

May 2009

Easter Came Early That Year: A Eulogy to My Wife

Dan Edes
St. John Fisher College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>



Part of the Religion Commons

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Recommended Citation

Edes, Dan (2009) "Easter Came Early That Year: A Eulogy to My Wife," *Verbum*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol6/iss2/10>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol6/iss2/10> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Easter Came Early That Year: A Eulogy to My Wife

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The moss crumbles under my nails as I scrape away the overgrowth obscuring my grandfather's name. It flakes away into powder; while a light breeze scatters the remnants over the broken lamb marking my youngest brother's grave. I never knew Michael. He survived only days in the hospital unable to breathe correctly. Ironically, beside him is Bill, another brother undone by an ailing chest: pneumonia compounded with HIV/AIDS, or is it vice versa? Anyway, that was 1985 and HIV was still the gay man's disease and now, seven years later, not much has really changed. Back in 1967, Bill introduced me to the music that would later define the "summer of love." He changed my life in so many ways. My obsession with this and other music was just one."



Faculty/Staff Eye

Easter Came Early That Year: A Eulogy to My Wife

Dan Edes, PhD

The moss crumbles under my nails as I scrape away the overgrowth obscuring my grandfather's name. It flakes away into powder; while a light breeze scatters the remnants over the broken lamb marking my youngest brother's grave. I never knew Michael. He survived only days in the hospital unable to breathe correctly. Ironically, beside him is Bill, another brother undone by an ailing chest: pneumonia compounded with HIV/AIDS, or is it vice versa? Anyway, that was 1985 and HIV was still the gay man's disease and now, seven years later, not much has really changed. Back in 1967, Bill introduced me to the music that would later define the "summer of love." He changed my life in so many ways. My obsession with this and other music was just one.

My sister, sensing my wool gathering, touches my shoulder. I need to move Ellen's ashes into place; time for the ritual; time for the eulogy. Ellen would approve of this. It starts out with three poems from T.S. Eliot and ends with the 23rd Psalm - a combination of desolation and reverence. This is not a eulogy in the strictest sense; yet, the overall tenor parallels much that would describe her life. To my left, a couple of town workers lean on their shovels while talking to the minister. Their day won't end until after we leave, when they can finally replace the freshly upturned soil. As we all gather, the minister steps before us and begins. I am wrong about the order of the eulogy. It starts with the Lord's Prayer.

"Our Father Who Art in Heaven....

Easter came early last year. It seems so long ago. The vigil from the night before became a waiting game on this Easter morning. Wodehouse had been my companion for most of that time. The messengers were returning to the operating room, remarking on my calmness as they turned to leave. There was a subtle disconnect, shifting from Wodehouse's weird universe to this sudden new reality. Had it been a day later, April Fools', I might have reacted differently; but this was Easter. This was the day of resurrection. I sank deeper into the couch, reading again the last paragraph for a second time. It was Easter Sunday, I had Wodehouse to read; and time to reflect.

...For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever."

"Amen." I should have worn a short sleeve shirt. A muggy Maine day, close to 80 degrees; there is absolutely no shade in this cemetery. The

flags left from Memorial Day lay completely still. I can feel my head start to burn. Ellen loves this weather. It is one of the things on which we always disagree. I often accuse her of having lizard blood in her ancestry. Down goes my nephew in a faint. Everything stops. I use this opportunity to take off my jacket and we all get some water. The eulogy gets back on track and Eliot takes over.



"To whom I owe the leaping delight. That quickens senses in our waking time..."

It was Easter Sunday. Her reaction was different: non-reflective and visceral. The atmosphere in the room was brittle. Nurses scurried carefully in and out, fearing to break that thin veneer. The chaplain, sitting calmly in the rocker, looked shocked, as she expelled him from the room. "Don't bring God into this!" She always preferred Gorky to Wodehouse. Gorky's universe was black and white. He knew how to suffer, how to rail against the unjust turn of events.

...But this dedication is for others to read: These are private words addressed to you in public."

