LifeGem / Ashes, Diamonds, and the Metaphysics of Presence

Ewa Domańska

Is the body really an earthly “tent,” as the Christian scriptures declare, a vessel, which without the spirit is only a corpse? Is a dead body destined to return to the earth, to become mineralized there, broken down into the elements from which it was made? How can our attitude toward the dead body, ashes, remains or bones become transfigured when the formula “ashes to ashes” ceases to be binding or perhaps is rewritten as “ashes to diamonds”?

In 1999, in the US city of Rockford, Illinois, Russel (Rusty) VendenBiesen, 33, and his brother Dean, 39, together with Greg Herro and his brother Mike, were talking about death and funerals. Rusty, who did not want to be buried in the cemetery or laid to rest in an urn, kept by the family over the fireplace, came up with the idea of transforming people’s ashes into synthetic diamonds. In 2001, the four founded a company they called LifeGem Memorials. Its headquarters are located in Chicago.
Rusty VendenBiesen admits that when he began his research, he knew nothing either about biochemistry or the production of diamonds. Under normal conditions, it takes several million years, at high temperatures and pressure levels, for carbon to crystallize into diamond form. The production of synthetic diamonds in laboratory conditions was begun in 1950 by General Electric. First they were used in the production of drills and cutting tools; only later did jewellery begin to appear.

“LifeGem,” the company’s website announces, is “an authentic diamond created from the ashes of your loved one as a memorial to their unique and wonderful life.”\(^1\) In April 2002, after three years of experiments with burning animal (chiefly pig) remains in a laboratory belonging to an American company but located in Munich Germany, carbon obtained from the cremation of human remains was successfully used to produce an artificial diamond.

The company immediately attracted enormous attention. Shortly after the first published report on the subject was released in the Chicago Tribune of 20 August 2002, followed shortly thereafter by CNN (and jokes on the subject by Jay Leno on his widely popular CBS Tonight Show) and BBC News, the LifeGem website was visited by 45,000 people weekly. By the end of August, six funeral homes in various parts of the US offered access to LifeGem services; at the beginning of November,

---
\(^1\) The website of LifeGem Memorials is: http://www.lifegem.com
the number rose to 50, and it now has reached 330. At this time, the company has received commissions for the next two years, and offers its services not only in the US but also in Canada, Australia, Holland, Japan, England, and Hungary.

The human body, which is 15% carbon, can yield about 50-100 stones of various sizes, according to Greg Herro; their production takes about 16 weeks. The process begins at the moment when technicians monitor the level of oxygen during cremation in order to keep carbon from turning into dioxide. At a certain point, the incineration process is interrupted and the technician collects the carbon which has formed as dark powder. Some of it is preserved and given to the family, while the rest – after being issued a 16-digit identification number – is sent to a laboratory in Pennsylvania where it is heated to a temperature around 3000°C. In this way the powder is purified of such elements as calcium, iron, and aluminium, and turned into graphite. The graphite is then sent to a laboratory in Germany or near Moscow, where it is kept in autoclaves for a period of 7-10 days and subjected to the high pressure (80,000 atmospheres) and temperatures (3000°C) needed to produce a diamond. These laboratory procedures thus replicate natural processes. That analogy, creationist in its implications, is used in the company’s advertising, which proclaims it to offer LifeGem –created diamonds. The diamonds are then processed and sent to New York, where the European Gemological Laboratory (EGL/USA) issues certificates affirming that each stone
is a man-made diamond and describing its quality. Each diamond also bears a certificate from the International Gemological Center LTD.

LifeGem currently offers diamonds varying in size from 2.5 to 1.3 karats, but the company has announced that in the near future, it will be able to produce a three-karat synthetic diamond. The size of the diamond depends on how long the graphite remains under pressure: the longer the pressure goes on, the greater the diamond. The stone that emerges from under the press is a raw crystal, which then is processed according to the customer’s wishes. (Engravings can also be commissioned.) The price (in May 2003) depends on the size: a 20–29-karat stone costs $2499; a one-karat stone, $15,000. The price is high and considerably above that of a natural diamond ($25–700). The diamonds are produced in different colours – the first made were naturally blue (because of the trace amounts of boron in the body), but since then red, yellow, and green have also been available. Mark Gershburg, the director of EGL, states that it’s easy to tell natural diamonds from artificial ones, but impossible to tell those made from ashes apart from ordinary synthetics. The minimum order amount is two diamonds, but according to Herro, all orders made so far have involved larger amounts than that.

