

## **The Dumpster of Redemption**

**By Sarah Odderstol**

Several weeks ago, I posted the following on my Facebook page: “What began as a ‘junk drawer’ was emptied into a bucket when we moved. That became ‘the bucket of fun.’ We moved again and again; the buckets multiplied and got bigger. Eventually all the buckets were placed in one room and now we have the ‘room of horrors.’ I need a ‘dumpster of deliverance and redemption.’”

This post elicited quite the online conversation; I was dumbfounded. All sorts of folks stepped forward to confess their closet or attic or basement or even freezer full of clutter. One person posted that her sister calls her clutter-filled hideaway the “room of doom.” Several others wanted me to send the dumpster to their homes when I was finished.

A few weeks ago, we marked Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. During Lent, Christians are called to the observance of spiritual disciplines: self-examination, prayer, fasting, self-denial and reading of scripture.” No matter what our background or perspective, Lent can be for all of us a time of spiritual housecleaning; to clear the literal and figurative clutter of our lives – a time to make the rough places plain and the crooked, straight. Lent is the dumpster of deliverance and redemption.

My friend Connie is the Queen of Clutter. A brilliant, kind and compassionate woman, she organizes, or perhaps disorganizes, her life in piles. Piles from one end of her house to the other, piles in her office, piles tucked into bags in her car, and she is most often found carrying around another pile or two. Connie takes the Lenten call to clear the clutter quite literally. Everyday during Lent, Connie cleans up and clears away one pile. She pitches that which needs to be pitched and files what she saves properly. All the while she prays. As she tosses an old grocery list, she prays for the people who work at her favorite grocery store. She smiles fondly as she shelves a favorite book. She cries when she runs across the clipping of an old friend's obituary and prays for herself and her friend's family, gently nursing her grief. By Easter the clutter is gone. Gone from Connie's house and gone from the room of doom in her soul.

The Chicago poet and former DePaul professor, Elizabeth-Anne Vanek Stewart, penned the following poem about Ash Wednesday:

You thumbed grit  
into my furrowed brow,  
marking me  
with the sign of mortality,  
the dust of last year's palms.  
The cross you traced  
seared, smudged skin,  
and I recalled

other ashes  
etched  
into my heart  
by those who loved too little  
or not at all.<sup>i</sup>

What do you pile up in your room of doom?

Harry, whose story I tell with permission, was an usher at a church I attended. Harry was a kind and gentle man but he rarely smiled. I was a lay healer and Harry came up regularly for healing prayer; he suffered from terrible migraine headaches. Not long before I left this congregation to go to seminary, Harry asked to take me out to lunch. Harry thanked me for encouraging him to seek counseling. In therapy, he had discovered what he thought was the source of his headaches.

Harry had served in the Army in Viet Nam. During his first tour in Nam, he was assigned to a very busy field hospital. Harry ran the morgue. He bagged bodies, stacked them in the cooler to await transport, and processed the paperwork that accompanied the bodies. Harry did this for almost two years.

Over lunch, Harry told me that his headaches always followed a reoccurring dream of being back in Viet Nam stacking bodies. Harry said that with therapy he was having the dream less frequently, but that dream was still a problem. Then Harry told me that he was convinced that I could help him. I hadn't even been to seminary yet, and here was this guy convinced that I could help heal him. I was humbled and, yes, a bit flattered, but mostly scared out of my wits. But then, by the grace of God, I had an idea.

I asked Harry, how he had handled being around so much violence and death. He said, “I don’t know. I just did my job.” I asked if he had ever attended a funeral service for any of those men. He said no, he hadn’t really known any of them.

With the help of one of our parish priests, Harry and I began planning a memorial service to honor the lives and grieve the loss of all the men whose bodies Harry had processed. After a bit of digging and finagling, Harry got his hands on a list of names of the men whose bodies would have passed through his morgue during his tour. We invited his friends from the VFW and his family. Then on a cold and wet day in March, we held a very simple memorial service. Taking turns, his buddies and I read every name on Harry’s list. We read names for almost forty-five minutes. There were a lot of tears.

The next time I saw Harry was almost a month later and he was grinning from ear to ear. He was a changed man. The dreams had stopped. His headaches were all but gone. Harry had finally cleared the clutter from his room of doom.

Lent is not intended as some sort of spiritual boot camp – as if we could work harder at our faith and somehow be more deserving of God’s grace and mercy. No, the spiritual disciplines recommended to us are tools. They are the pitchforks and shovels that help us to clear the clutter that keeps us from a whole and healthy relationship with God. How can I embrace a relationship with God, if I have piled up past hurts, unresolved grief and other emotional baggage in between God and myself? How do I work on my relationship with God, if I can’t remember under which pile my Bible and prayer book are buried?

The tools of self-examination, prayer, self-denial, almsgiving, fasting and so on are not unique to Lent. In Lent we are reminded that we need them and that they are

there for us. As if on Ash Wednesday someone pulled up and parked the dumpster of deliverance and redemption outside our door with a note attached. “Get to work.”

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<sup>i</sup> Elizabeth-Anne Vanek Stewart, “Ashes” as found in *Lent I: A Lent Sourcebook The Forty Days*, J. Baker, E Kaehler, & P. Mazar, Eds., (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications 1990), 16.