

Bagpiping at Funerals: Through the Honor and the Tears

By William W. Don Carlos

I have played the great Scottish Highland bagpipes for hundreds of memorials over the years. It might seem like a depressing or morbid endeavor, but for me, it is a distinct honor to dignify someone's memory by performing this noble music. The mourners always recognize me first. There is no place to hide when you are the only one in a crowd wearing the Scottish kilt. I enter this ritual event employed and invited to witness a person's final chapter. I have the privilege to play a role in a moment that is about more than just music. By just being there, the piper lends comfort and strength in moments of grief.

To begin with, my arrival in Highland dress with a strange-looking instrument usually provides a welcome moment of levity. There are probably no piping jokes that I have not already heard. I recognize their value. Oscar Wilde had some superb quips about piping. Sometimes I share one that I remember. I have often exchanged a joke with formidable grown men wearing suits. They slap me on the back with a smile and offer me a glass of water or a stick of gum; later, they weep like little children as I play "Amazing Grace" alongside their dad's casket. Human nature does not change. In the ancient world funerals were attended by professional mourners who loudly wailed to encourage others to release their own emotions. In Europe until the beginning of the 20th Century, another important profession associated with funerals was that of the Mute. The Mute stood silently as a type of symbolic protector of the deceased; normally stationed near the door, wearing black clothing and a melancholy expression. My role as piper is an enduring part of that legacy: to dignify the service by standing silently; when called-upon, to give voice through the pipes to the grief that is felt, enabling the survivors to begin to let go.

There is an almost typical, recurring pattern to most memorials, like a script, but there are also those exceptional situations. I remember some beautiful services where doves were released, filling the blue sky with an explosion of white wings while I piped. I recall a particular service that was held outdoors at night. On that occasion I played "Amazing Grace" followed by the famous pipe march, "Scotland the Brave." At the start of the march, over a hundred people individually released large white balloons which seemed to shimmer in the darkness, rising in a symbolic farewell. More challenging are sudden tragedies like the death of a child. One such day lingers

in my memory. The parents leaned against each other as if piled in a heap next to the little coffin in the children's section of the cemetery. The wind came up as I played. I felt objects knocking against my ankles and strained to look down for a moment as I kept playing. The wind was blowing toys from the other children's graves around my feet, entangling me. It was so bizarre that I wondered afterwards whether or not I could ever do another one. That was many years ago. My job, like that of the people I serve, is also to keep going and to let go. In all types of weather, you have to know how to set the reeds and maintain your instrument. You have to know things like how long to keep playing as the widow leans against her son after casting one last rose upon the casket now nestled in the open grave below. When I pipe for Jewish funerals I stroll behind the slow-moving hearse, playing as it courses a short distance to the grave from the cemetery chapel. The pipes truly belong to all cultures now. Much of the job of piping for funerals is standing patiently and waiting while loving tributes seem to flow like a never-ending stream. It is also my privilege to stand silently while the American flag is crisply folded for one more final presentation, on "behalf of a grateful nation." Seeing tears does not make me happy, but I am pleased to think that my pipes are really *singing* well, that I am doing a good thing. At the end, I cradle the pipes in my arms and gently put them back in the case. I close it up, like a little casket that contains what I love so much along with my own memories of this passing moment, this final 'Goodbye.'

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