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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 65-68: Negotiating Traditions

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director

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My great-great-aunt was born in 1891. She lived a long and industrious life, dying not long after her ninety-ninth birthday. As she put it, "there's no way I want to be a hundred!" And we all felt she willed herself into the divine embrace, after she was unwillingly moved from her long-time "Old Folks Home," where they served dinners promptly at 5pm and showed the Nightly News on a black-and-white Zenith TV. A dozen miles away, in an industrial nursing home with elderly patients left locked and screaming in wheelchairs and gurneys, she sat quietly reading *Reader's Digest* and looking out the window at crows that came to her ledge. Her sister-in-law (my great-grandmother) was on another floor, catatonic and bedridden. It was a shock to the system that she lamented, but still found mild peace in the sunshine, the crows, and the Sunday visits from family. But it was short-lived. Somehow there was a psychological and perhaps even spiritual stain on passing that century threshold, now coupled with being away from her old friends in their nightly parlor, chatting and having tea.

Aunt Anna (above), who became a talented seamstress in the same hometown I later grew up in nearly a century later, wanted to be a nurse, but was prohibited by her mother (my great-great-grandmother Martha), because she wouldn't let her daughter "draw a man's water." She had many memories like recalling old Civil War veterans parading around town at the end of the 19th century, or the story of a young childhood friend dying after hitting an iron fence at the bottom of a hill while tobogganing around 1900. She also had quirky old sayings like "happy is the coffin that the rain falls on," possibly from the English poet Edward Thomas (1878–1917), who died in WWI and wrote a poem called "Rain" where a similar line appears. Aunt Anna died on a sunny summer afternoon. I got the news as a young teenager with my 6-year-old sister, while we lounged in front of the TV watching Nickelodeon specials. Somehow, in my pubescent mind I thought I was at fault for her demise, because I failed to visit her more often. I recall offering evening supplications to God (in my more religious days) to protect the good health of all those elderly relatives, as if I thought they would live forever. But they didn't, of course, and over those years members of that generation passed on in quick succession and we carried on with the activities and responsibilities of our lives.

Our large family gathered at the local funeral home and we made our farewells before the burial. I don't remember exactly now, but it seemed to be overcast. I'm not sure how happy the coffin was that day, but it may have rained. We were all there, and soon left for repast and fellowship. The curious thing about most American deaths is how they contrast to other cultures, how there is a delineation between the living and the dead, and how quickly and easily people are forgotten. Perhaps it is in the social fabric of our culture

of "now and later." Rather than be tied to the remnants of the past, we bolt ahead, away from the discomfort of human finality, almost in a capitalistic dusting of the hands that satisfies our self-appointed desires to move on. I have learned many lessons about this contrast in our multicultural "deathworlds"—spaces where we experience loss of human life and the ambiguous spaces we inhabit as the survivors. Around the time of Anna's death, I began violin lessons with an 80-year-old doctor and skilled violinist, Dr. Herman Ash (above), who had fled the Nazis after being kicked out of medical school for being Jewish, and settled finally in the Hudson Valley, just outside of NYC. Among the many things he taught me were little acts of tradition, including the *Yahrzeit* candle, lit in memory of deceased family and friends each year. That simple gesture was deeply personal and enshrined the distinct importance of purposefully remembering the dead. I also learned about *sitting shiva*, the Jewish practice of gathering around those who suffered a loss for seven days, to comfort, discuss, and reflect on that loss. That purposeful act of grace is very much cultural, because it comes from a collective belief in understanding the longevity of memory, human gifts to community, and a binding sense of tradition. In fact, the fuller practice of *Yahrzeit* requires a more extensive set of directions including fasting, reciting prayers, visiting the grave, and doing good deeds. Not only does this allow for a person to be remembered, it cultivates a communal sense of responsibility, care, and tradition that ties the memory of that person with acts of kindness and generosity in the present.

