

“Advent of Hope”

by Bill Tammeus

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

Advent Service of Remembrance and Hope
Community Christian Church
4601 Main St.
Kansas City, Missouri 64112

My earliest memory of death dates to when I was about five years old.

An elderly woman we called Grandma Morse lived across the street from us with her daughter Gwen and son-in-law Charlie.

One day I was playing in the side yard when my mother came to tell me that we were going to walk across the street to say goodbye to Grandma Morse, who had died and who would be there in her casket, and to express our sympathy to Gwen and Charlie.

“I’m not going,” I told Mom.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because,” I said, “I don’t need to see an old dead lady naked.”

It seemed like a perfectly logical conclusion to a 5-year-old mind. After all, why would dead people need clothes anymore?

Well, Mom took the time to explain that Grandma Morse would be in her casket in the front room but would not be naked. She may not need the clothes any more, but putting them on her is a way of showing respect for her body, Mom explained.

In other words, Mom talked to me about death. And if you take away anything from what I say this evening, I hope it’s that we need to be talking to one another about death, because if we don’t understand our own death we’ll never understand our own life.

In age-appropriate ways, we need to be talking to our children and grandchildren about death. We need to be talking to our spouses and partners about death — ours and theirs. We need to talk with the leaders of our faith communities about death. We need to talk with our family and friends about death.

In this way, we can acknowledge the inevitable and be better prepared for what is to come. And we can grieve in ways that are healing and restorative rather than getting stuck in grief that does not help us, grief that, instead, sucks the life out of us.

This past summer I taught a weeklong writing class at Ghost Ranch, the national Presbyterian conference center in northern New Mexico. I called the seminar “Death and Its Mysteries: Writing About the Journey.”

For a week class members talked about death. And wrote about death. One day I even took them to a funeral home in Espanola, where I had a funeral director walk us through exactly what happens to a body from the time it arrives at the funeral home until it’s either buried or cremated.

In fact, we stood next to the crematory oven — called a retort — while it was in use at 1,675 degrees.

It was a remarkable day, and although some people in the class weren’t sure they wanted to do this before we did it, when it was over everyone agreed that it had been enormously helpful.

To help make the point about the need to talk about death, I want to share with you a few pieces of the writing that my class members produced that week.

First, here is part of a piece about how hard it can be to speak of death. The woman who wrote this — her name is Kaze — does youth ministry through the Episcopal Church with the Navajo in Arizona. One of the things Kaze told us is that when a Navajo dies, no one should say the person’s name for fear that evil will be given an opening. The main character in this story is a boy named Keenen, whose mother had died 10 days before this part of the story. Kaze writes:

Now here we are on a mission trip ten days later and Keenen finally and cautiously opens the dialogue. The five other Navajo youth in the car are intently listening to our conversation. I am praying: “God, give me the words and please don’t let me screw this up.”

“Would you like to talk about your mother?” I began. A violent negative shake of black hair answered me.

“Can you remember inside your head the things she taught you and the memories you want to keep?”

This time, he looked straight ahead with a stoic face and tears began creeping down his cheeks. We all stayed totally silent for the next twenty minutes. Silence like this was most unusual.

Finally, he murmured “thank you,” and we continued driving along I-10 with muted sounds. No one said anything until we stopped for gas. Then we slowly resumed normal conversation.

That night, one of older Navajo youth casually paced himself with my step and started talking without making eye contact: "You know, Kaze, that Keenen is not all right. He is still hurting over his mother."

Startled and pleased that one of the youth would bring this to the open, I cautiously said: "What can we do?"

We walked a little in silence. Terry haltingly spoke: "Maybe we can have a ritual." Words spilled out of him. "But we can't name her."

My brain was speedily turning over and rejecting alternatives. We are at a church camp in thick woods in California. I had always bragged that there is something comforting about ritual. Now I had to validate that.

There had been three deaths of relatives and youthful friends in the past four months. Not being able to talk through and openly grieve them had left little knots of unresolved scars in all of us.

Talking it over with some of the older youth, we got a sand bucket and candles prepared for the following evening. We walked to a traditional story telling place that held a two-story tree house in a large oak.

All of us sat in the branches of the tree. Quickly, I recounted the story of the crucifixion and the two thieves with Jesus. Somehow I explained that Jesus accepted the shame and disgrace of not only his death but welcomed the thief to be with him in paradise. In Christ, shame was erased. In the end, Jesus the Christ let go of it all with the words: "It is finished." And for those of us who follow him, we can also give it over to God.

