

A mosaic of Friendly living

Sacred spaces

By Megan L. Anderson



I have a fondness for cemeteries. Most people don't know how to respond when learning that fact. I imagine images of cloaked figures or old-timey grave robbers flash across their minds' eyes. What good could I possibly be up to in a place like that? Sure, people visit graves of loved ones and meander around for genealogy research from time to time; that's understandable. But those of us who stay for hours at a stretch, not there for anyone in particular? That's just weird, right? Off-putting at least.

But if we all paused for consideration of where Moses moments in our lives took place, those moments when we unexpectedly found ourselves on holy ground, we'd realize the Spirit prepares some unconventional locations in which to open both our physical and spiritual senses to him. For Moses it was a dirty cave perfumed with sheep dung. Jonah got a particular sense of the Lord in the bowels of a whale. Paul stood upon sacred earth in the confines of a prison cell more than a time or two. Some are touched by eternity in hospital waiting rooms, traffic jams, movie theaters, and chip aisles at the grocery store where racks of tortillas, kettle-cooked, and crinkle-cuts stand in for heavenly hosts. Emmanuel—God among us—he may be, but who would've expected this penchant for consecrating the most obscure of spaces?

For me it was, and remains, a sleepy country cemetery tucked out of sight from gossipy neighbors and highway traffic. Sure, the residents are many, but they're quiet and don't seem to mind the occasional loiterer. It's a beautiful place, really. Protected on all sides by lush woodland it feels as though God consecrated it as a sort of sanctuary from time immemorial. Your eyes are naturally drawn to the sky, where the dipping and zipping of dragonflies plays out like a drama in which servants of a grand house bustle through preparations for hosting some important occasion. In a way, I suppose, that's the sense cemeteries invoke in me: this idea of death as a preparation for something greater, something beautiful.

I certainly didn't understand that when I first visited, though. Life had become a confusing jumble of beginnings and endings, most of which I couldn't tell apart. There were things I knew I needed to die to, like the cynicism, despair, and bitterness I'd clung to as if they were precious treasures adding value to my work and relationships. But how do you die to something inherently part of your identity as you understand it? And more confounding yet: how do you live going forward? Caught in the pull between these feelings of life and death, a graveyard seemed an apt setting for seeking clarity.

So I left my car in the chilly shade of a copse and followed the streaming sun to a warm grassy grave. There I crouched babbling with nose to gray marble slab, its occupant listening patiently six feet below. The dead this side of the veil make great therapists, by the way. Guaranteed confidentiality, no waiver required, no copays. It was the most cathartic experience of my nearly thirty-year life. I cried. I confessed. I lamented and laughed. It was more than I expected in a place I'd never lingered before. I'd come for privacy in which to begin sorting my thoughts, and I'd found the Spirit of God waiting almost palpably to breathe new life into my soul. Though I didn't come away "restored" or "healed" or whatever prescriptive Christianese buzzword it might be tempting to apply, I did come away with an undeniable sense that God had just opened my whole self to experiencing him in ways I never had before. And for the next three months of walking through the valley of the shadow of death—death of loved ones, dreams, opportunities, relationships, passions, and fears—that proved true in ways words can't inadequately describe.

Now, over a year later, I still visit the burial ground from time to time. It's a place of remembrance, of respite. When my mind clouds again with confusion and frustration, I take up my mat (thank you, college yoga class) and walk back to that sacred space, settle in, listen. I like the idea of being lain to rest in a place like that. Rest is a rare commodity for me. One aspect cemeteries have in common is their lack of other people, which appeals to

this textbook introvert. Meeting together for worship as a body offers a communal experience of God, which is powerful and uplifting, but also distracting. We're called, too, into a different kind of intimacy—the desert kind of intimacy that Hosea knew, where our Lord hems us in, just the two of us, and speaks tenderly the words our hearts need most to hear.

Maybe, like me, you're struggling to see through the gray in that space between life and death, frustrated by not finding peace of mind praying in a pew. Maybe your sanctuary is the left side booth at your local KFC, or maybe a backyard workshop or garden. Maybe you haven't found your sacred ground yet. I don't have the answer for you. But I can urge you to keep stumbling forward. In your confusion, in your pain, in your chaos, bitterness, and apathy, move just a little farther. And then take another half step. Then another. I hope you find, like me, that when you can't budge another inch, the divine appears when the end of yourself begins. I hope that if you find yourself crumpled on sacred ground marked for you by the God who knows you better than yourself, you'll rest there, then stand; and from there walk. And step by step I hope you walk out of the gray, alive.

