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Faith & Values

Faith & Values: Cemetery cycling celebrates human spirit

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Sometimes the outdoor church of life yields the best sermons. Such is the nature of the cemetery cycle.

Saturdays and Sundays are our favorite days to go on a long bike ride. My husband and I often start out with no place in mind and just go. That is how we ended up on our first cemetery ride. We started out by following the river. Then we amazingly discovered how much riverfront space cemeteries in Richmond occupy. This is definitely a great town to die in — one with a nice possibility of a waterfront view.

At first I was not sure how "respectful" it would be quietly riding our bikes through Mount Calvary, Riverside and Hollywood cemeteries, but when the Harley Davidson bikers came roaring through after us we figured the dead would welcome us just fine.

While riding through the cemeteries, there is the physical exercise of the flats of Mount Calvary and Riverside cemeteries and the challenging hills of Hollywood Cemetery, but there also is the mental exercise. The ride makes us ponder on death and filial commitment. The joint "married" headstones were most intriguing. We see headstones showing the name of one spouse with the dates of birth and death on one side. Carved into the other side of the joint headstone is the name of the other still living spouse with the birth date but no end date. All that remains is a date just waiting to be carved into the headstone; an empty plot waiting for that other casket. And I ponder, "What if the surviving spouse wants to remarry? Ethically can they? Did buying a side-by-side plot obligate the living spouse to never remarry? What if he or she decides to remarry and prefers to lay in eternity with the second spouse? Maybe it makes a difference if it's a Hollywood Cemetery spot overlooking the James

River with an incredible view. Perhaps that is enough incentive for the surviving spouse to never remarry. Or maybe the living spouse remarries but has a prenuptial agreement that provides at death that he or she returns to rest with the old spouse for eternity. Those waterfront spots must cost a fortune — why let one go to waste? What a dilemma. Will the deceased spouse ever know that the other side of the headstone never got that final engraved end date because the surviving spouse found a new love? How many joint plots never get that second casket?"

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The family plots — huge headstones with spots for up to eight folks — also got my attention. Two are filled. Who gets the other six? Who gets in? Who does not? Do they draw straws? Do spouses who marry into the family earn a spot or are they relegated to another graveyard far from their loved ones? And if the black sheep in the family does not get selected for the family plot — will he or she (now dead) ever know? Or care?

And as we cycle along with my thoughts pondering the afterlife, I realize that I must stay focused on the present since my husband is not always 100 percent consistent when it comes to signaling his next turn. Following him in a ride through Hollywood Cemetery is a bit thorny. Fortunately when I predict in advance his next turn, just a split second before averting a collision, I comment, "It's a good thing I have learned to read your mind." To which he responds, "that's not much to read." I chuckle.

Fortunately, we've already decided to be cremated. Hence no dilemma with regard to whether we purchase side-by-side plots. No need to worry about one of us remarrying and leaving the second plot empty. We have so many obligations to each other in life — should those obligations carry over into death?

That brings up an entirely new issue: the family debate over cremation. Which is better: having one's ashes scattered over some bucolic mountain or ocean scene, or having a casket in a cemetery plot? Some members of our family say that it is selfish to be cremated and not allow the rest of the family to have a place of memory. Is it selfish to be cremated? Or is it self less? Seems to me not having any cemetery plot to purchase and mess with makes things easier and less expensive for the survivors. My mom and dad have told us kids just to put them each in a green garbage bag, leave them at a landfill and spare the expense. We kids figure that must present some sort of health hazard and will pool our funds for the crematory. Plus with cremation, there's no issue of survivor's guilt. Why leave loved ones behind to feel obligated to go visit a plot of land and ensure that it's free of weeds or has not fallen into disrepair? On the other hand, I can appreciate the need for the survivors wanting to have a place to go. There is sentiment in having a place to go and reflect on departed loved ones. And for plots with a waterfront view, that is not so bad for the living either. Who is to say what is the right answer?

Finally, that leads to the other family ethical debate — the open versus closed casket. Personally, I do not want to be remembered looking like some wax museum make-up laden dummy. Cremate me and show a video of when I had a human spirit in me (perhaps on my mountain bike). Scatter my ashes in some open body of water somewhere and then go have a big outdoor barbeque and celebrate. But other family members say that viewing an open casket gives closure, that it allows folks to properly say good-bye. And so the debate goes. I say from ashes to ashes, from dust to dust. My body is just a vessel for my human spirit; one that loves a Sunday cemetery spin.