

IDEAS

The meaning of lives that are no longer

A cousin's death, a graveside visit, and a meditation on the tethers that bind families together.

By **Bob Regan** Updated February 15, 2023, 3:00 a.m.



"One day my own children will be sprinkling dirt on my coffin, the memories and people alive to me now having faded to whispers and ghosts." DAVID NEAL HANLON/ADOBE

There was a time when our forebears took up their own shovels and picks to bury loved ones, literally “coming to grips” with the finality of death, the reality of dust to dust. Today, the sprinkling of dirt on a coffin is only a ritual, a vestige, but a powerful one still.

Last year I flew to Virginia on a bone-chillingly cold January day to attend my cousin Robert’s funeral. I arrived at the funeral home, paid my respects to the few relatives still among us (Robert was 25 years my senior), then browsed the display of memorabilia from his life and watched a slideshow of him very much alive and well. I felt reverent and respectful. I felt sorrow at knowing we would never have a conversation again. Yet I also felt, somehow, detached. During the service, as I listened to the eulogy and the prayers, I thought of the threads and tethers, sometimes sagging, sometimes pulled taught, that bind families together, willing or not.

After, at the graveside, when I took my turn to pick up a handful of cold dirt and let it fall onto the wooden coffin, my eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. Robert’s death was suddenly real. My tears were for him, for his widow Jenny, for his sons and grandchildren, but they were also for the countless souls gone before, for countless somber days leading to this one.

“Dennis and Annie Keegan,” our great-grandparents, now barely more than words on a yellowed census form. “Milker, Farm Cook, immigrated from Ireland, 1867.” The gap between their life experience and mine infinitely wider than the 150-year span that separates us.

Two Keegan great-uncles who died in their primes after eating poison clams on an outing at Stinson Beach on the California coast; at first a wrenching, wailing tragedy, then a story told and retold at family gatherings with somber toasts and slowly shaking heads, then even that paling to faint memory, their names lost.

My own mother, Alice, at age 3, looking up at her father's coffin raised on saw-horses in their parlor, he having died that very day of a crushing heart attack on the downstroke of a slaughterhouse sledge hammer, that image and that day imprinting as her first memory, ever-after shading her world view.

Then, some 50 years later, my youngest brother, then age 12, crying in the driveway, asking, "Am I an orphan now?" at the moment he, and we, first heard that Alice, our mother, was gone.

I watched Robert's sons, now in their 50s, lining up to throw dirt on the coffin, knowing now what I've long known: You can be orphaned at any age.

For a moment, I saw myself not as the culmination of the hopes and strivings of all those who came before but merely as a few lines in a story, a story unspooling at the speed of the world's whirling toward unwritten tomorrows, leaving in its wake chiseled-in-stone yesterdays.

And with the knowledge that one day — and it is one day closer every day — my own children will be sprinkling dirt on my coffin, the memories and people alive to me now having faded to whispers and ghosts.

And the message of the graveside sermon, so simple that it must be stated again and again and again: "Love one another."

Bob Regan is a professional songwriter in Nashville and the founder of OperationSong.org.

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