

Ashes remind us of lives

By Tim O'Toole

At the close of 2017, the Times Union published a page with a month-by-month summary of 120 notable people who died last year. Actors and astronauts, poets and pundits, felons and financiers, saints and sinners.

Perhaps you scrutinize the obituaries on a daily basis, looking for familiar names. Comforted by accounts of long-lived and well-loved individuals, saddened by stories of pain and suffering, accidents or illnesses cutting lives short. If you have some vintage behind you, you will compare your own age to those of the departed. We are finite creatures, occupying limited time and space. We mourn the passing of friends and family, and wonder when our own time will come.

Perhaps you've had a near-death experience (a pulmonary embolism, cardiac arrhythmia, IRS audit). In time, those feelings of mortality may dissipate, only to resurface when others pass on.

For some, New Year's Day is a time of remembrance of those who died the previous year. For me, one memory is renewed annually on its own timetable. On Ash Wednesday in 2012, one of First Presbyterian Church's memorable tenors passed away. Albert Wood was a fine musician, a father and an accomplished professional. Our Chancel Choir felt cheated by Albert's early death, but gave him points for his sense of liturgical timing. We sang that evening with heightened awareness of life's fleeting quality.

"My Shepherd Will Supply My Need" comforted us at Albert's memorial service later that year.

Albany Pro Musica's rendition of "Sing Me to Heaven" served as lullaby to their colleague, never anticipating that APM's director, David Janower, would follow Albert into eternity the next year.

Another Ash Wednesday will soon be upon us, with ashes on our foreheads to remind us that we are from and will return to dust. We may take comfort in the fact that the atoms in our bodies (e.g. carbon, calcium, pasta carbonara) came from exploding supernovas. Our own existence depends on the death of distant stars.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, when some Christians finally attend to their New Years' dietary resolutions. Fair trade chocolate sales may be a casualty of such resolve. Others will take on more activities, burning up calories through works of mercy. Tutoring school children, feeding the hungry at soup kitchens and FOCUS breakfasts, donating clothing to homeless shelters.

Others will picket state and national capitals, demanding restoration of SNAP (food stamp) funding, peace and justice in the Middle East, accessible and affordable health care, and dignity for all God's creatures, immigrants and refugees included.

Easter comes on April Fool's Day this year. It is not foolish to believe in life after death. Christ's resurrection reminds us of unfathomable things to come. A universe that transforms dying stars into heavy elements, supporting new life, is a hint of the marvels of creation.

Whatever your own religious tradition, be reassured that you are made of star dust. An indefinable immortality awaits.

Tim O'Toole is a First Presbyterian Church of Albany choir member.

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