

Growing Old

Perhaps growing old is defined by knowing more people who have died than are alive. If that is so, I have been older longer than I have been young.

Those remembered live constantly within my heart and mind. They are intertwined with my who. I cannot take a step without a memory bubbling up from deep within the recesses of my mind bearing an image that recalls one no longer there. So rarely do I walk alone. In step are legions of old friends and loved ones. Their shadows define me.

There is never fear associated with the memories. They are like any old friend or family member whose presence exudes love and provides comfort. I am pleased to speak with them and find the compass of my life from the responses I hear clearly spoken. Though the conversations help ease the sense of loss, their physical absence always breaks my heart.

I need not engage in the debate of whether there is a heaven or hell. Knowing that daily I have contact with loved ones who touched my soul, the question warrants no consideration. I accept one day that I will be walking alongside those I miss so deeply. Accepting this as a fact does not make me wish to hasten joining them but removes trepidation about the journey.

My life is full. I have been blessed by people who loved me. They gave with their hearts. No price tags were attached nor expected. My constant fear was that when I die the memories of those who continue to live within me would perish.

I have come to realize, though, that I will one day be a memory who speaks to those I leave behind. Within my voice that will speak long after I have passed on are all those who have made my life special.

I wrote the above when my son died nine years ago and had it inscribed upon his headstone. The effect of his death on the family, including myself, has been profound. My grandson, born after the death of his uncle, was blessed with the name of my missing child. It is both a joy and a reminder of the loss shared by all who loved him.

I have suddenly become aware of my own mortality. I have entered a time when it seems each news report of the death of a celebrity states an age not too distant from mine. This sudden acknowledgment of the pendency of my life reaching its climax has caused a sudden awareness of how I truly have not considered death as a possibility pertaining to me.

That is strange considering I have been at St. Michael's Cemetery in Queens, New York, for nearly 20 years. The number of families I have counseled and shared tears and the joy of remembrance with at this point defy counting. Yet for so many, the emotional contact was thankfully brief. Their emotional pain was not mine to carry.

Often I would laugh at my father for falling asleep before the TV. The rest he enjoyed before the tube was more comforting than that earned between the sheets of his bed. We spoke many times about the end of life. Mostly the conversations were about his fear and his inability to accept that life would come to an end. His favorite saying as to the issue was, "I hope the last voice you hear will be mine!" He desperately wanted to live forever.

I became numb to his wishing to revisit his past by sharing memories and repeating the stories told so often they are ingrained in my brain.



The headstone of Ed Horn's son, William Charles Horn. (Photo courtesy of Ed Horn)

He would tell me about his dreams and being back to places and with people long gone. I trained myself to grunt at the appropriate times.

Nightly I no longer have dreams but visitations with my deceased parents, family members and friends. I relive moments from the past. Daily I am shocked and outraged by my acts and statements of stupidity that caused so much hurt and anger over a lifetime of seemingly selfish acts. Seeking a way to amend these violations and knowing there is no time machine, I know not what to do.

It is said that we may ask God to forgive our sins committed against Him but only an aggrieved person can forgive an act of egregiousness against them. I do not have voice or the required courage to seek absolution from the trove of people I have offended.

I don't know if any of this has consciously impacted my interaction

with those who depend upon me or St. Michael's, but I find that the time I spend with them has increased. My level of interest into the lives of those who surround me and who are recalling a loved one engages me more intimately. My emotions now compel me to say, "I love you" to my children and those I care so much for. I feel more deeply for those whose tears bring them to St. Michael's.

To repeat how I began this, perhaps growing older is nothing more than life's way of giving us an opportunity for reflection and emotional growth. We were born by a loving mother and hopefully held by a father who adored us. Our lives are planned but hardly ever follow the fantasy we mapped out in our youth. The only question that can never be repeated is when we take our last breath, will there be anyone who holds our hand with love? •