

11th January 2021

Burdens

**“With aching hands and bleeding feet
We dig and heap, lay stone on stone;
We bear the burden, and the heat
Of the long day, and wish ‘twere done.
Not ‘til the hours of light return
All we have built we do discern.”**

Matthew Arnold, Mortality

When I worked as a hospice chaplain, a common theme in our continued education was self-care, because there was always a danger of overload and burn-out. We all had our own methodologies. Here’s one of mine.

I attended a conference addressed by a drug and alcohol specialist on the theme of “Looking after yourself”. “We all have our ways,” she said. “One of mine is to take the case notes of the patients I’ve dealt with that day and slowly, one by one, put them back in the filing cabinet before I leave the office. I leave my cases there, ready to be picked up again the following day. It symbolises that I’m not taking my cases home.”

The word “cases” struck me. I didn’t keep case-notes. But in “the heat of a long day” I had many heavy burdens to carry. So, I developed my own symbolic way of dealing with them. And “cases” were involved too.

On my twenty-minute walk home, I imagined myself carrying lots of cases, one in each hand, and, on the worst of days, a rucksack on my back and bags over my shoulders. At various spots I would stop, wait, and let go of a case. One by one, case by case, burden by burden I left them behind. I have no idea what people thought of me as they walked by. It was enough for me to know that I was lightening my load. When I got home, hopefully I was in a place where “the hours of light” could return.

When you’ve had to “dig and heap, lay stone on stone”, I hope you can find ways of laying your cases down. For tomorrow you’ll be picking them up again, and you need to be in good shape to tackle that.

Matthew Arnold has it right. “All we have built we do discern”. Let’s make sure that, as part of our discernment, we care for ourselves, so that we can get on with more building of good and effective care.

A prayer for today

Jesus said: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

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