

Wit and Wisdom

I sat one evening in the waning light at my mother's bedside, knowing as we spoke that her ticket to eternity was already punched. I knew I would miss her, but I was no doubt thinking of the woman I had known long ago. After her death, when she had been gone a while, I remembered mostly her final troubled years. I forgot much of the person she had been for most of her life.

The older our "dearly departed" are at their deaths, the less we remember the bright beautiful edges that limned their hearts and personalities earlier in their lives. By the time they kick off, they may have thoroughly annoyed us ... sometimes scared us with behaviors or attitudes that are natural to the process of their aging, but are unsettling to us who in our hearts, if not our heads, believe we will never get old, decline and die.

When my father died, my older brother began the burial arrangements in his typical ex-Marine manner as I packed up and traveled home to Utica. We met together in the baronial teak and walnut offices of Digger Dick the Undertaker, as we jokingly referred to him. After

some preliminaries, Digger toured us through his showroom of caskets, quickly listed the eternal attributes of each price level and then discreetly withdrew for Paul and I to choose a model suitable for Dad's triumphant ride into Heaven. We looked at each other and laughed as we burst out with Dad's well-worn shopping dictate, "middle price for the middle class."

Back in Dick's office we reviewed names, dates, ancestors and all the usual details. When we got to the obituary, Dick told us the local Utica newspaper encouraged families to insert a sentence or two of personal accolade into the standard write-up. This was probably good for the soul as well as business, but some of the past examples I saw made me wonder how the publisher could allow families to embarrass themselves so publicly with syrupy words about their loved ones. Looking at us doubtfully, Dick asked if we had thought of any words we might like to include.

I was about to decline when my brother stirred, fished around in his back pocket and pulled out a crumpled place mat from the Lucky Duck Mongolian Buffet Restaurant, his favorite watering hole that year. He unfolded the paper, smoothed it over his belly, cleared his throat and began to read. He had written a short romance borrowing heavily from hit song lyrics of the 1950's, idealizing the love of this man and woman, the sanctity of their marriage, their love of God and country (*Semper Fi!*) and their dedication to us children and to the Miraculous Medal. All of this was carefully penned in around Lu Chow's Daily Specials. My brother's tribute to our parents concluded with the

observation that their time together in this Vale of Tears had not diminished their zest for life (!) and they would always be remembered for their warm sense of humor and their Irish Wit and Wisdom.

Dick was very good about it. He simply stared at the top of his desk. I was astounded to hear my parents had any sense of humor, let alone terrific wit. I was almost angry and I couldn't help myself. "Do you mean," I said to Paul, "like the time Mom told my little boy to go play on the Thruway when she got tired of his noise? Or the time Dad threw the dinner rolls around the table at my house instead of passing them because he thought my wife was stuck up? Have you forgotten all of the legalistic churchy bullshit we had to listen to from Dad, our own Father John? I didn't see a lot of warm humor, much less Wit and Wisdom!" He looked at me and said ... and he was absolutely serious..."I know you didn't. You still don't."

My brother and I were never really close, which is too bad because we might have made a good team. My wits could plan out any quest the two of us might launch and his heart and courage would find the way through. But I never thought of him as much of a humorist.

The next day a man approached me at the wake and told me how my Dad had literally saved his life years before when his troubled young wife killed herself, leaving him two baby girls to raise. "I was so depressed, I thought of climbing to the top of the Hotel Utica and jumping," he said. "Your Dad came over and helped me with the girls after supper each night for months and we

drank coffee and he told me funny stories and shared his guts with me and eventually I felt like I could go on."

It's true that people say nice things at funerals. But I took each tribute offered to my Mom or Dad and held it for a while, finally able to see through the years



and remember a smiling, happy Mom as she took me on the bus downtown to the Library and a laughing Dad pulling us on the sleigh through the snow up Graffenburg Hill.

The words in the obituary didn't really matter, as Paul understood. What sounded flat to my ear rang perfectly clear in his heart. Wit and wisdom, indeed.

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