Reaching up into the tree to give a candle to each youth, I suggested that they think of someone they loved who had left us, and when they are ready, to light the candle and put it in the sand bucket with the words: "It is finished."

We sat in the branches a long time.

Finally, one after another, a youth dropped down, lit the candle and declared "It is finished," either softly or with bold confidence. Keenen was the last. More than one of us was crying.

The benediction permeated the tree. "Oh Thou, whose presence is everywhere, and whose mercy never fails, receive the spirits of those who have died; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"

Sometimes it takes a combination of both words and ritual to move us toward healing. That's certainly been true in my life in the deaths of my grandparents, my parents and my nephew

Karleton, who perished as a passenger on the first plane to hit the World Trade Center on 9/11. I needed words but I also needed the comfort of ritual.

The next piece I want to share with you was written by a pastor named Mike, whose grandparents used to own and operate a funeral home.

Listen in Mike's words for the importance of both words and ritual as he describes his memory of that funeral home:

We never played in the East Room,
though I remember one Christmas
we were allowed to have a full-scale war in there
with toy tanks and platoons of plastic soldiers.

My mother and father
were married in the East Room.
But mostly it was where the bodies
were laid out in gray, velveteen caskets.
Country people could not afford mahogany ones,
and besides, everyone knows
the dead are no less dead
if they lie in expensive caskets.

Anyway, in the small town of Bradford, Maine,
Gramp Williams — Harold Williams to most —
was the undertaker,
as was his father before him,
and his father's father before that.
Gramp had a big, old, black Cadillac hearse
that barely fit in the small garage,
but deep ruts worn into the dirt floor
from funerals past
guided it to exactly the right spot.
I'm told the Williams funeral wagon
from the horse-drawn era
now sits in some Maine museum.

Aunt Eleanor, Gramp's youngest daughter,
died at (age) 32 — three hours after
she complained of a headache.
A few days later,
Gramp rolled her body into the embalming room,
and when, at last, he had finished the task,
he emerged looking a decade older.
All deaths are not equal.

The upstairs bedrooms in Gramp's house
 glistened with oak floors he himself had laid.
 One night I seemed to be the only one
 lying awake thinking about the man downstairs.
 I might have been six.
 I had looked closely at him,
 taking in the raging stillness,
 scratching at the mystery
 that everything passes.
 Everything.

My grandfather has long since joined the other
 undertakers in the Williams Cemetery.
 The East Room is also gone,
 as are the oak floors, the embalming room,
 and all the rest of that hallowed home –
 returned to the earth from whence it came.
 Still, day after day,
 I place my own feet on the ground
 as faithfully as I can,
 knowing that life is precious
 precisely because
 it is so permanently
 temporary.

Yes, friends, that is the human condition – so permanently temporary. The psalmist tells us that our days are like grass, and the old prophet Isaiah affirms that with these words: “The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.”

And yet the gospels of Matthew and Luke take the idea of grass and uses it to comfort us: “Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”

So when we speak to one another about death, we acknowledge that life is, as Mike wrote, so permanently temporary. But knowing this liberates us to live full and joyful lives. And when death claims the ones we love, we can help to heal ourselves and others in our circle by speaking about our grief, about our love for the one who is gone, about our fears and our hopes.

Talking about death means, for me, acknowledging that I am still surprised that my parents aren't still in their 60s and still around. I felt exactly that surprise when I stood at their graves just six days ago in my hometown of Woodstock, Ill. It means confessing that I'm still angry that violent extremists murdered my nephew and nearly 3,000 other people that day in 2001. It means I still miss my sweet Swedish grandmother and her unsurpassable rye bread.

But it also means that family and friends understand my feelings about all of this. And I try to understand theirs. So yesterday I could and did try to provide solace to my sister Mary, whose close friend and coworker Tom dropped dead this week, and to my sister Barbara, who was rocked in a way even she has difficulty explaining by the death this week of Elizabeth Edwards. Talking about death also means that I know that some day my own children may well find themselves surprised that I'm not still around and still in MY 60s.

So talk about death. Talk about the permanent temporariness of life. Speak of your grief, your hopes. Words can help us heal. And when words aren't enough, ritual can help us heal. And when ritual isn't enough, silence can help us heal.

May it be so, good friends. May it be so.