When Dr. Ash died at the age of 96, I had just started a new job in Chicago, and was unable to attend the funeral. As he lay dying, my family comforted him at his bedside, while a local charity, which he had worked with, sent staff over to rummage through his clothing before he had even died. At the time I was angered by this, but now I see it as a symptom of our culture of impending deathworlds, where spaces among the dying tend to warp our sensibilities of public behavior. Since we live in a society of commercialized dying and death, we mirror those expectations in ways that are less comfortable, partitioned, and ignorant of the process, instead of embracing it as part of life's blueprint. In another time, I would have gathered with a community around my old

teacher, but the trappings of the modern career held me back. Though, a decade later, I made a snap decision to make a 1,600-mile round trip drive from Indiana to my hometown in four days, just to see my grandfather in his final hours, something I am glad I did. But in the spaces of corporate deathworlds, we still are made to feel the guilt of "missing work," which to me now seems abhorrent that a system separates us from the things that really matter.

Not long after Dr. Ash's passing, there was a memorial service, but since he was a fairly secular man who lived far from his small family and had been a widower for more than forty years, no one ever observed his *Yahrzeit* or even sat *shiva*. But I think of him often when I meet his other students or play chamber music at Christmas. A few years before meeting Dr. Ash, my family went on a trip to Sicily and the region where my father was born in the 1940s. Older widows still wore black in 1987 and doled out cards with local saints painted on them. We visited cemeteries, which were well-kept, tidy, and full of fresh flowers. Most tombs had a black and white portrait of the deceased mounted on the front. People in each village or neighborhood took walks through the immaculate grounds. These cemeteries were made of small and large above ground tombs and mausoleums. And in a fascinating way, the living were very comfortable in these spaces, even committed to walking among the dead. Men played cards and smoked cigarettes, while women changed old bouquets for new ones. The conversations among family members were always about food, health, sickness, and death. A little religion and sports were always thrown in for good measure. The next time I experienced something similar was when I visited the El Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón in Havana last March, though it was much grander and more famous than the local cemeteries of Comiso and Santa Croce in Sicily. In the Havana cemetery, the evocations of the dead are profound, beautiful, and heart-wrenching, like the evocative tomb of child with mother (p. 2, right column).

Back in the United States, the grand mausoleums of northern New Jersey are visited often by the older Italians, but don't possess the same sense of an Old World cemetery, where people take walks. These are industrial and are perfumed with lilies and glycol ether solvents used in floor cleaners. Having a large family, we made many trips to these mausoleums, interring the older generations one-by-one. While going through old photos, I was struck by one that had thirteen people around a table at my grandfather's 75th birthday, only to realize that nearly forty years later none but my brother and I remain (below). A flashbulb blurring the center of the photo captures an older generation in all of their celebrations, anxieties, and concerns. A glimpse long gone, but still in the fragments of my memory. The traditions of gathering in formal spaces like this, honoring our elders,

and carrying on practices that guide our cyclical calendars in meaningful ways is very much part of what gave shape to many people's livelihoods, but also provided a foundation upon which people construct meaning. Perhaps the elements of how we understand tradition capture some inner human need both to mark time and to repeat it by remembering each other in the past and in those no longer with us. Few other places in North America have that sense of communion or transparency between the living and the dead, or the regular reminders of those who have passed on. Only in places along the southern border or in Latin America have I seen families gathering with candles in the cemeteries or having picnics upon the graves of their loved ones. Though it was before I was born, my Aunt Anna brought a blanket to the cemetery in winter to cover the grave of her late husband Anthony Benoit. In one of the Dallas suburbs a few years ago, during an el Día de los Muertos celebration, I experienced the most vibrant commemoration of the dead I'd ever witnessed. It married the two worlds in color, had decorative personal *ofrendas* (altars), and was full of food, dancing,

and music. There was no shortage of skeleton costumes either. This brash embrace of death and memory is a celebration of the deathworlds, a living into it that smashes any sense of corporatization and reclaims the cycle of human existence with dignity, care, and joy.

