

'Farewell to My Father'

This is Philippe Foubert, Val and Wilma's first-born, and only son, speaking from Australia. My father's death is like a great earthquake beneath the ocean, shifting the metaphysical plates of existence, sending a tidal wave of emotion across the vast distance. I feel an inescapable sadness, 'thoughts too deep for words.' My father is now sealed into the timeless silence of eternity – yet I must speak of him: and, after all, words and forms of speech were his own specialité.

Despite my geographic remove at this moment, I recall that before I returned to Australia in 2002, together he and I visited the grave of his beloved Agnes – and saw his own gravesite, with headstone already in place next to hers, there at Sunset Hills, where today he will be laid to his own final rest. So I *have* stood there with him, looking down, into the earth. He told me how, at Agnes' death bed, he had said to her: 'It's all right to go, because I won't be far behind you.' I responded: 'Commendable, but what's the rush?' Now, just 5 years down the track, a mere milli-second in geological time, he has already left to rejoin her as he envisioned doing. Still, he **was** 82, so he cannot have been in 'that much of a hurry.'

Joseph Campbell, the great scholar who inspired my father's thinking with his concept that behind the thousand faces of all the religions, there is really just one story, the perilous journey of the

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mythic hero, wrote that ‘The last act in the biography of the hero is that of the death or departure. But the hero would not be heroic if death held for him any terror; the first condition is reconciliation with the grave.’

I feel certain that at the last he **was** reconciled, within himself, and certainly with all of us, and then drifted away peacefully from this shore.

On the Friday morning of his death, he had already folded his arms across his chest, in a traditional burial gesture for the rite of crossing: that bespeaks a readiness, a peaceful consciousness, does it not? He knew his time had come, to go.

So, I **have** looked into his grave, but in fathoming the mystery of Being that is our existence, I have an unspeakable confidence that he is not there, but in a realm of light and peace, suffused with an infinite acceptance of who he was, and shall remain – and that is what he sought, and seemingly needed most: appreciation. James Joyce wrote of Ulysses: ‘He rests. He has traveled far.’

His last words to me were ‘Vaya con Dios,’ *go with God* in Spanish. I can be at peace myself, because those last words, just a few days before his going, conveyed a final reconciliation, and a touching salute, despite the several compound fractures in our own relationship history. I had said: I guess I’ll see you, on the other side, but you will have to go in an upward direction.’

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Admittedly, when he used that Spanish phrase, I could not help but also think of how he used to annoy the Hispanic waitress at the Mexican Restaurant in Issaquah, where we sometimes met for lunch, peppering her with pidgeon-Spanish phrases, served up with linguistic relish like some swarthy, vocabulary-totin' Mexican *hombre* out of a B-movie western. She humoured him, but walked away, shaking her head ... surely, if you knew Val, you had the good fortune to have that experience as well?

I loved my father. With his help, I became an over-achiever, but also a wordsmith, a *tourista* of high culture, and a more forceful person just by the dialectic of engagement with him. He also taught me how to use the F-word in a variety of contexts, and to call upon the name of the Lord frequently at times of mechanical failure. He passed on a sacred tradition: what to eat when it is raining in Seattle on Saturday: Grilled Tuna and Swiss on Rye, with a Kosher Dill Pickle and Chips, served with tomato soup. You may or may not know that my father was also an accomplished underground Pharmocologist: if you ever encountered the inside shelves of his pantry, and the row-upon-row of tablets and supplements there, you knew for certain that if downtown Bellevue were ever destroyed by a cyclone, he could re-open Bartell's Drugstore right out of his pantry. He also proved that you could gain weight eating nothing but copious quantities of diet foods, which somehow always

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included Strawberry Ice Cream.

I knew that he was proud of me, and my accomplishments, perhaps more comfortably and safely from afar, than up close. He was a forceful personality, at times more argumentative and judgemental than my sisters and I found comfortable, but with a certain combative toughness of mind, commendable and appropriate to his time. He came of age during the Depression, was part of what Tom Brokaw has called 'the greatest generation,' that beat back the Nazis, returned and generated families by means of the old tribal methods rather than by test tubes, constructed careers, rebuilt the European and American economies, and worked hard doing whatever it took to get the job done. His success as a debate coach was no accident: he had a forensic nature. His passionate and challenging personality, and his love of ideas and ideals, made him a superior teacher, as his students have testified for decades. He had a relentless will to live; he was a kind of force of nature, and only temporality itself, with its 'sleeper cell' partner, the clock within the human body with the battery that always runs down all the way, was able to do him in.

His 'determination' enabled him to survive the War, and later to overcome a heart attack, a broken knee, emergency surgery, cataract surgery, prostate cancer, temporal arteritis, and more ... until the final stroke, which he always said was coming, but then was unable to enjoy

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being right about **that**. It disabled him, but its impending approach annealed him into a final affirmation of love and compassion for his discontented children – and that was such a profound relief, and a healing and cheering thing, for all of us to behold. 50 years earlier would have been good, but this will do fine. His open vulnerability is what finally drew us to him.

He traveled far. He rests. We loved him. We forgave him. It was not always easy, but as he himself used to say: ‘So What?’ We love him still. To his tombstone, on which he himself wrote ‘Soldier, Teacher, Musician,’ I should like to add one thing more – Father. Fare well, my father. Say hello to ‘Our Father,’ for me. I plan to be a while yet. You showed us that we need to keep going, no matter what.