

All Souls Day

I was curious that I felt so little emotion as I knelt – some twenty years ago - close to my mother’s casket, while a strange priest recited the prayers of her funeral Mass. Actually I felt numb, too weary to wade through memories left by her once lively presence.

But isn’t that the way it is with Death? Its initial impact to cancel all thought of business as usual. Suddenly the absolute absence of someone we took for granted makes us absent minded, wondering why? and what’s it all about? I mean, here was a life worthy of a novel! A sad faced 3 year old girl in a 1912 photo among relatives on a Jersey truck farm; a 1920’s flapper, complete with Louise Brooks hair style; a waitress at Abe’s Oyster House, whose tips got us through the Depression; then playing Rosie the Riveter circa 1943; still bowling while practically blind in her 80’s; and so on and then - erased from the chalk board of human history. It makes one pause and wonder.

“Wonder about what?” says the cynic within my breast. “What did you expect? Oblivion awaits us all.” Or to allow the materialist Buck Mulligan (the medical intern in Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*) to express it in his terms: “And what is death, your mother’s or my own? You saw only your mother die. I see them pop off every day in the Mater and Richmond . . . It’s a beastly thing and nothing else. . . Her cerebral lobes are not functioning. She calls doctor sir Peter Teazole and picks buttercups off the quilt. Humour her till it’s over.”

Yet while I kneel there gazing at the sanctuary floor, the celebrant’s voice begins to infiltrate my benumbed brain: “Now I am going to tell you a mystery,” he says. “In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the last trumpet . . . the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. Then will the saying of Scripture be fulfilled: Death is swallowed up in victory.”

And I think: here is the great gift of my Catholic tradition, this defiance, this power of imagination to envision realities that lie beyond the evidence of our senses -- to take events like birth, marriage, sickness and death and turn them into sacramental moments, embroidering them with ritual and poetry that reveal them to be so much more than meaningless biological or physical or economic phenomena.

And I say, “Yes - this and not the fatalism of Mulligan is what speaks to my heart and therefore tells me the whole truth and nothing short of the truth!” And I thank the celebrant in my heart and the lady in the choir and the people on their knees around me who testify to that traditional vision and I turn once more to look at my mother’s casket next to me, remembering another fragment of verse of that New England saint, Emily Dickinson:

A Coffin - is a small Domain / Yet able to contain / A Citizen of Paradise / In its diminished Plane. // A Grave - is a restricted Breadth / Yet ampler than the Sun / And all the Seas He populates / And Lands He looks upon. // To Him who on its small Repose / Bestows a single Friend / Circumference without Relief- / Or Estimate - or End-