The minister has lost his place for the next part of the eulogy. My father is starting to fidget and my sister and I share a glance of

understanding. Don't get me wrong. I know my mind doesn't seem focused. It's not that I don't grieve. It's not that I haven't shed tears today. For some reason, I have always been part observer, part participant in most everything I do. Ellen often complains of this distance. Why do I always seem distracted when she tells me something important? Can't I even give her my full attention on this day?

"Let us go then, you and I, when the evening is spread out against the sky..."

I roam the medical library daily; rummaging deep in the stacks, searching...searching for clues, cures, any information that will make sense of our post Easter reality. The copy machine accepts my bountiful offering of quarters as it spews out pages of information on treatments and drug regimens. These I take back to Ellen and we read them together. What I don't copy, what I keep to myself, are the reams of data about stages and longevity. These linger on the lips of all the experts during our endless appointments, but we willfully avoid asking to hear these truths out loud. The doctors are our merchants of hope, our dream of resurrection.

...Till voices wake us, and we drown."

Why did I choose so much Eliot? William Blake had seemed too obscure; Ginsberg too angry; although "Howl" could have had a place here. Today, Eliot sounds so devastating. "I am Lazarus, come back from the dead, come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all..." When Ellen reads Eliot, you hear hope; recognition of life; and, through it all, the solitude therein. Why can't I hear her voice today? This eulogy is relentless.

***"We are the hollow men. We are the stuffed men. Learing together
Headpiece filled with straw...."***

Hope and resurrection; the possibility hovers, palpable in all our conversations. Doctors, survivors, friends, all speak of hope, of treatments, of success. After years of sleeping on a floor pad, we buy a new bed. We buy a new couch. We begin to establish a new normal in our lives. Our success is only stymied by one ugly word: colostomy. It is a clumsy word, an invasive word. In conversation and on paper, the flow of discourse can not help but stumble at its juncture. This clumsiness is mirrored in the effects: unexpected noises, usually at inopportune times. Sometimes it was a gentle flutter, other times it trumpeted, much like Joshua at Jericho, tumbling down the walls of denial we were stealthily trying to build. It demanded attention. Like no other experience, the daily change left her humbled and dependent, and she had never been a humble and dependent woman.

***...This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but with a whimper."***

The eulogy is almost over. It could have ended here. The unexpected parallel between this and the Lord's Prayer are found in the lines from this very poem. I don't know if anyone else noticed, except maybe my sister. Ellen would have known.

"Between the desire and the spasm, Between the potency and the existence, Between the essence and the descent, Falls the Shadow. For Thine is the Kingdom."

It is almost a perfect circle. But perfection is not the intent in this eulogy...

Suddenly, there were more good days than bad. By that Christmas, we traveled to her home in Connecticut. Christmas was always her favorite time of year. This year it was a bright time, a particularly wonderful holiday. All her family gathered together and she felt almost completely well. A sense of rejuvenation followed that lasted almost two months. A new, experimental treatment was found and she became one of the first to try. Everyone was excited by the possibility of this drug. There were protocols to follow and endless number of tests. By the end of this trial, we knew every department in the hospital.

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want..."

It was almost Easter once more. The results were inconclusive. The pain worsened.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

Morphine drips lead to strange visions. These were scenes straight out of Burroughs. We half suspected our current doctor went by the name of Benway; all this strangeness resulting from Bug Powder Dust or the "black meat" found within the interzone. These attempts at humor waned quickly as Ellen's moments of clarity faded. While in the past a source of hope and healing, this hospital visit was different. She just wanted to go home.

He leadeth me beside still waters

Ellen seldom leaves the upstairs bedroom. Unable to heal her illness, hospice care redeems her dignity.

He restoreth my soul....

Although by her side, most day and night, during the last two weeks; I am not there when she passes. The nurse, on her first hospice case, is more visibly upset than I am. At 3:00, my son returns from school to hear the news.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...."

The eulogy is complete.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..."

I now make my final farewell.