The idea of treating people’s remains this way quite naturally elicits, especially in Poland, the very worst possible associations. We remember the production of lampshades
and soaps from human bodies, the smelting of gold teeth and other means of exploiting corpses. For some, the transformation of ashes into diamonds can appear a repellent and macabre practice, a form of necrophilia. For others, “it is really a twenty-first century version of Victorian mourning jewellery, of chopping off a piece of hair and putting it in a locket”, as David Hampson, director of the English branch of LifeGem Memorials, says. And in fact LifeGem is advertised as a kind of biojewellery (the term for all jewellery made from elements of the human body), which, together with memorial art (such as painting pictures with paints mixed with ashes or ceramics from clay mixed with ashes) is one of the most energetically developing currents in the contemporary funeral industry.²

If we are outraged by LifeGem, we should remember the historical practices of using corpses to build trenches during a siege, or of eating powders made from parts of Egyptian mummies, which were thought to possess curative properties (like the relics of saints), of the unwinding of mummies from their bandages in order to turn the bandages into brown paper; of the burning of mummies in the furnaces of steamships, the dismemberment and frequent transport of the remains of saints, or, indeed, the use of such remains to decorate statues and altars (particularly in the baroque period).

Let us nevertheless reject the interpretations of the phenomenon as a form of necrophilia or, all too obviously, consumerism (LifeGem as a way to make a fortune, the diamond as a symbol of wealth and luxury) and consider the highly controversial practice of creating diamonds from ashes from another point of view— that of the individual person; let us ask, what motivates those who decide to “refashion” the ashes of their loved ones into diamonds? Is the “metaphysics of presence” at work here, as well as the magic of one’s own personal relics? I believe that it is difficult, in this case, to understand people’s motives without an individual case study, so the remainder of my text will be devoted to considering one such case in detail. While visiting California in the spring of 2003, I conducted over a dozen interviews with people who were contacting various funeral homes and cremation services in the San Francisco Bay area, in which I asked about the idea of having the ashes of recently deceased or previously cremated loved ones transformed into memorial diamonds.

In 2003, David A. Starker, 20, died as a result of wounds from a knife attack on one of the beaches in California. David’s mother, Kate Starker, came to the office of the director of the local funeral home – Eric Stromer. Kate had heard on television about the development of technology enabling the transformation of human ashes into synthetic diamonds, and resolved to make use of that method for preserving the remains of her son. Here are excerpts from our conversation on that subject:

---

3 The names of interviewed persons have been changed to preserve their anonymity.
Ewa Domanska: How many diamonds did you decide to order, and what sizes?

Kate Starker: I haven’t decided yet on the sizes, because my daughter is getting married in the fall and I’m going to have a lot of expenses. We are thinking about two right now: one for my daughter [David’s sister –E.D.] and one for myself.

E.D.: What colour did you choose?

L.S.: Blue and yellow.

E.D.: What happened to your son?

K.S.: He was attacked by several men who assailed him with knives. One blow touched his heart... Yesterday I picked up my step grand-son from school and he told me: you know Grandma, David is guarding. ... So, this is also something to give to my grand-son who adored David. He was a huge guy and his perception is that David is always guarding him. (...) Derek is still with us. And that is what the diamond is for. My son’s existence will never have closure. The diamond will remind us that he is still here.

E.D. to Eric Stromer: What made you decide to have your company provide people with access to LifeGems?

Eric Stromer: Because people kept asking me to, but I do not advertise LifeGem and as an intermediary, I receive
not financial benefit from the sale. People just... come to me and ask if I can help them. When a family enters my office, I know that a diamond like that can mean a lot to them... Last week a lady called me. Her husband died two years ago and was cremated. She heard about the possibility of turning ashes into diamonds and asked if it would be possible and if so, within what length of time after the funeral. I said, of course.

E.D.: How long after cremation can carbon still be extracted from the ashes?

ES.: The older the cremation, the easier it becomes to extract the carbon because it is more carbon in it. There didn’t use to be such good furnaces as there are now, so in older ashes there is a great deal of carbon. Nowadays after cremation the ashes are so decarbonized that they lose their color, but when I started working thirty years ago, ashes were almost black. That shows they have high carbon content. [...] So many people wear jewellery, lockets, rings, and so on, inside which they have the ashes of loved ones or some other form of their remains, but a LifeGem goes beyond that. Here, we don’t see the ashes; we don’t have contact with them directly.

