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Ash Wednesday: Dangerous old women

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When I was a child, after we got a new priest at the immigrant Hungarian church, my grandmother Katerin started making the ashes for Ash Wednesday by herself. She said the new priest was impatient, and didn't burn the ashes well enough at high enough flame so his ashes only made a faint mark on foreheads on Ash Wednesday.

That's how I learned to walk around happily with my grandmother's homemade palm frond ashes making a dark black cross on my forehead... sort of like a miner's headlight beaming to the world...

right there on the forehead, all of us on that high holy day signaling each other, 'Yes we are together on a pilgrimage of remembering... remembering life's median which is not cruelty, nor ignorance, but wisdom. Shed everything that is not wisdom. Shed everything that is not well needed.

The other side of the family too, during *La cuaresma*, Lent, would tell whomever asked, that *Cuaresma* was a time of penitence for life wrongly lived, a time of fasting to mortify the body, and a time of doing good... that last part, actually should come first, but too often it was not emphasized and seemed an almost "nice but not necessary."

But, the good works are necessary, and we old believers, with man-made map or not, we find our own ways to it all, one way or another, this tangle of 9th century and older rituals we call preparation for the darkening and resurrection of the Light of the World.

But, it didn't take long for me to realize that the official party line about Lent, was nothing like the reality.

Even as a young adult, I was doing Lent all wrong by trying to be good, by trying to fast, by trying do good. But it just wasn't working.

Something was missing. Besides my inability to be perfect. Besides my inability to ever dress up without something always being out of place, red slip showing, two different colored black shoes (yes, there are a thousand shades of black heels), hair sticking up funny (without realizing it). Even today, many decades later, my friends smile because I sometimes wail rather pitifully, 'I'm never going to be a saint...' because though every day I rededicate myself to trying to be at least like one of the lesser saints, on most days I have already ruined my brief run of saint-likeness by 10 o' clock each morning.

But, still, as a young adult, it was none of these that stood in the way of partaking in Lent in depth. I seemed to have a bad case of post-adolescent Lenten ennui.

Yet, my grandmother used to say: ?You go to the well to draw water and it rains on the way...? meaning, nourishment, understanding and insight may not always come in rote ways, but also arrive unexpectedly and from odd angles. Take it up: it is good.

Even when it comes in "unauthorized forms..." perhaps especially because it comes without being vetted by a committee of two-hundred people who insist ten pounds of mud must be squished into a five pound bag... and are willing to dislocate joints and cut off limbs to 'force a proper fit.' That isn't theology. That's ill theoretics pretending to be theology.

Thus, it wasn't until I took a sculpting class, now many years ago, I then began to understand Lent more deeply. My soul listened in class, and I realized that Lent is indeed near the returning of the light in springtime, and that Lent's work is related to sculpture directly: to release a scintillating form from out of the seemingly dead stone. Meaning not only the Cristo at the center of the Story of stories, but meaning us.

I find Lent, at heart, is like creating a sculpture, calling forth and releasing the light form from the dark block... and particularly: taking away what is not needed in order for the most radiant form to be revealed.

That was so pure to my little brain. Lenten ritual: knocking off the marble not needed, even the most precious Italian Carrara marble; cracking it along a fault line or a certain studied angle, hitting it with chisel and mallet, not smashing, but precisely, clumsily even, but softly... letting the unneeded marble break away... not trying to save what is not needed.

Only trying to reveal the new form brought by each season of heavy studio work... from hauling in the blank block of stone, to finding and freeing the living filament inside it, the form ever given by Creator.

Then, after, to polish that one and add it to the other forms of holy self freed from the stone in previous seasons. The polishing of all, taking an entire lifetime of Lents and all other days.

On Ash Wednesday, my grandmother and aunts and I would go to church and despite all grumbling before and after, get our too-pale ashes from the priest who was inexperienced at burning the palm fronds.

We all already had a bad reputation at church for praying too loudly... as many of the immigrants and refugees did... because that's how it was done, in sort of a loud musical drone, back in the Old Country.

