

#3 – On the Death of Your Dad



Dear Peregrina (10 AM):

I might as well admit that I feel awe whenever I have the chance to go visit Crater Lake, which I did recently, when I was driving on June 17th, making my way with Lexie (the car) towards Los Altos, CA, and to the Jesuit Retreat Center there, for the sake of directing the Long Retreat.

One assumes that the awe induced there at Crater Lake in all but those deadest of soul has its complete reason in the sheer beauty of the water, the footprint of the living air in motion on its surface (as if the air particularly delights to walk thereupon), and beholding the up thrust of the cliffs of fall that define the limits of the water's surface.

That "cliffs of fall" line comes from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ, which in part reads:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall

Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

But then wonder increases when one comes to knowledge of certain facts about that place – beauty opens the intellect; intellect explores what beauty already knows; and then beauty's impact increases by the insight intellect offers.

For example, the lake is a perfect, self-enclosed system. It is fed only by water from the heavens – snow and rain. There are no springs or rivers into the lake; and no exit from the lake by hidden watercourses. Instead, what water departs from the lake does so by way of evaporation; and what evaporates is perfectly replaced by rain and snow.

Awe increases.

For example, Crater Lake is the deepest lake in the United States, and the seventh deepest lake in the world at 1,932 feet of depth.

More awe.

For example, the exceptional clarity of the water – no greater clarity in a lake exists in the world – was once measured to 134 feet (though more typically it measures out at around 100 feet).

Awe-full.

And then there are human beings.

We, **unlike** Crater Lake, are not self-enclosed systems – we are not “pure” like that. Rather, we come to be and exist very much from others lives, both living and dead, whose lives and influences flow into us from the moment of our conception (first into the DNA double-helix; next into that which appears

in time as our “natural” endowments of grace, intellect, strength, social context, and knowledge of God perceived and processed through the love of our parents for us their emerging children; finally through all the friendships we effect and build and cherish (and those not friendly to us, but influential over us) through the course of our lives.

And so we, unlike Crater Lake, are “impure” by virtue of those in the midst of which we live, and from whom we proceed. Note here that I do not mean “impure” in the sense of “unclean”; rather, I mean “impure” in the sense that our lives are constantly saturated with sources of life other than our own – we are a “mixture” of sources.

And so unlike Crater Lake, our beauty as persons is genuinely different than that of Crater Lake. (Though we might think of the effort of the Carthusian monks to make sure that the only influences coming into their monastic lives are good ones, when referring to their so disciplined a way of life in their motto: “Never reformed ... because never deformed.”)

Ours is not a beauty of “purity”; ours instead is a beauty constantly made and re-made because of all that destabilizes us, and all that makes a previous version of our selves.

In other words, the beauty of persons is more like Mount Mazama itself, whose beautiful and graceful heights were, around 8,000 years ago, violently blasted away, enduring a convulsion that tore deep into the heart of the mountain, and gouging a wound so vast that none living then could have imagined it remaining forever as anything other than a permanent wound on the curving surface of the Earth.

Yet, over time, and with the assistance of water from the heavens, century-by-century, the Divine solution to the “wound” became clear. Where there was a wound, there came to be a lake of exceptional depth and clarity – our “Crater” Lake – whose water is so perfectly blue that one has not understood “blue” until he or she has stood there on the crater’s rim.

THIS is the beauty that persons can be, and through divine grace, and through the love of others who believe in them, are.

Peregrina, you can see in how I write here that I have greatest respect for the inability of words to speak directly at the greatest of life's Mysteries, of which death is one, and of which the death of one's parent is a particularly profound experience. And so about the best that one can do is to speak along the Mystery, rather than at it.

Yet, when I read this morning the Eulogy that you wrote, and which then (as your husband reports) you delivered with breathtaking mastery, I see a person given a startling ability to say the "beauty" of her actual (not imagined) father, articulating the beauty that is not like the "purity" of Crater Lake's water, but instead is the beauty of Mount Mazama in whose "wound" beauty was planted.

Hidden within the beauty lies the cost ... and knowing the cost, a person finally understands what the beauty means.

Your dad would have been so proud of you, Peregrina. Or better, he most certainly IS proud of you, and for what you did to help everyone see him, and in seeing him, to see what the beauty that he became means.

Your friend in Christ the Pilgrim,

Padre