

Every Cradle Asks Us “Whence?” and Every Coffin “Whither?”

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It was the drizzly Monday morning of January 9, 1882, in our nation’s capitol. The Feast of the Epiphany lately behind them, a retinue of black-clad Victorians gathered around a small grave in the Congressional Cemetery to bury poor Harry Miller, the darling toddling son of Police Detective and Mrs. George Miller, who had succumbed to that winter’s contagion of diphtheria. The tiny coffin rested on the ropes and boards over the open ground while the mother’s sobs worked into a rising crescendo. Once everyone was in place, and though the mother seemed beyond consolation, the undertaker nodded to Ingersoll to begin. He shook his head. The mother’s deep, animal sobs continued. People shuffled their feet in the cold, discomforted by her grief.

“Does Mrs. Miller desire it?” Ingersoll asked. The dead boy’s father, who had asked Ingersoll to officiate, nodded his assent. The dead boy’s mother quieted.

Robert Ingersoll was no pastor or parson, cleric, or priest. He was rather the most notorious disbeliever of his day, his age’s Christopher Hitchens or Bill Maher. Though stridently unchurched, Ingersoll was the son of the manse, the youngest boy of a Congregationalist minister who preached his unabashed abolitionist views, and had, as a consequence, been given his walking papers by congregants in Dresden, New York, and Madison, Ohio, and throughout Illinois where Robert spent most of his youth, shifting from church to church because of his father’s politics. Ingersoll was nine when his father was tried for “prevarication and unministerial conduct.” Because of his father’s mistreatment at the hands of Congregationalists, Robert turned first on Calvinism and then on Christianity, and by the time he stepped to the head of the grave that rainy morning in Washington, D.C., he was the best known infidel in America—an orator and lecturer who had travelled the country upholding humanism, “free thinking and honest talk,” and making goats of religionists and their ecclesiastical up-lines.

“Preaching to bishops,” an Episcopal priest of my acquaintance once told me, “is like farting at skunks.” (I have quoted him every chance I get.) And I wonder now if he wasn’t quoting Robert Green Ingersoll.

“Injure Soul” is what church people called him, while the press called him The Great Agnostic. He’d been a Colonel in the Union Army who’d raised his regiment in Illinois, fought at the battle of Shiloh where he was taken prisoner, and after the war served as the Illinois Attorney General. He taught law and lectured on Shakespeare and Reconstruction and Religious Hucksterism and was held in such high regard by Walt Whitman that Ingersoll gave the eulogy at the great poet’s funeral. He was able, it seems, to rise to all occasions.

As he stepped to the head of the Miller boy’s burial site, Ingersoll began his oration:

I know how vain it is to gild a grief with words, and yet I wish to take
from every grave its fear. Here in this world, where life and death are equal

kings, all should be brave enough to meet what all the dead have met. The future has been filled with fear, stained and polluted by the heartless past. From the wondrous tree of life the buds and blossoms fall with ripened fruit, and in the common bed of earth, patriarchs and babes sleep side by side.

Why should we fear that which will come to all that is? We cannot tell, we do not know, which is the greater blessing—life or death. We cannot say that death is not a good. We do not know whether the grave is the end of this life, or the door of another, or whether the night here is not somewhere else a dawn. Neither can we tell which is the more fortunate—the child dying in its mother’s arms, before its lips have learned to form a word, or he who journeys all the length of life’s uneven road, painfully taking the last slow steps with staff and crutch.

Every cradle asks us “Whence?” and every coffin “Whither?” The poor barbarian, weeping above his dead, can answer these questions just as well as the robed priest of the most authentic creed. The tearful ignorance of the one is as consoling as the learned and unmeaning words of the other. No man, standing where the horizon of a life has touched a grave, has any right to prophesy a future filled with pain and tears.

May be death gives all there is of worth to life. If those we press and strain within our arms could never die, perhaps that love would wither from the earth. May be this common fate treads out from the paths between our hearts the weeds of selfishness and hate. And I had rather live and love where death is king, than have eternal life where love is not. Another life is nought, unless we know and love again the ones who love us here.

They who stand with breaking hearts around this little grave, need have no fear. The larger and the nobler faith in all that is, and is to be, tells us that death, even at its worst, is only perfect rest. We know that through the common wants of life—the needs and duties of each hour—their grief will lessen day by day, until at last this grave will be to them a place of rest and peace—almost of joy. There is for them this consolation: The dead do not suffer. If they live again, their lives will surely be as good as ours. We have no fear. We are all children of the same mother, and the same fate awaits us all. We, too, have our religion, and it is this: Help for the living. Hope for the dead.

Help for the living. Hope for the dead. If there is a briefer or better motto for what vocation, education, and meditation have summoned us to, as ministry and mission to our fellow humans, I’m not able to imagine it.

