



THE HOME FORUM

Leaving Footprints For One Another

A Psalm of Life

*(What the heart of the young man
said to the Psalmist)*

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream! —
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act, — act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

HE had spent more than 60 years with the same woman, and after she died she continued to enrich his life. He was 87 when she left, yet he earnestly continued to go to work every day — not because there was much to do at his old Brooklyn law office, but because she had always told him retirement was a foolish thing to do with one's life. This "up and doing" approach to life was an irrevocable gift she had given to him.

Another reason he went to work, I believe, was that he loved coming home at the end of the day, turning the key in apartment 15-C, and calling, "Darling, I'm home!" I don't think he imagined for a moment that she would reappear to take his hat and kiss him a welcome. It was simply that things were not as they seemed — despite her absence, she was always there, held in his heart joyfully and inextricably.

One of the last times I talked with her, she confided that after all their years together, her heart still "leaped" each day when she heard him open the door after his day at the office. She was an avid painter, so one might assume that her creative imagination conjured up such romantic images, but I doubt that — for I saw them greet each other time and time again, and always, remarkably, there was a freshness in their daily reunions. Room for surprise and change, mixed with a love of the familiar. This was a gift they gave each other.

After she left, he began sleeping in her bed, an arm's reach from his own. Whenever one of his children or grandchildren came to visit, he invited them to sleep in his old bed rather than in the guest room, because he enjoyed talking deep into the night. I (his granddaughter) visited quite often, and discovered that he spent much of his work day at the law office napping on a couch, which meant that he rarely felt like sleeping through an entire night. At 1 a.m. he would flip on the lamp by his bed and begin chatting.

When he had had enough, he would switch off the light, often mid-sentence, and doze. But at 3:15 a.m., it was on with the lights and conversation once again.

The first time this happened, I chided him for keeping me awake. But gradually, I grew accustomed to the fact that he took increasingly little notice of time. He developed a schedule of his own which, at home and office alike, consisted of working, napping, eating, and talking exactly when he felt like it. This was life in the present tense. It tired me out, yet there was a serendipity to it that charmed me.

One night, he never turned off the light at all. He just talked, reminisced, and recited poems. He loved poetry and literature. In all of his many books he had penciled on the fly leaves the dates when he read them. Some, like Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina," had two or three dates noted. He delighted in telling of his eccentric literature professors at Columbia University — particularly one stately chap who always wore a flamboyant black cape:

"He would arrive in a big black limousine with a chauffeur and a footman! We would all rush to the window to watch the footman drop a little set of steps by the car door and help the old fellow out."

Anyway, my grandfather was reciting poems that night when the lights stayed on and on. They were old classic verses whose memorization had been the stuff of his education. Poems like Shelley's "The Cloud": "I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers;/ From the seas and the streams;/ I bear light shade for the leaves when laid/ In their noonday dreams..."

As the night wore on, he mulled over Shakespeare's sonnets. He whispered the poems that Robert and Elizabeth Browning wrote for one another. At one point, he started a poem I didn't recognize, only to stop after the first two lines: "Tell me not, in mournful numbers;/ Life is but an empty dream..."

"What is that?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. Then, unable to remember the title, the poet, or the rest of the poem, he moved on the Keats and Donne. But several times he returned to that unknown

poem, saying its opening lines slowly, thoughtfully: "Tell me not..." It sounded terribly sad to me. I told him so. "Yes, it does appear so, doesn't it?" he said. "But it's not, really."

The next day I left on a writing assignment that took me away for six weeks. I was on my way home by way of New York City and, as always, made a stop at apartment 15-C. But my grandfather was gone — forever. Once back to my own home, the partial poem he had recited during our last night haunted me: "Tell me not, in mournful numbers;/ Life is but an empty dream..." I found myself repeating the words again and

again. They still seemed sad to me, even ominous. Were they a verbal threshold leading to a dark commentary about death and about life's futility? At the end of his years did my grandfather have deep regrets he never told me of, but hinted at with this poem? Was this man, who had lived so joyously, retracting his life example and giving me a warning? I pulled out my poetry books and looked for the lines. I could not find them.

A few months later, over breakfast, I told this story to a friend who teaches poetry and literature. From him I learned that the lines came from Longfellow.

After breakfast, I ran to the library and found a collection of the poet's work. It happened to be a well-worn, turn-of-the-century edition, one I could easily imagine my grandfather poring over.

As I read, my dreary questions ended and I discovered what my grandfather meant when he told me, "Yes, it does appear sad, but it's not really." For the poem is entitled "A Psalm of Life." In its entirety, it is a poem about life's great purpose that survives all time and all transitions. It is about the lasting gifts we give one another, and about leaving footprints for each other to help us find the way. So he did.

Bunny McBride

■ **My grandfather developed a schedule of his own — working, napping, eating, and talking exactly when he felt like it. This was life in the present tense.**