Grief and grievance: The tyranny of the dead

by Garret Keizer in the May 17, 2003 issue

"Before I became enlightened, mountains were mountains and trees were trees." So begins a well-known Zen Buddhist proverb that continues: "As I approached enlightenment, mountains appeared to be more than mountains and trees more than trees. Now I am enlightened; mountains are mountains and trees are trees."

Leaving aside the question of whether I have grown more or less enlightened over time, I seem to have progressed along a similar path in my reading of the Gospels. My current understanding of a given passage can be uncannily like that of my first encounter with it.

As an example, consider that episode where a man asks to bury his father prior to accepting Jesus' call to discipleship. "Let the dead bury their own dead," Jesus tells him. "But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

As an adolescent reading this for the first time, I thrilled to Jesus' seeming disregard for convention. Who needed funerals anyway? Older and presumably wiser, I came to feel that Jesus' response was not sufficiently "pastoral." At the very least, these were words too terrible for any but Jesus to repeat.

Lately, though, the trees are starting to look like trees again. I am certainly not contemptuous of grief, which Jesus himself is reported to have felt, most notably at the grave of Lazarus, but I am suspicious of its potential for exploitation. Let the dead bury their dead, and—I'm inclined to add—better keep an eye on them while they do.

Some of this change of attitude comes from my years as a high school teacher. I dreaded those inevitable tragedies that struck our school community—student suicides and fatal car wrecks—not only for the heartbreaking loss of young life, but also for the disheartening spectacle of sentimentality and recklessness that followed in their wake. Of course, one can excuse some excess in these cases, if it can even

be called excess. After all, the death of a young person is far in excess of the normal bereavement we mortals must expect. These poor kids were just beginning to deal with emotions that can send the strongest of us reeling.

Nevertheless, through the course of repeated tragedy, I came to identify a certain pathology, laid bare in the unsophisticated grieving of adolescents but by no means absent in the behavior of adults. These were the most notable symptoms:

• a spirit of competition, in which mourners vied with one another in ostentatious displays of grief, some going so far as to insinuate that those persons less demonstrative than themselves weren't *really* sorry.

• a tendency to take offense at every turn, a sort of McCarthyistic morbidity that saw disrespect for the dead in the most innocuous words and gestures

• a shameless appropriation of the tragedy as an excuse to advance the most self-serving agendas ("With Stacey dead, I'll never be able to face homework again").

• a complete disavowal of free will, expressed alternately in a fatalistic view of the tragedy (i.e., Stacey's drunk-driving accident was "meant to happen") and in a sacrosanct priority given to the supposed wishes of the dead ("It's what Stacey would have wanted").

It is the last of these, as witnessed not only in school life but in church and national life too, that has led me to conclude that of all forms of oppression, rich over poor, white over black, male over female, perhaps none is so insidious or so deserving of defiance as the tyranny of the dead over the living. Not that the dead should never have a vote, only that they should never be given a veto.

Another way to say this is that on the day when I can no longer believe in the resurrection, I shall no longer be able to follow Christ. It's not that I require a reward after death; it's just that I refuse to have a dead guy running my life.

I left classroom teaching some seven years ago, but ever since the events of September 11, 2001, I have had the impression that I'm back in high school once again. All those characteristics I mentioned above—the competitive mourning, the absurd blaming, the use of mourning to mask self-interest, and above all the sentimental overruling of thought—are out in force. We grieve; therefore we are above reproach. We are under orders from the dead; therefore we may not be

questioned.

This is not to say that I've stood dry-eyed on the sidelines of those grievous events, no more than I stood dry-eyed at the funeral of some young person who had sat just the day before in my classroom. It is only to say that among the mourners I have felt that familiar teacher's worry and whispered that old teacher's prayer: "Dear God, please just keep the rest of them from doing something dangerous and stupid."

With the war and occupation in Iraq, "dangerous and stupid" are upon us. In the name of the dead, we have passed an unconscionable (and unprovoked) death sentence on untold numbers of the living. Like mourners rending their garments, we have torn asunder our civil liberties, the rule of international law and the self-respect befitting a people who make war only in self-defense. Greed is at the root of this, we say. And fear and the lust for revenge. All true.

But no less at its root are the self-righteousness of sentiment and the exploitation of grief. Christians have a special duty to point this out, if only because the church is commonly perceived as the sanctuary of sentiment, as the place where we keep our voices down out of respect for the dead—a gesture accompanied and in some cases prophesied by a moment of acquiescent silence "in support of our troops." I think we all know what Jesus would say. It is time for us to get out of the business of funerals and into the business of proclaiming the kingdom of God.