

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Decoration Day

The Rev. David K. Fly

Driving south on Interstate 44 with a carful of peonies (pronounced “pee-O-nies” in the Ozarks) is dangerous. My car is filled with their thick, sweet perfume. It’s been a good spring for peonies, and I’ve filled every Mason jar I could find and cushioned the jars with newspapers. The smell of the flowers makes me remember lying under the big elm tree in my grandmother’s backyard on a warm spring afternoon, listening to the bees humming in the clover while I drift off to sleep. Good memories. But probably not so good while driving 75 miles an hour. I’m on my way from St. Louis to Monett in the southwest corner of Missouri to meet my brother and sister on Decoration Day. We plan to decorate the graves of our family. We’re the only ones left now, and it’s been far too long since we were last together. We’ve decided to hold our little family reunion at the graveyard in honor of my grandmother and Great-Aunt Susie, for whom “grave decorating” was a sacred task. They were the ones who looked after the dead in our family, and after they died, nobody else volunteered to take up their cause.

“Pee-O-nies” were the flower of choice for decorating graves in Monett. Every Memorial Day was an event. It was as if the entire graveyard had suddenly exploded with every conceivable color. Plans were made for weeks in advance. One hoped, if the spring was late enough, the peonies would be blooming and ready to be picked and placed at the graves. But if spring came early, the fear was that the peonies would reach their peak before Decoration Day and lose their petals. So Grandmother and Great-Aunt Susie picked the flowers while they were still in the bud, carefully wrapped them in damp cheesecloth, and put them in the refrigerator to save them from blooming ahead of time. For weeks their refrigerators were filled with peonies, and you’d have to pick your way through the flowers on the way to yesterday’s leftovers. Then, a few days before Decoration Day, they carefully brought them out, placed them in warm water to force their blooms, and, by the holiday, their homes were filled with the rich, sweet odor of those pink and purple, red and white bushy-headed flowers.

Each year on the morning of the decorating, Grandma and Aunt Susie sat drinking coffee, pen and paper on the kitchen table, carefully listing the names of all the folks in the cemetery for whom they were responsible. This led to stories about all of them, so that it was early afternoon before they began their mission. They already knew, of course, how many of the dead awaited them; they had made this trip many times. But without this little ritual, there would have been no opportunity to tell stories. Looking back on it now, I’m reminded of a litany of saints. That’s what it was like as the two women remembered those whom they loved.

The practice of decorating graves has fallen on hard times in my family. And I don’t think it’s doing too well in other families, either. People are pretty much separated nowadays — it’s like that with my sister, brother, and me. Graveyards don’t look like they used to on Decoration

Day — not the abundance of flowers and colors that once was there. I've seen lots of plastic and paper flowers, advertised at WalMart as looking "just like real." But none of them look real. All of them look as though they've been bought by busy people who don't have time to pick peonies.

It's late afternoon when I arrive. My brother and sister are there. We've not been there together since our mother died two years earlier. Few other visitors remain in the cemetery. There's one younger family with a couple of kids standing at a freshly dug grave. Another man goes from grave to grave searching for veterans of past wars, planting flags and cleaning tombstones. He passes me as I get out of my car and says, "Somebody's got to do it. There are a lot of guys here whose graves never get tended at all. I guess I do it 'cause I hope someday somebody will do it for me." We don't see anybody we know, but as we pass, people nod as if silently approving our presence here.

As we wandered among the tombstones, I was reminded of an old man who once took me for a drive through a cemetery in the town where I was a priest. "Some people call this a 'silent city,' but it's not silent to me," he said. "I know most of these people here, and they speak to me as I pass."

His words were true for us that day in Monett. As we looked around, the small town where we grew up rose before our very eyes and the dead came back to life as we called them each by name. There they all were, the people who had touched our lives and helped make us who we are. We wandered among them: the doctor who delivered us (me at home, the others at the hospital), the only banker we ever knew, who was rich and lived in a "mansion," the mechanic who worked on Daddy's car, guys who died in the wars, the folks who worshiped with us at little St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, the old photographer who came to our house every Christmas morning when we were kids to take pictures that he sold to my dad for a nickel apiece. Sometimes we would see a name, and one of us would try to remember and another would say, "Oh, that's the one who . . ." And we would sound like our grandmother and great-aunt as they told their stories while arranging peonies in Mason jars.

We approached the holy ground of our family's graves. Each of them came suddenly alive for us as we stood before them weeping and laughing and remembering. We knelt at each grave. We had forgotten to bring something to dig with, so, with our hands, we made holes in the ground into which we gently set the jars of peonies. The ritual was over — we had come home again.

The final two graves we decorated that day in Monett, before we went our separate ways, were those of Grandmother and Great-Aunt Susie.



The Rev. David K. Fly, a former clown, college chaplain and parish priest, took the early retirement option after 33 years of ordained ministry, last serving as rector of Grace Church, Kirkwood, Missouri. He leads parish and diocesan conferences and retreats, and he and his wife Adrienne are members of the teaching team of the Church Pension Fund's Planning For Tomorrow conferences. This article is an excerpt from his newly published book *Faces in the Rearview Mirror*, a memoir.