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**UNDERWHELMED**

# Dead Wrong

By **Sandy Asirvatham** | Posted 2/21/2001

Funerals and wakes bring out the atheist in me faster than you can say "Madeline Murray O'Hair."

A few months ago I attended a viewing for a family member, E., who had succumbed after a three-year fight with prostate cancer. E. was only 60 and his death was hardly a quiet passing in the night, but ultimately we mourners had to admit it wasn't the worst tragedy imaginable: He'd lived an interesting life and had amassed many friends, relatives, and co-workers who loved, respected, and admired him.

E. grew up in a brutally poor family in rural Minnesota. His father was alternately negligent and violent--so stingy he wouldn't buy beds for his children but made them sleep on old car seats he got from a junkyard; so cruelly self-indulgent that he would leave his wife every time she got pregnant and shack up with a girlfriend (presumably one unencumbered by weight gain or morning sickness) until the baby was born. E. had escaped that cold, miserable place, had excelled at a state college, gone to grad school at Harvard, become an influential urban planner. He also escaped his paternal legacy, for the most part, to become a genuinely nice guy--although he ended up dying of cancer, just as his dear old dad had.

He had hobbies and passions, spent hours at woodworking and building a garden. He was a science-oriented guy, an agnostic, although he remembered loving to sing in church as a boy. He had a son, an ex-wife, a new wife, stepsons, a still-living mother, several siblings, and a gaggle of towheaded nieces and nephews. One of his brothers had followed in his footsteps and gone into urban planning. Lots of people loved E. At the wake, the young secretaries and assistants from his office were so distraught that they spent several hours sitting in the back composing themselves before daring to approach the open casket.

Apparently none of this mattered much, if you listened to the rent-a-preacher who showed up at the wake. The preacher hadn't known E. personally and so was incapable of referring to specific details about his life, but his sermon implied that the specific details were meaningless anyway. It simply didn't matter that many people cared for this man despite his flaws, or that some had been jealous of him sometimes, furious with him, attracted to him, bored by him. It didn't matter that he'd done first-rate work at his job but had also been irresponsible about his health (ignoring symptoms for years before seeing a doctor) and negligent about important practical tasks (he never wrote a will or a solid financial plan for his inevitable widow). The good and bad of his life didn't matter. What mattered was that E. had finally thrown off the burdensome yoke of earthly existence, its endless doubts and sufferings (I'm actually putting this more eloquently than the preacher did, sorry to say), and had gone home to be with the Lord in perfect peace and eternal rest. It was a glorious day. E. had embarked on a magnificent journey. We should not feel sad but joyous, for one day we'd all be reunited with E. in the great beyond.

These clichés were repeated for an excruciating 40 minutes. Like most sermons I've heard, it was composed entirely of bland, repetitive rhetoric designed to wear you down into soporific submission. There was absolutely nothing in the way of surprising insight, moving testimony, or narrative development, nothing that might shock you awake and focus your attention on useful truths. Even my husband, who is generally not as hypersensitive on these matters as I, turned to me and whispered angrily, "This guy makes it sound like it's just positively *great* to die!"

Granted, this preacher was a particularly mediocre one. But I've heard magnificent orators make the same basic point--earthly life is meaningless; only heaven counts--and it offended me no less. Even for those who do believe in life after death (as E.'s mother and widow do), how much comfort can they possibly get from a grab-bag of religious catch phrases and worn-out ritual? How can they skip from mourning--such a visceral, body-draining, earthly feeling--to this rarefied spiritual "joy" they seek, without paying any attention to the actual life of the person in



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question? What I yearn for in moments of extreme grief--and I'm sure I'm not the only one--is for someone to honor the exact, individual humanity of the deceased, not to fill my ears with language that's as generic as a toe tag.

I have a beloved friend, A., who's so verbally combative, such a royal pain in the ass, that I can hardly imagine how we've managed to stay friends through 13 years and dozens of screaming matches. At her father's funeral, A. simmered in silence while various funereal officials and facilitators spouted pieties about what a wonderful person this man was. A. finally stood up and said, "Listen, my dad was a *complete asshole*. I loved him, but he was a total jerk most of the time, to most people in his life. Can we talk about that a while?" People were shocked and offended, but, by and by, others started coming forward with their stories--some funny in retrospect, others still disturbing--about what a complete asshole and total jerk this man had indeed been, and how they would miss his annoying, burdensome, insufferable earthly presence anyway.

A much more fitting end than one-size-fits-all.

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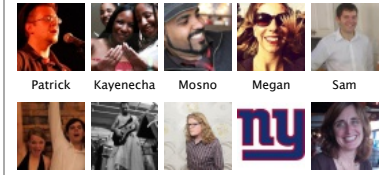
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