

THE FUNERAL CRITIC

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I PRELIMINARIES

Let me begin by saying that the “Natural Burial” movement must be stopped! If I hear or read one more time about people who are dispensing with a proper funeral in order to plant their friends and relatives in the ground without a casket for the sake of “environmental friendliness”;—just wrapping them in a sheet and plunking them into the dirt as though they were so many potato plants or pumpkin seeds;—if I hear or read about this one more time I am going to scream! Because it’s just another indication of the coarsening of our society, of the degradation of the human being. And though the advocates of this degraded phenomenon like to present it in the wholesome aura of a “return to nature,” I suspect that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the real motivation is cheapness. For let’s face it: people are selfish. They want to spend their money on themselves. They’ll splurge and even put themselves in debt to buy a big house, a new car, the latest computer or smartphone, but boy oh boy how they squawk about high prices when it comes to shelling out a few extra bucks to upgrade Mom’s casket! Just deplorable! And I am not exaggerating. I’ve seen it for myself! I once had a neighbor—let’s call him Beau (he was a handsome fellow)—who lived with

a tipsy uncle who passed away in his sleep after polishing off half a bottle of cheap Polish vodka. Beau knocked on my door early in the morning in a panic to tell me what had happened and to ask me what he should do. I told him to notify the police and then begin contacting funeral homes, which he did in just that order, and two days later he came back to me complaining about the expensiveness of funerals and saying he wasn't sure if he could afford one;—this from a man who had a well-paying job and had been living rent-free for years. I sought to help him out by contacting several funeral homes and getting prices on their various “packages,” and I had found one within his means (he had told me how much he was “able” to spend) when he informed me that he had decided to forego a funeral altogether.

“What do you mean?” I asked,

“Oh, it's not necessary, they have other things now,” he said.

“Like what?”

After an embarrassed clearing of his throat he told me he had gotten in touch through the Internet with a “green burial society” which had instructed him how to dispense with his uncle's body in a “dignified, no-frills service” for less than \$200. I happened to be drinking some orange juice at the time and when he told me that I nearly choked. \$200! I told him that he had to be joking. There were some meals in a restaurant, I said, which cost more than that. Was he really going to be such a cheapskate toward a relative whom he had lived with for the last ten years and supposedly loved or at least felt some affection for? I tried to argue him out of it, but to no

avail. Less than a week later he informed me that his poor uncle's booze-pickled body had been "laid to rest" upstate in some horribly anonymous field abutting a soybean farm. The headstone was nothing more than a large rock, no bigger than a coffee mug, inscribed with his uncle's name and dates of birth and death. It was not even anchored in place, and two months later it was washed away by a nor'easter.

The fact that the headstone, or rather the inscribed rock, had been washed away was of no concern to Beau. He had been too fully indoctrinated in the propaganda of the natural burial movement, according to which there is something noble in the obliteration of all traces of one's life—in it being as whirled away, as forgotten, as the dust of the earth; an attitude which those in the movement, otherwise heathen through and through, love to justify by quoting the Bible passage "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." But that passage was loony when it was written and is even more loony now. For how insulting and degrading to compare human beings, with all their hopes and dreams and struggles, to particles of dirt! If God himself were to come down from heaven and promulgate such a doctrine amid a fury of thunder and lightning I (unlike the scampering cowards around me) would stand up to Him, shake my fist in His face, and bel- low back, "How dare you!"

—For consider what stamina, what bravery, what resilience are required to live even the average life. You enter the world a helpless quivering being, thrust into the light and cold, into a confusion of sights and sounds, of movements and colors

and voices which shock the mind into cries of terror or overwhelm it into mute wonder;—then follow all those slow years of uncertainty and confusion, of learning how to speak, how to communicate, how to interpret gestures and tones of voice, of learning what is good and bad, of what is allowed and forbidden, of who you and the people around you are;—along the way enduring the sicknesses of early childhood, the colds and measles and chicken pox which cause one to spend so many nights feverish and sweating, coughing and crying;—and then, just when you have developed a little strength and a few certainties about life, just when you feel secure in your sense of the world, you are thrust out of it into the indentured slavery of schooling, whose ruthlessly rigid regimen will afflict you for the next fifteen or twenty years, forcing you to hateful studies, to sitting still and captive for countless hours as teachers pump information into your head though it were a bottomless slop bucket, even as the world outside, all sunlight and fresh air, beckons you to freedom and life;—always having to study more, to remember more, to pass the next test, to get ahead, to prove yourself over and over, even though you are only seven or ten or fifteen years old;—all the while pummeled with the anxieties common to childhood, such as whether or not you will gain the friendship of the popular kids, or win the approval of the pretty girl who has stolen your heart, and more frequently than not rebuffed by the former and scorned by the latter;—straining to maintain your composure, to hold up under an endless succession of demands and disappointments, and able to do so only because the hundred little emotional injuries already received