The paradox of time gives us both the celebration of life and the countdown toward death. And the period of the year when this cycle becomes ever more pronounced is spring, a time of rebirth and renewal, especially seen in holidays like Easter and Passover. These are not the only holidays, though, as the celebration for life, death, and rebirth cross cultural and religious lines around the world.

This year I managed to participate in one such spring activity that had been on my mind for nearly two decades: the Feast of Saint Joseph and *Le tavolate di San Giuseppe* (or as they say in Sicilian dialects *Tavuli 'ri' San Giuseppi*)—the Saint Joseph's Table. This time immemorial tradition supposedly began when Saint Joseph intervened in a drought that was starving Sicilians, bringing on great rains to drench the countryside and allow for blooms (like bluebonnets in Texas) in the fields to provide a bounty of fruits and vegetables. It staved off a famine and forever after the Sicilians paraded 5-foot statues of the saint on wooden beams or *machine a spalla* around the town squares, before offering supplication through a bounty of baked breads, boiled eggs, and homemade dishes to be shared with the community. After discussing the possibility of gathering for the Feast of Saint Joseph with a friend, she and her Italian-born husband agreed to host a celebration. It was more than I could have expected and over thirty people showed up to these friends' home, which they had converted into an old fashioned Sicilian festival, replete with dozens of floral arrangements, burning candles, countless bottles of wine, the massive loaves of braided and *rusticana* breads (of which I spent six hours making a cross-shaped loaf with a whole brown egg and fennel!), bowls of fresh fruits, and an assortment of meat and side dishes. The hosts built a large table like the famed *tavolate* and adorned it with decorations, including images of Saint Joseph and several photographs of grandfathers who had long passed on. The gesture was to the memory of those 'familial Saint Josephs' who had worked the fields, shops, and factories, came to this country, and perpetuated the tradition of the Saint Joseph legend and the *tavolate*.

I'm not even Catholic but have a strong affinity for this kind of tradition, its place and practice, its communal supping, congregating, and remembering, its lifegiving. A passage of time is marked by such events traditionally, as a reminder of times of hardship, loss, death, but also in the vibrancy of life and living. For the modern American (perhaps even Protestant?) mind and culture, such habits have often been viewed with a critical eye, but these now almost-lost practices should be seen through the ambiguous relationship that people have with death and rebirth. The week leading up to Easter, for those who participate in it, is our rare attempt at contending with this cycle, yet Easter is not celebrated as widely as Christmas. While Christmas is about birth, light, and celebration of renewal in the darkening winter, it has also become a corporate experience of the gift economy. Easter is not that. But Easter is also more bluntly about deathworlds and the extreme example of death and rebirth of God.

Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why it often passes unnoticed, along with the fact it is based on the lunar calendar, which has its celebration bouncing around more than bedbugs at the Waldorf. But these observances, of Easter, of Saint Joseph's Table, of a calendar and cycle of meaning were all the more poignant and significant this year, in an extended period of death and loss that many have experienced. We know war, famine, conflict. We see what traumas that end in deaths bring upon us, but don't really feel or fully understand them until they come close to home, in our backyards, or living rooms, workplaces, or neighborhoods. Over the last decade I've seen more generational death of grandparents (three of my remaining grandparents died within one year), sudden loss of colleagues, and traumatic or accidental death of people younger than me than I care to count. I've walked into deathworlds that I did not want or expect, nor can I imagine others do either. A former employee, an older woman from Korea, once called me up late at night screaming that her husband had died suddenly, then hung up; and a dear cousin of mine suffered a postpartum break, and casually met her end staring down a train with a smile. I heard the shroud of the temple ripped through familial screams over the phone the moment everyone discovered what had happened, two thousand miles away, and those sounds of visceral anguish are forever seared into my heart and soul.

