

Good Grief: With Cemeteries as Our Setting

In the spring of 2003, I stepped over the threshold of an old nineteenth-century barn, located on a Real County “Texas Century Ranch” – one of those prestigious ranches that have been in the same family for over a 100 years. Inside the wooden building, my feet rested on top of an old gravemarker that lay face up. My hostess, the owner of the ranch, had purposely brought me to see that gravemarker.

My hostess then drove me to the top of a hill that rose up behind us. There, inside her family’s cemetery, she showed me a gathering of gravemarkers –all facing the barn and a silo, a milk house, a garage, and a beautiful two-story house. Beyond the house I could hear the whisper of the Frio River. Everything about me was immaculate, well cared-for, preserved with care.

Among the cemetery’s twenty-eight markers, in a mixture of German and English languages, forty-two family members have been memorialized. The oldest death date is 1862; the most recent is 2003 – the same year as my visit. The 1862 marker reads: RUHE SANFT, SABINE REAL, GEB. KREY, GEST. MAI 17 1882, 66 JAHRE ALT. (*Rest in Peace, Sabine Real, born into the Krey family, died May 17, 1882, at the age of 66.*)

This gravemarker has replaced the older gravemarker that is now being used as a stepping stone in the barn. I mention these two gravemarkers because they allow me to discuss some of the rationale for this new column. First, all cemeteries – even family cemeteries with only one gravemarker – have the same legal status as any other public property. Everyone has a legal right to access them; everyone has a legal right to photograph them; everyone has a legal right to discuss them and write about them in public. The insides of barns, on the other hand, are private; I have no business discussing details of what I saw in that barn.

Second, sociologists and psychologists refer to private expressions of sorrow as “Grief”; they refer to public expressions of sorrow as “Mourning.” I would like to think that – in the case of

cemeteries – “good grief” can lead to “good mourning.” Yes, I did toy with the idea of using Good Mourning as a title.

Third, I have, however, chosen the title "Good Grief" because it has a Peanuts Cartoon connotation. I am a Midwestern, Protestant, Scots-German-Welsh Anglo. By definition, we descendents of Northern Europeans tend to get uptight regarding our cemeteries. Most other cultures do not.

I have, for example, lived in Japan for eight years. Asians – not just Japanese – Asians use cemeteries for family picnics! So do Italians. So do Mexicans. So do people in many other cultures. I want a title to my column that sort of hints at that "relaxed" attitude.

Finally, I am an Applied Linguist, concentrating my research on actual language usage in home environments. A significant number of households think they are using Spanish, or German, or Polish or Arabic, or whatever language, when, in reality they are often using a mixture of English and ethnic languages. They carry that language usage into their places of mourning.

So. I started this column by talking about a threshold. On a late-summer day, early in this twenty-first century, I stepped over a threshold back into time – onto an old gravemarker inside a twentieth-century, wooden, barn. I’m now stepping onto a new threshold forward into time, with this series of columns. I invite you to drive up to the top of many hills with me, to see what we can see.

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October 2, 2010

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