E.D.: How high is the level of interest in LifeGems now?

E.S.: I signed four agreements this month alone.

E.D.: How long does the diamond-making process last?
D.vS.: At present it takes about 16 weeks from the moment of sending the ashes off to the moment of presenting the family with their diamond. LifeGem takes orders six months in advance.

E.D.: What kinds of people use your service? Are LifeGems really for “rich and extravagant Americans,” as one often reads in commentary on the subject?

K.S.: Well, I am poor. I raised two kids on my own. I’ve worked hard my whole life to support them and give them what they need, but this LifeGem is very important for me. I would never buy myself a diamond for even a thousand dollars, because I can’t afford it, but a LifeGem is that important to me that somehow I am going to do that, even if I would have to take another job.

E.S.: For the first family who ordered a LifeGem the money was not the problem. The lady I dealt with last month – we are having three diamonds make for her. Her husband passed away; he was only 37. Two of the diamonds are for her mother-in-law, who decided to make earrings from them, and one is for herself. The overall cost of the order came to $7000. She couldn’t afford it and I tried to talk her out of spending so much money, but she was going to do that.

E.D.: What happens to the rest of the ashes, since only a part (the extracted carbon) is sent to the laboratory?
Ewa Domańska, LifeGem

**E.S.**: About 99% of the carbon that we do not collect during the cremation process is lost to the atmosphere; is consumed in the heat. We are not reducing the amount of cremated remains that the family would get back. If you are getting back 7 pounds of cremated remains normally, you are still getting back 7 pounds plus the carbon.

**K.S.**: We have not figure out yet where we are going to place the ashes; if they will go yo the cemetery or will be with us at home. (...) Is the amount always 7 pounds?

**E.S.**: No, it depends on the person, and the amount of calcium and iron the body contains. Sometimes it is about 9 pounds. Nowadays it’s rare to get more ashes than can fit in one urn, but in the past, when technology was less advanced than now, two urns were sometimes needed.

**E.D.**: And how have religious communities reacted to the idea of LifeGems?

**E.S.**: I have heard nothing.

**E.D. to K.S.**: Are you religious?

**L.S.**: No, I am not, but David’s father is. He is Christian and my sister and brother in law are Catholics, and they all think LifeGem is wonderful. They do not have objection.
E.D. to E.S.: What percent of families doesn’t stop with cremation and decides to do something special with the remains?

E.S.: About 20%. For example near here there is a lady who makes the pottery, artistic vases using the cremated remains. What is especially interesting is the company that makes artificial coral reefs, also using human remains. Diamonds are very expensive, but the price of the reef is unusually high. I have five of those in the water near Hawaii.

E.S. to K.S.: So LifeGem – did you decide what you want to do?

L.S.: I want to do that, I just have not decide the size. I will let you know during next couple of weeks.

E.D. to E.S.: You’ve been running a company that offers cremation services for a long time. You worked in and ran funeral homes for many years. You’re a well-known embalmer in California. What do you think about LifeGems?

E.S.: I like the idea. Finally someone came up with an idea that is more meaningful than previous ideas for preserving remains of a loved one. In the US people approve of anything that will get the dead body out of our eyesight. They don’t want to have anything to do with it. [...] 

E.D.: And how do you feel about dead bodies?
E.S.: It’s a remnant. I believe that the body dies but the spirit continues. I refer to the dead as a case, because this is how we call people after they pass on. This is something that I and my colleagues at the company treat respectfully, but it is not a person any more.

E.D.: But if we didn’t think that the dead body meant something, we wouldn’t take such great care with it. Even if we believe the spirit continues, we often wish to maintain phatic contact with the body of our loved one after their death.

E.S.: I carry a lock of my mother’s hair with me. When my mother died, I was the director of a funeral home and I organized her funeral. I organized a big funeral, and then we went to the cemetery and buried her, then we came home and I thought: “I forgot to take a lock of mother’s hair! What am I gonna do? Exhume her?” No, I thought, I can’t do that to my own mother. I called my sister and said, “I want a lock of Mom’s hair,” and she said, “Me too. I didn’t say anything because I was sure you would do it yourself.” I told her I hadn’t kept any of mother’s hair. So „what do we do?” I asked. She said: „Go to mother’s house. When she got sick, her hair started falling out. See if there aren’t some left in her hairbrush.” My mother was very tidy and I didn’t have much hope for finding some of her hair, but when I looked at her brush, it turned out there were a lot there. You can’t imagine how many days I spent, getting those hairs off the brush one by one and putting them into locks. I made three of them: for my sister, my brother and for myself.
E.D.: Why was it so important to you to keep a lock of your mother’s hair?

