



THE TIME MY FATHER DIED

BY JOSEPH W. MATHEWS

SOMETIME past noon, November ninth the last, our telephone rang. It was for me, person-to-person. My oldest sister, Margaret, was calling. "Joe, Papa just died!"

We children never called him Papa while we were growing up. He was mostly "Dad." But in the last decade or so, out of a strange mellowing affection, we started, all seven of us, referring to our father as Papa.

My Papa dead!—just seven days before he was ninety-two.

Within the hour I began my journey to my father. I find it difficult to express how deeply I wanted to be with him in his death. Furthermore he had long since commissioned my brother and me to conduct the celebration. My brother unfortunately was out of the country and I had quiet anxiety about executing it alone.

The late afternoon flight was conducive to contemplation. I thought of the many well-meant condolences already received.

"Isn't it fine that your father lived to be ninety-two?"

"It must be easier for you since he lived such a long life."

Certainly I was grateful for such comments. But I found myself perturbed too. Didn't they realize that to die is to die, whether you are seventeen, forty-nine, or one hundred and ten? Didn't they know that our death is our death? And that each of us has only one death to die? This was my father's death! It was no less significant because he was most of a hundred. It was his death. The only one he would ever have.

The family had already gathered when I arrived in the little New England town. We immediately sat in council. The first task was to clarify our self-understanding. The second was to embody that understanding in the celebration of Papa's death. Consensus was already present: the One who gives us our life is the same that takes it from us. From this stance we felt certain broad implications should guide the formation of the ceremony.

Death is a very lively part of a man's life and no life is finished without the experience of death.

Death is a crucial point in the human adventure which somehow transposes to every other aspect of life.

Death is to be received in humble gratitude and must ever be honored with honest dignity.

Together we concluded that the death of our father must be celebrated as a real part of his history, before the final Author that gave him both his life and his death, with integrity and solemn appreciation.

The very articulation of these lines of guidance worked backward laying bare our own inward flight from death. They also made more obvious the efforts of our culture to disguise death. I mean the great concealment by means of plush caskets, white satin linings, soft cushions, head pillows, Sunday clothes, cosmetics, perfume, flowers, and guaranteed vaults. Empty of symbolic meaning, they serve but to deceive—to simulate life. They seem to say, Nothing has actually happened, Nothing is really changed. What vanity to denude death! All our pretenses about it only strengthen its power to destroy our lives. Death stripped of meaning and dignity becomes a demon. Not to embrace death as part of our given life is finally not to embrace our life. That is, we do not really live. This is the power of unacknowledged death. I ponder over the strange smile on faces of the dead.

To symbolize the dignity of our father's death, the family thought to clothe him in a pine box and to rest him in the raw earth.

I remembered the men of the war I buried. There was great dignity in the shelter—half shrouded, in the soiled clothing, in the dirty face, in the shallow grave. I say dignity was there. Death was recognized as death. Death was dramatized as the death of the men who had died their own death.

A sister and brother-in-law were sent to make arrangements. They asked about the coffin. A pine box was out of the question. None was to be had. The undertaker, as they called him, explained that caskets ranged from one hundred to several thousands of dollars.

Interpreting the spirit of the common mind, our emissaries asked for the \$100 coffin.

"What \$100 coffin?" replied an astonished undertaker.

"Why the one you mentioned."

"Oh no, caskets begin at \$275."

"Did you not mention a \$100 coffin?"

"Yes. Yes. But you wouldn't want that. It is for paupers. We bury only the paupers in the \$100 coffins."

This thought racked the psychic foundations of my sister and her husband. They retreated for further

consultation. None of the rest of us, it turned out, were emotionally prepared for the pauper twist. Actually, the tyranny of the economic order over us was exposed. Our deepest emotions of guilt, love, sorrow, regret were all mixed up with this strange tyranny. In short, we could not move forward with our decision until we first agreed to set up a small memorial for Papa that would be used for charity in the little community.

