

There is a township graveyard not far from our farmhouse. It's about half the size of this meetingroom, maybe a dab bigger, and full. The last burial was back in the 1920's. It's so old there are never any flowers on the graves, because everyone who might have known the people buried there are dead. It sits out in the middle of the township cornfield and the township makes more money from the corn than it does from graves, so the graveyard hasn't been expanded.

Last fall, Joan and I were out for a motorcycle ride and drove down the gravel lane to the cemetery to read the names on the tombstones. We were especially curious about one tombstone, because it's significantly taller than the other tombstones. You can see it from the road, rising like a little Washington Monument over the corn. It's probably fifteen feet tall and sits on a large limestone base. The man had died in 1900 and I asked Joan if she'd heard of him. She hadn't. Joan's mother was quite the historian, but she'd never mentioned the man to Joan. The tombstone had the man's name, date of birth, date of death, but then at the base had something I've never seen before on a tombstone. The cost of the tombstone was chiseled into the limestone, five hundred dollars, which in 1900 was a little more than the annual average family income in America, which was \$449.80. I guess he wanted people to know he had spent a year's salary on a tombstone.

Think about what kind of person would do that. Isn't that sad? Someone had lived their entire span of years, had gotten married, had children and grandchildren, and wanted their legacy to be the cost of their tombstone. How sad is that?

This came to mind because tomorrow is Memorial Day and we'll go to the Apple Chapel cemetery with Joan's sister and put flowers on Ruby and Howard Apple's grave. Every time we do that, I think about what it means to honor someone and what it means to be honored.

Who do we honor? Joan and I visited the Soviet Union in 1987. Wherever we went, there were statues and posters of Vladimir Lenin. Everywhere. You could even stand in line and see his body. But it was a forced remembrance, because when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the first thing that happened was that the statues of Lenin came down. People didn't even wait for the government to do it. They got ropes and pulled them down. The long lines of people waiting to see his body vanished. When tribute was no longer required, Lenin's importance to the average Russian plummeted. It is possible to compel adoration, but when you do, it is usually false and fails just as soon as the compulsion fails. Whenever anyone insists upon honor and tribute, they will receive the most meager form of honor—honor compelled, not honor earned.

Remember this, those of you who have children—think twice before insisting your children honor you simply because you are their parents. Honor insisted upon never endures. It ends just as soon as the power to insist ends. If you want to be honored by your children, live the kind of life worthy of honor. I have two grandmothers. They are both gone now. One grandmother insisted upon honor and deference, so I gave it. But I have never placed flowers on her grave. Nor have I ever heard any of my relatives lament her passing. It is ironic that she worried inordinately about her legacy, but never left one. My other grandmother was warm and kind, one of the finest persons I've ever known. I never visit Vincennes, Indiana without stopping by her grave. Though she never insisted on honor and tribute, her children and grandchildren treasure her memory.

It was never her intention to be honored. Honor and acclaim were simply not on her radar. She wasn't one to sit around wondering how to make people respect her. But her life was such a testament to beauty and kindness that the only fitting responses were admiration and respect. Watching my grandmother, I learned a great truth. When you treat people with grace and dignity, your legacy will take care of itself. You won't have to prove anything with your tombstone or your obituary. Your life will be your witness. People are all the time concerned about their legacy, how they'll be remembered, what people will say about them after they're gone. Don't worry about your legacy. Treat people with grace and dignity and your legacy will take of itself.

The writer Annie Lamott was once giving a lecture on writing and afterwards a woman in the audience raised her hand and said, “I want to write my story, but there are people who’ve been unkind to me. Should I write about that? Lamott had a very insightful response. She said, “You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people want you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.”

If you want your memory to be honored, then live a life worthy of honor. Simple. It’s not rocket science. We honor the people whose lives were worthy of honor. Don’t fret about your legacy. Be gracious, and your legacy will take care of itself.

In the Bible, there were two people whose lives intersected at a critical point. Pontius Pilate and Jesus. Of the two, who do you think was most concerned about his legacy? Who do you think was most concerned about being honored and celebrated?

Of the two, who do you think is most admired today? The one who cared the least about it. The one who gave little thought to his legacy, but in treating people with great love, secured for himself the most enduring legacy of all.