E.S.: Perhaps because I know what happened with my mother after I bury her. If it was up to me, I would not have buried my parents, but they would be cremated. The main point is that we don’t want to let go of our loved ones. I don’t often go to the cemetery. My sister visits the grave all the time, her husband too. When I am near for a burial, I will go over to pay my respect but this is nothing that I am tied to. If I lost the lock of my mother's hair now, many years after her death, I wouldn’t be too upset, but back then, right after her funeral, it was very important for me and I carried it around with me all the time. After I while, I stopped doing that.

E.D.: Do you think that the same thing can happen with LifeGems? I mean, that people want to have the diamonds shortly after the death of their loved ones, but later they keep them in a drawer?

E.S.: That is an important concern for me. The lady I mentioned to you earlier is poor– she doesn’t have money for extravagant expenses, and she wants to spend $7000 on three diamonds. I wouldn’t want to have to wonder, if in three years her financial situation deteriorates, “And why did she spend that money?” That’s why I don’t encourage people to spend beyond their means.

E.D.: Don’t you think that people might want to just sell the diamonds without revealing that they are synthetic diamonds from human ashes? That’s a serious ethical problem.
E.S.: All created diamonds of this type have a 16-digit identification number engraved with lasers. Could somebody want to buy a diamond made from human carbon? The possibility of resale? It can’t be ruled out... a grandson who doesn’t remember his grandparent and finds himself in a tight situation financially... But does that really matter? At that point the person who ordered the diamond has got what they wanted. [...]  

E.D.: You completed a degree in mortuary sciences in San Francisco. Do they offer new courses about LifeGems?  

E.S.: No, since the 1920s they’ve been teaching the same curriculum. When I studied there in the ‘70s, they were still teaching us how to make embalming fluids. We told our teachers: “Why are you teaching us that, you can buy fluid that’s already prepared now.” The funeral industry is not a business that’s developing quickly. [...]  

E.D.: What made you decide to pursue this line of work?  

D.vS.: Because I like helping people. When Kate called me, I was on the freeway and with my thirty years of experience I could tell right away that she was completely lost; she had no idea what to do or where to go. The first thing she said to me was: “I need help. My son was murdered.” In that situation, the most important thing is to be quiet, let people speak and just help them.
"LifeGem offers the most advanced technology ensuring eternal continuation of existence as well as a unique way of honouring and remembering the dead (not only people but also animals). A diamond – the hardest stone in the world– guarantees permanent endurance to remains, and allows loved ones to be with them “forever.” Moreover, it represents a kind of everlasting legacy, to be passed down from generation to generation. In advertising its services, the company speaks of a personalized and individualized approach to human remains, representing the most important trend in the funeral industry at the moment.

Long distances separating the family from the cemetery where their loved ones are buried, the impossibility of visiting the grave frequently, and a sense that the connection with the dead has become disembodied are the main reasons why people decide to have their ashes transformed into diamonds. A person needs something tangible, because memory is fleeting, so, according to the company’s marketing, wearing a necklace or ring with a diamond made from ashes allows you to be with your beloved forever. Remains thus become indestructible, eternal, mobile, beautiful and not requiring care. They also constitute a kind of fetish or talisman that protects, supports, and gives energy. Furthermore, through this phatic nearness, they render possible intimate contact with those who are gone, and vows such as “‘Till death do us part” acquire new meaning.

“A LifeGem,” declares a brochure from one of the funeral homes that works with the Chicago company, “is some-
thing more than a monument to visit on weekends; it’s an
everyday way to to keep your loved ones in your memory.
A LifeGem is the most unique and long-lasting souvenir
that you can create to pay tribute to their unique life. We
hope and believe you’re your LifeGem will bring you calm
and support whenever and wherever you need it and will
ensure that your memory lasts as long as the diamond–
forever. If you want to have an everlasting union and inti-
macy with the person you lost, a LifeGem is precisely
what you need. Each LifeGem is a celebration of life that
tells a unique story and represents a new beginning. The
nearness and mobility that only a LifeGem offers allows
your loved one to always be near you and constantly be
a part of your life. A LifeGem is a one of a kind diamond,
one that will be looked after by your family for genera-
tions to come.”

