

Memento mori. Two Reminders of My Mortality

Colleagues,

Since last Thursday's post two memento mori's have come my way. One was the death of James Danker, son of dear Seminex colleague and next-door neighbor Fred Danker and his now-sainted wife Lois. Only 53 years old! We had the memorial service last Friday.

The second was the death of John Steven Paul, whizkid speech-and-drama student from my days of teaching theology at Valparaiso University, who later returned to his alma mater to be professor in that field, and in, with, under that calling to profess the Christian faith in drama—and teach others how to do likewise. A lay theologian “first rate.” Only 58 years old!

Children shouldn't die before their parents, nor students before their teachers, we say. But there it is—twice in this very week.

Unless you know Latin, you may miss the somber message in “memento mori.” It is not: Remember that you WILL die. Somber enough. Rather it is: Remember that you MUST die. The WHEN is on a sliding scale. That “must,” however, is the grimmest edge of the grim reaper's scythe. That “must” calls for something even more superlative if it is to be trumped.

Crossings colleague Fred Niedner was the homilist at John Steven Paul's funeral in the V.U. chapel. He sent me a copy. I think he did it with that “even more superlative” trump card. See if you don't think so too.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

First off, here's the obit for John Steven Paul, also "my" dear departed.

John Steven Paul, a Valparaiso undergraduate and Univ of Wisconsin Ph.D., taught theater and drama at Valparaiso University from 1979 until his sudden and unexpected death at age 58 on July 10, 2009. He taught courses in dramatic literature, playwriting and screen-writing, drama and the church, and non-Western theatre. He directed more than 60 plays, musicals, and operas. He was the founder (in 1987) and director of Soul Purpose, a liturgical drama troupe that creates new plays and performs them in churches throughout the country. He served since 2005 as Program Director of Valparaiso's Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, the largest national, ecumenical association of church-related colleges and universities. He was a member of the Bach Choir of Valparaiso University. He is survived by his wife of 29 years, Margaret Franson, along with his parents and two sisters. A funeral service was held in Valparaiso's Chapel of the Resurrection on July 16.

Finally, After So Much Rehearsing, We Dance

Sermon for the Funeral of John Steven Paul

Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso University, 16 July 2009

Frederick Niedner Isaiah 25:6-9

6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. 7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; 8 he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will

take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. 9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

2 Corinthians 4:5-10

5 For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 6 For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

John 11:17-44

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into

the world." 28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31 The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus began to weep. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" 38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

We are staggered. We are stunned. Many of us have been walking around in a daze since the news began to spread so rapidly on Saturday morning. But as they say in the theater, "The show

must go on.” So here we are, in one of the primary venues where productions directed by John Steven Paul were staged and performed. This drama’s director, the one up there, exultant above the altar [the Christus Rex], gives us the perfect cue for how we shall act in this hour. His gesture signifies victory, of course, but long before anyone used it to proclaim victory, it was the priestly gesture of giving thanks. So those are the things we’ll do today. We will comfort ourselves with the gospel, and we’ll throw up our hands in celebration and in thanksgiving.

We give thanks for the innumerable blessings that came to us in and through a remarkably gifted man who played so many roles in the lives of those gathered here today and so many more who cannot be here. Husband, son, brother, uncle, teacher, mentor, colleague, friend—he played all those parts with grace, integrity, humility, wisdom, and good cheer.

For reasons I never thought to question, around the university we commonly used all three of his names when referring to John Steven Paul. And once in a while some of us would joke about his being one of the few people we knew with three first names. John, Steven, and Paul. I don’t know the story of how his parents chose those names, or at least the first two, but to me they all sound like biblical names. So here was a man named for a disciple and evangelist (and one who understood drama), a deacon and martyr, and a tireless traveler and ambassador for Christ.

When you hear that list, you know how well each name fit. Our John Steven Paul was all those things. And when you think about it, he really did need all three names. It’s obvious from what Mark Schwehn recalled for us a few moments ago that in so many years like this past one at Valparaiso University, John Steven Paul did the work of three people, and some of us wondered if

perhaps there were three of him-or them-and we merely saw them one at a time at the meetings we attended. In truth, all institutions, even this one, eventually prove that each of us is ultimately expendable and more or less replaceable. But some, especially when we lose them suddenly, leave behind a bigger hole than others. It will take a while to measure the full scope of the void John has left.

John's family gives thanks today for a faithful son who honored his parents in their old age as carefully as in his youth, for a kind and loving brother, and for a generous uncle with a marvelous sense of humor. Margaret gives thanks for more than any of us could know after nearly 30 years of making a life together with John. Many of us here today can't yet imagine the world without the remarkable institution in our lives that we have called "JohnandMargaret," kind of like it's all one word and one gracious entity in our lives. For this, too, we give abundant thanks to God who gave us this gift.

We all have our cherished JSP stories. . .about family times, moments in the classroom, Linwood House, the theater, or on tour with Soul Purpose. Some of my own come from long ago, when John and Margaret were my next door neighbors in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in Valparaiso. Back in the bad old days of single-sex residence halls, I was director of Brandt Hall, while John and Margaret did their best to tame the insanity of Wehrenberg, at the time an all-male freshman dorm. (Think about it!) You can imagine how much we had to learn about drama, and how much we needed to laugh. . .but only afterwards.