This spring we lost several friends and colleagues. Our dear colleague Chuck Aaron sat with us for one day at lunch and died the very next day. Our ambiguity of space and presence was nursed by the balm of good community presence and the support of chaplaincy work, reflection, prayer, and human interaction negotiating that deathworld. In the month around Easter, three colleagues and friends died suddenly—Jalesia Horton, Len Delony, and Sonja Romanowski. Each held a special place for many of us. I traveled to the Atlanta area for Jalesia's funeral and experienced the transformative power of her family's spiritual spaces, all while witnessing the depth of their collective mourning. The rituals of the Black Church, whether the exultation of the *homegoing* practice or the reading of the family's proclamation were rich traditions of renewal, hope, and community support that expressed a triumph of the human being and their memory, in spite of the reality and discomfort to the living of the physical death. The last time I saw Len Delony, I had been in Fort Worth and stopped by one evening to sit on his back porch with him and his spouse Beka Miles and her sister. It was a lovely dusk, looking through the trees and talking. He began to tell me about owls and shared recordings of them with me as I sat there. I knew that he was ill and had wanted to ask him a question, which I regretfully never did—what does *hope* mean when you no longer have your health and are looking to a future you may no longer have on earth? I don't yet know the answer, but I'm sure he would have had something meaningful to say. And when we all heard that he had died on a beach in Florida and read of Beka's reflections on this and her conflicted feelings about what happens to a loved one's body as they are being prepared for burial or cremation, we were confronted yet again with the complexity of these deathworlds: what they mean, how we relate or not to them, and how we move forward with a balanced sense of experience and remembering. It came as a shock then too, when a good friend and supporter, Sonja Romanowski, died the week after Easter. We had just celebrated a time of renewal and she exited this mortal place with the energy she brought to life. A beloved benefactor and keen supporter of the arts, she was one of the most engaging people I've ever known, and the busiest octogenarian, for sure. Though, when her sudden passing was shared, there was a certain energy that dissipated among her friends, as if her existence was tied up with immense currents that flowed among us. Her tremendous power was in how she cultivated and shared in people's lives a breadth of enthusiasm that is rare these days; her

consummate joy and persistence to celebrate and see all people succeed was both intoxicating and highly contagious.

We know that people with certain energy live well-beyond their own physical existences, through their work, writings, and lives. Their presence on earth was so profoundly transformative that even when they are gone, they are not gone. Last summer, while traveling in New York, I decided to stop in Yonkers and make a pilgrimage to Rachmaninoff's grave (below). The great composer is buried in a suburban cemetery there and had lived in the

greater New York area at the end of his life. When I visited the Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, NY (adjacent to Yonkers), I saw a sublime 19th century cemetery, built along a once rural hill and estate. To my surprise there were other famous people buried there—Ayn Rand's small tombstone bore marks of a visit from loyal fans, with small memorial pebbles placed upon the top of her tombstone; and not far from Rachmaninoff's burial place was the Di Nero family plot, where the actor Robert Di Nero's parents were buried along with his grandson, who had died suddenly just the week before I visited. The ground was freshly dug and the flowers lay across the mound of dirt. But I had come for Rachmaninoff, and while

he had died more than eighty years ago, his plot was well-tended, and had fresh flowers and wreaths placed at his majestic cross at least once a week.

Our perceptions of death and the deathworlds we are forced to inhabit are affected by those who are dying or have died, and how they lived life, just as much as the societies and cultures we live in tell us to react, negotiate, and behave. When my great-great-aunt was born, she came into the world of the nineteenth century, where time, communications, and human interaction were different than when she died a century later (see her sitting on a wagon above, ca. 1897). A hundred years made traditions different, fade, and die away like people. And while we still disappear, it seems like some practices need reviving and repair to make the deathworlds more human, less corporate; to not let us succumb to the divisions of life we now endure, but to embrace all aspects of life, death, and rebirth, however we choose.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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