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Digging Up the Dead For Medical Diagnoses

[Essay] Exhuming famous people to test their tissues is mired in legal, ethical and moral p

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Deborah Hayden (internews) 🗣

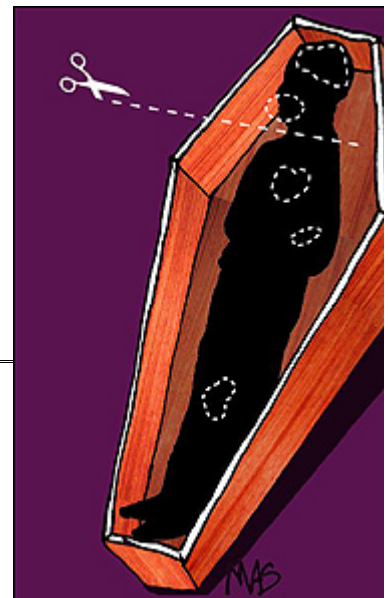
Preparing for Death

How does one prepare for death? Those who have created a public persona must grapple with any spiritual ponderings about eternity the mundane chore of organizing the archives to protect any of life's secrets that seem worth the effort. That task involves choosing what diaries, letters, drafts, and laundry lists to donate to a university or to a closet for legions of biographical ragpickers to quote, misquote, or variously interpret in yet unimaginable contexts -- or to burn.

Many well-known figures contemplating their posthumous selves have been foiled in exercising control over their literary remains. Purposefully confounding future biographers, Sigmund Freud burned his early papers and admonished his wife Martha to destroy their love letters. Instead, she bequeathed us this charming insight into the youthful exuberance of the patriarch of psychoanalysis, written in 1884: "Woe to you, my Princess, when I come. I will kiss you quite red and feed you till you are plump. And if you are forward, you shall see who is stronger, a gentle little girl who doesn't eat enough or a big wild man who has cocaine in his body" [1].

Anais Nin, whose voluminous diaries recorded her daily life in exquisite, compulsively recorded detail, had better luck in choreographing her literary afterlife. While alive, she published volumes of carefully edited literary diaries. When someone at a seminar remarked to her that they seemed more, well, racy than those diaries revealed, she smiled mysteriously and after the death of all concerned, "unexpurgated" editions would be published decades later, companion volumes to the literary diaries revealed passionate incest with her father, Joachim Nin, an affair with her analyst, Otto Rank, and successfully navigating marriages in New York and California.

When Andre Gide revealed that Oscar Wilde had had sexual relations with a young boy in Egypt, Wilde's friend Robert Sherard lamented: "Heavens! The task of hyenas away from the graves of the illustrious dead." Sherard meant Wilde's literary



▲ Is it ethical to remove body parts for tissue diagnosis? (Illustration: Marc Public Library of Science)

but what about actual graves? What about history's corpus delicti?

The Line between Scientist and Grave Robber

How many giants and tyrants unlucky enough to have left body parts or ashes behind when they shuffled off the mortal coil could have imagined what scientists and practitioners of the future would do with their physical remains? Here, the line between scientist and the grave robber blurs, as corpses are exhumed and cremation urns provide organic remnants for any number of curious purposes.

Ethical debates about the appropriate care and maintenance of biological relics occur even at the autopsy table. Having removed Albert Einstein's brain, pathologist Thomas Harvey chopped it into 240 pieces and stored it in a cookie jar in his basement, often shipping (mailed in mayonnaise jars) to brain researchers eager to count glia and neurons. Years later, Harvey lugged what remained of the brain cross-country to deliver it to a woman rumored to be the physicist's daughter from an affair with a dancer. Dr. Charles Boyd had tried to prove this paternity with his brain-chunk, but DNA proved "too denatured to decipher."

Harvey's volunteer driver, Michael Paterniti, described getting his hands in the cookie jar as actually feeling as if he might puke. The pieces are sealed in celloidin—the pinkish, livid blobs of brain rimmed by gold wax. I pick some out of the plastic container and hand them to Evelyn. They feel squishy, weigh about the same as very light beach stones. I hold them up like jewelers, marveling at how they seem less like a brain than -- what kind of snack food, some kind of energy chunk for genius triathletes" [2].

Pilferers cannot resist snipping body parts. While Einstein was being autopsied by an ophthalmologist, Dr. Henry Abrams, dropped by and filched Einstein's brown ceramic keepsake, storing them in a jar in a Philadelphia bank vault. There were rumors that Michael Jackson, a collector of body parts, offered Abrams several million dollars for the eyes.

Beethoven's ears were hacked out and soon went missing. Rene Descartes's microscope was stolen. (His head was also separated from his body for shipping -- a philosophical joke, since Descartes introduced the mind/body split into Western philosophy.) Napoleon's reputed penis went on a picaresque odyssey of its own, being displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, auctioned, and finally ending up in the possession of a collector. Or so the story goes. Josef Haydn's head was stolen by phrenologists at his burial.

In 2004, Dr. Anunciada Colon presided over the opening of a golden trunk from the 15th century, containing ashes and bone fragments presumed to belong to her husband, Christopher Columbus, an event chronicled by a television crew. Officials at the Cathedral allowed researchers at the University of Granada to borrow the bones for study. Being unsuccessful at extracting DNA from pulverized fragments, Professor Lorente loaded the bones in a shoulder bag and flew them to Dallas, Texas, where he performed sophisticated DNA tests (developed for the victims of the terrorist attack of 9/11) and produced a disappointingly short and impure sequence of mitochondrial DNA. Remaining bone shards were inelegantly deposited on a metal storage shelf in a lab, in a Styrofoam basket labeled "Colon" in black marker, awaiting better tests [3].

