



A Good Word for Ted Morris

Psalm 104, Mark 12.28-35, 1 Corinthians 15.35-58

Russ Dean, May 21, 2014

Don McLean's musical poem, "Starry, Starry Night," is a tribute to the painter, Vincent Van Gough, who tragically ended his own life, McLean says, "as lovers often do." And in that haunting ballad he includes this word of praise: "The world was never meant for one as beautiful as you." As I sat down early this morning to pen a Good Word for Ted Morris, that line came to my mind. Something about it resonated with me, about Ted Morris. "The world was never meant for one as beautiful as you."

He was known to many of you as Teddy, and, as you know, he lived a hardscrabble life for many years. His mamma undoubtedly grew old, too young, sitting up at night worrying; his daddy knew the heartache and the frustration of trying to be a father to a son bent on traveling his own, often-destructive path. But through the hard living and the bad choices a spark always shone through. People were attracted to his charismatic charm, his affable demeanor, his infectious smile. There is a beauty to this world that some can see, that is hidden to most eyes. Like too many visionaries and lovers and people of uncommon passion, though, Ted spent the first half of his life lured by the Sirens of that beauty, but, falling too often along the way for the enticements of its many glittering pretenders.

Thirty years ago that changed. And for thirty years Ted has been making amends, repairing the wounds, living much more in harmony with himself and the world around him than some could have imagined in that first life he lived. One of his mantras was, "If I can do it, anybody can do it." If I can do it, anybody can do it! The thirty-year testimony that came to a peaceful end on Sunday night, is proof of that biblical experience called, "repentance." *Metanoia* is the Greek root, and true *metanoia* isn't just feeling sorry, not just a shallow emotional contrition, real repentance means turning around, going the other way, the opposite direction. As a

symbol of that turning, Ted spent one day each week working at Ted and Harriett's house, in the yard, helping where he could. He was making amends, but making amends to parents whose love never wavered – despite the turbulent times.

Ted lived *metanoia*, and while he was no more perfect for the last thirty years than you and I, and while those years were not free of conflict, some consequences have a long half-life, for the half of those thirty years I have known Ted, his direction has been true, his intentions pure, heart, full of gold.

As much as Alcoholics Anonymous stresses the first “A,” it also stresses the second, “Anonymous,” but Ted Morris did not want to be an anonymous former alcoholic. AA was his life. In the fourteen years we have been the pastors of this good church, I am not sure there has been a Monday or Friday night that Ted's truck could not be found, parked going the wrong direction, under the car port out here, just below the sign that says, “No parking in covered area of drive through.” There is something fitting about that, don't you think!? Going the opposite direction (not necessarily the wrong direction!), in defiance of the rule that keeps most people conforming to the way it ought to be. Well, who says that's the way it ought to be? Heather said there was a sacred routine to Mondays and Fridays. The days were built around preparation for the meeting that gave him back his life. AA was a sacred obligation for Ted, a gathering of souls in a spiritual quest to become whole. Reading the prayer was always his joy¹, an expression of the deep power that underlies that program. The routine, the order, the steps of the AA program, provided the structure Ted needed to touch beauty in his own life, and to offer that beauty to others. For one who colored outside the lines, tradition, formality, and structure were important for Ted. The structure of the AA program became the means of returning to the spirituality that had been planted in his life in an innocent age.

One of Ted's many jobs in those wandering years was at Harkie's Nursery. Anne said Mr. Harkie was a sometimes hard-driving mentor to Ted, but he also taught him to love the trees. Their majestic strength, their

¹ The words to the “serenity prayer” were printed on the cover of the bulletin, because Ted loved this prayer and the Lord's Prayer, and he delighted in reading whatever prayer was prescribed by “the book” in his AA meetings.

painted beauty, their infinite intricacy and diversity spoke to Ted's soul. He fell in love with the trees, and then AA challenged him to find his Higher Power, and what a powerful step that is, along the 12-step path to healing. In search of that higher power Ted became intrigued with Native American spirituality, the reverence for all living things, the sense of the sacred in fauna and flora, the tangible glimpse of Spirit that endows the change of the seasons, the cycles of the moon, the fundamental elements: wind, water, fire, earth. Though Ted did not often come to worship on Sunday mornings in this sanctuary, he often worshiped at Park Road Baptist Church. He knew every tree, every inch of this ground that had been hallowed by the Ashcraft name, and more so by all the life that the good earth at 3900 Park Road continues to bear.