By this time, assuming that no one would want to put his father away as a pauper, the undertaker had placed Papa in the \$275 casket. Having recovered some equilibrium we protested. He was understandably upset by our stand and insisted that we come to his showroom. We all went together, including Mama, who has been weathering the storms of life now for more than fourscore years. Caskets of all kinds filled the place. We asked about the pauper's coffin.

"We keep that outside in the storehouse." Anticipating our next request he hurried on. "No, I can't bring that into my showroom."

In the back I saw a wooden rough box which reminded me of the pine coffin. We talked, the undertaker and I. He was really a very sensitive man. Certainly he had a living to make. When I offered to pay him more for the other expenses of the funeral, he refused. But he mellowed a bit. He remembered when he lived in upper New York state as a little boy. His grandfather had been an undertaker too. Grandfather had used rough pine boxes out in the country to bury people in. In his recollecting he found a kind of meaning in our decision for the pauper's coffin. He even brought it into the showroom where Mama and the rest of the family could see it.

Immediately it was opened, another mild shock came. The pauper's coffin was exactly like any other coffin—pillow, white satin, and all. Except the white satin wasn't really white satin. It was the kind of shiny material you might buy at the ten-cent store. Everything was simply cheap imitation. We had hoped for something honest. Despite the disappointment, we took the pauper's box. And Papa was transferred to his own coffin.

I did not want to see my father until I could have some time with him alone. Several hours before the funeral I went to where he waited. I can scarcely describe what I saw and felt.

My father, I say, was ninety-two. In his latter years he had wonderfully chiseled wrinkles. I had helped to put them there. His cheeks were deeply sunken; his lips pale. He was an old man. There is a kind

of glory in the face of an old man. Not so with the stranger laying there. They had my Papa looking like he was fifty-two. Cotton stuffed in his cheeks had erased the best wrinkles. Make-up powder and rouge plastered his face way up into his hair and around his neck and ears. His lips were painted. He . . . he looked ready to step before the footlights of the matinee performance.

I fiercely wanted to pluck out the cotton but was afraid. At least the make-up could come off. I called for alcohol and linens. A very reluctant mortician brought them to me. And I began the restoration. As the powder, the rouge, the lipstick disappeared, the stranger grew older. He never recovered the look of his ninety-two years but in the end the man in the coffin became my Papa.

Something else happened to me there with my father in his death. Throughout childhood, I had been instructed in the medieval world view. This by many people who were greatly concerned for me. My father, my mother, my Sunday school teacher, yes, my teachers at the school and most of my neighbors. They taught me the ancient Greek picture of how when you die there's something down inside of you that escapes death, how the real me doesn't die at all. Much later I came to see that both the biblical view and the modern image were something quite different. But I wondered if the meeting with my father in his death would create nostalgia for the world view of my youth. I wondered if I would be tempted to revert to that earlier conditioning in order to handle the problems of my own existence. It wasn't this way.

What did happen to me, I am deeply grateful for. I don't know how much I'm able to communicate. It happened when I reached down to straighten my father's tie. There was my father. Not the remains, not the body of my father, but my father. It was my father in death! Ever since I can remember, Papa never succeeded in getting his tie quite straight. We children took some kind of pleasure in fixing it before he went out. Though he always pretended to be irritated at this, we knew that he enjoyed our attention. It was all sort of a secret sign of mutual acknowledgment. Now in death I did it once again. This simple little act became a new catalyst of meaning. That was my Papa whose tie I straightened in the coffin. It was my father there experiencing his death. It was my Papa involved in the Mystery in his death as he had been involved in the Mystery in his life. I say there he was related to the same Final Mystery in death as in life. Somehow the dichotomy between living and dying was overcome.

Where is thy victory, O death?

