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La nivel spiritual Rezumat

Articolul de față ia în considerare puterea fascinantă a simbolurilor de a recunoaște și marca evenimente și ocazii majore ale vieții, el oferă o atenție specială rolurilor comemorative. Se adresează potențialului acestora de a explora relația dintre lumea fizică și metafizică, de asemenea luând în considerare capacitatea lor de a transmite, reflecta și conecta elementele celor două entități. Atenția este îndreptată către sensul în care simbolurile pot fi înțelese în relație cu arhetipurile platoniciene și către potențialul lor de transmitere a esenței unei idei în forma cea mai pură. Puterea conexiunii simbolurilor este de asemenea un subiect atins, la fel ca și abilitatea lor de a rafina și comemora îndeosebi experiențele și memoria individuală sau colectivă. Două exemple particulare vor fi analizate și discutate. Unul se referă la o vizită la Cimitirul Vesel din Săpâța, Maramureș, iar celălalt la slujba de pomenire făcută pentru a onora viața tatălui scriitoarei, la câteva luni după moartea acestuia. În amândouă cazurile, rolul și puterea simbolurilor sunt caracteristici centrale. În cazul slujbei de pomenire, este evidențiată în forma unei poezii scrise în jurul unui simbol folosit cu această ocazie.

The Spirit Level

Key words: *symbol, Merry Cemetery of Săpâța, death, sacred space*

Often, when people very close to us die, the objects, possessions and symbols which we associate with them assume a heightened significance and a powerful resonance. Those objects, which are very often simple things and of little value as we normally measure it, seem to act as particularly potent kinds of emotional catalysts for memories associated with the person with whom we connect them. So they are, in a very important sense, visible and tangible links to the person we have 'lost'. Just as historical artefacts can often uncover interesting perspectives on past ways of life and past customs and rituals, so too do symbols associated with individuals say something vital about both the activities in which they were involved and their central preoccupations while they were alive. The latent power of symbols in connecting us with people who have died is, therefore, something to which we should pay careful attention. A favourite possession or a symbol which captures a person's interests and values can sometimes evoke very strong and perhaps even sur-

prising, somewhat mysterious and seemingly disproportionate emotional responses. The object becomes invested, as it were, with the weight of emotional memory and, in doing so, can speak to us in ways more powerful than language of both the person and our relationship with him/her.

The singular import of symbols which link us to those who have died has been brought home to me in two very different ways recently. The first of these involved a visit to a famous cemetery in Romania some time ago and the second was when I participated in a Memorial Mass for my father who died on November the 24th last year. In both cases the central role which symbols played suggest, not only their universal significance, but also the possibility of a common human need for retaining a connection with the person who has died in some real and concrete form. Each of these experiences might first appear to differ in every possible way, but perhaps a closer exploration of the role which objects and symbols might play for those who remain, may suggest that there could be a deep-rooted, barely articulated need to both express and retain our memories in tangible, palpable ways. Warren (1) asserts that symbols 'hold a powerful attraction for people'; that a symbol, 'transmits something, reflects something and is metaphysical' in its power to 'go beyond the physical realm' and 'remind us of our invisible part.' He cites the example of Plato's 'Archetypes' – those forms or ideas which contain the unobtainable concept of perfection but which, nevertheless, exist even though their incarnation is necessarily flawed or imperfect. Warren states that 'this concept of an idea incarnated is the basis for the understanding of what a symbol is.'

Bodnar (2) speaks of the various ways in which we remember and commemorate the past, and proposes that by reducing and commemorating experience through 'memory symbols' we 'reduce our knowledge to something we can understand' and make connective links to the 'larger span and structure of history.' Warren asserts that 'to study the language of symbols is to learn about nature and about the laws which rule the universe' and that, in a very particular way 'sacred symbols can remind us that we have an immortal soul.' De Liso (3), in the consideration of the role of symbols in many different aspects of human existence, speaks of the sense in which 'the ancients understood their power and used them extensively in and out of their culture for protection, fertility, wealth, crop germination, death and birth rituals.' He proposes that symbols are 'like road maps', and that 'the road, in this case is energy - an energy which, like a roadway can twist and bend and connect two things together.' This connective link which sacred symbols can forge between the physical and metaphysical elements of our understanding and consciousness is clearly apparent when one considers the various ways in which we choose to commemorate the dead.