This morning as I drove up Park Road, when the church came in view my eyes followed the trajectory of the roof line and the steeple that graces this building, and there he was. A pair of hawks, birds which mate for life, often roost on that high perch. Most days I come to work, one is there, if not both. This morning I saw him up there. I know he was sitting there scoping out the next meal, but his majestic strength always feels to me like he is a sentinel at watch, and I see in him a symbol of something beautiful and divine, soaring on the wind currents, and touching down to watch over on this little plot of holy ground. As I saw that beautiful bird, I was thinking of Ted. I probably will from now on. He watched over those in his care, and he will always be a reminder to me of the beauty of holiness, the grace of forgiveness, the length of mercy, the diversity of God's good creation.

Ted wasn't Christian in the usual sense, though the "usual sense" Christianity has become may very well be part of the Church's problem today. One of the sages of ancient wisdom, though, spoke truth when he proclaimed, "*Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it*" (Proverbs 22.6). Well, it was a long, and windy road. There were lots of bumps along the way, enough heartache for several lifetimes. It took thirty years to find it and lose it and find it again, but at the heart of Ted's deep, deep spirituality, was the faith his parents give him, through the routines of Park Road Baptist Church. He

learned it as a Royal Ambassador. He heard it from the pulpit. By church osmosis, it seeped into his bones through Sunday school teachers. He memorized scripture, and the Bible stayed with him all his life. Heather says he spent hours reading and re-reading the Psalms, and the stories of the Bible were burned into his consciousness. The heart of Christian faith, which is the center of most of the world's religions, was the heart of Ted's faith, still. He did not depart from it. Love God, as you understand God. *Love with all that you are, heart, soul, mind, strength.* And *love your neighbor*, the ones who are like you and the ones who are unlike you, the ones who are loveable and the ones who are unlovable, love your neighbor – which includes the hawks and the trees – *as you love yourself* (Mark 12). AA and an earth-based religious system taught Ted, again, to love the person God created, that person who lived with unbridled passion and a love of all things beautiful. In the ways that count most, I think Ted Morris did not depart from the faith he learned as a child – thanks in large measure to the longstanding love, the patience and forbearance, the Christian character of parents who never gave up on their son. Ted, well-done. *Well-done, good and faithful servant* (Matthew 25.23).

I asked the family yesterday for the one word which best describes Ted Morris, and I heard: generous... magical... powerful. Jamie, who had experienced the wonderful, fun, caring love of his Uncle Ted, said, "He had a presence." There is no doubt about that. He had a presence. For the presence of Ted Morris, who taught each of us by his deeply spirited love of life, his passionate desire to help a brother or sister in need, his insatiable pursuit of all things beautiful... For Ted Morris, thanks be to God.

Amen.

A Family Reflection: Heather Morris

First, thank you all coming. I truly believe Ted is here with us holding us in his mighty arms. His Popeyes' arms as I called them.

Ted enriched our lives. He brought Hawk and I into a wonderful family. He gave us many friends who became family of our hearts.

Ted shared so many tricks-of-the-trade in the gardens and with the trees. Trees were his passion. Flowers were his art. At home, we have flowers on the table every day of the year.

It was with the trees that he trimmed to perfection that his body began to fail him. He was a strong man with resilience to keep moving going forward.

Ted took to the wild road. Life was an adventure. As time passed, Ted found a warrior spirit within himself and trained himself to be the fastest, the most accurate, and invincible man there is.

Later, Ted took a new direction. 30 years sobriety. Ted told me that his mom, Harriet said that she didn't think he would even live to be 30 years. Bet, she's proud of him. I know papa is. I am.

Ted lived a good life, albeit short. Ted lived it fast, and died too young. So many dreams yet unfilled. I will miss him.

Our time was short, but we had a very deep relationship and we were looking ahead. He spent the last hours in my arms as we laid together on his bed. His last breath was filled with my kiss goodbye.

We had a fantastic 5 years, 2 of them married. Ted is the best man I know. He will be my ghost and I will be his Mrs. Muir. For those who don't know the reference, this is an old black and white movie.

Today, Ted walks beside us, between the world. This coming Sunday, he will ascend to the next plane. So when you look to the moon, know that Ted is looking down at you.

And on Sunday, say a prayer to him and to all those you miss for this is the same moon that our ancestors looked up to.

I miss my husband. You miss your family member. Others miss their friend. There is no one like Ted.

Ted loved his horror movies, he loved Supernatural, he could watch them over and over.

Ted loved his stones. Ted loved giving people stones and telling what there properties were.

Ted loved reading Charles Godfrey Leland, an author who wrote in the 1800's. He loved to the share stories from those books. Plus, he knew them inside out and back again.

He touched the lives of such diverse people. Look around you. So many groups of people. Wherever Ted went, whatever store he entered, Ted stuck-up a conversation. Ted made friends and he got to know your families.

While in the hospital, Ted had over 100 people visit him, per day. One night someone asked, why I was smiling at such a sad time, and I said, look around, so many people. Thank you, from me, for being his friend.

Ted was proud to know all of you.

I love you, Ted.