

One Last Gift

Category: Stories

written by Edward Beal | October 3, 2014

Edward Beal

During most of my career as a psychiatrist, I haven't often dealt directly with death. For the past five years, though, I have had the privilege of spending two days a week treating service men and women returning from deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq. Listening to their stories and talking with them about their war experiences, I've spent much more time thinking about death and dying.

Despite this, I was shocked when my wife recently told me she was planning to donate her body to science—specifically, to the Georgetown University Medical Center's anatomical donors program.

My first thought was that she obviously has never been a first-year medical student in a Gross Anatomy lab. My next impulse was to warn her of her mistake.

Fortunately, I restrained myself.

My wife had been heavily influenced by the example of our dear friend George, who died two years ago. After his wife's death several years earlier, George, then in his eighties, went back to school, enrolling in the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service.

The school treated him well: he found their programs very stimulating and had a great time. So he decided to return the courtesy by "gifting" himself to the anatomical donors program. He spoke about it frequently and enthusiastically—especially to my wife, who visited him weekly. Little did I realize how seriously she'd listened.

I knew the financial benefits of this arrangement. When you die, Georgetown arranges to pick up the body, preserve it appropriately for the anatomy lab, cremate the remains when they are finished, and return the ashes, all expenses paid. That is a significant financial saving—money that could be reserved for your grandchildren's college tuition.

Still, I know how bodies were treated when *I* was a medical student, forty-eight years ago. My worst recollection involves a group of male classmates removing a cadaver's sexual organ and using it to harass one of our few female medical classmates. I wanted no part of this kind of treatment for myself or for my wife. I decided that I would tell her my concerns about myself, but not discourage or interfere with her own plans.

When I raised the subject, she responded, "I'm going to attend the School of Medicine's annual liturgy and Catholic Mass for families of donors." An annual event organized by the medical students and their Jesuit advisors, the

Mass is celebrated each May, after the Gross Anatomy class has finished.

I decided to tag along and see what my wife was volunteering for.

The hour arrived. We drove to the School of Medicine, where we enjoyed valet parking and were personally escorted by a medical student to a large classroom.

Apprehensive at first, I felt surprised and delighted to see many of the first-year students whom I had taught the previous fall. It eased my concerns somewhat. Yet I was still completely unprepared for what followed.

Nearly 200 students processed into the classroom, each carrying a lighted candle—for their donor/body—and placed the candles on a stage. The group was impressively diverse: there were Jews, Muslims, Protestants, atheists and outright antireligious students in the procession. Nearly the entire Gross Anatomy class participated.

A student choir, directed by a student and formed especially for this Mass, sang many lovely hymns, accompanied on guitar by the Protestant minister.

In the center of the choir I spotted a young woman who had fainted during my Introduction to the Patient class last fall. (She'd been overcome by the stress of conducting interviews in the overheated examining rooms. Fortunately, we'd caught her as she was falling to the floor and had sent her to the ER; a full recovery followed.)

Now she waved to me as I walked down the aisle to take Communion. The Eucharistic minister offering me Communion was another former student. A Jesuit delivered the homily, and a minister from each major faith expressed gratitude on the students' behalf. These contributions, and those of the students, underscored the depth of their gratitude to the donors and their families. This was not the Gross Anatomy I remembered.

At the lunch afterwards, the conversations were equally warm and appreciative.

"Whenever I think of the heart, I always picture my cadaver's heart," one student said. "The blue veins, green lymphatics and red capillaries that you see in the anatomy textbook don't look that way in real life. Even modern three-dimensional technology is no substitute for hands-on learning."

Another student remarked that although she would never try to persuade her parents to donate their bodies, there was no doubt in her mind that she would donate hers.

Still another commented that throughout the entire class the cadavers' faces had remained covered, out of respect, until the time came to study the face. She spoke almost reverently of the day she and her classmates had first looked into their cadaver's eyes.

These students' care, concern and respect was such a far cry from what I had witnessed as a student.

This experience has gone far to change my view of my wife's decision to give her body to science. So, too, has my work with soldiers. Their altruism is almost infectious. Many of them give their bodies in service, suffering serious injury even if they do not die. Giving one's body after death is consistent with that altruism.

For me, the thought of continuing to be a teacher after death is quite compelling. To think that I could continue to be a part of the medical-education experience even then!

I guess I owe George and my wife a thank-you note.

I'm almost a convert.

About the author:

Ted Beal, a distinguished fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Georgetown University School of Medicine, has been teaching medical students and psychiatry residents for more than forty years. He has published numerous academic papers and book chapters and also coauthored the book *Adult Children of Divorce* and coedited the book *The Failure of Nerve*. "While working with soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center over the past five years, I began writing essays about their experiences, partially as a way of coping with the trauma of hearing these experiences. I wish to thank my wife, Kathleen, and her sister, Ann Redpath, for encouraging me to write. I also thank my good friend Scotty Hargrove for encouraging me to submit this essay to *Pulse*."

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