One of the most interesting and indeed vibrant examples of a very distinctive approach to the commemoration of the dead in iconic, pictorial and symbolic form is to be found in the famous Cimitirul Vesel, the Merry Cemetery in Sapanta, Maramures. Some time ago I had the opportunity of visiting the cemetery in the company of colleagues from the University of Baia Mare, and the experience is one which I will never forget. First of all the visit differed significantly from any former experience of cemeteries which I have had, in the sense that I have always thought of graveyards as quiet, restful, reflective and, in some cases, even bleak spaces. Secondly, and not merely because this cemetery is very popular with tourists and is therefore a busy, somewhat noisy place, there was a totally different atmosphere in this sacred space - an atmosphere, which I thought afterwards actually fits more perfectly with what, in ideal terms, a cemetery should be. It was, in effect, a truly joyful experience to be there.

The iconography and the commemoration of the lives of those who were buried there in visual and pictorial form, has succeeded in creating an essentially celebratory tone to the memory of their lives, and the satirical epitaphs add to the notion that death, the celebration of life and the idea of merriment in remembrance are not, in fact, paradoxical at all, but in many ways glorifications of life with all its twists and turns. The distinctive oak crosses with their pictures which describe the lives of the deceased and, in some cases, their modes of death, propose an essentially joyful attitude to death itself which we may be inclined to forget without such colourful and vibrant reminders. The activities which the crosses depict and the symbols which characterise their occupations and preoccupations while they were alive, speak perhaps more eloquently than words of the essence of these people and of the values and dispositions which characterised their lives. Perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of the iconography in Sapanta is the searing honesty with which these lives are remembered. There is an authenticity there, sometimes missing in conventional memorials in which it is sometimes difficult to recognise the person being commemorated, - as such, there is a sense of a genuine encounter, even for strangers, with those who are buried there.

The power of the visual and the symbolic to remind us of what was important in the lives of those who have died was made manifest in a very different way when my family was invited to a Memorial Mass to celebrate the life of my father a few months after his death last year. On that occasion my three sisters and I were asked to bring an object to be placed on a table at the front of the altar which, in some way, symbolised the life of my Dad. I was also asked to write a short piece for a Communion reflection and thought that I might be able to connect my symbol with that reflection. My older sister, Anne, brought a Science book because in his working life my Dad had been a Lecturer in Chemistry in the University College in which I now work. My younger sister, Claire, brought my father's well-worn and often read prayer book, of central importance in what was a life characterised by an unfaltering spirituality and a deep-rooted faith. My youngest sister, Martina, brought a map of Scotland because that is where he was born and raised and also the country to which he loved to return in the later years of his life. So, what was left for me? For some reason I was beginning to focus on my Dad's love of carpentry and on the many little desks and tables which he made many years ago which are still dotted around my house. As far back as I can remember my father used to disappear into his workshop and spend hours there listening to the radio and making all sorts of things from wood. That hobby symbolises for me, not just a connection with another famous carpenter, but also the pleasure which my Dad had in creating the simplest of things for other people.

I wanted, therefore, to choose a symbol which connected with that side of his life and I wanted also to write something for a Communion reflection which might coalesce with the symbol chosen to remember my father's creative hobby. The trouble is that most tools and implements associated with carpentry are quite noisy, even aggressive in character – the hammer, the saw etc. require much force and noise, and my father was an essentially gentle and quiet person whose memory, I thought, should be symbolised by something a little quieter and more calm. Then, it hit me! The spirit level – that object of quiet composure, vital to the success of all carpentry and symbolic of my father's presence – steady, wise, grounded. So I got to work in writing a short poem to accompany the symbol which I brought to that Memorial Mass, and once again, in the most po-

tent of ways, the role of symbols in the commemoration of the dead came home to me in singularly striking ways. They seem to say much more when associated with particular people and special lives - they are invested with memories and connections which ring true and authentic as testaments to those who have died, and perhaps most importantly of all, like the cemetery in Sapanta, they place, in proper balance, both the joy and the grief which should characterise our attitude both to people who have gone from our lives and to death itself. The following poem tries, in its own way, to connect the life of my father with a symbol which represents one of his interests in life, and tries also to locate a 'spirit-level' kind of balance between the grief and gratitude with which we struggle after the death of a very special person.

The Spirit Level

(in memory of Jack Mc Kiernan)

It stands its ground,
Signals the straight path, the level playing field.
All is poise at its centre;
Eye of the storm, axis of gravity.

A still bubble of balance,
A quiet homage to steadiness and constancy;
It keeps faith with ground and air,
Holds firm, rod straight, exact and sure.

Father of life and love,
Spirit-level of the soul;
Teach us to resist the slant and sway of life,
The tilt of time, the shifting force of mood and mind and moment.

Help us to stay firm; to find balance and ballast
Between impulse and intention, forgiveness and fury, grief and gratitude.
Lead us to a place of grace and peace;
Keep us sure and steadfast and Spirit-bound.

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