Death is indeed a powerfully individual happen-

ing. My Papa experienced his death all alone. About this I am quite clear. I remember during the war I wanted to help men die. I was never finally able to do this. I tried. Sometimes I placed a lighted cigarette in a soldier's mouth as we talked. Sometimes I quoted for him the Twenty-third Psalm. Sometimes I wiped the sweat and blood from his face. Sometimes I held his hand. Sometimes I did nothing. It was a rude shock to discover that I could not in the final sense help a man to die. Each had to do his own dying, alone.

But then I say, death is something more than an individual experience. It is also a social happening. Papa's death was an event in our family. All of us knew that a happening had happened to us as a family and not just to Papa. Furthermore, the dying of an individual is also an internal occurrence in the larger communities of life. Indeed it happens to all history and creation itself. This is true whether that individual be great or small. The inner being of a little New England town is somehow changed by the absence of the daily trek of an eccentric old gentleman to the postoffice who stopped to deliver long monologues on not very interesting subjects to all who could not avoid him. Perhaps we don't know how to feel these happenings as communities. Maybe we don't know how to celebrate them. But they happen.

Finally, death is a happening to that strange historical cadre the Church. This body, however vaguely, is more self-consciously aware of this. It is clearly there in ancient rites by which it celebrates the event of death.

We wanted to celebrate Papa's death as his own event but we wanted also to celebrate it as a social happening. Most of all, we wanted to celebrate Christianly. But this is not so simple. The office of the funeral suffers a great malaise in our day. Perhaps even more than other rites. There are many causes. The undertaker, in the showroom episode, spoke to this with deep concern. His rather scathing words disturb me still.

"Funerals today have become no more than disposal services!"

"What of those conducted by the Church?" I ventured.

"Church indeed! I mean the Church." he said.

His professional posture was here set aside. Pointing out that most funerals today are held outside any real sense of Christian community, he spoke of the tragedy of keeping children away from death. He spoke of adults who sophisticatedly boast of never having engaged in the death rite. He spoke of the

over-all decrease in funeral attendance. He especially rued the emptiness of the rites because they were no longer understood. And he caricatured the clergy as the hired disposal units with their artificial airs, unrealistic words, and hurried services.

"What we all seem to want nowadays," he said, "is to get rid of the body as quickly and efficiently as is respectably allowable, with as little trouble to as few folk as possible."

These solemn words were creatively sobering. The funeral embodied the full office of worship. We who gathered acted out all three parts. We first confessed our own self-illusions and received once again the word of cosmic promise of fresh beginnings. Then we read to ourselves from our classic scriptures recounting men's courage to be before God and boldly expressed together our thanksgiving for the given actualities of our lives. Thirdly, we presented ourselves to the Unchanging Mystery beyond all that is and corporately dedicated our lives once more to the task of affirming the world and creating civilization.

The point is, we did not gather to console ourselves. We did not gather to psychologically bolster one another. We did not gather to excuse anybody's existence or to pretend about the world we live in. We celebrated the death of my father by recollecting and acknowledging who we are and what we must therefore become. That is, we assembled as the Church on this occasion in our history, to remember that we are the Church.

In the midst of the service of death the "words over the dead" are pronounced. I had sensed for a long time that one day I might pronounce them over Papa. Now that the time had come I found myself melancholy beyond due. It was not simply that it was my father. Yet just because it was my father, I was perhaps acutely sensitive. I mean about the funeral meditation, as it is revealingly termed. Memories of poetic rationalizations of our human pretenses about death gnawed at my spirit. Some that I recalled actually seemed designed to blanket the awareness that comes in the face of death, that death is a part of life and that all must die. I remembered others as attempts to explain away the sharp sense of ontological guilt and moral emptiness that we all experience before the dead. The very gifts of grace were here denied, whether by ignorance or intent, and the human spirit thereby smothered into nothing. I remembered still other of these meditations even more grotesque in their disfigurement of life—undisguised sentimentalities offering shallow assurances and fanciful comforts. How could we shepherds of the souls of men do

such things to human beings? Perhaps after all, I was not unduly depressed.

