

26 April 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

It seemed like nothing could push the pandemic from its top spot in the headlines. Then it came: horrific news of mass killing in a quiet corner of Nova Scotia. Within hours, flowers appeared in front of police tape, marking the roadside with makeshift shrines. Most were wrapped in cellophane, as if to shield them from April's icy wind. Why?

Flowers speak when we cannot. Tongue-tied, we strew them on the ground, as if to say, "We have no words." Their brief beauty is our sorrow's soliloquy.

This gesture is religious. The root meaning of the word 'religion' is 'to bind'. (It shares the '-lig-' part with 'ligature' and 'obligation'.) Religion *binds* us to the truths we value above all else, and to the very the source of truth. This binds us to each other too. This is why religious instincts spawns roadside shrines. "We're in this together," they say. "Your pain pains me too."

My secular friends shake their heads when I rattle on this way. "Religion is a violent lie," they say. "It's silly superstition spouted by 'men in black' who afflict the gullible with repressive dogma."

Seeing how feeble I am at the violent repression business, those friends tolerate me. I amuse them. I drink beer. I laugh at racy jokes. I watch movies with a 'viewer discretion' warning. I'm no Ayatollah Khomeini. I even watch the Donald Trump Show.

"See? Secularism made a world we can enjoy together. Not religion," they say. "Progressive people have said goodbye to all that. You seemed smart. How can you be so stupid?"

They will not see that rituals of mourning, even a spontaneous pile of flowers by the roadside, not only 'borrow' from religion, they're an example of it. The earliest evidence of our sense of the sacred, unearthed by archeologists, are the signs of care our ancestors took with their dead.

"Frail as summer's flower we flourish, blows the wind and it is gone," says the old hymn. Life is tenuous. But it's tenacious too. The dandelion finds its crack in the pavement and the white pine's roots cling to a cliff side. The

hymn continues: “But while mortals rise and perish, God endures unchanging on” (#407 in *The Book of Praise*).

Good religion knows how to celebrate life. But its rituals of mourning are fearless. They do not run from pain. They give us forms to feel and express it. They hold us closely as we pass through it. They deal head-on with deaths and dangers we’ll never predict or control, whether it’s a global pandemic or a gunman’s mad rampage. This is religion’s power *to comfort*; a word that, in its derivation, means ‘to strengthen’.

To be fully human and strong is to know not just how to celebrate life, but how to mourn its loss without loss of hope. Secularism fears this.

When its ritual gestures get it right, religion is an eloquent utterance of what’s deepest and most precious within us, those “sighs too deep for words”, as St Paul called them (Romans 8:26). At the same time, it’s a vehicle for what’s highest above us. In that sense, for Christians, Jesus Christ is the definitive religious gesture. He lives the sighs that lie within us and shows them to God the Father; and he lives the love who is highest above us and shows its beauty to us. He binds us to God and each other.

Our secular souls fear mourning. Funerals have been on the endangered species for a while. But the pandemic we’re living through forbids funerals in any case. We’re not allowed to care for our dead or be with them as they die. We know why. We accept it. But it adds grief to grief. Without religious binding, we come undone.

There was to have been a memorial service for Helen Hughes, but it had to be cancelled for now. Pat McGhee’s father, Roger LeBlanc, died this week. And another of our friends, Pat James, died too. She fervently wished for her funeral to happen in the sanctuary of Elmwood. I do too. But it must be postponed indefinitely. We mourn them all.

I’m sorry to sound glum this week. But saying what makes us sad lightens its load, doesn’t it?

Yours in the faith,
Andrew