

Protagonist Corner

Accounts

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Here is a picture and a thousand words. Well, 990 now. See how it works? They're gone before we know it—life, time, visions, words—and we don't feel their going, slipping away; we get a glimpse sometimes, when the dead are passing.

You've seen the photo of the mourning man, now President Biden, his women around him, sad-faced and black-clad; Job in a pair of aviator shades, his hand over his heart. It is the protocol, the done thing—a citizen salutes as the flag is passing. What is likewise passing, beneath the draped colors, is the box in which the body of his dead son, Beau, is moving towards its permanent repose. Thus, a heartbreak to the photo a thousand words will not undo. The mourners are desolate. Ours is only to watch and bear our portion of the brutish truth: we die. Those we love die. We cannot undo it.

The funeral for Beau Biden in early June 2015 was grave and weighty, unambiguously sad, a man in his prime, all promise and good purpose, a husband, father, brother, and son—dead of a cancer, gone too soon.

Apparently his family didn't get the memo about “celebrating a life.” They look so disconsolate, so ravaged by grief. Pity the fool who might recommend a celebration. One can only hope some grinning mortician didn't offer some trifle or trinket or kabuki theater: “Did he like Lawrence Welk music? We could do bubbles!”

Pity likewise, the cheery churchman who offers some pie in the sky instead of suffering, death, passion, and the paschal mysteries.

It's everywhere these days—the pressure to replace the good cry with a good laugh, public grief with a private disposition. “He'd rather we have a party,” we tell ourselves, blaming the dead for our lite-heartedness, however feigned or imposed. But the Bidens, by the look of them, are having none of that.

“How sad,” Fr. Leo O'Donovan said, welcoming the body in the box into church, “how very, very sad.” He was speaking for the thousand packed in the pews and the thousands outside and millions who were watching by cable news.

The bearing of this essential burden, when we see it done, seems ennobling, graceful, a humanizing exercise—a good funeral. A good funeral moves us to stand with and witness, to go the distance, to look deeply into the mystery of life: we die. It asks of us to do our part, bear the cruel truth, carry our portion of it—actually, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually.

The “celebration of life”—so *au courant*—is a lighter lift. It moves us to warm-hearted approval for the memorial karaoke (from the Japanese for *empty orchestra*), which is maybe why these commemorative events leave us feeling as if something is missing. If possible the body has been disappeared. In its place is a tableau vivant of favorite things—her gardening gloves, his Harley Davison, her prize-winning tomatoes, his golf bag, and photographs, albums of those, and videos looping to favorite tunes. The earnest, if eventually vacuous, talk avoids the questions we don't have answers for. “Is that all there is?” “Will this happen to me?” “Where did he

go?” “What comes next.” We share the good old stories about the good old dead guy—how funny he/she was, how eccentric, how loved. “No one could hit a sand wedge or make a baloney sandwich, or find more sand dollars on the beach than good old what’s his/her name.”

The Bidens had pipers and Clydesdales, Cardinals and archpriests, an Irish tenor to sing from *Les Miz*, Chris Martin from “Cold Play” playing a song, and eulogies from a soldier and siblings and the President—no shortage of one-offs and custom mades, the personal, the poignant and bespoke. But the overwhelming theme was neither Beau-ness nor Biden-ness; rather it was frail humanity, freighted with love and grief, joy and mortality. Which is to say, while it was tailor made, personal to the dead man and seemed to suit the sadness perfectly, it was, likewise, a “one size fits all” affair, what humans do when one of their own dies—an ancient ritual that transcends race and tribe and time, biography and style, religion and region, nation and geography, to lodge itself in and align itself with all of human kind. The sad drama that the Bidens enacted was recognizable to members of our species everywhere and anywhere, ancients and moderns. It bore the timelessness good funerals do—the *done* thing, whether six years ago, sixty thousand, or sixty years hence.

A good funeral, as the Bidens made manifest, is at once both personal and universal, custom made and custom bound, *one and only* and *only one of a kind*. It is not either “personalized” or “cookie-cutter,” “mass market” or “monogramed.” Rather it is some of each, and their opposites—*one off* and *one size fits all*. The good laugh and the good cry are part of its register, the lamentation and songs of thanks and praise, the wince that gives way to the loving grin. Not *either/or*, a good funeral is *both/and*, and is less and more.

Alas, the religious/mortuary marketplace too often seems incapable of such nuance and mystery. Thus, biography in place of theology, the stages of grief, prepayment plans, the themed event and Hallmark accessories—the biker funeral and golf bag urn, the memorial trinkets and dove release, the life story and the memory stein. We follow up with the latest pamphlets, a sort of Thomas Kincaid of bereavement, mini books, and how-to’s.

Because we settle for crap, we end up peddling crap—the memory drawer or casket corners, the cocktail party sans corpse as the “celebration of life,” the bubbles and balloons and commemorative ballyhoo, life stories, “healing tributes,” anything instead of the heavy lift—all gravitas and gravity—required to get our dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be.