

Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

The Dash

Mary's Perspective:

I recently read the obituary of a lady in her early 40's, who had died of cancer. What struck me about this particular death notice was its length – it was easily four times longer than any of the other obituaries listed that day. It was a detailed description of a person who, I'm sure, was a lovely lady. From this description, one could learn how the deceased approached life, with joy and enthusiasm. It described her battle with cancer, how she helped other patients in treatment with her positivity, and how she showed indomitable spirit in the midst of the pandemic. In addition to the typical list of family she leaves behind, it also described in detail her career choices and what a vital and talented worker she was. By all accounts, this lady left a very positive impression on the hearts of all who knew her.

This got me to pondering... an obituary with such depth and length almost seemed to me like it was either too much – as in, “thou doth protest too much” – or perhaps the writer felt that any life, but especially one of such brevity, deserved to be documented with the most positive strokes. I'm certain this was written out of love, and I appreciated the well-rounded description of a life well lived. However, it made me wonder... when I die, will someone feel the need to write a lot about how I touched lives, or will my actions in this life speak sufficiently?

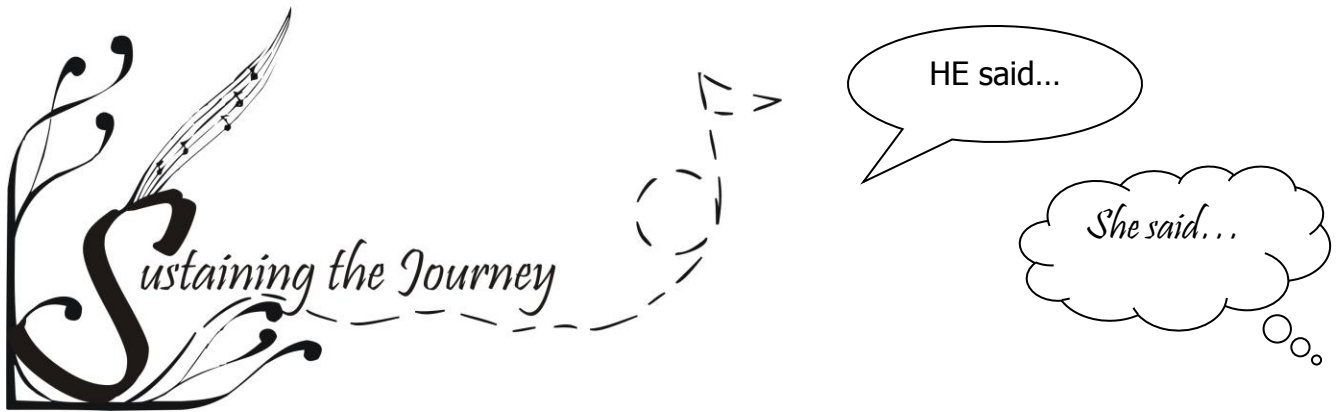
We have a priest friend who used to give a funeral homily about “the dash”. He would reflect on how all the gravestones at the cemetery showed two dates, connected by a dash. And while the date of birth and date of death are recorded, what is most important is what occurred between those dates – i.e., the dash. In much the same way, I felt like that long obituary was an attempt to capture all that happened in the dash.

Different strand of thought... I was listening to a podcast as I was walking recently, and the speaker offered an exercise in mindfulness. It went like this:

In your mind's eye, imagine an oak tree by the side of a lake. Okay, now get rid of that image, and in your mind's eye, see a full moon. Okay, now get rid of that image, and now imagine a red triangle. Easy, right?

So what's the point?

Our minds are powerful. We can conjure up those images and make them go away easily. We have control over our thoughts. We need to remember that, especially in these days of pandemic. At times it feels we are surrounded by negative thoughts. It's simple to focus on what has changed, or what we can't do. Our lives are different now, and it would be easy to feel swallowed up by all the negative connotations that distinguish “then” from “now”. Jobs have changed or outright gone away. We can't just run to the store without thinking about taking a mask, walking the correct direction in each aisle, and washing up upon our return. Gone are the days when you didn't feel like cooking so you



went out to dinner. No more lazy afternoons spent at the ball field eating hot dogs and watching the game. We can't even sing at Mass!

But, just as easily as we can see the oak tree or the moon or the triangle – and then send that image away – we can also control these negative thoughts. Worry doesn't need to control us. Feeling restricted or defined by the negative is NOT inevitable. We have the ability to see it, acknowledge it, and then move past it while focused on the positive. We can choose what we believe, what deserves priority, and then allow our actions to reflect those beliefs.

Certainly we are living in turbulent times, and a lot of this is easier said than done. But the challenge is to recognize that we still have control over our thoughts and how we act on them. If we remind ourselves of that regularly, choose to send away the negative ones, focus on the positive ones, and find the opportunities to make "the dash" meaningful, perhaps our actions will speak louder than an obituary of any length.

Bob's Perspective:

There are times when the juxtaposition of our blog topics and the occurrences of my daily personal life are astonishing to me. In the very week that our topic "The Dash" is in its final redaction, I've celebrated the sixth anniversary of the death of my brother-in-law, will be attending the funeral of my father-in-law, and will be attempting my first go at skydiving. This blog could conceivably be the last thing that I write. Keep hold of this one until the next blog - it might just turn out to be a collector's item.

I knew the subject of the obituary to whom Mary is referring. She (the Subject) was within a circle of friends that I've known for the last couple years. While I can't say that I knew her well, I had a number of conversations with her at various gatherings. I was aware of some of the facts included in her obituary, but there were some things that I didn't know as well. The writing in question was authored by one of her cousins (without the approval of her more immediate family). While many appreciated the cousin's effort, I think it's safe to say that some felt that the obituary was a little over the top.

I'm not a big fan of obituaries or eulogies. More times than not, it's been my experience that the author or eulogist makes their remarks more about themselves than about the deceased person to whom they're referring. In other words, it's about their experience of (or with) the person rather than about the decedent. While such can be sort of charming or touching, it almost trivializes them or presents them in only a fraction of the reality.

The simple "dash" between the dates is actually a multifaceted gem. Each surface is its own individual part of the story. It's not until all of the facets are examined that the true value of the gem can be discerned.

We all have multifaceted lives. There may be some things about our lives of which many people are aware or are impacted. Conversely, there may be some things about our lives that few if anyone know or even care. A worthwhile (rhetorical) question might be: What facets make you as a gem most valuable?