

TOO MUCH SUN?

“Saint Thomas Aquinas furthers Augustine’s work of setting the “rational soul” of humans against that of the “animal soul.” Aquinas holds much of creation has a soul, yet there is clearly a difference between the rational soul of humans and that of, say, a dog. This standpoint places the rational human soul as better than and therefore above all other created souls. Thus, Aquinas argues for soul layering where the human rational soul is above all other created souls. This soul layering argument allowed Christianity to create a structure of belief where not only does the animal soul reside at a level lower than that of the rational human soul, but also, those humans who are not rational have a soul that resides somewhere between that of the rational person and that of a dog.” Dave Bell, “When Reason Becomes Faith”

One thing we haven’t had this past June is too much sun. We didn’t go swimming even once during June. I only sailed four times. I guess I’m a fair weather sailor. I never put on summer shorts.

Now comes July and with it came sun. The two don’t always go together.

I was thinking about some words I was asked to say on Sunday when we were going to place my cousin Bob’s ashes in the water beyond where we anchor the sailboat. The placing of ashes really doesn’t need words. It’s a profoundly personal experience for everyone present. I respect that.

There on my boat, sitting on deck in the sunshine, I was thinking of fitting words. I knew traditional words for such events. I have borrowed from the Book of Common Prayer for some of the numerous such times we have had here at our beach,

Maybe I get too much sun, but my years of life right here have taught me what seems like truth. Under my boat all sorts of life and death are happening. I can’t get to the water’s edge without walking on the remains of scores of life. How are human remnants any different?

Dave Bell thinks reflectively and often mystically on such matters and has a significant work on that question. The opening quotation comes from his beginning page.

Are we all that different from other life, and if different, how? Do oysters have souls? Or dogs? Or...do we?

I read my words on our deck overlooking the water before we sent them out to the water along with some wild roses we had. I read them again to see whether they reveal where I am in this quest for understanding the place of human life in the spectrum of all life.

These were my ending words:

“...Wonder, mystery, cycles of life—shells born of dying—all part of everything, everything part of us all. Temporary, yet part of eternity. Biodegradable in a biodegradable container, we return to the elements of stardust and seas and sun and earth from which we are all made. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, each life a wonder and miracle, turning moments into eternity. With memories that still overflow into our lives, we commit the ashes of Robert Arthur Berst to the waters of Puget Sound.”

As I read the words again I realize that there is no mention of soul or God, revealing my sense that whatever we are, from wherever we come or go, we share a common outcome. We can decide whether to believe our lives are part of a meaningless journey in which we are as nothing, or whether we are participants in something so unspeakably grand and wondrous and eternal that we should be in awe of the fact there is life at all.

I’m suspicious that Dave may veer away from Augustine and Aquinas and the Psalmist who declared man a little less than God (an understatement if there ever was one!) Rather, neither mankind nor the world can be whole unless we recognize the oneness and sanctity of all life. Those ancients who believed even the rocks had “soul” were on to something humans have to reclaim if our planet is to survive as an inhabitable place.

Art Morgan, July 4, 2011