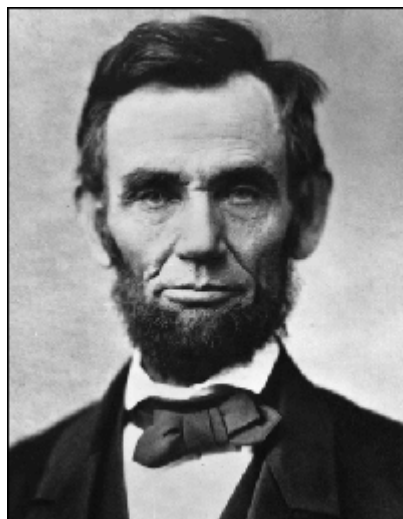
Vladimir Ilyich Lenin remains the most visible deceased person. His body, or what

of it since his brain and other organs were removed, has been viewed by the mi have passed by his open casket in a mausoleum on Moscow's Red Square. A v suit under his uniform holds in the embalming fluid. His hands and head ai frequently. His microtomed (31,000 sections) and dyed brain resides down the s his body at the Moscow Brain Institute, joining the brains of his countrymen & Tchaikovsky. Many Russians who find Lenin's public resting place a embarrassment think his soul will only rest (and theirs with it) once he goes und But who can decree his burial?

When I was four, my mother found me exhuming a goldfish we had ceremoniously the garden in a little fish coffin a few days before. How different, I wonder now childish curiosity and wonderment at the mysterious process happening to my i swimming fish below the earth from that of grown-up exhumers? Consider Gira F who unearthed 49 members of the Medici family to confirm various causes of dea committee that had Beethoven and Schubert dug up to transfer them to more se coffins (borrowing both heads for a bit more measuring, and swiping Schubert's larvae-laden hair while they were at it). Archaeologists have braved curses and b to retrieve mummies from pyramids. Doctors from Japan, however, were not allow DNA from King Tut's mummy to sort out his genealogy; the Egyptian government's council of antiquities, after first agreeing, reversed the decision. A non-invasive x-mummy suggests a murder plot: King Tut may have been done in by a blow to th the skull.

Guidelines for Bioethical Research

When a committee was convened to decide whether specimens of Lincoln's b bones should be tested for DNA to discover whether he suffered from Marfan & ethicists voted yes but scientists vetoed the plan, claiming that the precious mater not be destroyed in case future tests would prove more effective [4,5]. But what if even asking the wrong question? Lincoln once told his biographer and frien Herndon that he had been infected with syphilis by a prostitute in Beardstown arc [6]. What if a future test could prove that Lincoln had spoken the truth? Imagine, if press release from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology revealing that hot poi the most beloved of American presidents.



▲Victor McKusick of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine chaired a committee to decide whether

The Lincoln testing question spurred bioeth Andrews and her colleagues at the Chicago Society to join with the Illinois Institute of Tech review existing ethical issues of biohistorical Their conclusion, after studying professional code other organizations: none contained guide conducting biohistorical research and analysis recommend genetic testing for "historically s questions. But who is to define that loaded phrase

The newly dead are warm, soft, and somehow st by contrast, aged corpses and skeletons rising cold ground are the stuff of horror films, vam ghouls. While fascinating, they also unnerve examiners in fiction (Kay Scarpetta) and telev Quincy, Jordan Cavanaugh) capture wide audie

specimens of Lincoln's blood and bones should be tested for Marfan syndrome. (Photo: Alexander Gardner)

their gruesome and graphic dissection of putrefied ridden corpses, all in the service of solving some mystery.

Respect for the Dead

Does confidentiality extend beyond the grave? Should doctors publish articles in journals about diagnoses that were confidential when the patient was alive? For I have often raced to put pen to paper and reveal the signs and symptoms of the illustrious deceased patients. According to Anne Sexton's biographer Dial Middlebrook, who used tapes of hundreds of hours of therapy sessions given to Sexton's therapist Dr. Martin Orne, the dead have no rights [8]. Although Dr. Orne thought that Sexton had given him permission to do what he thought appropriate with the tapes, his colleagues howled that he had made a travesty of doctor-patient confidentiality. Orne wishes he were damned.

The long-dead are latecomers to the game of lobbying for rights. Who owns the body? Who is to choose the right test, the right time, the appropriate question to ask? We must decide whether they should be sliced, diced, dyed, pulverized, displayed, photographed, and subjected to the esoteric tests developed for forensic laboratories to reveal secrets they carefully took to their graves or urns? An interdisciplinary commission? The law? The government? Should such decisions be made by bioethicists, medical examiners, lawyers, archaeologists, descendants of the deceased? We must bring simple respect for the dead play into this issue?

The answers change over time and from place to place. The quagmire of ethical, moral, and even aesthetic questions that surround the use (and misuse) of left-over parts can only become more complex and contentious, not less.

A word of warning, then, to the famous not-yet-deceased: consider the disposition of your physical remains as carefully as you consider the packaging of your archive.

Swear your doctor to posthumous secrecy.

Be cremated.

And have your ashes scattered to the wind.

Notes

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