

Eulogy – December 7, 2007

Von Maur Remembrance Gathering

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In the darkest moments of our lives when tragedy makes us more deeply conscious of our frailty and our mortality, we feel impelled to implore the Giver of Life: "Do not test thy mortal creature too severely." This prayer comes out of the knowledge that there is no life without its tests, no dawn without its dusk, no sunshine without its clouds, but we also know that when we are most severely tried in the furnace of affliction, when life's burdens seem heavier than we can bear, there comes to us a surge of inner strength out of a hidden reservoir which the Creator has laid into his creatures. Not only in nature but also in man, "When it is darkest, the stars come out."

Our hope, our grief beyond the power of expression, never have we felt our utter helplessness so profoundly as we do now standing at the very boarder line of existence, looking for light in our darkness for an answer to all our tormenting questions. No matter how far man seems to have pushed forward the frontiers of knowledge and acquired control over the forces of nature, we are still at the point of the Psalmist who lifted his eyes to the eternal hills, cried out, "Lord, what is man?" How slender is the thread of life. How quickly can the present become the past and erase our hopes for the future!

Indeed, time is but lent to us as a brief and sacred trust. We are like children privileged to spend a day in a great park, a park filled with gardens and playgrounds. The day allotted to each one of us is not the same in length, in light or in beauty. Some children of Earth are privileged to spend a long and sunlit day in the garden of the Earth. For others the day is shorter, and dusk descends more quickly, as in a winter's tale. But whether our life is a long summery day or a short wintry afternoon at the Mall, life is always brief -- brief as compared to the everlastingness of God's eternity.

Perhaps the most pathetic and the most heartrending episode to be found in the entire Bible is that moment when King David is told that his son, Absalom, has died in battle. David cries out in his despair, "Oh, my son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom, would I had died for thee, Oh, Absalom, my son, my son."

There is a burning anguish in this lamentation, which every parent understands only too well. And, which expresses the extent in which we live in and through our children. In the presence of this kind of tragedy, there are no words with which to try to mitigate the pain, or to console the inconsolable. This is why our entire Omaha community has been plunged into the deepest sorrow and why every heart goes out to all of you, dear families: we feel with you the intensity of your despair, and we share with you an inexpressible sense of loss and bereavement. It is so hard for us to believe that these extraordinary people with their vital energies, their gleaming youth, and their effervescent and charming personalities are no longer here to brighten the hours for us, to enchant us with the radiance of their presence.

With hearts too heavy for words and too sorrow-laden for utterance, we meet this morning here in this place – our minds confused and souls troubled, our spirits crushed. What can we say? What shall we speak in the dark hour when families are overwhelmed by shock and inconsolable grief? Death, whenever it comes, leaves a trail of tears, of pain, of suffering. But the tragedy seems beyond compare on the sudden, swift and unexpected loss of wonderful, promising people. This is a tragic occasion. Death cannot be reversed, nor can it be made pleasant. It constitutes an irreplaceable loss. We are here to say we share your grievous loss.

All life grows riper and fuller when rooted in the lives of upright men and women. When its soil is enriched by deeds of loving kindness and mercy, all life becomes lovelier when it is watered by streams of memory and fed by the cool springs of recollections and remembrance. Sudden death, of so many, like the one you have experienced breaks through the crust of the present, and preoccupation with the present, and revives the past, its tears of half-forgotten memories of childhood, of innocence, of happy unconscious

acceptance that life is good. Such memories are a blessing when they are woven into the fabric of life; and the memories that each and every one of us has of our dear beloved friends are happy ones. They are memories of their life of goodness. The memories of the faces staring at us from the front page of a newspaper, who not only accepted that life was good, but tried to make it better.

We have known tragedy before, and we have suffered other grievous losses, but there has always been at least a little time for a measure of psychological adjustment to the possibility of a friend, a neighbor or a relative losing in the struggle against mortality. We are still shocked, still unable to accept the evidence of our eyes, and ears. Still stunned how the angel of death swooped down and plucked all of our beloveds from our midst, to be able to assess our loss clearly.

Our rabbis tell us that when a righteous person leaves this world, the ministering angels say to the Holy One, Praise be He, "such and such, a righteous man is coming." The Almighty then replies to them, "Let the righteous here go out to meet him and speak to him these words of greeting: Let him enter into peace." Our beloved friends, joining the company of the immortal righteous in the heavens above. So, we here assembled, ask God to ease their journey and to lift our burden, and say unto them, "go in peace."