

Memento Mori

Colleagues,

Memento mori. Although it's Latin, it's in the English part of my Webster's 10th edition, not in the "Foreign Words and Phrases" at the end. Says Webster: "A reminder of mortality. (L, Remember that you must die.)" A whole bunch of these memento mori have come our way in the last six months, six of these mementos from Valparaiso University. My first paid job started at Valpo exactly 50 yrs ago this fall. I was there for 14 yrs – 1957-71. Bob Bertram hired me for the theology department. It's where Crossings got started.

There were several Young Turks on the faculty in those days, not only in theology. We were mesmerized by President O.P. Kretzmann to conjure and create a Lutheran University where "Athens and Jerusalem (and Wittenberg too)" intersected. You might say, where they made "crossings." It was all great adventure. Holy hoopla—and sometimes maybe not so holy.

But now we all are old and some have died. Six in the last six months. The last one, just a few days ago, was Simone Baepler, French teacher par excellence, wife of my dearest seminary class buddy Dick Baepler, whose own career at V.U. started 3 years before mine did—way back in 1954—and he's still there. But Simone is not—nor Al, nor Nancy, nor Lou, nor Carlene, nor Tom.

Did you notice that "must" in the Latin rendering above? Memento mori is not just "you WILL die" but "you MUST die." If Luther had ever seen—and could have read—the King James English translation of the Bible (published in 1611, 65 years after his death) he would have chided the English divines who produced it for being "soft" on death when they rendered that passage from Psalm 90:12 as "So teach us to number our days that we may apply

our hearts unto wisdom.”

Luther heard the original Hebrew saying: “Lehre uns zu bedenken dass wir sterben müssen, auf dass wir klug werden.” “Teach us to think about [the fact] that we MUST die, so that we get wise.” In nickel words: Death is not a “you’re gonna,” it’s a “you’ve gotta.” Christian wisdom in funeral sermons must address that “you’ve gotta” with whatever Gospel they claim to proclaim. If not, memento mori gets the last word.

Fred Niedner, current VU theology dept chair, was asked to be the homilist at some of these V.U. funerals this year. One was for theology dept. colleague Tom Droege—a major dreamer and schemer for the Athens, Jerusalem, Wittenberg intersection we were scissoring and pasting together way back then.

Here’s Fred’s proclamation at Tom’s memorial service back in April. It took place in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, where Tom and Esther Droege had moved fifteen years ago.

Note how memento mori does NOT get the last word.

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

The Last Passage
Homily for Thomas A. Droege Memorial Service
22 April 2007

Psalms 27:1-14

1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
4 One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to

live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock

7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

8 "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, LORD, do I seek.

9 Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

14 Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Romans 8:31-39

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of

God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 11:21-27

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."

I bring warm and heartfelt greetings, condolences, and expressions of love to all of you from the circle of colleagues and friends associated with Valparaiso University's Department of Theology, in which Tom followed his calling as a theologian and teacher for nearly 30 years. Many more than could be here this weekend have held all of you, along with Tom, close to their hearts and have remembered you in their prayers in these last months and years.

We've had the great blessing of keeping in touch with you over the years since first Esther, and then Tom, moved here to Atlanta. Sisters Betty and Suzie helped us at that, as did occasional publications that told of Tom's work at the Carter Center. But eventually there began the regular rhythm of e-mails to which Tom gave the simple name, report (with a small r), the first of which told us of his multiple myeloma diagnosis in January 1998. Over the ensuing months and years those reports kept us informed of the mysterious activity of the lethal stalker that followed Tom, and in a way all of you family members, right up until Maundy Thursday.

In the very first message about this disease, Tom made it clear there was no cure. So, for a long time we have known this moment would come, and why, if not exactly when. Several times in the most recent years we thought the moment was at hand, and perhaps Tom did as well. Two years ago, I came for a visit and said good-bye, as did any number of us here today. I was sure I'd never see or speak to Tom again on this side of the boundary of space and time. However, several months later, we sat together on the porch of the inn up at Camp Arcadia and enjoyed a wonderful afternoon doing theology, cultural analysis, and storytelling.

We've been doing the same thing this weekend. Only this time, Tom's chair is empty.

