

Meditation – The Place of Dying in the Whole of a Christian Life

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Consultation on “Accompany Them with Singing,” Indianapolis, 7-8 Jan ‘10

One of the more fortunate things I ever did was actually something I didn’t do, an error of omission, so to speak. Back in the early 1970’s, I failed to send back one of those book club cards that says, “Don’t send this month’s book.” Soon thereafter, a copy of Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death* arrived in my mailbox. It remains one of the half dozen most important things I’ve read—important because it taught me to pay attention to how thoroughly and consistently everything we do is somehow a response to the reality of death, and more importantly, to the specter of our fundamental expendability and our passing like grasshoppers and chickens into utter extinction. Except that, unlike the other critters, we know it’s coming and we are left to ponder the meaning of there being, perhaps, no meaning—no meaning at all despite the amazing, wonderful minds and imaginations we have for pondering it.

What St Paul calls “living by the flesh” I came to understand as our personal and collective response to what Becker bids us to peer upon honestly and without blinders. We seek to deny our fundamental expendability by doing whatever it takes to survive on the best possible terms, and to prove we are right about everything—demonstrably so—no matter the cost or the consequences for those around us.

Alternatively, what Paul calls “living by the Spirit” is the gift-life that comes with looking at the same reality, but with the promise of God’s Spirit that we go back to the dust, all right, but we go accompanied, and with singing, into the bosom of the one who accompanied us in the darkness and joined us in the suffering of the cross. Once again St Paul’s words fit: “Our lives are hid with Christ in God.” This is the burden of Tom Long’s book, for which I have profound appreciation, especially for its truth-telling. In that regard, it’s much like Becker’s book. It tells us little that we don’t already know at some level, but it puts the whole picture together and tells the truth about it.

At our best, Tom Long reminds us, we practice dying, as well as the musical accompaniment for it, *daily*. There’s an old line I’ve heard at Valparaiso’s Institute of Liturgical Studies that has an equivalent in Tom’s book: When it comes to facing death, there’s nothing quite like 30 years of living amidst a community of worshiping Christians.

My community learned this graphically a few months ago when a dear friend and colleague, a professor of theater and director of many stage productions, died suddenly and unexpectedly. He was well-known in our circles for directing a liturgical drama troupe, and one of their most frequently-staged productions presented the story of Jesus’ raising Lazarus. “And They Danced” is the title. It imagines the party John’s gospel never relates, the one they surely had in Bethany on the evening after Lazarus was raised. And the ending of the play teaches that all of the joy and dancing of that party could never have happened, except that first Lazarus had died. Only from inside the tomb do we hear the voice that says, “Come forth!”

Countless times the cast of that drama group had rehearsed that play and got to the end, to the dancing. But this past summer, all of the rehearsals, and even all the productions, proved to be practice for what we had to do together on a hot day in July. We acted out our own story, and this time it wasn’t “merely” a play. This time our loved one had perished, and we murmured, “If you had been here, our brother would not have died.”

What did we do that day? We sang. We knew the lines and tunes. We didn't have to search for things to say or sing. And in our own way, we danced. It turned out, we had spent our whole lives rehearsing for just that moment.

Indeed, the Lazarus story teaches this kind of living as practiced way of life. It's a story of a newly raised person being stripped of grave-clothes and mentored into a new kind of living. It's the story of the baptized people, the Christian community, who throw off grave-clothes and put on new garments. It's our every day habit and habitat, that tomb and those grave-clothes and the community that helps us "get loose" from them. (Look closely at those 'unwrapping' words. Those are forgiveness words in John 11!).

And to what life did Jesus call Lazarus? To the life abundant that Jesus names a chapter earlier. What did that life look like? It isn't defined clearly in John 10. But it got lived later, on the road to Jerusalem, and on the cross. The enemies of Jesus sought to kill Lazarus, too, remember? How odd. Jesus raises Lazarus only to get him killed a few days later. It's as though when Jesus called out Lazarus, he said, "Lazarus, dear friend, come out of there. Anybody can die of AIDS or H1N1 or cancer or a heart attack. Let's go up to Jerusalem and die a real death, a Big-D Death! Let's *give* our lives away!" The same call comes to us. Ordinary, little-d death will get us one way or another, but we'll have cheated that death out of its power with our gospel, and with living the abundant life by dying a Big-D death—his death, Christ's death.

On a simpler, more practical level, I think often of the practicing I did my whole life for the solitary month of duty I spent as a hospice worker while my father died slowly in my parents' dining room. Only, I didn't know for all those early years I was practicing for *that*. My father, who suffered a massive brain tumor, entered a wordless wilderness of silenced speech. We knew he couldn't speak, but we didn't know if he could hear. We assumed he could, so we made words. You can only say, "I love you," and, "Thanks for being my dad," so many times a day. What else do you say? You sing, that's what. We sang. Every hymn we knew. Especially on that last morning as he drew his last breaths we sang for a couple hours straight. At the end, as we witnessed those very last breaths, we sang, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

There was also a day, not long before the end, when some of that singing awakened that sleeping, old man one last time, long enough that he could share in a family Eucharist, homily and all. At the end, he spoke. I said, "Go in peace, serve the Lord." He said with the rest, "Thanks be to God." It was the second-to-last thing he ever said.

I'm convinced that this is one way God's Spirit works at clinging to us even when we can't cling to God. Songs of the faith we've practiced all our lives prove one of the ways we come to know that faithful, eternal grip.

I have insisted that my children promise me that they will sing me through that second birth canal and into the arms of the one who awaits me. They don't practice the songs of the faith like I do. And some of the songs they do like make me cringe. My younger son, a brave and immortal 18-year-old, deems himself an agnostic these days. But I've made him promise me a song as well. I think this will all work out. Because I trust the Spirit to whom I entrust my children, I can trust them as well.