

SERMON "What Dirt Taught Me, Early Jobs" 3/26/23

We all have an autobiography, a storyline, a series of chapters. Ministers are storytellers. You find material in sacred lit, in fiction and in nonfiction. I try to find material in my storyline, my journey and hope that you can relate it to yours. Probing our personal past reminds me of the author who wrote, Life is a process of coming home and recognizing the place for the first time. Today I am plowing, unearthing where I have never before. Dirt has many connotations. One is getting to what's real or fact, aka paydirt. That's often called the lowdown, the basic irreducible fact or truth.

I started my dirt sermonizing with holy dirt, what I hoped to get from the holy land, literally digging there, very amateur archaeology. I didn't get it. The people who felt and found holy there brought it with them. I didn't.

My second dirt sermon is Troy NY dirt, where I worked and played and often got dirty. From about age 4 on I had a stepfather Jack for about a dozen years until his sad, accidental death. I can't remember when he joined our family of three, me, my three year older brother and single, hard-working Mom. My older of two half sisters is four years younger than me so that gives me a clue when he took us on. Jack was a gruff, down to earth, hard-working carpenter. My older brother and I and he had a lot of negative physical contact. For decades I've wished he had lived long enough to give me time to mature enough to tell him I grew to realize and to appreciate how much he did for us. For the decade he provided, we underappreciated that provision.

At age 10 or 11 I accompanied him to jobs. He worked mostly on the exterior or outside of homes in a well-to-do section of Troy. Not the homes shown in HBO's *Gilded Age* but well-to-do by our standards. His favorite comment about the people who hired him was a derogatory observation of biological/anatomical functions we all had in common. I assure you I could quote him exactly all these decades later but Corina would have to bleep me. **Corina, do you know how to bleep me?** Jack had a class grievance. He worked hard and couldn't get ahead. He was supporting two families. One job he took me on was janitor service for a string of beauty parlors.

We swept up hair and mopped. He always said to look carefully for money on the floor. We find, we keep. He assumed only rich people occupied those chairs, so more of the same anatomy bleep. What he meant was, WE ARE ALL HUMAN. Later I read a lot of philosophy and theology that boiled down, distilled to what Jack said but without the class grievance. WE ARE ALL HUMAN. Who taught you that, and maybe even how to use that as a lens on people you might want to think more derogatorily about?

More early jobs and dirt. At age 13 I found an afterschool job cleaning apartment houses. They were mainly apartments for RPI students so I got the hallways and stairwells. I was told that one student had recently taken his life. The stairs were those white enamel steps with the black rubber panels. You had to scrub and dry those panels carefully so the dirty water didn't run onto the white. One day he wanted me to find him and show him a staircase I had just cleaned. He looked up and down for longer than I could take. So I said, "It's pretty clean, isn't it?" He said, "Bobby, haven't you heard, blowing your own horn is a poor recommendation."

The last job I'll mention and one that was great preparation for a career in ministry was hospital orderly. I got trained at the Samaritan Hospital which was near RPI and did this for two summers and after school before off to college. I remember one patient all these years later. Mr. King passed away while I was washing his face. I was trained to give male patients enemas. It was an oily mix called Fleet. I would arrive on the male ward with my little kit and the first guy would yell, Hide, here comes Fleet!

Decades later Lori and I moved from Long Island to near Hartford and the local bank was Fleet Bank. My new church secretary got a kick out of my observation, Can't believe I found a bank named after... We have the same account we got there many changed bank names later. Occasionally a new bank asked the security question, Do you remember the name of the bank you opened this account in? Oh yes I do.

One of the ways I responded to these early "I'll call them learning, not dirt" experiences was developing a love of classical music. I hadn't heard it at home. I must have gotten the idea from school mates. I delved into it with a passion that has never left. I was so happy to buy my own little Granco FM radio. It has appeared in dreams. So I started collecting albums of the great conductors, Toscanini, Ormandy, Czcell. There was a used book and album store downtown named Daubers. I was tickled to find out Bud Sterling at RPI knew that store also. I was going there for affordable albums of hero conductors and Bud was going there for the daughter of Sol Dauber. I still have vinyls I got there.

So this love of classical music was my rising up, I believe, and my pantheon of great conductors whom I lionized, adored without knowing them. A little like the adoration our community feels for Maestro Amaro of the ACO. My heroes were gone before I could hear them in person.