Coincidental with these broodings, my imagination was vividly assaulted by another image. It was a homely scene from a television western. A small crowd of townfolk were assembled on Boot Hill to pay last respects to one who had lived and died outside the law. A very ordinary citizen was asked to say "a-few-words-over-the-dead." He spoke with the plainness of wisdom born out of intimate living with life as it actually is. Protesting that he was not a religious man, he reminded the gathered of the mystery present in that situation beyond the understanding of any one or all of them together. Then he turned and spoke words to the dead one. He spoke words to the family. He spoke words to the townfolk themselves. In each case his words confronted the intended hearer with the real events and guilt of the past and in each case he offered an image of significance for the future. There was comfort in his words. But it was the honest, painful comfort of coming to terms with who we are in the midst of the world as it is. It impressed me as deeply religious, as deeply Christian. For my father, I took this pattern as my own.

At the appointed place I, too, reminded the assembled body of the Incomprehensible One who is the ground of all living and dying. I, too, announced a word to the assembled townfolk, and to my family, and to my father.

I looked out at the members of the funeral party who represented the village where my father had spent his last years. They were sitting face to face before one another, each caught in the gaze of his neighbor. In that moment, if I had never known it before, I knew that a community's life is somehow held before it whenever it takes, with even vague seriousness, the death of one of its members. I saw in its face its failures and fears, its acts of injustice, callousness, and irresponsibility. I saw its guilt. I saw its despair. They would call it sorrow for a passing one. But it was their sorrow. Indeed it was, in a strange way, sorrow for themselves.

In the name of the Church, I spoke, first, of all

HE LED THEM THROUGH A DEEP

WOODCUT

R. REGIER

this which they already knew yet so desperately needed to know aloud. And then I pronounced all their past, remembered and forgotten, fully and finally received before the Unconditioned Being who is Lord both of life and death.

I looked out at my family. There was my mother surrounded by her children and her children's children. What was going on in the depths of this woman who had mixed her destiny with that of the dead man for the major share of a century? What of sister Margaret who knew so well the severity of her father? What of the son who had never won approval? Or the son-in-law never quite received. What of the one who knew hidden things? What of the rebellious one? What of the specially favored? What of Alice? What of Arthur? What of Elizabeth? I knew, as I looked, perhaps all over again, that the sorrow at death is not only that of the loss of the cherished and the familiar. It is the sorrow of unacknowledged guilt, postponed intentions, buried animosities, un-mended ruptures. The sorrow of the funeral is the pain of our own creatureliness, of self-disclosure, and of self-acknowledgment. It is the pain of turning from the past to the future. It is the pain of having to decide all over again about our lives.

In the name of the Church, I spoke of these things written so clearly upon our family countenance. And then in fear and joy pronounced all our relations with Papa and one another as cosmically approved by the One who gives us our lives and takes them from us once again.

I looked at my father. And I knew things in a way I had not known them before. It wasn't that I knew anything new. But my knowing was now transposed so that everything was different. I knew his very tragic boyhood. I knew the scars it engraved on his soul. I knew his lifelong agonizing struggle to rise beyond them. I knew his unknown greatness. I knew his qualities next to genius that never found deliverance. I knew his secret sense of failure. I knew things he never knew I knew. I knew the dark nights of his soul. I knew, well, what I knew was his life. His spirit's journey. That was it. It was his life I knew in that moment. It was frozen now. It was all in now. It was complete. It was finished. It was offered up for what it was. This was the difference made by death.

In the name of the Church, I spoke his life out loud. Not excusing, not glorifying, just of his life as I saw it then. And then I pronounced it good and great and utterly significant before the One who had given it to history just as it was. Not as it might have been, not as it could have been abstractly considered, not as I might have wanted it to be or others felt it should have been, not even as Papa might have wanted it altered. I sealed it as acceptable to God, then, just as it was finished.