For almost 20 of Tom's years in Valparaiso's Department of Theology, I had the gift of being his colleague. I cannot count, nor can I adequately explain, how many blessings came to me, or to the rest of my colleagues, or to a generation of students, thanks to Tom. The list of students who found their vocations partly through learning in one way or another from Tom would be a long one, as would the number of those who would have given up on school, or even life itself, except for Tom's compassionate and skilled interventions.

When I first read the lessons chosen for this service, as Esther sent them to me a few months ago, I mistakenly opened my Bible to Ps 26 instead of 27, and this is what I read: Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked. (Psalm 26:1, 4-5)

For a moment, this seemed a kind of revelation. Aha! I thought.

Now we find out why Tom retired a few years earlier than he might have from the Valparaiso faculty, and the Department of Theology. Our department meetings had made him flee! We had some knock-down, drag-out, theological and academic donnybrooks over the years. And quite often the dynamics of those became yet another occasion for my long-standing admiration and respect for Tom. He never let himself get sucked into the swirling confusion of those free-for-alls, but seemed always to wait until just the right moment, when the heat had outstripped the light, and he'd calmly say something that would leave the rest of us looking at each other thinking, Well, yes. Of course. OK. Maybe we could all be adults here. Through most of those years, I was the kid in the department, and I would think to myself, When I grow up, I want to be like Tom. I confess today that I still tell myself that.

You family members may have stories about other sides to Tom. Surely no one is perfect, but honestly, I never saw a genuinely dark side to Tom, although I recall hearing once, I believe from Ted Ludwig, that if you ventured onto a handball court with him, you'd better be serious, or else.

We colleagues learned so much from Tom about faith development, about stages of emotional growth and maturation that assisted us in understanding and teaching our students. He worked at research projects on healing that assisted the ministries of congregations. He preached regularly at the Chapel of the Resurrection. He provided pastoral counseling and lent his expertise to a peer ministry program. He regularly taught a course called Spiritual Needs and Health Care, and, I don't know how many semesters he taught his Death and Dying course.

He left that work, officially, back in 1992, and came to work in the Carter Center, until he finally transitioned into actual retirement. But he never quit teaching about spiritual needs,

healing and health care, or death and dying. Indeed, he did some of his most powerful teaching about death and dying in these last few years of living with a terminal illness. As many of you know, after years of developing and teaching expertise at giving care, he had to learn how to receive it. So, he wrote a book. He became a teacher of receiving care. And he talked freely, honestly, and with deep insight about living with mortality, about dying.

Tom wasn't happy to be dying, but he didn't avert his eyes from its steady glare, either. Right up to the end, he insisted on having the full experience of his condition, including the pain, sometimes terrible pain, so he could learn from every single moment what life, and death, had to teach. In part, his curiosity as a scholar prompted this, and in part it was his faith, and maybe a tad of plain, old competitiveness as though he'd invited death onto the handball court.

And then there was his trusty friend, mindfulness. On February 22 of this year, in response to my reply to the last of those reports, Tom wrote about his pain, and the ways he addressed it. The mindfulness is central, I think. We never have more than the moment, the day. Live it fully, and don't dwell on what might have been, which cannot be changed, or what the morrow will bring, about which we know very little. He closed the note, A blessed Lent to you and your family with the glorious promise of Easter to follow.

Which takes us to Holy Week, and to Maundy Thursday, the beginning of those three days whose message and traditions Tom so cherished. I don't know if people get to choose their moment. Tom might have waited just a couple more days and had another birthday. But no, Maundy Thursday became for Tom the day of birthing through that narrow passage we call death. So, the rest of us received that Last Supper this year, and heard

Jesus' cry of abandonment the next afternoon, with a new finality and absence in our hearts and on our minds. Then, with wet cheeks we spoke our Alleluias and sang Easter hymns. But sing them we did.

Tom chose to have us read a resurrection story for our gospel lesson when this day came, a piece of John 11, which tells of Jesus raising Lazarus. We heard again the part in which Jesus promises Mary and Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will have eternal life. In response, Martha confesses boldly her faith. She gives her heart to this Jesus.

