

Scattered Remains

My father-in-law died this past Memorial Day, 16 days shy of his 92nd birthday. Following the church memorial service and a brief committal ceremony, at which most of his physical remains were placed in the church's columbarium, a few family members made a pilgrimage to the local cemetery to visit the grave of his first wife, my mother-in-law. My brother-in-law had kept apart a small container of "ashes," from which we each took a small amount to scatter on her grave. In this small and mostly symbolic way we honored the relationship that had brought my wife and her brother into being, and profoundly shaped the lives of all the rest of us.

The scattering of remains has become a fairly common practice. The intent and symbolism seem to me to matter much more than what actually happens, physically speaking.

In a different way, I deal with scattered remains all the time. I frequent auctions, many of which are estate sales of persons who are deceased or in the final stage of their lives. I frequently bring home some remains from the person whose estate is being sold. Some of these remains are altogether impersonal, evoking no particular association with the former owner. But some of the remains bespeak a life of creativity or relationship, accomplishment or passion, compulsiveness or curiosity or craftsmanship. Often I experience a sense of poignancy as I handle something made by, written by, collected by, or used by, the person to whom it once belonged.

Things do not a person make, yet they often represent a significant investment of a person's life. Most such things, if not thrown away, end up being scattered among a great diversity of people with all sorts of different purposes for them. The disposal of a person's remains evokes a certain sadness, as one realizes how much will not endure, but there is also opportunity to preserve, use, cherish, and pass on what seems to embody continuing value.

I buy things at auction because they interest me, or I envision some use for them, but I often find myself called to be a steward of what another person has left behind.

In larger perspective, everything that is made has somebody's life poured into it. We honor the makers, and former owners, by making good use of what we can, and passing on what may still be of value to others.

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