I thought of this this past week when I stopped to see Martha Alfee in her rehab center. Martha 96, one of this congregation's original members, has quite a bio of orchestral wonders. I told her I found an interview with her simply by googling her name and Stuart Florida. And it tells how she was recruited by a famous conductor to join an orchestra

right out of high school. She played the oboe and the English horn. I told her the article called her a hornist. I was also interested in another story from another interview. I wanted to be gentle with her memory about this so I said there was another interview where she said after a performance the prominent conductor came to her and kissed her on the cheek. She lit up; “yes, that was Mitropolis and I didn’t wash my face for a month.” Dmitri Mitropolis, he was already in my pantheon. And my teenage collection.

You may be wondering, where is he going with all this, an early life in dirt and cleaning and WE ARE ALL HUMAN, and now classical music?

The movie Tar made quite a hit. If you get Xfinity, it’s free on demand on Peacock for a month or so. Tar is a fictitious woman orchestra conductor Lydia Tar, played by Kate Blanchett. The story tells us she was lesbian and more than suggests she was abusive to women in her orchestra. The nonfiction woman conductor Marin Alsop, who went from the Long Island Philharmonic to the Baltimore Symphony, reacted that she was offended as a woman, as a lesbian and as a conductor. But it was fiction. A couple weeks ago a real conductor, John Mauceri, who was adviser to the makers of the film Tar wrote an OpEd, “Why are conductors upset about Tar?”

What Mauceri says about conductors I put on a pedestal, STILL DO, was piercing. You might say he knew some dirt I didn’t want to know.

JOHN MAUCERI, “Why are conductors upset about TAR?": Fiction or not, the sort of **backstage backstabbing** depicted in Tar is, alas, very real. We conductors do not generally like our colleagues, and we delight in denigrating one another-that is, until one of us dies. I am now old enough for the younger set-50 and under-to say nice things about me, which I find somewhat troubling.

Yet there are surprising exceptions, Leonard Bernstein among them. In the 18 years I worked with him, the closest I heard him engaging in what the Germans call a dirigentenkrieg-a conductors’ war-was to say of his archrival, Herbert von Karajan, “I don’t think Herbert ever read a book.” More typical was Arturo Toscanini who called Leopold Stokowski “il Pagliaccio”(the clown) for appearing in Disney’s “Fantasia” and shaking Mickey Mouse’s hand.

(Mauceri’s conclusion, I hope, connects all this to my sermon and to my stepfather.) “Tar” is not actually about any of us. Lydia Tar is fiction, made real by the performance of a great actress. We are all -composers, conductors, musicians and audience- merely human. THE LIE SOME OF US CLING TO, that the artistic greatness that pours through us

makes us great, IS THE TRUTH AT THE HEART OF TAR. (Like FAU/men and MIAMI/women had great moments, and each wants two more.)

I think what Mauceri means is, we are all capable of seizing great moments, but once we think greatness has landed and stayed, the greatness has actually passed. The Greeks called that HUBRIS. And Martin Luther said all of us are both saint and sinner. And proof positive of that is, for me, unfortunately, HYPOTHETICALLY OF COURSE, I can see more clearly how that applies to you than to me.

All of a sudden, we are back to dirt, dirt with the potential of holy. Dirt that can have moments that make the pain at the beginning and the pain at the end SO SO SO worth it. That's the take of Hebrew scripture, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Ashes suggest, I'll take cremation, thank you! We ought to talk about the end more. We definitely ought to let anyone who loves us know what we have chosen for our end. Especially since so many of us are in blended families and children we didn't co-create might not be sure who's deciding how we will be disposed of. We owe it to them and to any other we might have what we want for our ending. Quite a number of my friends in other churches have asked me if cremation is ok. Suggesting, is there anything in our deceased state we might need later? I can't imagine what.

The Jewish metaphor ashes to ashes, dust to dust is the basic truth, not really metaphor. But I love the metaphor talk of Hebrew sacred writ Psalm 8, giving us the estimate, the value of what is possible in between: Psalm 8, what is man, human that deity should consider him at all. We can seem so insignificant, but from the dirt to the heavens, YET THOU HAST MADE HIM.

Christian scripture also is rich in metaphor about what happens after we turn to ashes and the world turns to ashes; it uses phrases like a new heaven, and a new earth, and a new body for all of us. Like me, most of you didn't want to wait or trust that metaphor talk so we went ahead and got new body parts. Do replacement knees, hips and hearing aids, ETCETERA, count?

The value we put on the life span, individual and collective, is what counts. We are all human, only human, merely human, still ashes to ashes has had some pretty lofty portrayals. Carl Sagan said we are about the same as stardust. UU value/principle 1 says inherent worth, worthiness, goodness of every human being. Dirt may be beneath us but no other human being is.

