

Mourning Becomes Elective
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Wedgewood Baptist Church
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This week has been a week of death for me. A close friend of the family, Juanita, was in a car accident last Saturday evening – related to the snow and ice left over from Thursday’s storm. By the time they got her to the hospital, there was no brain activity. The removed all live support last Sunday morning. I visited her Monday evening. She dies Tuesday afternoon. The viewing was at the funeral home Thursday evening and I attended her funeral on Friday afternoon. I graduated from high school with her daughter and she and her husband belonged to the church where I grew up. I had known her, more or less, all my life. She was 2-3 months younger than my mother.

I didn’t cry at the funeral. Actually I was so appalled at some of what was said, I didn’t even get to grieve much. There were three clergy “men” and all of them talked about how, even though we might miss Juanita, we should be happy for her. She’s with Jesus now. I even said that to my nephew. I, myself, the Grinch, said to my nephew that Miss Juanita had gone to be with Jesus. Mostly because I wanted him to not be upset anymore than necessary. And maybe I meant it in some way – she’s become part of the myth of resurrection. But was I happy at the funeral?

Sometime around 1988, I was living in Hillsborough and working between Durham and Chapel Hill. My mother called me one afternoon at work to tell me that Steve, a man who, with his wife Karen, had been a leader of our youth group when I was growing up, was dead. He was the one who taught me to tie a real tie. I won’t go into more detail on that right now, but trust me that it was a momentous occasion in my life. He wasn’t just dead you see – he committed suicide. I didn’t know it at the time, I suppose, but I was in shock. Steve was only about 15 years older than I and hadn’t been sick that I knew about. I only found out around the funeral of his years of bipolar disorder and his inability to stay on his medications. And he shot himself in the head and was dead and I never knew he was sick.

Well, for some reason I couldn’t get home in time for the viewing at the funeral home. My first real encounter with the reality of his death was at the funeral itself. And I broke down and cried. Not just tears – sobs. Loud crying. The ushers came and tried to get me to leave because apparently I was disturbing the funeral. Even at the time, the irony of this was clear to me. How could crying disturb a funeral? Mostly, I suspect, because nearly everyone there was afraid of feeling what I obviously was feeling. They had done their best to hold it back, to repress the fear, the rage, the emptiness. And my sobs called to those feelings in ways that made most folks very uncomfortable.

In 1992, the month before my 30th birthday, a teenager, Rob, in my church in New Jersey, hung himself in the basement of his home. It was only then that I started to figure out why centuries of tradition suggested the importance of a “viewing” of the body. I don’t think anyone should have to do it. And I know it’s the popular modern sentiment to talk about how morbid it is to want to see a corpse and how, if you want to appear sophisticated etc., you just don’t do such

things. But with Robbie's death, I found the importance of a "viewing". Again, beyond my awareness, I was in shock. Like with Steve, I didn't process the reality of Rob's death. But unlike Steve's death, I was at all four hours of the visitation at the funeral home as his pastor. And when I walked into that room with just his parents before the other came – then, when I saw him there, obviously no longer the same thing as a human being; different; cold – then I began to understand that he was dead. Like a slap in the face, the real death of Rob hit me cold and sad.

And it wasn't just me. As his schoolmates began to come through, I tried to stay with them. And I saw in their eyes the shock of seeing him dead. They had known in their heads that he was. They were at the funeral home because they knew he was dead. But their eyes told me that they had not known in their hearts that he was gone until they saw him there.

Finally, just before Christmas in 1999, my Uncle Franklin died. Franklin Roosevelt Narron. One of his children is a double diamond Amway person – way up in that particular ponzi scheme – and a raving fundamentalist. The funeral was one of the most difficult I've ever attended. One of his grandchildren, with a blank smile on her face, recited a poem called "The Night Before Jesus Came Back" modeled on "The Night Before Christmas" – about how the rapture is on the way. His pastor talked about how we should all be celebrating that Uncle Franklin was with Jesus. I told my family that they would have an easy time planning my funeral now, because I could deal with anything they DIDN'T do at Uncle Franklin's.

Yesterday, the entire crew of the Columbia died on their way home. It's sad. I didn't know any of them and yet I'm sad. I didn't know Princess Diana. I didn't know the people in the trade towers. The Columbia incident reminds me of the Challenger – and I remember the American response to that. We all sent money. Loads of money were sent to special funds for Christa McAuliffe's children (the beneficiaries, already, of a million dollar life insurance policy). The modern trend among the masses is to decorate the site of deaths with teddy bears and ribbons and hearts. We make death cute. We're just as likely to wear black to a wedding as to a funeral.

A hundred years ago, people died at home. We saw death often. It was familiar. We didn't necessarily fear it or the feelings that came with it. We encouraged mourning. But no more. We celebrate the lives of those who have died and forget to mourn their deaths. We forget that funerals are as much to help us deal with our own sadness, despair, separation as they are to mourn the deaths of our loved ones. Today we want to avoid death and the road to it. We put the ill in hospitals – warehouses of death so that we don't have to watch them die at home. We even entertain euthanasia partly – though certainly not wholly – because we'd rather not have to watch our loved ones slip away from us. When planes crash, all the relatives flock to the sight of the crash. That one I don't get. But there they go – and a great deal is made about recovering bodies so that they can be cataloged and buried someplace we can keep up with them. And, God help us, everyone talks about "closure" as though anything can shut the door on the death of a spouse, or child, or parent or other loved one.

Today we will take communion with each other. Even this ritual we have sanitized. We're embarrassed by it in its original form. We talk about it being a symbol of grace; a gift from God; a ritual of togetherness, even. Anything but a remembrance of death. And I'm right there with everyone else. I'm really uncomfortable with the idea of communion being about death. I've

always found much more meaning in incarnation than in crucifixion and resurrection. I prefer the empty cross of Protestantism and have been known to disdain catholic crucifixes (in spite of Jesus' inevitably fabulous abs).

I don't have any answers for you on this one. All I can say is that the modern craving for distance from death is disturbing to me. Just so that you'll know, when I die, I'd really like to think that at least someone will be sorry I'm gone. A few tears – maybe even some outright sobs – will be welcome at my funeral.

Like I said – I don't have answers. But I think that perhaps it is important for us to reacquaint ourselves with death. We've done that with birth. We don't give birth at home anymore, but the entire family is likely to be watching in the hospital (or on tape). And maybe we've made some progress. I mean, "Tuesdays with Morrie" did make it as a big seller. I'm not suggesting laying out our dead on the living room table or revisiting backyard cemeteries. But I think it wouldn't be amiss to refigure our conceptions so that death again becomes part of life.

Apart from it all, however, and in spite of my incipient agnosticism and associated inability to explain what this means, I am at ease in placing the progress of my life in the hands of a God with no hands.