I've heard and read countless, informal tributes to John Steven Paul in the last few days, from colleagues in many university departments, from alumni all over the world, from Lilly Fellows and former Lilly Fellows, and from "the Porpoises," veterans of

the Soul Purpose drama troupe. I've heard John described as a teacher and director who asked for hard work and rigorous attention to detail, but who, on performance night or when the final papers came in, never lamented or berated anyone for the failure to achieve perfection. Instead, he gave thanks for all that went well.

Students, actors, and younger colleagues trusted John with their souls, not merely their lives. For some of them he believed, even when they could not, until they could find their way back. To my knowledge, he leaves behind no enemies, and for one who chaired the University Senate, led several key searches, and served on countless committees, including the Assessment Committee, that is beyond remarkable. For all of this, we throw up our hands in humble thanks.

As Mark Schwehn reminded us, one who serves as a program administrator and theater director works off-stage, out of the spotlight, teaching and preparing, getting things ready, making sure that players on the stage have everything and every directive they need. We wouldn't be too far off if we described John Steven Paul as one who spent most of his life in rehearsal. Just imagine how many rehearsals he attended or conducted in one way or another, given the 60 theater productions he directed, the choirs in which he sang, and all those Soul Purpose pieces.

Of all the scripts he rehearsed, I doubt that any of them got more frequent attention in John's life than the one that grew out of the gospel lesson chosen for this service. Almost from its inception in 1987, Soul Purpose performed a liturgical drama entitled "And They Danced," which is a way to proclaim the gospel as we read and hear it in the 11th chapter of John. "And They Danced" tells the story of Lazarus' death, the dismay and anger of Mary and Martha over Jesus' delay in coming when

their brother fell ill and they sent word, and ultimately the celebration that John's gospel doesn't mention, but which the family and the people of Bethany surely had, when Jesus spoke and Lazarus came out of the tomb and lived.

As so many of you know, when the play draws to its close, the cast turns to the congregation and says, "But none of this could have happened, except first Lazarus had died. There is no rising to new life except first there is dying. And only from INSIDE the tomb do we hear the voice of Jesus call, 'Lazarus, come forth!'" Dear friends, here is the truth of our lives, and here, too, begins the word of good news on this day when we face a staggering loss. For the last twenty years, all the rehearsals for "And They Danced," and every performance as well, done as they were all over the country, not just here, were practice and preparation for this day. Today we finally are, for real, the family of Lazarus, the people of Bethany. Our brother is dead. It's no longer just a play.

Our only hope in this moment is the same one that Mary and Martha had, the coming of the young man who, as it happened, was on his way toward Jerusalem when the call came about Lazarus. Indeed, we must see everything that Jesus said and did when he finally got to Bethany as part of that journey to Jerusalem, else we misunderstand it-and miss the real reason for dancing. Within a very few days, Jesus himself would be in a tomb, dead as an executioner's nail, so when he called into Lazarus' tomb, instead of shouting, "Lazarus, come out of there," he might just as well have said, "Heads up, Lazarus, I'm coming in to join you!"

There is no place Lazarus or any of the rest of us could ever end up, but that this one has gone or will go there, too. And only from INSIDE the tomb can we hear the crucified one call us, "Lazarus, John, Margaret, Jane, Joanne, Mark, come forth!"

Yes, put your name in that call, too, for we're all in a tomb today-a tomb of grief and sorrow, with a numbing sense that not just John, but part of us is gone as well. Notice, too, that this man on the way to Jerusalem entered that kind of tomb as well, the realm of deep grieving, as he wept openly, and in the gospel's language, "was greatly disturbed." God knows our emptiness. God knows.

To what does this one call us when he rouses us from our tombs, or from our grief? In the case of Lazarus, Jesus called him to a remarkably perilous journey, the one that led directly to the cross. According to John's gospel, this meant that Lazarus, too, was marked for death. How strange, that Jesus would raise Lazarus from one kind of death only to get him quickly killed with another.

But that, too, is our story. And it's our only hope, that we will hear the voice from *INSIDE* this tomb, and head out somewhere to die a different kind of death, the kind that comes from giving our lives away-in service, in sacrifice, in offering them up for love.

That was the story of John Steven Paul's life as a baptized child of God-daily dying and daily rising, only to die again in giving his life away in service, so many times to one of us. And this is our story, too. Over and over again we practice . . . until the day that twenty or thirty, or a hundred, or maybe a throng like this one will gather to throw up their hands in thanks for us because this time we played Lazarus' role for real. We do none of this alone. When we die, we die with Christ. When we live, we live with Christ. But in these days of stumbling around in tightly-bound grave-clothes we also live with and within the body of Christ. Notice how Jesus puts Lazarus in the care of the community whom he charges, "Unbind him. Set this one free."

That's who we are here, the gathering of grave-cloth strippers. You can barely sing, and it's even harder to walk, wrapped up in the clothes of mourning or in one of those mummy things, and you surely cannot dance. And friends, we do have some singing and dancing to do-tentatively at first, but we'll learn the steps.

And we have this meal to share, which is, dear people, truly part of an endless celebration, the very same sharing of bread and cup that began in those days soon after that scene with Lazarus in Bethany. We call it a foretaste of the feast to come, something we'll need to rehearse for the rest of our lives, but even now, and especially in a moment like this one, we comfort one another with the promise from God that when we gather at this table, we are part of the cast in the one, great scene upon the vast stage of heaven and earth on which the curtain will never fall.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.