

DATELINE: MARCH 9, 2011

DUST AND ASHES

*We are pilgrims on a journey
We are travelers on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.*

From *Servant Song*, Richard Gillard, 1977

The television commercial begins with a beautiful scene of green, rolling hills and the bright blue Pacific stretching endlessly across the horizon. The sun is shining, and I think to myself, it's a wonderful world.

The voiceover asks, "If you could create the perfect place to spend eternity, what would it look like?"

A voice replies, "It would have the most incredible view of the ocean."

Another chimes in, "It would be in the mountains."

Someone else with an Asian accent expresses their preference, "My perfect place would have good feng-shui."

The narrator responds, "Imagine an elegant funeral and reception facility on the same magnificent property. A place like no other. Skylawn Memorial Park." Fade to black.

I think to myself what a ubiquitous name for such a magical place. Skylawn. It must be the easiest place on the face of the earth to keep off the grass. Except, of course – and this is my second thought – the permanent residents are six feet under, with extremely limited views.

Don't get me wrong; it's a beautiful place. I've gathered there with mourners on more than one occasion myself; to memorialize their dearly departed, and inter the earthly remains that once held the life of one who is no more. I think places, as markers, to help us remember are important and meaningful.

So, I've stood beside gleaming caskets, suspended over freshly dug graves. I've scooped up a handful of loose dirt and made the sign of the cross on the rich grained wood of some elegant boxes, reciting the familiar words of committal: "... earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust ..."

In fact, in some cases, it was only the last of numerous times when I'd delivered the same perennial message to some fellow traveler when they were still alive. "Remember, my friend," I'd say, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

For many years among a former congregation, the faithful would process forward on Ash Wednesday, and their priest and pastor would utter that sobering reminder. I would press my thumb into a bowl of ashes, scooped up from the burnt palms from the previous year. I would smudge the forehead into the shape of a cross; superimposed over the *stigmata*, where Chrism oil used in baptism had long before left its invisible, indelible mark.

The same simple gesture was used to express both the inescapable reality of our mortal nature, as well as the mystery of that which is eternal, and comprises so much more than little 'ol you and me. Those who were part of that faith community shared the same fate of what it means to be human, along with everyone else. But they were also part of another shared journey, as well; venturing forth into that greater mystery in which we "live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

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In response to my own question, many, many years ago now I used to provide a service, assisting such mourners scatter cremated ashes at sea. My partner in this fly-by-night venture was a weathered sailor with the most cheerful disposition; and who ran charters out of the Sausalito marina with his handsome 32' Grand Banks fishing trawler.

Weather permitting, Charlie and I would greet a group of total strangers on the docks, welcome them aboard, and shove off for what was usually for them an unfamiliar adventure. We'd round the Golden Gate, and scoot under the bridge's north tower, where the chop and winds would invariably pick up. If the thick morning fog was still burning off, the deafening, intermittent blast from the foghorn along the rocks would almost knock our socks off.

Charlie would keep a steady hand on the wheel, as we hugged the shoreline; finally ducking in to one of the little coves along the Marin headlands. Then he'd turn the boat into the wind and reduce engine power; revving the prop just enough to keep us from drifting, as we bobbed like a cork in the strong currents.

Assembling my new found friends in the stern, I'd hand each of them a pair of long stemmed, fresh cut red roses; representing both the beauty and transitory nature of all things. One of the two roses, I would suggest, might represent for them the life of the one whom they had gathered to remember. I left the obvious implication of the second flower for them to figure out for themselves.

Someone would hand me the container of all that remained of someone's body, now reduced to the size of a shoebox. Sometimes I'd be asked to say a few customary words. Oftentimes no words were appropriate or necessary. At those times in our lives when we brush up against that mystery between our life and our death, silence is often better than speaking about that which we frankly know little.

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I'd take a quick glance at Charlie to make sure our captain had our little vessel pointed upwind. He'd smile and give me a nod. And then – and this is something I learned from experience, and pass along as purely practical advice to anyone who would ever try this on your own – I would lean out over the stern as far as I dared, to pour the remains as close to the heaving waves as I could.

The gravel-like bone fragments would quickly sink out of sight into the deep churning water; but that wind that “blows where it wills” would sometimes catch the powdery dust and ashes in an upward swirling motion over our heads, before it disappeared into oblivion.

One way or another, the elements of earth, wind and sea would welcome back its own. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Any words of committal would seem more than a little redundant. *But what of the journey for the rest of us?*

Steadying themselves along the rail, those who'd embarked on this journey would toss their roses overboard. They'd watch them float off with the swift currents, without sinking. Minutes would pass, and we could still see those bright red dots that remained clearly visible from a considerable distance, as they dispersed in every direction.

As we would head back to port, there would often be light conversation; as if old friends had shared and survived some great seafaring adventure! Indeed, together we had somehow “walked the mile, and borne each other's load.” Now we were headed safely home again, and spirits seemed to lift.

Disembarking, everyone would express their thanks, often finding themselves at a loss for words to further describe the experience. Sometimes they'd eagerly grasp my hand with both hands. Occasionally, someone would surprise themselves and give me a spontaneous hug.

The repeated experience with these sojourners who I never saw again taught me a couple things. "All of us go down to the dust," as one liturgy for the burial of the dead reminds us. One way or another, all of us are in this journey together. How then shall we travel it, with all the uncommon kindness, compassion, understanding and affection we can muster? For some, there is such a faith that surpasses human understanding. And it is enough.

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So over the course of many years, I would continue to "impose" the ashes on the foreheads of the faithful, calling each by name, with the obvious reminder of a sod home or the deep blue sea that awaits all our earthly remains.

But in addition, I would always gently cup the side of each face with the palm of my hand, as a gesture of genuine affection; not only for the common lot we share in our mortality, but for the journey in which we had dared to embark, as well, into the fathomless depths of a divine mystery.

See, now is the acceptable time ... so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships ... sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with ... righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

(II Cor. 5:20b-6:10)

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