones’ ashes, the power of human remains continues to shape lived Protestant religion (Stringer 2008; also Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou 2005; Heessels, Poots, and Venbrux 2012; Prendergast, Hockey, and Kellaher 2006).

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Notes

2 William Bentley (1905–14) vol. 3, 127 (entry of 13 December 1804).
3 For deathways among African Americans and Native Americans, see Seeman 2010.
4 Sarah Connell Ayer (1910) 341 (entry of 12 November 1832). See also Laura Hadley Moseley (ed.) (1931) The Diaries of Julia Cowles 77 (entry of 25 April 1800); Nancy Thompson Diary, Connecticut Historical Society (hereafter CHS), 27 October 1821.
5 Mary Ware Allen Johnson Diary, American Antiquarian Society (hereafter AAS), 9 May 1836.
6 Margaret Jocelyn Diary, CHS, February 1839.
7 Mary Ware Allen Johnson Diary, AAS, 29 July 1838.
14 The ancient Roman roots of apostrophe may be seen in Donald A. Russell’s (2001) translation of Quintilian: The Orator’s Education vol. 4, 55 (book 9, ch. 2, sections 38–9).
17 ‘Thoughts Beside the Corpse of a Young and Deeply Lamented Cousin’ (18 February 1832) Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate (Utica, New York) 3(7): 56.
19 Louisa Jane Trumbull Diary, AAS, 7 February 1833.
21 Louisa Adams Park Diary, AAS, 2 May 1801.
22 Louisa Adams Park Diary, AAS, 2 May 1801.
23 Louisa Adams Park Diary, AAS, 23 and 24 May 1801.
26 Louisa Jane Trumbull Diary, AAS, 13 July 1832.
27 Eliza M. Spencer Diary, typescript, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter MHS), 21 June 1834.
30 Felicia Hemans (1828) vol. 2, 82. At least ten editions of this volume were published in the United States before 1850.
36 Sarah Brown Ruggles Eaton Diary, Rhode Island Historical Society, 6 March and 13 April 1834.
37 Louisa Jane Trumbull Diary, AAS, 9 February 1833.
38 Eliza M. Spencer Diary, typescript, MHS, 10 September 1832.
39 Eliza M. Spencer Diary, typescript, MHS, 4 August 1833.

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