It comes very close to the directive my father always raised over the work we mortuary sorts make it our business to do, to wit: *to serve the living by caring for the dead*. It is as if we are all assigned the one endeavor, this brokering of peace between the living and the dead.

Perhaps Ingersoll’s rhetoric seemed an incarnation—his words made flesh of the fist that we humans shake in the face of God when the worst that can happen happens, as it does. Especially at the deaths of innocents, theodicy gets the foot of doubt into the doorway of our theologies, our faith. “What good in this?” I remember asking

any god in earshot, while dressing the body of a dead baby or toddler. “Is this the toll then, for the glory of God?” I do not think I am alone in this.

It happened when I called to condole with the undertaker Dan Honan of Newtown, Connecticut, who took care of many of the slaughtered six-year-olds.

“Why wasn’t God watching?” Tom Waits wails in his song “Georgia Lee” on the death of a twelve-year-old Georgia Lee Moses who was kidnapped, raped, and murdered in Santa Rosa, California, in the summer of 1997. “Why wasn’t God listening?” “Why wasn’t God there for Georgia Lee?” Or drowned Syrian refugees, or the collateral damage of a gun sick culture? Why wasn’t God there as he was for Lazarus and Jesus? It is Job’s old query shared by the bereaved forever.

It is kin to the case made in the eleventh chapter of the gospel of John where Jesus deliberately tarries in Capernaum so that Lazarus will be dead beyond any quibble, dead with the stench of death on him, by the time Jesus shows up, tardy in Bethany, to call the dead man, putrefying in his winding sheet, from the tomb. “This sickness will not end in death.” Jesus tells his apostles. “No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”

“If you had been here my brother would not have died,” says Martha, speaking for the heartbroken down the ages. This is Job’s imbroglio: How can God be both all good and all-powerful and let such sadnesses happen? It’s the foot of theodicy’s doubt insinuated in the door of faith.

If the risen Lazarus is a harbinger of the risen Christ, the former a preview of the latter, then ours is a faith that makes its claims on the emptiness of empty tombs and the dead who yet appear alive.

If theologian Thomas Long is right, and ours is a culture and a creed peopled by those who have “lost their eschatological nerve and vibrant faith in an afterlife, maybe it is because we’ve grown unfamiliar with last things, the sick and dying and the dead, the grave, the tomb, the fire or sea to which we consign the bodies of the dead which, like the sick and dying, we no longer see. Just as the aged, demented, sick, and dying are removed from the custody and care of their families, the dead are often quickly disappeared by industrialized cremation that has become the norm for body disposition in many communities and churches—the funereal equivalent of a wedding without the bride or baptism without the baby or Calvary without the cross, the spilt blood, and sacrificial gore. Our celebrations of life have become vapid equivalents to Easter without an animate corpse, saying to everyone in earshot, do not be afraid. We settle for the idea of the thing while the thing itself is steadfastly avoided.

Maybe we could go the distance with our dead—intimates and family, friends and co-religionists, colleagues and congregants, dead saints, such as they might be, fellow pilgrims. Maybe the best work any of us will likely do will be done at the graveside or the crematory or the crypt. That is where our cases are made in the maw of human mortality and grief, not the idea of the thing, but the thing itself.

Like Ingersoll on that desolate morning, the occasions we are bold to rise to are the best and worst of times, the new life, true love, fresh grief that inform the baptisms and marriages, burials and cremations we are called to comment on, preside over, officiate for. The relentless cycle of Sundays and holy days, feasts, and festivals that pepper the liturgical calendar, the sick calls and counseling and pastoral visits, the committee meetings, the civic and secular enterprises that pastors and preachers are

bidden to or drawn in by—few present the chance to channel help for the living and hope for the dead as those places where the ante is inevitably upped, the stakes are raised, and the faithful and those of shaken faith are teetering at the brink, ready to go all in, open to a restoration of eschatological nerve.

Resolve this Paschal season to go the distance with them, the living and the dead, to the edge of whatever abyss we leave the dead to, commending their beings to God, coaxing the living home in hope. And if the living will not go the distance, as they more and more are disinclined to do, then go the distance with the dead on your own, as the primary office of your calling—to see your saints to the edge of whatever is or isn't next. The opened ground, opened fire, the hope of heaven, or the claims we make for eternal life. Accompany them with singing and with faith. It might embolden the timid, shaken family to do the same, to join in some of the work of witness and vigil, watching and praying, digging and lifting, and doing their parts in these primary human duties.

Notes

1 Robert Green Ingersoll, “At a Child’s Grave” in *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, Clinton P. Farrell, Ed. (published by Library of Alexandria), 399.

2 Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them With Singing, The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Know, 2009), 73.