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Staring the immensity of death in the face

Bill Tammeus | Mar. 7, 2012 A small c catholic

ODESSA, Mo. -- It was sunny and in the mid-60s on a late February day in western Missouri -- in fact, it was Ash Wednesday -- as we stood at the gravesite here in McKendree Cemetery.

At the request of the family of a retired Presbyterian pastor, I conducted the graveside service, and we buried my friend Cecilia's ashes next to the grave of her mother, long ago a Cumberland Presbyterian missionary in Colombia.

This is what I prayed just before Cecilia's adult children began shoveling clods of earth into the opening that held the urn: "And now, O God, whose son was laid in a sepulcher in the garden, bless, we pray, this grave and grant that Cecilia may dwell with Christ in paradise."
One day, I thought to myself, others will stand on the lawn of my own church [1] and say something similar as they bury my ashes there. And I wondered if I'm prepared.

Theodore Roethke, in his lovely poem "The Far Field," [2] writes, "A man faced with his own immensity/Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire."

Ever since I first read that poem in the mid-1960s, I have thought the word "immensity" somehow was too grand. I think we wake all the waves, all their loose wandering fire, when we face, instead, our own insignificance. And yet perhaps what finally astounds us is that despite our seeming inconsequentiality, we matter to God.

So maybe Roethke was right. Facing our own immensity in that sense, we set loose the astonishment that sends the waves crashing, the fires burning.

This is some of what I hope to unpack this summer at a weeklong seminar [3] I'll co-teach in July at Ghost Ranch [4], a national Presbyterian conference center in northern New Mexico where I teach each summer. With my co-teacher, who's a physician and an artist, I'll be helping myself and others prepare for the end of life.

We'll be reading, talking, writing and sharing our writing. We'll be trying to imagine our own deaths. Indeed, I intend to ask members of the class to fill out a formal death certificate for themselves, giving the date and cause of their demise.

Nothing says the party's over quite like a death certificate.

In some ways, I think Catholics might have a better shot than do Protestants at grasping the reality of death. That's at least partly because of the prominence of crucifixes in Catholic churches. In most Protestant churches, as you know, the crosses displayed are empty. And for good theological reasons.

But in choosing an empty cross, we Protestants do something quintessentially American (and dumb) -- we deny death. That's not just foolish, but also unhealthy.

I wear a cross on a chain around my neck. The cross seeks to honor both the Protestant and Catholic traditions. I bought it in New Mexico years ago and was told that it's a Navajo cross. It looks to be empty, but when you examine it closely you find that its metal is uneven -- lumpy, even -- to suggest the presence of a body. The ends of the cross are flayed to suggest hands and feet.

So, yes, my cross is empty, except that maybe it isn't. And, thus, as I become aware of it against my chest each day I am reminded not only of my savior's death on my behalf, but also of my own inevitable death.

In Roethke's poem, he also writes this: "I am renewed by death, thought of my death ..."

It may be too much to hope that I will be renewed by the thinking I'll do about death -- my own death -- in my Ghost Ranch class this summer, but it's what, in fact, I do hope for. After all, understanding my own life requires me to understand my own death. Maybe some of you will come along in July and help me with that task -- and with your own.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [5] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust* *[6]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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