The celebration ended in the burial grounds.

The funeral party bore Papa to his grave. There was no drama in the processional. It was just empty utility. The death march, once explosive in symbolic force, had lost its power. I allowed myself to be swept along in silent frustration. I was sad for Papa. I had pity for those of us who bore him. I grew angry with myself.

The sun had already fallen behind the ridge when we came to the burial ground. It was on a remote New England hillside (they call it a mountain there). I remember clearly the sharp, cold air and how the very chill made me feel keenly alive. I remember also how the dark shadows dancing on the hills reminded me of life. But I remember most of all the clean smell of God's good earth freshly turned.

I say I smelled the fresh earth. There was none to be seen. What I did see is difficult to believe. I mean the green stuff. Someone had come before us and covered that good, wonderful raw dirt, every clod of it, with green stuff. Everything, every scar of the grave, was concealed under simulated grass: Just as if nothing had been disturbed here: Just as if nothing were going on here: Just as if nothing at all were happening. What an offense against nature, against history, against Papa, against us, against God.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry out to the whole world, "Something *is* going on here, something great, something significantly human. Look! Everybody, look! Here is my father's death. *It is going on here!*"

The banks of flowers upon the green facade only added to the deception. Was it all contrived to pretend at this last moment that my father was not really dead after all? Was it not insisting that death is not important, not a lively part of our lives, not thoroughly human, not bestowed by the Final One? Suddenly the great lie took on cosmic proportion. And suddenly I was physically sick!

This time I didn't want to scream. I experienced an acute urge to vomit.

A sister sensitively perceived all this and understood. She pushed to my side and gave me courage. Together we laid aside the banks of flowers. Together we rolled back the carpet of deceit. God's good, wonderful clean earth lay once again unashamedly naked. I drank it into my being. The nausea passed.

Mind you, I'm not blaming anybody. Not anybody really, save myself. I just hadn't anticipated everything. I have no excuse but I was taken by surprise, you understand. And I so passionately wanted to celebrate Papa's death with honesty and integrity and dignity—for his sake, for our sake, for God's sake.

We lowered Papa then in his pauper's box deep

into the raw ground. Then began the final rites. There were three.

I lifted up the Bible. It was a sign. We were commemorating Papa's journey in the historical community of the faithful. However distantly, however feebly, however brokenly, he had walked with the knights of faith, Abraham, Amos, Paul, Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Wesley, Jesus. By fate and by choice these were his first companions of the road. I recalled aloud from their constitution which I held in my hands. The heroic formula from Job is what I meant to recite: Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. What came from my lips were the words of Paul. "If I live, I live unto the Lord; if I die, I die unto the Lord; so whether I live or whether I die, I am the Lord's."

I lifted up a very old, musty, leatherbound volume of poetry. This too was a sign. We were ritualizing Papa's own unique and unrepeatable engagement in the human adventure. Papa was an individual, a solitary individual before God. It was most fitting that a last rite should honor this individuality. Such was the role of the volume of hymn-poems. From it Papa had read and quoted and sung in monotone for as long as any of us including Mama could recall. The words I joined to the sign were from this collection. The author was a friend of Papa's.

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform;

He plants his footsteps on the sea and rides upon the storm;

Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His works in vain;

God is His own interpreter and He shall make it plain.

The third sign celebrated the fact that Papa was a participant in the total wonder of creation and that his life and death were good because creation is good. What I mean is that Papa was God's friend. My last act was to place him gladly and gratefully on behalf of all good men everywhere in the hands of the One in whose hands he already was, that Mysterious Power who rules the unknown realm of death to do with him as he well pleaseth. I ask to know no more. This I symbolized. Three times I stooped low, three times I plunged my hands deep into the loose earth beside the open pit, and three times I threw that good earth upon my Papa within his grave. And all the while I sang forth the majestic threefold formula,

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

And some of those present there for the sake of all history and all creation said Amen.

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