Listen to the Bulgarian Women's Choir, their loud, slightly harsh but haunting harmonies, and understand that as prayer-method too. The family devotees wanted to make sure their Intercessor heard every word about how grateful they were to be in America, with a roof, and black dirt and work, and food, and... well... more food. They wanted the Creator to hear their travails and their gratitudes.

My relatives could not read or write, but most knew Psalms by heart, taking them literally. When "more advanced" church-goers who'd been in the States for several generations would give my aunts and grandmothers hard looks, those dangerous old women would just pray in Hungarian these words that the people who'd been in America a long time could no longer understand

... ?In my distress *I call* upon the LORD... he *heard my voice* ... and *my cry came before him*, even *into his ears* .?

And then the old women would happily go on with their praying, treating the Creator as though he was a very frail old man with battered hearing trumpets for both ears.

Well, like I said, probably a lot like your elders too, out of simple and harsh survival for years on end, the old women were probably already certified dangerous before they even docked at Ellis Island.

So, perhaps it wasn't so odd that on Ash Wednesday, my grandmother carried a little wooden needle case of ashes around.

She'd burnt the palms from Palm Sunday previous and saved them back. She didn't know she wasn't supposed to take on priestly duties. She thought she supposed to be an elder and exemplar to the young, meaning anyone younger than 110 years old, and that she was here "to remember people back into themselves.?

And so on an Ash Wednesday, she'd dress up her little black dog who had hairy brown eyebrows, and tell him (He was named Teresa... another story for another time) how they were going to go help people. And Teresa would jump all around excited to be some tiny version of a St. Bernard with a mission to help humans in the cold of a backwoods winter.

Off they'd tilt from the snowy wooden porch steps, and she'd be sure to have her vial of ashes and ask any and every neighbor she met, had they got their ashes yet, yes or no?

And some would say no and look sheepish; work, kids, family members, homework, bus, fields, repair, storm coming, no time. But never fear, for the Ashes Lady was near. Grandmother'd whip out her little needle case, dip the tip of her thumb in, and with soft eyes and as though talking to a starving child, she'd ask, Would you like some?

And if they assented, which they always did, they'd soon after be walking down the street with a big sooty black cross shining like a headlamp on their foreheads too.

My grandmother was the only light-skinned woman who lived in ten square blocks of houses owned by black families. Most blacks there were not Catholic, but the church ladies from the A.M.E. and Zion Baptist, and Daughters of the Everything, loved my grandmother and all her cooking and pastries she gave out freely to children and adults alike...

even though two people in our large immigrant family grumped about her giving out pastries to "the colored." They argued that it took a whole day or two to make the pastries and she shouldn't be working for the neighbors for free, and look at the steep price of sugar alone, and huff, puff, mutter, blather.

But, a lot like your own kin too, Katerin had an eagle's eye for hypocrisy. She'd say some version of: And so if it only took five minutes to make this sweet bread and this *ratás* and these *kiflis* and that *kolasc*, then it would be alright to give them to "the coloreds?" (Pronounced with a thick Magyar accent as 'color-reds,' with the emphasis on the last syllable).

Those particular relatives would throw up their hands and stomp off. Impossible woman. No sense.

And she'd say, "Ya ya, I gots no cents... Ha! See! But I gots lots of dollars worth of brains instead!"

They say that punning well is a indication of high intelligence. Or love of life. Or love of humanity. Or just being born silly... a virtue in itself.

But that stayed with me too about Lent: that on the street, giving what takes time to create, Grandmother asking after each person's life before she gave them the cross of ashes on their foreheads, and she would hear and comfort and laugh and pat.

After those tendings to the soul, listening and responding, then the ashes. Not before. Not without. So that too, the listening and the comforting and the doing what you can. The good works part. In the moment, the Tao of the sidewalk: Be with. Be with some more. However one can.

Let it be so for all of us at this time,
that by giving away, subtracting in some wise sense,
we can grow stronger and are mysteriously added to,
enlivened, arighted somehow...
able to reach, teach, be clarified and called,
to listen, and christen other souls, and our own,
in meaningful ways...
as we prepare for another turn of the great Wheel
during which time the stone of the grave, again,
will not be able to contain or restrain
The Light of the World.

In some customized way for each soul,
Let this, in some part, be the lesson.
Let this be our blessing of ashes.

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