Then, as we know so well, Jesus stood in the doorway of the tomb and shouted, Lazarus, come out! Lazarus came out. Next, we remember, there was the small problem of Lazarus needing some new clothes, after first being helped out of the smelly, old burial wrappings. And then things got really interesting. Threats began to fill the air, not only against Jesus, but against Lazarus as well.

So, when Jesus shouted as he did, into the door of Lazarus' tomb, he might as well have yelled instead, Heads up in there! I'm coming in!!! Because a few days later, in he went. All the way. And the door was closed once more. The Christ who called out Lazarus was on his way toward a particular kind of death, one that would change graves and dying forever. Diseases such as Tom suffered, complete with all the pain and temptation that go with them, those too got changed in Christ's taking them on, bearing them, going under and through them, all the way to the stillness of the grave.

What Jesus really says to Lazarus, and to Tom, and to all the rest of us, standing as he does in the entrances to all our graves, is something like, Tom, come out of there! Let's not

die some ordinary death due to illness, old age, or even some accident. Let's you and me go up to Jerusalem! Let's give our lives for something, for someone. No one takes our life from us. Because the life we have now, tied up in the love of God as we are, can't ever be taken away. It will never come to nothing.

Tom, like Lazarus, got called from the only tomb that could ever really hold him on the day of his baptism. And from that day on, he was headed for Jerusalem. As I said a moment ago, Tom taught Death and Dying. He was still teaching up to the end. He did so in part as a faithful follower on the road to Jerusalem, with a new relationship to dying. The Holy Spirit called Tom to work as one who understood those things Jesus asked us all to do when he said to those who watched Lazarus come out of the tomb, Unbind him, and let him go. Tom was practiced and very skilled at dealing with grave-clothes, at working on forgiveness and healing and all the other gifts of the Spirit that free us from paralysis before death and allow us to give our lives in love and service.

Finally, on Maundy Thursday, after his long journey, and so much time on both the giving and receiving end of the Spirit's holy gifts, Tom arrived in Jerusalem. Which leaves us both saddened and rejoicing. That's who we are, we followers of the crucified and risen one—partners in paradox, tear-stained victors.

So, as we mark the end which is also an arrival, it's time for a last word. The Holy Spirit always get the last word. In this moment, however, we'll hear the Spirit speak through Tom's phrases and expressions of faith.

I searched my old files of colleagues' sermons and found this, from a Palm Sunday sermon Tom preached at the Valpo chapel on

April 12, 1981. . .

“There is no way around the valley of death’s shadow, no way to go from this life to the next without passing through it. To claim the victory of Easter without sharing the defeat of the cross, to claim the life without sharing the death. . . is to have half a gospel—really, no gospel.

God has never promised us that we will have a rose garden rather than a Gethsemane in our futures. God will not spare you the pain that comes with the death of a loved one. . .or the shattering news of a fatal illness. You, too, will drink from the cup of suffering. You, too, will experience moments, hours, perhaps even years of forsakenness and vulnerability. You, too will face death and face it by yourself because each of us passes through that gate in single file.”

A couple years later, on Easter Sunday, again in the Chapel of the Resurrection, in a sermon that opened with an account of the night DJ, only nine months old, lay gasping for breath in a hospital bed with double pneumonia and given about a 50/50 chance of living until morning, Tom preached about passages, one of his favorite metaphors. He said,

“Your baptism means that you have already passed over from death to life. It is your assurance that you are already on the other side, already sharing in eternal life which bridges the chasm of death and the grave, thereby eliminating the horror of entering a cavity which threatens to devour you. That’s why a baptismal pall will be placed on your casket during the liturgy of your funeral because it symbolizes the victory of Christ over death, a victory you share through your baptism. You are covered with the cloak of Christ, who guides you through that last passage of death to the light and life of your own, personal resurrection.

May God keep you safe through all the passages of your life, save you in the time of trial, and carry you safely to the other side where we will all join in a cosmic celebration of never-ending Easter joy."

By God's grace, Tom has now practiced what he preached. And we line up to take our turns. Yes, Tom, amidst our sadness at losing your dear, sweet, wise company for the rest of our years, we shall sing. We give thanks to God for the gift of your life. We celebrate all we have shared together in Christ. And we'll see you next at the empty tomb.

Frederick Niedner

Living Grace Lutheran Church, Tucker GA

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