have calloused your soul and made it more a little more resistant to injury;—while you long for the day when there will be no more tiresome subjects to study, no more teachers to appease, no more tests to take, no more peers to contend with;—when the whole devilish business will be done with, and you will finally be “free”;—only to find that freedom means leaving one set of problems for another just as bad, the mean teachers having become demanding bosses, the hateful studies having become the hateful job to which you are crucified by the fear of poverty; a job repetitive, alienating, calling up not the best in you but on the contrary smashing down whatever good in you there is, so that your mind is benumbed and your heart is broken, and from which the only respite are the weekends, which can never come fast enough and are too quickly over, or some yearly “vacation” consisting of a measly two weeks out of the whole year and which gives you only an illusion of freedom, is but an enticing sop to keep you trudging on the treadmill;—and sure enough you trudge on, hoping for change, hoping that next year will be better, happier, easier;—but it never is;—becoming, on the contrary, more difficult, more frustrating, more disillusioning, partly because in growing older you have less stamina to endure the physical demands made on you, and partly because experience has shown you how unlikely change is; and eventually you resign yourself to it all with the trite formula, “Well, that’s the way it is for everyone,” and find solace in that last refuge of the defeated, namely, in being “grateful for what you have,” in “looking on the bright side of things”;—till four of five decades have passed and

you are left old, tired, sometimes sick, and stranded with the benumbing realization that time has run out and you are left standing on that cold, dark, miserable place at the brink of Eternity.

Good heavens! Who, after having endured the all this, as most of us do, doesn't deserve at least a decent funeral?

The problem is that most of the time what goes for a "decent funeral" never is. It means no more than a *traditional* funeral, which is *indecent*. For anxiety surrounds it, sorrow invests it, and after it is over the memory of it darkly dogs one's steps like a nightmare impossible to shake off. Insofar as almost everything about it is negative, it dishonors the dead and increases the misery of the living for whom it was meant to be (as the obscenely blithe phrase has it) a "part of the healing process." What is to account for the stark yet easily accepted discrepancy between intention and result?—between the reality and the charade? How is it that mature men and women, who would never allow themselves to be so taken advantage of in any other circumstance, blithely accept being bamboozled and abused in this one? The answer is that even worldly-wise people are kowtowed by the force of convention. Human beings are social animals, are born followers, with an instinctive need to be accepted into, to be part of, the herd. The essential humanity by which people are revolted by funerals is controverted and held in check by an indoctrination so early that it seems to be second nature. No wonder that misanthropes like to call people sheep.

—Nor was I, for a long time, any different. "Baa baa!" I said, along with everyone else, not only in the

matter of funerals but in so many other things. For a long time nothing out my mouth too but “Baa baa!” Baaing in school; baaing at play; baaing at the dinner table; baaing to get along, to obey, to be liked, to get ahead; baa baa baa baa! Only—and here is the main thing—my color was decidedly *black*. I made the same sounds as everyone else, but these came from somewhat different animal. I *sounded* the same: but I *was* not. And despite the anatomical sameness of the eyes of sheep white and black, those of the latter *do* see things somewhat differently;—a difference which was bound, sooner or later, to make itself apparent.

In my case they began to see things differently with the death of my paternal grandparents. They both lived into their nineties. They had Roman Catholic funeral services. The Catholic faith is notable for its pomp and panoply; thus there was no good reason why their funerals couldn't have been elevated by the diverting spectacles possible through their faith. Instead they were the typical horrors of doom and gloom. The church services were long and tedious, and for my grandmother's funeral music was provided by an organist and a two-bit local opera singer who belted out “Ave Maria” while making strange faces when she hit the high notes. At one point she “acted out” her rendition by extending her arms as though she were performing in a cabaret—which was bad form. In both services the officiating priests had about as much charisma as week-old bread, and their eulogies were mumbled messes. The funeral corteges on their way to the cemetery formed a long, slow, morose nuisance to other drivers. By the time most of the

guests arrived at the grave site they were so bored or depressed that they were ready to jump into the ground themselves.

But the worst parts of both events were the receptions. Somehow or other it had become the custom in that time and place to have it in the church building itself or in some annexed space—it was so long ago that I can't remember exactly where it was. At any rate it was a barren room outfitted with a couple of long tables covered in white paper by way of tablecloths and set with paper plates and plastic utensils. The food was cheap and starchy: pastas, potatoes, breads, rice dishes; and the culinary offense was topped off with bottles of soda and plastic party cups to drink out of. A children's birthday party would have had more nutritious and tastier fare.

