

I remember my friend and an inkwell

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—My friend, Robert Guerrant, died last week at 90. I wrote a bit of his story two months ago—West Virginia WWII-vet with a high-school diploma who was forced out of the mines because of black lung in the mid-60s whereupon he earned a master's degree from Harvard and ran a community-service agency for two decades.

I was informed that he approved of what I wrote, a fairly rare event in a biographer's life.

Funerals are affairs of sadness and mourning—coffins, limousines, processions, graves and familiar words. If you're lucky, you might get a recollection that captures your way of resolving the core dilemmas of life.

Wakes are similarly somber. The word "wake" derives from the Indo-European words "wog" or "weg," which meant "active." Wakes back then seem to have been held when the deceased still had some jump left.

Wake evolved to mean a "guarding" or a "watch over." When a wake is properly lubricated, it runs like a Rolls-Royce Phantom; otherwise, it's a bunch of squeaky wheels.

Most dead people I've known haven't said much about how they want to be sent off. Arrangements fall to the family who tend to be at their least flexible in these moments.

The default position -- "Give the guy the usual." -- is used because people know when to stand and sit, when to respond and keep quiet. You don't want to start throwing curves and changeups at mourners who don't even want to be in the ballpark.

I've always wondered how much honesty mourners should display at funerals. I try to say something nice so I don't get in trouble. An inoffensive remark has worked well for me, something like "His socks always matched, which, I think, says a lot about the direction of his moral compass."

The element of ending is always present at these affairs. "Closure" is the preferred term these days, which sounds to me like a vault door slamming shut to wall off the dead.

I'm against closure for people I liked. I want them to be available. We can "do" lunch without eating. I keep them on my email list—it can't hurt.

If you think of your consciousness as a big parking lot, you can insert the deceased in an empty space and take him out for a spin whenever you

want. Individual vehicles may get moved toward the back over time, but it's not that much work to keep their batteries charged and the floor mats vacuumed.

I realize that this is not the normal approach to these matters.

Memorial services can be better than funerals. For one thing, all the details of burial or cremation are out of the picture. For another, attendees might be encouraged to say a few words.

It's important to remember the deceased as having some wit, or at least a peeking sense of human absurdity.

A well-thought-through memorial service encourages the survivors to laugh with the departed, not at him. This is not as easy as it sounds.

I like hearing funny stories about the guest of honor. I lean toward those that are both funny and courageous, funny and self-defeating, and funny with a point. I like to laugh so hard that I can't catch my breath, which beats grieving.

I don't care about acts of charity and generosity. Everybody chalks up a couple of nice things given enough time.

Memorial services are not opportunities to share secrets about weakness or bad behavior. On the other hand, honest mistakes are always fair game as are good deeds that have been properly punished.

Sometimes a service can resemble a high-school reunion when a confession illuminates a mystery or reveals the long-buried explanation of why something happened.

A fourth-grade classmate took me aside at our last reunion and confessed that she had deliberately, intentionally and willfully set me up at Sunnyside Elementary almost 60 years ago.

With malice aforethought, this girl, who was pretty beyond my understanding, wagged her long ponytail in front of me as I sat behind her. Her hypno-sexual metronome so deranged me that I, with great stealth and cunning, dunked it in my inkwell. This passed for erotic communication in the fourth grade.

(Inkwells were small glass bottles that rested in a hole at the front of each elementary desk. They held blue-black ink that you dipped your pen into when you had to write cursive on lined paper using your brain as a virtual keyboard. I was better at dunking than penmanship.)

A cute girl with a drippy, black-tipped ponytail caused a stir. She, of course, stirred the most, which was her plan. She and four or five ladies in waiting ran to the bathroom where they washed her up and rung her out.

Miss Roth escorted me by the ear to The Principal's Office where Miss Elizabeth Neill, who always smelled good, smiled and asked me whether I liked Nancy a lot. No subtle, psychoanalytic rubber hose was going to beat a confession out of me. My mother was called.

I was eventually reinstated to a different seat. My inkwell was never filled again. And I never knew that I had been lured into crime by a flirt with a swish until our reunion when we were both 65.

At funerals, I've heard similar revelations. Once I was told that the deceased had liked me. At another, I learned how a fortune was started—the wife financed a new business for her husband with money she had saved without his knowledge.

If I had to choose from the unpalatable options, I'd favor a covered-dish picnic as a memorial-service setting. But that's my useless, vestigial hippie gland squeezing out its last say. If it were it up to me, I'd bag the whole shebang.

I don't want a funeral, wake or memorial service.

I've told my likely survivors that I want to be buried in a simple wooden box or cremated. I suppose I should choose one or the other and not dump that burden on them.

A coffin would work better. It's bigger than an urn. Whatever harm I've caused can be tossed in beside me where it belongs.

I don't want to be mourned or even missed.

I've told the resident marital other that she should remarry quickly. Her response has been on the order of "Are you kidding me?"

Robert shared my distaste for funeral services, particularly the drawn-out kind. He left in the middle of one recently, but I think he's going to have to suffer through what's scheduled for him tomorrow.

If he were here, he and I would be in the back row where the big lugs and the smart-alecks hang out, talking smack about the deceased under our breaths. We'd be leaning forward to hide our irreverence. We'd try to muffle our laughter so The Authorities wouldn't kick us out or call our mothers.

I'd love to hear his scatological commentary as the encomiums on his behalf roll over his attendees.

He was a guy who did things his own way to suit himself. That's the way he took himself, and that's the way I took him.

He liked women. In the hospital a couple of months ago, he was putting moves on the nurses. Successful moves! At 90!

He knew who he was.

He probably wouldn't object if I write that I miss him. "You should have called more often," he'd say with a laugh. He's right. I should have.

Among his talents, he knew how to dandle a nine-month-old on his knee. He was the only person who ever got a belly laugh out of my son.

"O Death, where is thy sting?"

I'll tell you where it is. Right here.

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