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In Faith and Hope

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

“That we may end our lives in faith and hope, without suffering and without reproach, let us pray to the Lord.”

“Lord, have mercy.”

Prayers of the People, (Book of Common Prayer, p. 383)

In this season of Lent, the solemn Ash Wednesday service and the ashes on our forehead are a symbol for us to confront both our mortality and our need for repentance. Lent prepares and strengthens us for our confidence as “Easter People,” to believe in the resurrection and the hope of eternal life. We trust the words from the Prayers of the People in the Book of Common Prayer “that we may end our lives in faith and hope. . .” That God’s grace and compassion are generously given to all of us.

This year on Ash Wednesday, I thought of David, my best friend. He died a few months ago at his home on the side of an extinct volcano in western Panama. I do not know all the details of his death, but I do know he had surgery for cancer last year. After I heard this alarming news and reached out to him, most of my emails went unanswered. This was not unusual.

Generally, I heard from David when there was negative news about religion – another abuse scandal uncovered in Rome, Anglicans tearing themselves apart

over the gender issues. “You Christians!” David would write on the article from the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*.

Occasionally, messages from David would become personal. He would mock me and my faith: “Where does it get you? What is the point? How can you believe those preposterous claims?” are just a few I remember.

David was born into a blue-collar Jewish family in the South Bronx in the middle of WW II but denied being religious himself. Years ago, we travelled together in Eastern Europe looking for his family’s roots. We prayed together in the synagogues of Kovno, Lithuania, and Krakow, Poland. We stumbled in silence across the frozen ground of Auschwitz; we went to seders with young people reclaiming their Jewish heritage. But still, David kept his distance from religion, always holding it at arm’s length, as if to avoid the stench.

David’s was a restless mind. He dropped out of college after a fitful year or two, joined the Peace Corps and served in Panama. When he returned, he went to work for Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers of America union in California editing their weekly newspaper. When Chavez decided to organize the workers in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, David went there and started a local Spanish-language newspaper. That is where I met him. I had also left college after two years and set out to find something more useful to do with my life.

From Texas, David returned to New York, becoming the press person for the mayor of New York City. Frustrated with politics, he cashed out his retirement savings, bought land in Panama, and built a house. He never married but adopted two teenagers with the consent of their mother who had seven other children from at least three fathers (that was how David described it) and could not feed them all. One of David’s sons went to Panama City and was lost to the drug culture. The other son stayed with David until the son married and had his own five children who called David their *abuelo*, or grandfather.

Two months after David’s surgery, I received an email from the oldest of his grandchildren, a polished young woman in her twenties who is perfectly bilingual and studying at the university. There were no words in the email, only an attachment. It was a funeral announcement: David was to be given a full Catholic burial, including a Mass.

Again, the details are sparse, but I am guessing his Pentecostal grandchildren did not arrange the Mass. David had spoken, often with disdain, about the aging Catholic monks who lived in his town and ran a vocational school for poor “Indios,” the Indigenous kids who would wander down from the mountains looking for food. It was at the school that David met the two young men who became his sons.

I can only imagine, but perhaps toward the end of his life, the monks visited David, and they arranged the Mass. If that is true, I am certain that initially David railed against God-and mocked their faith.

Because of David's life-long doubts about religion, my faith is stronger. His questions, disdain, and mocking tone about my beliefs sharpened my resolve and witness. I can't really explain how it happened, but David's skepticism made my faith more sure.

And now, some months after David's death and with the season of Lent and time to reflect and fortify my beliefs, I am certain that after years of struggling with his own devils, David found peace.

I see his story as an Easter message to inspire our faith and renew our hope. "That we may end our lives in faith and hope, we pray to the Lord."

