**Ash Wednesday, 2015**

taken largely from John Shea\*

I believe there is something universal about Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent it inaugurates. Ashes are a universal, archetypal, sacramental, visceral symbol that cuts across centuries, cultures, and religions.

In our Christian tradition, Ash Wednesday symbolizes, expresses, and commends something in the human condition that is simultaneously real **and** hopeful. This combination of reality and hope, this *juxtaposition* of reality and hope is powerful and attractive because so often we have viewed them as not being able to coexist at the same time. Hope is often achieved by *not looking at* what is real, ignoring reality. But when we do that, what we are really experiencing is not hope, but hope’s counterfeit, optimism. We feel good, but at the price of deliberately screening out anything negative that might bring us down. We close our eyes and smile.

That is *not* how Lent invites us into hope. Lent puts the negative and real fact of our mortality, our death directly in our face on the first day. We receive ashes on our forehead and listen to the ancient instruction, “Remember that you are dust and unto to dust you shall return.” Perhaps the majority of people who receive ashes ignore this command and do not spend **any** time *remembering* their dust identity. It is a quick ritual, after all, and most of us squeeze it into a busy schedule. But, like *most* rituals, it has a prescribed consciousness. It wants those receiving the ashes to entertain a certain set of thoughts, a mindset and a perspective that will open us to the inner Spirit who is waiting to revitalize us – to fan the flames of Life within us. (*see 2 Timothy 1:6*)

This Ash Wednesday ritual begins by asking us to **remember**. “Remember” is a classic injunction of spiritual traditions because spiritual traditions are in agreement that we human beings suffer from forgetfulness. We forget the truths associated with life itself because we have buried our heads in the sand of immediate, everyday activities. The *big* picture eludes us because the *small* picture absorbs us. Therefore, just the *word* “remember” has shock effect. It pulls us from the mindless rush of endless tasks, and **demands** we redirect our attention.

However, lifting our head from the earth long enough to see ourselves in perspective is not easy. Remembering is not easy. Facing the bare fact of our mortality – that we will die, all of us, without exception – is not easy.

But once this bare fact of our death is firmly established in our mind, other thoughts emerge. For death is the teacher of life. Remembering the bare fact of our death may initially lead us into making a will, assigning a power of attorney for health care, making choices about life-sustaining treatments, etc. But after this type of planning is over, another type of inquiry takes over. In the light of our death, what type of life *should* we be leading and what type of life are we *actually* leading? There is no telling where this reflection will lead us. In fact, we may short-circuit this inquiry because we fear where it will take us. But if we carry through with the remembering, two lines of thought will most likely emerge.

The first line of thought is: how much we have taken life for granted and how much we need to change that oversight. In the consciousness that we will not always be in this life in the way we presently are, we realize what a gift we have been given. Suddenly every moment is precious and needs to be cherished—the food we eat, the people we love, the work we do. Our consciousness of the transitory, fleeting nature of life moves us to be grateful not only for all the blessings within life but for the very **fact** of life itself. If we have lost wonder and reverence, we become determined to reclaim it. The taste of life’s sweetness is in our mouth.

The second line of thought is a consideration of what it is that really matters. Are our ambitions and anxieties around the “small stuff”? Do we “tithe mint, dill, and cumin” (as Jesus says) yet “neglect the weightier matters of . . . justice and mercy and faith” (Matt 23:23-24)? Have we sacrificed what is *really* im­portant to get **more** of what is *less* important? Does our work serve oth­ers? Do we have our priorities straight? When people are dying, no one thinks they should have spent more time at the office. Therefore, if we do the remembering on the first day of Lent, the Lenten agenda unfolds before us: cherish each day and prioritize our concerns.

So out of the negative **reality** (our death) comes **hope** (a greater treasuring and a greater sense of what is important). This is the first day of Lent, and now we have six weeks to put it into practice. We have to turn away *from* our habit of insensitivity *towards* the glorious emergence of each new moment.

But numbness is a long-standing habit, and it is deeply ingrained. We may find our mind does not learn new tricks easily. We also have to reprioritize so we give time and energy to what is most important, and this requires discipline. For we may find our old allegiances have convincing rationalizations. They will meet any attempt at reshuffling with a stubborn sense of squatters’ rights.

That is why Lent, in the ancient wisdom of the church, is needed every year.

God bless you in your Lenten journey.

AMEN

\*This meditation is taken in large part from John Shea, *Following Love into Mystery*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, pp. 77-79