Everyone tried to cheer up a little. Everyone tried to put the funeral and the burial in the past. There was light chatter and a burgeoning, if sometimes forced, sense that the worst was over, that we had all, as it were, weathered a storm and could breathe a little easier. Someone had brought her infant child, which she showed with overt pride, often holding it up, tickling it, cooing to it, so that its little arms and legs flailed in the air and a delightful smile lit up its cherubic face;—as though to show everyone that loss of the old generation was offset with the arrival of the new. Yet this attempt to emphasize the positive aspect of life was not successful because it was too little and too late as an anodyne to the negative atmosphere and emotions everyone had experienced for hours beforehand. There were easy conversations, there were occasional outbursts of laughter or good cheer, but they could not for more

than a few seconds disguise the sense of regret, almost of doom, which had descended on everyone like a leaden veil.

In the following years I attended a few more family funerals and they were all offensive. And then it occurred to me: Why *should* people have to endure such things? Are we manacled, in chains, led forcibly before these outrageous spectacles of the macabre? Are we not the masters of our own fate? Surely the first rule of individual life is self-preservation, a variation of which is avoiding exposure to anything which would psychologically injure us—and funerals certainly fell into that miserable category. As I was by then eighteen years old, and not easily forced to do anything I didn't want to do, I made the decision: Never again! I would never again step into a funeral parlor. And surely no one could blame me for this anymore than I could be blamed for not wanting to stick my hand into fire.

How wrong I was! What an uproar it caused! "But she was your aunt!" or "But he was your uncle!" or "He was your cousin, for God's sake!"—such were the formulas flung in reprimand at me, the attempts to make me feel guilty and change my mind. But by then I had seen the matter too clearly. I had thought it out too fully, knew what was what, and was not about to be intimidated. I shook my head and said serenely, "Nope" or "Sorry" or, more often, seeing the futility of answering, said nothing at all. If people didn't like my decision—too bad: it was their problem, not mine. I would not allow myself to be abused.

My aunt, whom I lived with growing up, was a stickler for convention. My aunt, whom I lived with

growing up, was a stickler for convention. Like so many weak-willed or thoughtless people, she derived her sense of self-esteem from how well she was regarded by others, and so was appalled at my newfound conviction, which she thought might reflect badly on herself. She vainly tried to argue me out of it, regurgitating the reasons which she had unquestioningly imbibed since childhood. When she saw that none of her arguments had budged me an inch, and a few of them had even made me laugh with contempt, she drew her ace card:

“And what about me?” she asked. “Is that what you’re going to do to me when I die?—huh? Not go to my funeral, either?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh! How can you do that to me!” she said, horrified.

“It has nothing to do with you. It has to do with me.”

“What? What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve told you a dozen times, I refuse to allow myself to be abused.”

“What are you talking about, ‘abused’? You don’t want to see me put into the ground?”

“Thanks for the invitation, but I think I’ll pass.”

“But you can’t ‘pass’! Nobody gets to ‘pass’! Are you out of your mind?”

“On the contrary, I’m very much in my mind and I’d like to stay there.”

“But what about me! How do you think I’m going to feel if you’re not at my funeral?”

“Now I know you’re joking.”

“I’m not joking! I’m serious! You have to be there. If you’re not there it’s a ... a terrible, terrible

thing!”

“Why are you eager to see me tormented? That’s not very nice.”

“You’re supposed to be tormented! That’s the whole point of a funeral!”

The poor dear woman: good in so many ways: honest, careful of my welfare, a good housekeeper, usually kind; but a born follower, and her powers of reasoning somewhat less than acute. In the end I assured her that I had only been “kidding around,” and that I wouldn’t miss her funeral for the world; which was of course a lie—but only a small one, only a little white one, very understandable, very forgivable, even somewhat admirable in light of the circumstances: in how much better it made her feel, and how little it cost me to say it. But costing me, some might say, my “integrity”? My dear friends, integrity doesn’t amount to a hill of beans, and may rather amount to a mountain of dung, if it makes people more miserable than they need be—if it hurts rather than helps them. Adhesion to truth is a lovely ideal but if applied to every petty vicissitude and concern of life it sinks to a mean-spirited and degraded indifference to the wellbeing of others. I made my poor aunt as happy as I could while she was alive because she was incapable of understanding that once we are gone we are beyond all knowing or caring about what is done by those who survive us. As it happened, I didn’t attend her funeral and I’m pretty sure she wasn’t aware of my absence.

My short and intense conversation with my aunt, recorded above, remained with me for years afterwards and was instrumental in my becoming a

critic, for it helped me understand that people attended funerals mostly out of a grim sense of duty. They hated, they loathed going to them, yet continued doing so as though they had been enchanted out of their own will, repeating to themselves the self-mesmerizing mantra, "It's the right thing to do ... it's the right thing to do ..."; or, if they had been close to the deceased, convincing themselves that their attendance would be part of their own "healing process"—even as the very thought of the ceremony intensified their sorrow.

