

Ash Wednesday
All Souls Parish, Berkeley
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“*Memento mori*” is an ancient Latin phrase—a wisdom saying—“Remember your mortality” “Remember you are going to die.” I’d like you to be my companion in meditating on this phrase *memento mori*...

During one Lenten season a Lutheran pastor and I joined forces to offer pastoral care training for the parishioners of our respective churches. We titled the training series “A help in time of trouble” drawn from Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” When the Lenten study evening that focused on death and dying issues was drawing near one of my parishioners, who was a cabinet-maker and wood craftsman (married to a family physician), offered to lead a “build your own coffin” workshop on the Saturday after that session.

John is a firm believer in simple burial practices and had made the casket for his mother’s burial when she died. He suggested that if people were interested he would get them the materials and show them step-by-step how to make a coffin. One extended family and I decided to take him up on the offer. John got the raw materials for a total cost of \$60.00 each—this was about 20 years ago—which

included beautiful planks of knotted white birch for the bottom and sides, and pressed mahogany tops.

As that family and I each made a coffin under John's guidance we started telling stories and reflected on death and life. John mentioned that in the middle ages it was the custom to make your own coffin as a spiritual discipline to remember your death. Some monastics still construct coffins in their woodshops to bury their brothers. I mentioned a Buddhist tradition of a master writing a last poem before death, and the story of a beloved rabbi's last words passing on the summation of his wisdom to his disciples. We reflected on the mystery of Easter. The mood was a mixture of solemnity and lightness. We felt alive! *Memento mori...* The family used the coffin to bury the male head of the household a few years later. Mine is used as a storage chest for blankets.

Although, while Ruth and I were teaching at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary students would sometimes borrow my casket—I call it my “box”—when they would do “play church” and practice funeral services. Four of them would come over to our house, put the box on their shoulders, and carry it around the city block to the chapel. Someday that box will hold my body, at least until transported to a crematorium. *Memento mori...* or as we will say in this service as we mark ashes in the shape of a cross on our foreheads, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

I worked as a volunteer hospice chaplain for a number of years and discovered a secret—people who work for hospice, caring for patients who are dealing with terminal illness and for their loved ones, learn that they should live fully and well until they die! Death can be a worthy advisor to us about the preciousness of life and that it is not to be wasted...

Psalm 103 appointed for today is one of my favorites and has undoubtedly given comfort and hope to many people before us. This psalm portrays the gentleness of God, the merciful kindness and forgiving nature of God in the face of our human fragility and mortality...

*As a father cares for his children, so does the LORD care for those who fear him.
For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.*

In the sixth century monastic *Rule of St. Benedict* there is a chapter entitled, “Tools for Good Works.” Among the listed tools listed are these: “Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die. Hour by hour keep careful watch over all you do, aware that God’s gaze is upon you, wherever you may be.” Day by day practice *memento mori*, but also hour-by-hour be aware that the Immortal One is gazing upon you.

Isn’t this interesting that St. Benedict includes a daily personal reminder that you and I are going to die and an hourly personal awareness that God is gazing

upon you and me among the “tools for good works?” How can these awareness practices be considered tools that help craft good works?

If we just consider our mortality without any faith context we could forget about good works and easily become paralyzed with depression, or turn to hedonism or escapism as a way of numbing our anxiety, or exhibit any number of other behaviors that could be self-indulgent and destructive. And if the eye of God that is cast on us is uncaring, capricious, or fearsome then we are no better off. But Benedict adds this to the list of tools—“And finally, never lose hope in God’s mercy.”

Never lose hope in God’s mercy! This is a God that is merciful—who keeps a loving eye on us—who desires that our lives will produce good works and reflect the care and concern for others that God has for each of us. Here is both the ground of true humility—we are creatures of the earth, of dust, and yet are creatures molded by our creator and bear the image of that creator.

The Christian witness is that our lives are not ours alone—rather, our lives belong to the God who is the very source of life and we belong to a community of God initiated through baptism in Jesus Christ’s life, crucifixion, and resurrection. The apostle Paul writing about this baptismal entrance into life in God’s community speaks of a passage through death—the death of an old self and a life of sin now crucified with Christ—into a new life reborn in Jesus Christ. “I have

been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” writes Paul (Gal. 2:20) in a radical spiritual insight he shares with the Christian community in Galatia. Here *memento mori* takes on a new meaning. A death has *already* occurred, and a transformed life in Christ is the result. And as Jesus said, “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...” (John 14:12)

So what is it that must die for this new life to flourish? Our Ash Wednesday liturgy directly points to what that looks like, and bids us begin a time of examination and self-denial and repentance that prepares us for the celebration of Easter and a season celebrating Christ’s resurrection and our own new life in Christ. It is not only our petty little sins that we are called to renounce. It goes much deeper...our liturgy of penitence names examples of that sin which is embedded in our social structures and in which we participate knowingly and unknowingly.

Biblical theologian Walter Wink calls it the ancient Domination System and it is death-dealing and soul-stealing. We see it in the intractability of institutionalized systems designed to keep some of us based on race, class, or sex in a place of privilege at the expense of others. We see it in systems of financial greed that provide disproportionate access and gain to a small segment of the

population while many are exploited. We hear it on the news in the liberation struggles of people in North Africa and the Middle East trying to get free from autocratic governmental control by the ruling elite at the sometimes brutalizing expense of the vast majority of the citizens. Governments and powers that sometimes our own government has colluded in supporting in the name of American self-interest.

Walter Wink writes (*Engaging the Powers*, p. 139):

Each of us has already lost what would have been our way, had we only known how to find it (Rom. 3:9-20). There is no helping it; children must be socialized. Rules, customs, habits must all be learned, and learned under the supervision of the Domination System. And there is no helping it; at some point we must begin to become ourselves. To do that, we who are dead must die. ...

But rebirth is not a private, inward event only. For it also includes the necessity of dying to whatever in our social surroundings has shaped us inauthentically. We must also die to the Domination System in order to live authentically.

Those born to privilege and wealth may miss life by having been installed at the center of a universe revolving around their own desires. Others, born to merciless poverty and the contempt of the ruling class, may miss life by never feeling really human at all. If the advantaged must die to their egocentricity, the

underprivileged must die to their hopelessness, fatalism, and acquiescence in their own despoiling.

Rationalists may need to die to idolatry of the mind; dominating personalities to their power; proud achievers to their accomplishments.

This is the path that begins with *memento mori*, my friends; it is the Lenten journey that we are bidden to take once again. It acknowledges our dying, even the necessity of it, and the hope of rising from the dust with Christ—molded anew in the image of God—that is the joy and promise we prepare for in Easter. Come, let us take that journey together.