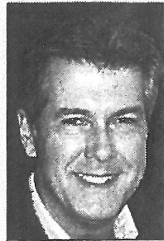


Monuments to self are nothing new



In a sidebar to the recent coverage of the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's death, The Associated Press reported that contractors restored "the permanent eternal flame" at his grave site after replacing gas and air lines, thus ensuring that JFK's tomb will survive as long as the United States stands and the sun shines.

Of course, both this country and the sun will perish and JFK's "permanent eternal flame" with them. Such is our eternal lot. Yet we build memorials to ourselves and loved ones as if they will forever be, a conundrum worthy of Camus: "I think my life is of great importance, but I also think it is meaningless."

It reminds me of a story a friend told me. One late summer day, he took his 9- and 7-year-old grandsons to the cemetery of their family farm. He pointed to where his wife, mother, father, grandparents and generations of relatives were buried. Modest Midwesterners, most graves were marked by clean rectangular stones.

Most.

Over a great-great-grandfather's grave, a marble column, with a weathered stone cup balanced on top, cast a long shadow in the setting sun.

Fresh from their trophy-filled

awards banquet for baseball, the boys gazed up at the monument.

"Grandpa," the youngest said, pointing, "what'd he do to win a trophy like that?"

Monuments to self are nothing new. The Great Pyramid of Giza, the above-ground tombs called "cities of the dead" in New Orleans and my friend's great-great-grandfather's tower reflect a yearning for recognition even in death. Like a cemetery, the Pyramid of Giza and the New Orleans vaults provide space and appreciation for family as well. In New Orleans, once a family member has been dead two years his body can be placed in a bag and laid to one side of the vault, the coffin destroyed, making way for the next relative's casket.

Of course, not all monuments are constructed after death. Some spring from the egotism of the living. See everything Trump.

Others are less tangible, but more substantive, the sum of a productive life: a loving family, friends, a successful career or business which benefits the individual and others.

But most of us do not consider our legacy as we traipse through this world. We attempt to do the right thing, to care for others and ourselves. We view actions which make things easier for all as fulfilling the social contract necessary for civilization. We do not seek recognition or an "atta boy." Not out of modesty, but because we are doing what is expected.

About Voices

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A "greatest generation" member like JFK, my father was a decorated combat vet of World War II. Yet he and his buddies rarely discussed, let alone boasted, of their service.

"Just about everybody served," he said. "Whether they were in the military or not, most folks pitched in. How you gonna brag about doin' something everybody's doin'?"

Such reticence may be why, in death, some individuals, or their family, feel the need to mark graves with a distinctive memorial as a final honor.

In David Lean's 1957 Academy Award-winning "The Bridge on the River Kwai," the bridge is the monument. Starring William Holden and Alec Guinness, the movie is memorable for many reasons, not the least the tune "Colonel Bogey March," which the British prisoners whistle as they enter the pris-

oner-of-war camp.

But Guinness' character, Col. Nicholson, dominates. His metamorphosis from a British soldier's soldier, staunchly defending officers against performing manual labor per the Geneva Conventions then ordering them to do so as they construct a bridge, "better than the Japanese can build themselves," drives the film. Nicholson moves from selflessness to self-absorption and unwitting collaboration with the enemy as the bridge rises, not comprehending his egoistic desire until the explosive end.

It is a scene from the night before Nicholson's self-realization that reveals the all-to-human origins for his motivation. He stands on the completed bridge talking to the shamed Japanese POW camp commander, Col. Saito. Nicholson won a war of wills with Saito and effectively runs the camp. At this point, though, Nicholson is reflective, not imperious.

"But there are times," he says to Saito, "when you suddenly realize you're nearer the end than the beginning. You wonder, you ask yourself, what the sum total of your life represents. What difference your being there at any time made to anything. Or if it made any difference at all really ... particularly in comparison with other men's careers. I don't know whether that kind of thinking is very healthy, but I must admit I've had some thoughts along those lines from time to time. But tonight ...

tonight!"

Nicholson gazes across the rushing river at the setting sun. The next day, the monument to self on which he perches is destroyed.

In contrast, a friend of mine died recently after a long battle with Alzheimer's. A brief and elegant obituary, devoid of aggrandizement, noted that he "was a fascinated student of language, literature and history, in particular of the Civil War. His favorite work on the subject, Shelby Foote's 'Narrative History,' contained one of his favorite lines, the last words of Stonewall Jackson: 'Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees.' There, he can now be found."

I will be cremated, ashes scattered. There is a craggy spot in Maui overlooking the Pacific that will do. An all-expense paid vacation for my heirs, in lieu of a funeral, my final gift.

That said, I have no quarrel with those who desire a more tangible "atta boy" for themselves or loved ones.

Who's to say? Perhaps a life well-lived, of great importance yet meaningless, deserves a "trophy like that."

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