

In Memory of Phil (4/27/70 - 4/28/93)

My younger son Philip, in the year before he died, felt a need to have a business card made up such as professionals use to identify themselves - one of which he presented to me at one of our memorable breakfasts in San Francisco (at Hamburger Heaven on Clement St. and sometimes at Bill's Place farther out). The card said:

Philip B. Wood
Failure
415-864-1196.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Actually I laughed – because Phil and I shared the same perverse sense of humor and I guess by then we had both come to agree that Phil was not going to make it by the prevailing standards of this world. I thanked him for the card and before slipping it into my wallet inscribed in pencil on the back his current address. Well, he passed away not long after that and over the years, as the address has begun to fade, I take out a pencil and re-inscribe it to keep it fresh – I guess out of some wish to keep him and our moments together alive.

Which brings me to my other son, Adam, who while maintaining a wonderful integrity has never had difficulty fitting into this workaday world. Indeed, convinced early on of the dignity of labor, he took pride in having had a sheet metal worker for a grandfather – and one day, having noticed his grandfather's portable toolbox in my garage, he asked if he could have it. Now the box had a wide patch of white bandage tape under the handle on which my father had inscribed his name and address in ink. And some years later, while visiting Adam, I came upon the toolbox again and much to my surprise the once almost illegible name and address on the tape now stood out more sharply than I remembered. Why? Because Adam periodically takes out a pen to restore the aging letters one by one – so that I'm sure somewhere beyond the wide blue yonder my father remains deeply moved by this gesture of a grandson he never lived to see.

Do you know what a palimpsest is? The word comes from the Greek, meaning “erased again”. It derives from a time when copyists, given the shortage of writing materials, would often erase the original writing upon a parchment manuscript to acquire a fresh surface on which to pen an entirely different text – the result being: traces of the original writing peek faintly from beneath the letters of the fresh writing. Such manuscripts are called palimpsests. For example, in Paris we have a 13th century palimpsest of the essays of St. Ephraem beneath whose letters traces of an erased 5th century Greek Bible are still legible.

All of which makes me think: are not you and I palimpsests? Are we not each a manuscript upon which over the course of our lives one script after another has been imposed, the latest script overlaying all prior scripts? Initially our once fresh manuscript contained only a baptismal statement declaring you and me to be each another Christ born into this world? And, thank God, that original script was indelible, because how many times have we tried to erase it, to bury it deep beneath one fashionable ideology or identity after another? Yet still that barely visible, barely legible story of who and what we really are pokes its way from beneath the mish mash and scribbling we have made of our lives – waiting for Christ to return at every Eucharist we attend to refurbish that fundamental text within us, that Good News you and I are meant to be – much the way I refurbish my Philip's precious address and Adam, his grandfather's immortal name.