

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, or certainly the woman I had known long ago. But soon after her death, I found myself remembering mostly her final troubled years. I forgot much of who she had been earlier in her life.

The older our "dearly departed" are at death, the less we remember the bright beautiful edges that limned their hearts and personalities for most of their existence. By the time they kick off, those we are bound to by love may have thoroughly annoyed us ... sometimes scared us with behaviors and attitudes that are natural to the process of aging. An elderly person is often unsettling. We ourselves are headed in the same direction, but we persist in believing we will never get old and decline, let alone cease to be.

When my father died, my older brother began the burial arrangements in his typical ex-Marine manner as I began packing up for the trip home to Utica. We met the next day in the baronial teak and walnut office of Digger Dick The

Undertaker, as we jokingly referred to him. His real name was Jack and after some preliminaries, he toured us through his showroom of caskets. He quickly listed the attributes of each price level and discreetly withdrew for Paul and I to choose a suitable model for Dad's triumphant ride into Heaven. We looked at each other and laughed. My father's well-worn shopping dictate, "middle price for the middle class," seemed quite appropriate.

Back in Jack's office we reviewed names, dates, ancestors and all the usual details. When we got to the obituary, Jack told us the local newspaper at that time encouraged families to insert a sentence or two of tribute into the standard write-up. This was probably good for the soul as well as the newspaper's business, but some of the past examples I saw made me wonder how the publisher could allow a family to embarrass itself so publicly with syrupy words about Aunt Tillie's loyalty to her bowling team or Uncle Fred's devotion to his favorite beer. Jack wondered aloud if we had thought of any words we might want to include, but he eyed us doubtfully.

I was about to confirm his suspicions 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 what could easily have been 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!*), their dedication to us children, to St. Joseph, the patron saint of families, and to the Miraculous Medal. All of this was carefully penned in around Lu Chow's Daily Special. My brother's testimonial 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.

Jack reacted appropriately. 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 kids to go play on the Thruway when she got tired of their noise? Or the time Dad threw the dinner rolls around the table at my house instead of passing them because he thought we were too formal? Have you forgotten all of the legalistic churchy bullshit we had to listen to at home? I didn't see a lot of warm humor, much less Wit and Wisdom!"

Paul 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 his new role as the family bard annoyed me.

The next day at the wake a man approached me 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 compliment 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 or to the Library, and a laughing Dad pulling us on the sleigh through the snow up Graffenburg Hill.



Wit and wisdom were indeed evident in my parents' life, as Paul understood. How he recounted it in the obituary was not important. What sounded flat to my ear rang perfectly clear in his heart. The words used to describe it didn't matter.

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