The corpse is an abject (rejected with disgust, as Kriste-
va defines it) form of the human body. A deceased per-
son and a corpse are of course two different things. The
word “deceased” brings to mind a relatively less abra-
sive meaning, that of the person who died, who we wish
to hold on to, while the impersonal and repulsive word
“corpse” refers to something we try to get rid of as quick-
ly as possible. “We don’t want to let go of our loved ones,”
says Eric Stromer, but neither do we want to see a corpse.
We thus want to preserve what does not decompose— for
example, a tuft of hair or ashes sealed in an urn. None-
theless, van Straaten is right when he says that the ad-
antage of ashes preserved as a cremation diamond over
those kept in an urn adheres in the fact that “we don’t see the ashes; we don’t have contact with them”. The diamond gives us the chance to have phatic contact with the remains in the form of the morpheme made from them. It is, furthermore, something more aesthetically and visually spectacular than ashes. A LifeGem offers a way to domesticate those remains, a change from the aura of the uncanny that we usually associate with them (“white bones” and ashes) toward the intimate presence of the eternal.

The fact that the largest number of orders for such diamonds come from the deceased’s immediate family is revealing: parents seek cremation diamonds from their children (orders from mothers are particularly frequent), and children seek LifeGems from the remains of their parents, as well as grandchildren from their grandparents; less often, widows or widowers from their late spouse. It is not accidental that Kate Starker (like many other mothers whom I heard from) wanted her diamonds to be placed in earrings. In that way, the body of her son is reunited with his mother’s body. We should also note the transcultural belief in the magic powers of diamonds. They are attributed the properties of holy stones possessing divine light, whose peculiar gleam protects from evil spells and reflects evil thoughts and words. The stones are thought to be capable of penetrating into dark corners of the human soul and purifying them. The stones’ power depends, however, on the intentions of the person possessing them, since it is believed that they feed on his
or her fluids. Interpreted thus, a LifeGem returned to the mother’s body (in the form of an earring or navel ring) represents her agreement to remain permanently pregnant and the two beings’ union until her death. In a certain sense, this practice is reminiscent of the endocannibalism practiced at funerals by the Amazon Indian tribe of the Amahuaca, where several months after the death of a child, the mother digs up her offspring’s remains, burns them, mixes a pinch of the ashes with a drink and drinks it down, believing that she can thereby become pregnant again.4

LifeGems are a case of both organic and symbolic transubstantiation. The basis for their creation is the carbon contained in the human body, extracted at the time of cremation. Being the main ingredient in all living organisms, carbon provides the possibility for continuing organic life. In that context, it could be said that in a LifeGem, the carbon becomes the essence of a human being rather than the soul. We are thus dealing with the problem of a change in substance, as a result of which form changes (body-ashes-diamond) while essence (carbon) remains.

The ashes belonging to the person from whom a LifeGem is to be created are described as possessing attributes like those of a diamond. “Marianne was a dazzling woman and she will go on being that way after her death

---

in the form of diamonds”, “the diamonds made from Valerie have as much fire as she did and are as beautiful as she was”, “John was a real treasure; he was like a rock; he was the light of my life”– these are testimonials from people who have decided to have cremation diamonds made from their deceased loved ones. Thus a metaphorical kinship forms between the person and the diamond: “x is like y” – “Marianna was like a diamond” (she was beautiful, she was light, she was a treasure), so– similarly to Likaon’s transformation into a wolf in the Metamorphoses of Ovid– changing her into a diamond in fact represents merely the materialization of her essence. The LifeGem thus revealed who Marianne really was, intensifying those traits that were most valuable in her as a person. To rephrase the Bible (“Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return,” Genesis 3:19), we could say “Diamonds thou art, and unto diamonds shalt thou return”.

The creation of a cremation diamond springs first and foremost from the desire for the presence of the deceased person. In this case that means the person’s real and tangible presence rather than the memory of them. A cremation diamond neutralizes the binary opposition between the absent deceased and the present corpse. It fills the horror vacui, the void that took shape after the death of the loved one, by filling it with a substitute. The important thing is that the substitute is something palpable, sensual. That is why this process also transcends another binary, the polarity of intimacy at one end and separation
at the other. The two states are revealed to be not mutually exclusive, but rather part of a continuum.

A diamond, the hardest mineral known to man, guarantees eternity; an eternity that transcends the history of redemption.

translated by Timothy Williams