



Thanabstetrics



By John Hendry, MD

*So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not like a quarry-slave at night,*

*Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one that wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams
- from Thanatopsis, by William Cullen Bryant, 1815*

The day before Thanksgiving, I went to the funeral of a young man who had been killed a few days before when a van pulled out in front of his motorcycle in the town of Auburn. He was 25 years of age. His mother, Mary, my patient, is devastated. She keeps asking, "Why?" - sobbing repeatedly, "I just want my boy back!" The service took place in a beautiful cemetery in Newcastle in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

The late afternoon sun was streaming through the clouds, radiating off the trees in their colorful autumn foliage. Just up the slope from the gravesite was the older part of the cemetery, with stone monuments under the pine trees dating back to the 1870s. A long freight train higher up on the hill rumbled by in the distance, its melancholy whistle signaling the start of its transcontinental journey.

Each in turn, the people who had known him well spoke about their memories. He was a wonderful young man, quite talented mechanically, and an artist as well. He was named "Donnie."

I had been the first to see him when he was born. With his mother, I had seen him in ultrasound pictures even before he was born. On his birthdays and many times at Christmas over the last quarter century, Mary would send me pictures of him as he was growing up. There would be no picture this Christmas.

He loved his mom very much, as she did him. For the first years of his life, it was just the two of them together. And he had taken good care of her, even when he was a child. He was the most important thing in her life. He had invited me to his first birthday party, though I suppose he had help from his mom in writing the invitation. And now he was gone. She had lost him, and very nearly had lost as well the will to go on without him.

Mary is a religious person, and that is a great comfort for her now. She feels she will see Donnie again soon. She believes in God, but doesn't understand why she has to suffer this loss, why her boy never had a chance to lead a full life, why his wife and little daughter no longer have a husband and father.

When the coffin was lowered into the ground, she could barely preserve her dignity, because she didn't want to let go, because she wanted to be lowered with it into the grave, and she had to be gently pulled away, the last goodbye of a mother to her son.

After the service I held her in my arms for a few minutes. I was too sad to say very much, but I told her that all these people gathered here cared very much about her, knew how difficult it would be for her to go on, and were there to give her support to face the challenge of a life seemingly diminished by the loss of the son that she had loved so very deeply, the son who had died before she would, and, by our mortal perspective, before his time.

After the gravesite ceremony, most of the people went to the reception at the historic Portuguese Hall in Newcastle.

Most of those who had arrived by motorcycle to the cemetery didn't stay for the reception. They roared off eastward into the mountains wearing their "leathers" with the logo and letters of "The Messengers of God." Perhaps they had a gathering somewhere else to attend to mark the passage of one of their brothers.

White doves were released from the gravesite, about 10 of them. At first they flew just above the cemetery grounds, first in one direction and then suddenly like an echelon of jets in close maneuvers reversing their direction, each time the sun reflecting brilliantly off their wings. Gradually they began to distance themselves from the cemetery, heading higher and to the east in their aerobatic zigzag flight.

I had no place that I wanted to go, so I wandered through the rest of the cemetery, looking at 140 years of headstones. The older stones told me that the people below had been natives of "Cornwall" or "Surrey" or "Dublin" or "Leicester." Those of slightly more recent vintage were natives of "Lisbon," "New York," "Pennsylvania." But those of less than a century, and indicating no other place of origin, by default let me know that they were from where they were now...from here, from nowhere, from everywhere.

Some of the most recent stones had room on the inscription face to add another name, a companion. Others, more explicit and somewhat more complete, had one name with dates of "born" and "died" but the other name with only as yet a date of "born." Curiously, though perhaps understandably, none of the stones had only a single name with just a date of "born," and a hyphen awaiting some still future date of "died."

And where was my stone? Was it lying deep and still not quarried in Penryn only a few miles away, within Griffith's granite wall, supplier of granite stone for a century and a half to former citizens from San Francisco to Reno?

I am very thankful for the opportunity and privilege that I have been granted in my career as an obstetrician, extending now more than 30 years, to have been able to help to bring forth more than 5,000 new lives into the world. But how much it saddens me that any of those lives should be buried at an age less than mine, though nowhere is it written, neither in scripture nor in stone, "Thou shalt outlive thy mother's obstetrician."

Life goes on, for Mary, for me, for you, and for all the others at that autumnal ceremony. We all have so much more to do, in my case many more new babies to deliver - and so little time left in which to accomplish all those worldly, though not mundane, life interactions represented solely by the hyphen yet to be carved between the dates of "born" and "died" on the stone that waits for each of us in Griffith's Quarry.

DrJohnHendry@aol.com

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

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