

Three Graves and a Prayer

It was dreary and overcast when we visited our loved one's grave. After my mother planted the fresh flowers, she walked around the cemetery, looking for other family gravesites. As she pointed to each grave, she always told me a little bit about the departed. I was already familiar with most of the stories.

Then she came to three graves. They were different, since my mother did not even know if we were related to them. Perhaps they were old neighbors of her parents or distant cousins. Although we will never be certain, she told me about them anyway.

The father and the two children died of the great Spanish Flu epidemic that devastated the world nearly a century ago. The dates of their deaths, displayed on the three grave markers, were all within one year of each other. The mother survived them.

The husband and wife were originally from Italy. They came to America and had two children. After losing her entire family to the Flu, the distraught wife found herself alone, cursed America, and returned to Italy. The graves remained here but were undoubtedly unvisited and forgotten by all except my mother and myself. As I gazed upon the three graves, I felt consumed by feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness.

They say that we all pass through history together. Each generation has its own unique challenges, memories, tragedies, and triumphs. But those memories pass into history as generations die off. And while the history remains and the historical figures are often remembered, the common people of that time are disregarded.

We can make assumptions about people by our vague understanding of the era in which they lived. However, the personal triumphs and tragedies of specific individuals are unknown – forever erased from our collective memory.

Inevitably, nearly every person from any generation is forgotten. No tangible evidence remains of their existence; just the memories others held about them. Those memories also fade into oblivion with each successive death, until finally all knowledge and thoughts of their existence is gone.

They were born, lived, and ultimately died. Did their lives serve any purpose?

When my mother passes, I will be the only person to know the story of the occupants of those three graves. In a sense, I will hold the last meager fragments of memory about that man and his two children. My entire knowledge consists of only a few paltry facts, yet those facts will be all that remain in the world. When I die, I will take those final memories with me. And those three graves, and the story of their lives will vanish from history – consigned to eternal silence.

Voltaire said that “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” Yes, it would be absolutely essential. Without the hope of an afterlife and eternal happiness serving Him, how could any of us make sense of our existence? How could we stand in a cemetery, gaze at the countless graves, knowing that children died before ever attending school, mothers died during childbirth, men died fighting wars, and the average person’s life consisted mostly of pushing through the drudgery of each day.

If we knew for certain that there was no God, I believe life would be too unbearable for most people. It is only our belief in Him that gives us purpose in an otherwise seemingly pointless existence. Without that belief, we are no more significant than any of the billions of creatures that ever occupied our world – an infinitesimally tiny spoke in the endless circle of life.

All that remains on those three headstones is a name, the year of birth, and the year of death – the briefest of summaries for their brief existence. I pray they found happiness in their new lives. I pray they found meaning and purpose. Because, although I know their story, I no longer remember where they are buried. For their sake, I hope it no longer matters.

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