

Celebrate the Myriad Ways

Richard T. Hull

Tallahassee, Florida

On July 11, 1987, I found our only child, Geoffrey, dead in his bed. He was home after his freshman year at Oberlin College. Dyslexic and not a distinguished student, he had nonetheless graduated from Buffalo's first-rate Calasancius prep school and scored well enough on the S.A.T. to have his choice of colleges. Anthropology was his goal and one of his passions.

He died from indulging another passion: experimenting with various drugs and gases.

I found him face down, the handles of a plastic shopping bag draped over his ears. Next to him was our soda-water dispenser and a couple of empty "Whippit" cartridges that had contained the nitrous-oxide gas with which he had filled the bag. His fatal error was in draping the handles over his ears: as he lapsed into unconsciousness, the bag did not fall away from his face; he continued to breathe the pure N₂O and suffocated.

Four years earlier, I had been drafted by the parents of Calasancius to take over as a temporary headmaster. The school was in trouble in several ways, and I spent three years balancing the budget, hiring new faculty, building enrollment, fund-raising, and negotiating a faculty contract. When my son's class graduated, I "graduated" with them, to return to the classroom at the University at Buffalo, from which I was on loan. The faculty, staff, and parents gave me a fine send-off.

Scarcely more than a year later, they all assembled to nurture us in our grief.

As many of the efforts to keep the school open had been staged from a local Episcopalian church, we decided to hold a memorial service there. This was odd, as neither my wife, Elaine, nor I had been religious since our earliest college years, but it made sense for the Calasancius community, since St. John's-Grace was where our lives had come together in collective effort to preserve the school that nurtured our children's minds.

With some misgivings, the Episcopal priest allowed an unstructured ceremony. He made some initial religious remarks, including Lamentations 3:22-24 and Psalms 23. He reviewed

Richard T. Hull is professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Buffalo. He currently serves as executive director of the Text and Academic Authors Association and Foundation and lives in Tallahassee with his wife, Elaine, who is professor of psychology and neuroscience at Florida State University.

the shared history of the audience and indicated that the service both had not been planned and was being planned during the week after Geoff's death. It was evident that he meant that as an invitation to all in the audience, which numbered over four hundred, to come forward to the microphone as they might wish and share the last week's thoughts. He finished his remarks with a poem my grandmother had written when one of my uncles, whom I never knew, was killed in a football game.

After a pause, when no one seemed ready to speak, Elaine came forward and spoke about some of Geoff's characteristics, illustrating them with powerful anecdotes. She ended by observing that the week had made us realize that we had many sons and daughters and many friends, all united in one big family.

The parent of one of Geoff's close high-school friends then read a couple of poems we had discovered in our son's effects. He wrote one at the age of eight after seeing my brother's ashes caught up in the strong mountain air currents of Colorado when we scattered them and the other the previous Easter, musing on the difference between a sheltered existence and one that tests one's mettle through adversity. He quoted lines from A.E. Housman's "Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff" and gave a rather stern appeal to the classmates to learn from his own excesses: "This hurts too much, don't let it happen again."

A recent Calasactius graduate (now music director of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra) played Debussy's *Le Premier des Estampes* and a tune from Bach's *The Passion According to St. Matthew* on our 1900 Steinway B grand piano that we had moved to the church for the ceremony.

Another graduate (then studying medicine, now a pediatric neurosurgeon) read several verses from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, including this reflection: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you, but not from you. . . . You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. . . . You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

"Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. . . . The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. . . . They come together; and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember! The other is asleep on your bed."

The line began to form. Classmates from Calasactius and Oberlin, former students of mine, friends of mine from my high-school years, other Calasactius parents whose children couldn't attend, and parent trustees of the school came forward to share their memories, anecdotes, and observations about Geoff and the school. We learned many things, a lot of them wonderfully humorous, about our son and his life with his classmates.

If there were space, I would review and even reproduce all these wonderful contributions. I did record and transcribe them, and I published them in a pamphlet that is available online for anyone who would like to have it as a model (www.richard-t-hull.com/publications/geoff.pdf).

After the ceremony had gone on for perhaps an hour, I got up and spoke. I recalled Aristotle's definition of happiness in terms of a life well lived. I spoke of this event as a celebration of our

son's life, not a funeral. I announced the creation of a fund to provide endowment support for scholarships to the school. And I thanked those assembled for helping us begin to get over the grief and anger at his death, for bringing to mind the good times and joy of his life and our shared efforts.

The priest then closed the formal part of the service with the observation that earlier, six years ago, he would never have considered that kind of memorial service. He observed that the day had confirmed for him the common sense of an unstructured, spontaneous service. He said, "We learn how magnificent the tapestry is when the people of God join together in a common event and have the chance to let the Spirit speak through them." He closed with several religious prayers, and we adjourned to a side room where food was available for the many who chose to remain to continue reminiscing.

Why did we have a ceremony in a church? Why did we "allow" religious messages and Bible passages to be expressed?

I think the answer is that we realized that the healing that this group of friends needed had to be pursued in the terms that each person's beliefs dictated. One of the things that was striking about this group, and, indeed, about the stream of friends that had come through our home during the week before, was how heartfelt and idiosyncratic were the consolations that were offered.

One Muslim friend came to tell us a parable about a wise man who had killed a child who ran from the village that he and his disciple were approaching in order to spare the child's parents the shame of a crime the child would someday otherwise commit. A famous concert pianist dropped in from New York to say that, from what he knew of N₂O, our son had died in ecstasy. A high-school friend of mine from Oklahoma City dropped everything, flew to Buffalo, and stayed with us for two weeks—cooking for us, taking phone calls, showing friends in, making them leave and us rest when he judged that necessary; in the middle of the week he confided in us that he was gay. A teacher from Calasactius called to introduce us to Compassionate Friends, an organization that had helped him through the loss of his own son. Another teacher looked me in the eye and said, "Well Geoff's finally done it!"—meaning, I suppose, that our son had always had an inclination toward risky behavior. The wife of a physician openly expressed doubt that nitrous oxide could have been the cause of death. A colleague from the university began quizzing us about our innermost feelings, as though we were in therapy with him. Several individuals offered the observation that Geoff had had a good death, without suffering, and that he must now be at peace. One said that God must have wanted him very badly to take him away from us so young. Many encouraged us to anticipate a reunion with him some day.

We could have taken offense at much of what went on at the service and much of what was said to us before or afterward. But it occurred to us that uncritically accepting the outpouring of others' consolations was the essence of what it is to be

humanist: one who seeks to understand and celebrate the myriad ways in which humans try to deal with the tragedies and stresses of life. Secular humanists hold that this life is all we have, and that what happens to us is the result of no hidden, supernatural forces. But with that recognition comes another: that humans must have, within the limits of mutual respect, the right to live this life under whatever structure of

beliefs makes it tolerable and gives it meaning. Giving life meaning is what humans do, and we decided to let all these reflections on life from the myriad of traditions and beliefs that give rise to them be expressed without criticism from us. We were just grateful for the love and concern that prompted those remarks that, taken literally and personally, could have destroyed many friendships. 🙏