

The Burial of the Dead for Michael James Joseph Merenda October 2, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Wisdom 3:1–5, 9; Psalm 23; Romans 7:9–17; John 11:21–27

Since April, I’ve been reading two very different books. One is by the now-retired chief judge of the Federal Court of Appeals in Chicago, Richard Posner. It’s called, *Aging and Old Age*, published in 1995. In his last chapter, he writes, “The evidence that there really is a process called aging that takes its toll of everyone, albeit at different rates, generating [fundamental]¹ and often occupationally relevant physical and mental differences between older and younger persons, is more compelling than any evidence thus far advanced to demonstrate occupationally relevant differences in the fundamental capacities of men and women, whites and blacks, or persons who differ in their sexual orientation.² Any of us who have had our DNA analyzed are amazed by the breadth of our origins since the beginning of humankind.

The other is a collection of essays published to honor the Reverend Dr. Thomas Julian Talley, upon his retirement as professor of liturgics—that is, worship—at General Theological Seminary from 1971 until 1990. The book is *Time and Community*.³ Scholars from a cross-section of Christian denominations and a senior Jewish scholar contributed to it. The collection also includes three fugues and a hymn tune composed in Talley’s honor by our present organist and music director at Saint Mary’s, Dr. David Hurd, then a colleague of Father Talley at the seminary. The essays are interesting for someone in my profession, but I like its title, *Time and Community*. Our lives can be touched and connected to others for our lifetimes by short encounters and relationships of many years. The mystery of faith can also

¹ Posner’s word here is “palpable.”

² Richard A. Posner, *Aging and Old Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 358.

³ J. Neil Alexander, ed., *Time and Community* (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1990).

change our lives. “Time and Community, and I would add, Family” can be said to bring this congregation together this morning.

I think I met Michael Merenda on Friday, November 20, 1998, the last night of my interview for the position of rector of the parish. For most of the years I have been here, Mike was a regular at one of the early Sunday Masses—services without music. But he himself was an accomplished pianist. He and Leroy shared a love of music, opera, and ballet. My predecessor, Father Edgar Wells, was a pastor to Mike’s mother, Elvira, after she came to live with Mike and Leroy at their apartment on West Fifteenth Street. She was buried from Saint Mary’s. The Fauré *Requiem* was sung at her funeral.

Mike died at home, last summer on Friday morning, July 17, in the room where his mother died on August 17, 1992. When Leroy told me his mother died in the same room, I couldn’t help but think she was watching over him all along, with him all along, and still watching him as entered the life of the world to come.

Here are a few words about death and dying I read in Posner’s book. One of his earlier books was *The Essential Holmes: Selections from the Letters, Speeches, Judicial Opinions and Other Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*⁴ Posner quoted Holmes’s translation of “an anonymous medieval poet: ‘Death plucks my ears and says, Live—I am coming.’” Posner also quoted Georges Clemenceau, France’s prime minister during the last years of World War I. When Clemenceau was asked what he planned to do in retirement, he said, “I am going to live until I die.”⁵

Here’s food for thought: Posner who is now eighty-two years old, but was 56 when he published *Aging and Old Age*. He wrote, “Even if cowardice in the particular sense of reluctance to encounter physical danger is a

⁴ Quoted in *Aging and Old Age*, page 113, from *The Essential Holmes: Selections from the Letters, Speeches, Judicial Opinions and Other Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*, Richard A. Posner, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), xv.

⁵ Posner, 113.

characteristic of old people (not of all, of course), it is balanced . . . by a form of courage unknown to the young—courage in facing old age.”⁶ Mike faced a rare, incurable blood cancer, myelofibrosis, with great courage. Without his inner strength, I do not think he would have lived as long as he did. He was in that sense very courageous.

Mike and I rarely discussed religious faith. We assumed it. But we talked a lot about the life of this parish community, the range of people, here and elsewhere, who have a relationship with this parish. Many cups of coffee were consumed over the years when we got together on weekends when he was in town.

Finally, the gospel lesson for today includes the words which have begun the Burial of the Dead since the first Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549. I quote the traditional language:

“I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.”

I miss traditional words that used to conclude the opening anthem. They speak of the hard truth of death.

Words from the Book of Job: “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we carry nothing out.” Followed by these words from the First Letter of Paul to Timothy, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”⁷ *Amen.*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁷ Job 1:21; 1 Timothy 6:7.