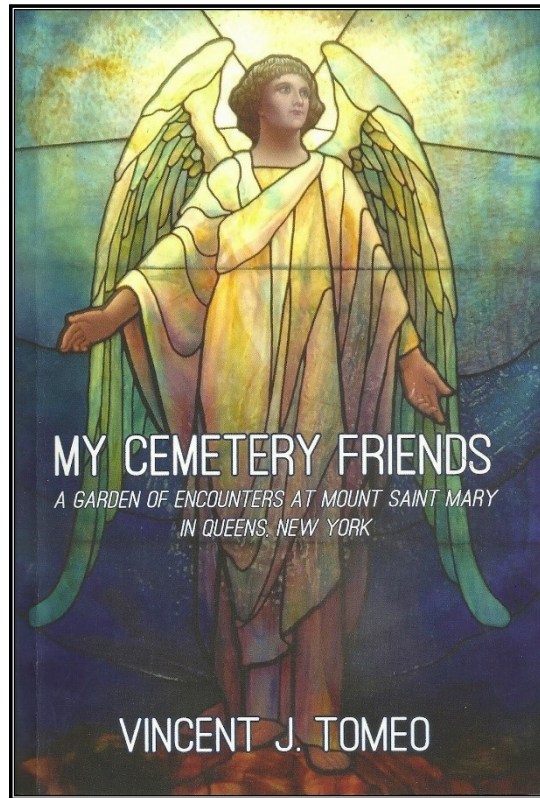


FLASH
HOMELESS IN PARADISE
July 10-16, 2020

IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 37



WHERE WILL THE HOMELESS LIE AFTER THEIR FINAL CURTAIN CALLS?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

COVERING last week's Boondoggle Busters city council meeting was my original plan for this column. If my modem hadn't died over the Fourth of July weekend, you'd be reading transcripts from Seaside City Council about the peninsula's uneven hospitality toward homeless campers.

Instead, the question arises: *Have people who camp at places like Robert's Lake or Laguna Grande made preparations for what happens after they die?*

It's a question we should all confront during the Coronavirus-19 pandemic.

*"i will be spending
the rest of my other life
lying in repose"
poet plots his wake
inspires others to plan theirs
while they're still alive
where do homeless rest
buried deep in wood coffins
or in unmarked graves*

In my own case, I willed my body to University of California at San Francisco. I gave myself a great 85th Celebration of Life Birthday Party but no memorial service is planned.

Why not visit the local cemetery of your choice to contemplate how to resolve this issue, if you haven't yet done so?

My friend, poet Vincent J. "Red" Tomeo, author of *My Cemetery Friends--A Garden of Encounters at Mount Saint Mary in Queens, New York*, combines prose and poetry to reveal how strolling through his favorite cemetery inspired him to plan his own wake.

Enjoy excerpts of how Vincent made his end-of-life decision, and may the muse be with you in making yours:

Our Last Curtain Call

"Walking through the cemetery today, I thought again about my departure, our last curtain call, but first, I had to convince Sylvia that it was something we should talk about, and how we should prepare for our wakes and our funerals.

"We decided my burial would be a poetry event. . .

"First, we had to purchase a plot. Sylvia loves gardening . . .

"We found a splendid place. . . It is under a substantial towering golden-white oak tree high on a hilltop blanketed by wild garlic plants, bright with various variegated flowers. We fell in love with the spot. We now own a plot of land in a garden in New York City . . .

"We bought an ebony marble high-standing tombstone. The stone is in the shape of an open book titled 'The Book of Life.' We had the stone engraved: 'Hello. Take a Seat. Stay a While.' . . . Sylvia works on gardening and I sit under a tree reading poetry. . .

"Now, we had to decide on arranging our prepaid funerals. . . I wanted to try the coffin out for size and comfort. . . I told the funeral director, 'If I can't try it out, I will go somewhere else. I want to test it. After all, I will be spending the rest of my other life in it lying in repose.'

". . . Although the funeral director was reluctant, he said I could climb into the casket. I jumped into my future home and requested a fluffy fleece lining to fit my size, needs and comfort. He accommodated me. Being inside the coffin was like being in a hammock: easy to climb in, hard to get out. I could hear my heartbeat. And then I almost fell asleep. Sylvia demanded I get out immediately. Then she asked if I was comfortable. Sylvia said she couldn't look at me in that position in a casket.

"I told the funeral parlor director I wanted my wake to be a poetry reading event, where everybody who attends my funeral must read a poem. Vanilla incense and music will accompany the viewing. After the reading of poetry in the wake, everyone will be served champagne with strawberries and whipped cream.

"At my Life After Death Ceremony, everyone will be given a black Mickey Mouse hat with big ears and different colored balloons. On my grave, Langston Hughes' poem 'Not What Was' will be read, as well as two poems that were written by me. After the burial, everyone will sing the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse song and let the colored balloons go. The funeral will proceed with a walk around the cemetery. Then everyone will be sent home with my poem '9.11.01 (Poem Two)' on a memorial card so they have a keepsake to remember a patriot. . .

"Afterward, everyone is invited to a banquet celebrating Death: 'The Trip of a Lifetime'."

About Vincent J. “Red” Tomeo

Vincent J. Tomeo, former Senior Poet Laureate of New York, taught American history at a New York City public high school for 36 years. He formerly volunteered at the 9/11 Tribute Center Museum at Ground Zero. Among his 886 published poems and essays were several included in *New York Times*, *Comstock Review*, *Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Grandmother Earth (VII through XI)*, and *Golden Words, Anthology of the National Annual Senior Poets Laureate Poetry Competition* of which I was Co-founder and Contest Administrator from 1993 to 2014.

One of Vincent’s memorial poems is published here. The other is yet to come.

9.11.01 (POEM TWO)

*I want to wrap myself
In the American flag
I want to fly high
I want to blow in the wind
I want to ripple in the light
I want to sing
God Bless America
I want to coil up
Cry for those who gave their lives
I want to be forever free
I want to announce to the world
I am a native New Yorker
I am an American*

Vincent ends his chapbook with these lines which, although not so intended, describe the unprepared homeless who, dying without preparation, often end up in potter’s fields wherever numbered stones exist for the poor, the helpless, the unloved and the unremembered:

“And then, there are the unmarked tombstones, in which names are not etched, or inscribed into metal, marble or stone, in time, making them unknown, lost to memory, and history.

“Death, to Christians, is a new beginning of life, and so, the story never ends.”

Copies of *My Cemetery Friends*, by Vincent J. Tomeo (Atmosphere Press, 85 pages, \$15 including postage) is available from www.amazon.com. Or, for details on how to order directly, call Vincent at 718-961-6208.

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Photo courtesy of Vincent J. Tomeo; triple-haiku by Wanda Sue Parrott.

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About this Column: “Homeless in Paradise” is a free public service self-funded and produced by the author. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this column appears regularly on the last week of each month in the Cedar Street Times at www.cedarstreettimes.com (and as periodic FLASH columns like this one).

It also appears on Facebook, in Nextdoor, and on private email lists. If interested in being added to the list, submit your request to the contact info below.)

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