

Subj: Closure: anxieties put to rest
Date: 95-06-19 16:41:01 EDT
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The radio was off. I usually drive with it on, but I needed to think. I hadn't had that much time to mull things over. Pat showed me the short notice she found on the obituary page only yesterday:

ANATOMY BOARD. Annual Memorial Burial Service is held each year in recognition of those donated and unclaimed bodies used by the Maryland Medical and Dental Education and Research Study Program. The families, friends, and public are invited.

When I got to work this morning, I called the number they gave to see if Mom were included this year. The head of the Board himself came on the line, took the particulars, and put me on hold while he checked. Yes, Mom was one of the 614 with remains buried and memorialized this year. He gave me directions---Route 32 north from I-70 to Sykesville, on the grounds of Springfield Hospital Center.

I arrived about fifteen minutes before the 1:30pm service and found a parking place in the shade near a red brick mansion, at least a hundred years old. In a hollow or dell that was once the mansion's front yard people had begun to gather under the trees. The trees, once ornamental had outlived and outgrown their gardeners. In a broad triangle formed by two oaks and an ash was a large, simple headstone, now decorated by several floral sprays. Some folding chairs had been set up, but the oak tree closest to the mansion---the tip of the broad triangle---looked more inviting to me. I sat down at its base and leaned against the mossy, lichen-encrusted trunk, the mansion behind the tree and the headstone in front of me.

I spent the next few minutes looking openly at my fellow attendees, some sixty in all. Most were my age or older. As I was wondering about the common bond that had brought us all there, my thoughts were interrupted by a practiced chant, "Adonai . . ." I didn't get the rest of the Hebrew, but the rabbi told us later in English that it was a 5,000 year-old call to worship. The rabbi was followed by the

Chairman and the Director of the Anatomy Board. Their statements were offerings of thanks. They both reminded us of the contributions to research and teaching represented by the donors memorialized today.

Two medical practitioners spoke next. They both said the expected things about the value of the donors' bodies for science, but each articulated something more. The first, a very young man who had just completed his first year of medical school, offered something very eloquent.

When we are assigned a donated body for dissection, we see the last physical manifestation of this person. But we also see something more. We see a manifestation of the person's inner beauty, reflected in the fact of his or her final, generous gift to us.

The medical student was followed by a urologist, some 25 years more advanced in his career, who was there to remember his father. He too had something eloquent to offer.

There are two parties to the "transaction" these donations represent who are not here. You and I need to stand in for those parties. The first absent group consists of those who benefit indirectly. We medical professionals benefit directly, but those who we are able to treat better and more effectively because of these donations also benefit, never realizing it. I will represent them. I will express the thanks that these indirect beneficiaries would voice were they aware of their gift. The other absent group is, of course, the donors---though they are here in a sense. You must represent them. You must accept the thanks from us grateful beneficiaries, direct and indirect.

The protestant chaplain followed the medical men. He reflected ironically on the fact that the human body's worth is grossly understated by the retail value of its chemical components, less than an hour's minimum wage. The catholic chaplain closed the ceremony. At first he seemed the typical pastor, recognizing the presence of the distinguished and notable. But once he discharged these obligations, he spoke the line that was the most meaningful to me.

May we all put our own anxieties to rest here today.

And so they were. From where I sat, at the apex of a triangle of trees, there was an ash to my left and a philodendron-covered oak to my right. On the line between those two trees, the headstone sat, somewhat closer to the oak. On the same line, closer to the ash, was an area of disturbed soil, the underlying clay overlaying the turf. This is where the urns were buried late last week. This is where the last physical remains of Kathleen Kirk Wright now rest.

After the ceremony, I walked over to the ash and sat in its shade for a while. Though it was ninety in downtown Baltimore today, the shade

and breezes left the temperature no higher than seventy, I'm sure. Off to the left, you could hear the sounds of traffic on state Route 32. Off to the right, the hospital grounds proper, you could hear only mocking birds. Not a bad place---in the midst of old, rolling Maryland Sykesville farmlands, now in the early stages of gentrification. Maryland---a long and unexpected way from Columbus Ohio.

As I stood up to leave, I took a leaf from the ash that overhangs the burial spot. As you may know, ash leaves have multiple leaflets growing from a single stem. I'll send you each a leaflet, along with a photocopy of the program. May it help you put your own anxieties to rest.

Geo

----- Headers -----

From GEO@LOYOLA.EDU Mon Jun 19 1995
Received: from loyola.edu by mail05.mail.aol.com with ESMTTP
(1.37. 109.11/16.2) id AA026114405; Mon, 19 Jun 1995 -0400
Return-Path: <GEO@LOYOLA.EDU>
Received: from LOYOLA.EDU by LOYOLA.EDU (PMDF V4.3-7 #4793)
id <01HRWAROZIXS00117X@LOYOLA.EDU>; Mon, 19 Jun 1995 16:35:50 EST
Date: Mon, 19 Jun 1995 16:35:49 -0500 (EST)
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Message-Id: <01HRWARP9FSY00117X@LOYOLA.EDU>
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Content-Transfer-Encoding: 7BIT