This is why, in an ideal world, the family of the deceased are precisely the ones who should not attend the funeral. The saddest, hardest, most crushing day of their lives is often not the death of their loved one but the funeral service which shamelessly emphasizes and embellishes it. Instead of distracting their attention away from their loss, it plunges the hot blade of despair deeper into their hearts. Instead of guiding them to a peaceful shore, it casts them adrift onto endless seas of sorrow.

The problem with funerals—as I came to discover—was that they concentrated on death, which is inevitable and over which we have no control, rather than on life, which never more than after a death needs to be affirmed and celebrated. Thus the very basis and intention of the service was mistaken, and this was the less excusable because it was a matter of our choosing. Man (as Protagoras says) is the measure of all things; thus it is up to us to create or choose that which makes our lives better. Because a maniac, or a group of maniacs, thousands of years ago, decided that funerals should be depressing and horrible in every way, does that mean that we have

to do the same thing? Of course not! How utterly stupid to think so! It was time to relegate such life-poisoning attitudes to the dust heap of barbaric history! It was time to start afresh, and innocently and honestly accept as a first principle that it is always better to feel good than to feel bad, and that it not only behooves us to alleviate our distress and sadness at the passing of loved ones, but that we only truly honor their memory by doing so.

The first step in this reformation calls for the frank admission of our mortality. But people already know they are mortal? Yes; intellectually; but not emotionally, not morally. We all know we will die one day but for all that it seems a shadowy unreality. We usually think about it only when it happens to other people, and even then do not consider how each death we hear about brings us closer to our own. Day by day we go through the routine of our lives unaware that, every minute of it, we are being surveilled by death. It skulks around us at every hour of the day: while at our jobs, while watching television in our living rooms, while taking a shower, while eating in restaurants, while lying in bed asleep:—it lurks in the darkened corners or behind the curtains of our rooms, always peering out at us, noting our existence and awaiting the moment to strike—a stealthy, patient murderer stalking us from the moment of our birth. But just as exposing a stalker often shows him to be a puny, timid, ineffective character who resorts to surreptitiousness for want of courage to show himself outrightly, we are likely to find that in pulling death out of shadows and into the clear light of scrutiny, it is far less intimidating than we had supposed; in

fact, the brighter the light we shine on it, the more it shows itself to be a bugaboo. We then find ourselves agreeing with Epicurus when he said that death has nothing to do with us, that between it and us there is an unbridgeable gulf, because so long as we exist, it cannot be, and when it comes, we do not exist. We rightly abhor the process of dying, for we are the embodiment of the will to life, but we should keep in mind that when our "moment" comes it will not be for us—we will not know it—but for those who survive us. They will mourn for us, or not; say good things about us, or not; remember us fondly or with a sneer of dislike; and as the world bustles along as it always has we will be a ———.

As funerals are, then, less for the dead than for the living, we must shift the focus away from the deceased (who in his physical condition must always be disagreeable) to the particulars of the ceremony, which can offer of opportunities to create positive impressions for the benefit of the attendees. This objective can perhaps best be achieved by adopting the following notion:

The funeral as a work of art.

Like a fine painting, like a joyful piece of music, the service should elevate the spirit in a healthy, upward direction. But this is rarely the case owing to an industry which for too long has been a matter of commerce banking on convention. Today the great majority of funerals are provided by people who haven't a clue about alleviating the distress of others. For them that is a secondary consideration; the first one is to make a profit; and insofar this is the case they might as well have been lumber wholesalers or electronics merchants. Their advertise-

ments “proudly” proclaim an eagerness to “assist families in their time of need” or to “be an integral part of the healing process”—but let the bereaved show up at their establishment without the proper, usually inordinate amount of cash required, and they are likely to have the door slammed in their faces.

In itself the profit motive is not blamable, since it is the engine behind the capitalism which, for all its shortcomings, has benefited the majority of mankind; but surely in this one instance the motive must be something more than a cold crude exchange of cash. In this one instance there really *does* have to be a genuine sympathy for others and, just as much, and perhaps more, an artistic sensibility. This is why 90% of funeral directors are not temperamentally suited to their profession: they are unprepared, or unwilling, to render the emotional assistance they pretend to offer.

Unfortunately this will not change until people in general do. We must come genuinely to believe what even to a child’s mentality must seem obvious: that the well-being of the living always takes precedence over that of the dead, who are beyond needing or thinking anything. It is a fine thing to respect the dead, but it is a false, wicked, destructive thing when it is done at the expense of *disrespecting* the living. This is precisely choice which confronts us in giving a funeral, and the rightness, the reasonableness of our choice will always depend on how much we value the light over the darkness, the good over the bad.