

For Tony – A Reflection

Where do I begin? Anthony Leo Barnhill came to my acquaintance through what has come to be the norm these days: We met through an internet forum serving a hobby we both shared. I've been a British car nut since I was a kid, and when I was restoring a Triumph TR3 a dozen or so years ago, I happened on the British Car Forum on the internet. Tony was a regular on the forum, and, one thing leading to another, we discovered that we didn't live that far apart. Our first face-to-face meeting was the day I traveled to his home to pick up a body for a car I was restoring, and the day I picked up that car body was the beginning of quite a ride with Tony. We became fast friends, and he and Jerri made several trips with Janet and me. In point of fact, we had been talking about making another trip with Tony and Jerri this spring to South Texas, where my sister lives, and wanted to make trips with Tony and Jerri an annual thing.

By now, I'm sure you get the picture: Janet and I had found something quite precious and rare, at least in the life of a priest and his family. It's not easy for clergy to get close to folks in the community in which they live; most people tend to keep us at a distance. And friendship within the congregation is nigh unto impossible; vocational distance is pretty

much the norm. So, now Tony's gone, and for Janet and me it is just not fair!

Now, typically, at Episcopal funeral services, the preacher doesn't spend a lot of time talking about the deceased; we don't "do" eulogies. The homily, instead, should touch on the Christian theme of Resurrection. Also, since we believe that all are created equal, all should receive the same treatment in the Church. The Anglo-Catholic way has always been that from pauper to queen, funerals are the same. But since this isn't a typical funeral sermon exercise, and Tony was so close, I'm going to take a few liberties.

One is to tell a quick story about just one of my experiences with Tony; an experience that is so typical of the kind of guy that Tony was. As I mentioned, we had made a few trips together; one was a mission trip to Honduras. My parish had established a sister-church relationship with a congregation down there, and had made several trips there to work with them. The latest project we had undertaken was to raise funds for a church bell. We found a bell; had it shipped down there, and traveled down to install it in their tower. In conversations with Tony and Jerri I told them about our work. They took an interest and told me that they'd like to go with us on one of our trips. When the trip to install the bell came up, I

figured Tony's experience would serve us well, so I invited them along.

Well, when we arrived at the church in Honduras with the bell, and the locals had gathered some workers, Tony jumped right in. The workers began to rig up a home-made hoist consisting of two-by-sixes nailed to the upper part of the tower, some ropes, and a couple of pulleys. This was to raise a 300 pound bronze bell and its cradle about twenty-five or thirty feet. Tony, ever the colonel, stood nearby and said, "That'll never work – those guys don't know what they're doing!" Well, of course, it all worked perfectly, and as they finished up and celebrated by ringing the newly installed bell, Tony said to me, "Huh – I sure thought those guys were gonna hurt themselves and that bell would fall right through the tower. I just learned something!" That was Tony!

Tony was perhaps the biggest kid I ever met. And I mean that with all sincerity and admiration. It was a joy to watch him get excited; he was often like a kid on Christmas morning. And there was never a doubt where Tony stood on an issue. But like his reaction in Honduras, he was lightning quick to admit if he was wrong. Come to think of it, he didn't exactly say he was wrong!

He was recently quite taken with reading books on spirituality, and recommended several to me, so we could discuss them. I suspected for quite a while a deep faith within him, and came to realize that he indeed had a hunger for growing that faith. That, too, was Tony!

But he's gone, and it hurts. I wish I had some appropriate answers. I wish I could say something meaningful that would help make sense out of what has happened. But I don't have those words. What I do have, however, is a promise:

When our Lord gave his Sermon on the Mount, one of the things he said was, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." I've always wondered about that. At an acute time of sorrow, such as we are experiencing as a result of Tony's death, these words can sound hollow. When a loved one dies, we all experience the deep sorrow that accompanies the mourning process, and we seek comfort, and even escape. We often do that by telling stories about our experiences with the one who is no longer with us. Telling stories is a grand way of somehow holding on to that person we've lost for just a little longer, and I think that's part of the blessing and the comfort to which our Lord was referring. Stories do help, and I'd like to relate one that, even though it's not about Tony, for me it puts

mourning into a surprising new perspective. This is a story about a girl named Margaret. The story comes from the novelist, Gail Godwin, in a book she wrote titled *Father Melancholy's Daughter*. Margaret, it seems, lost her mother when she was six years old. Then, shortly before she finished her graduate studies, Margaret's father died. This is what Margaret had to say about her mourning of the loss of both parents:

“I could write a handbook on mourning – how it weaves in and out of the ordinary traffic of your days, for weeks and months (and maybe years)... And the ache that you treasure, that unique wrenching ache that you hoard? You go looking for it. Contrary to what so many people try to tell you, people who want to divert you away from the ‘painful’ topic, people who proudly assure you that they have ‘been through it’, and ‘it will get better with time’... you want to dwell in its presence, you want to protect [that ache] from this heartless, future ‘time’ they promise you is on its way, you want to dwell in the presence of the pain, the mystery of its hold on you.

“You feel more at home in the presence of this than with any stained and false ‘wisdom’. You seek out objects and places that will free that mystery... You don’t want the ache to go away, because as long as it’s there,

so are they. They make a place for themselves in the center of the ache...”

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When a funeral service fails to point both to the mystery of the ache that Godwin wrote about so eloquently, as well as the mystery of the life beyond death, a sort of charade has taken place. When the doctrine of the resurrection is used as a way of somehow avoiding the grief, nothing deep is ever touched. So, a funeral merely becomes a way of going through the motions, and the grieving and mourning are bypassed.

And I’m sure we can all remember when, in the midst of grieving a loss, someone says, with good intentions, “You’ll be fine.” “It’ll get better.” “Life will go on.” Or some such. But the problem with all that is that when the reality of loss is avoided, it becomes worse; like a splinter which lingers in the flesh and only works its way deeper. But quite ironically, a loss visited over and over will yield in time to a kind of presence. Godwin’s character, Margaret, put it very well: “They make a place for themselves in the center of the ache. It’s unbearable and beautiful at the same time.”

“Unbearable and beautiful.” Seemingly an impossible paradox. But for Christians, we call such a paradox a mystery of faith. And the mystery is this: At this moment, we are both separate from and together with Tony.

But this mystery of Christian faith, to which Tony ascribed, is that our unity transcends all bounds, including life and death. We are one with each other, and all the company of heaven in a kind of unity found only at the center of all experience. Nothing and no one is excluded. This is the promise I mentioned a few moments ago. And this is how our Lord blesses our mourning. Truth be known, if we cannot acknowledge and mourn our separation, we will *never* discover our deeper unity. This is the mystery, both of the process of grief, and the Christian journey. Mourning and celebration teach us how to be with both.

So, Tony: Adios. *A-Dios – TO GOD*. Farewell, my friend, my brother. We mourn your loss; at the same time we celebrate our unity which you see clearly now, and we know we'll experience just as fully!

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