

Tribute to Fallen Eagles

David Cordell's Comments

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Like many of you, sometimes I feel that I have attended too many funerals, the most recent last week. I have given eulogies for my father, my mother, and my oldest child. Sometimes simply attending church makes me maudlin with the memory of so many funerals.

I have attended too many funerals.

Ironically, the first funeral I ever attended was for one of our fallen Eagles, 40 years ago this past summer. But I haven't attended any other funerals for our fallen Eagles, although I knew some of them quite well. One of them was one of my closest friends at one time. I played football with two of them. I had known at least five of them since elementary school.

Our fallen Eagles died of heart attack, cancer and various other diseases, and automobile and motorcycle accidents. One died in a vehicle-pedestrian accident while trying to be a Good Samaritan.

They were as young as 18, and as old as 58. They were their parents' children. They were brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. Even grandfathers and grandmothers. Each had a unique story. Each of their lives had meaning.

I wish I had attended their funerals so I could have offered my condolences to their families. I wish I had been there to say that their child, or spouse, or friend, will be missed, even if I wasn't very close to them.

In John Donne's great poem, he invokes the image of a distant church bell, ringing at a funeral. In his words,

No man is an island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,

Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as if a manor of thy friend's
or of thine own were:
any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind,
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

With each death of a classmate, the bell tolls for all of us. It has tolled far too many times. I have attended too many funerals.

But I have also attended too few funerals.

Like many people of a certain age, I look back on some of my past mistakes, sins of commission and sins of omission, with regret. Many were rather minor. A verbal slight here. Ingratitude there. Over the past few years I have tried to make up for some of these misdeeds with personal apologies, most of which are met with a chuckle since my victim had forgotten about the incident. Until a few months ago, one of the reasons I was looking forward to this reunion was to give personal thanks to one particular classmate. At a previous reunion, I was wallowing in self-pity after a couple of "girls" said something hurtful to me. A few minutes later, another classmate walked up to me and said something complimentary that completely turned my evening around. I can never remember having my mood turn so dramatically in a positive direction. I had hoped to thank her, albeit belatedly, at this reunion. But I won't have that opportunity because she is one of our Fallen Eagles. How I regret not telling her how much that small act of kindness meant to me.

As we honor our Fallen Eagles, let us also pay tribute to the living, to those who have helped us along the way, to those who have encouraged us, to those who made a difference in our lives. Let us show them the thoughtfulness, appreciation, and friendship that they deserve.

While we still can.