

And a charity for all

By **PETER LOVENHEIM** | July 15, 2020

It used to be that when a loved one died, family members—in the death notice—would invite friends and relatives to honor the deceased by donating to a local charity of their choice. Or they might suggest charities that benefit the larger community such as Strong Memorial Hospital, the Memorial Art Gallery, or Foodlink.

But is all that now passé—another victim of our political wars?

I wonder because I recently saw a Rochester obituary asking mourners to contribute in the deceased's name to organizations that aim to “unseat right-wing” office holders.



Political requests in obituaries, it turns out, may be becoming more common. In a 2015 article, the [Washington Post](#) turned up many instances from both sides of the political aisle. In death notices from around the country, mourners were requested to: donate to John Kerry's presidential campaign; support Republicans, especially Tea Party candidates; support anyone but Hillary Clinton; donate to Democrats; support anyone running against Barack Obama.

I get that we're living through a period of heightened political partisanship and many people want to see their favored candidates and causes supported after they're gone, but—whether the focus is right-wing or left-wing—I find this practice a little troubling.

Not to be lighthearted about it, but it reminds me of an episode of “Curb Your Enthusiasm” where Larry David and his wife, Cheryl, have agreed that for their 10th anniversary they'll renew wedding vows. But when Cheryl proposes that the new vow declare they will love each other “through all eternity,” Larry objects. “This relationship continues into the afterlife?” he asks. “I thought it was over at death!”

Maybe I was naïve to assume that political partisanship, too, ends at the grave.

Death notices that take aim at elected officials on one side of the aisle or the other not only reflect our divided nation but they themselves can be divisive.

What are mourners to do if they don't happen to share the deceased's politics? Must they dishonor their own views in order to honor the deceased's? If they give to a cause other than the favored candidate, are their donations to be considered second-rate? Where does it end?

Would the deceased's family disapprove if the person buried in the plot next to their loved one was discovered to have had opposite political leanings? Should we now have "Red" and "Blue" cemetery sections to be sure all can rest in peace? We can't live in peace with each other and now, it appears, we can't die in peace either.

But is death not the great leveler?

Speaking at American University in 1963, President John F. Kennedy noted that Russians and Americans—then bitter Cold War enemies—nevertheless all come to the same end. "Our most basic common link," he said, "is that we all inhabit this planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

Must it really be our dying wish that everyone with whom we disagree be defeated? Can we not, even at the end, muster enough humility to question the absolute correctness of our views and tolerate those who hold views different than our own?

Many times I've stood at graveside and found comfort in the ancient wisdom of Ecclesiastes: "A time to love and a time to hate/A time for war and a time for peace."

Even in these troubled times, I'd like to think death can be a time not for partisan hate and political war, but—if not for love—at least for peace.

If we truly desire to honor loved ones when they pass, let's try harder to extend the hand of conciliation to all who mourn. One way is by suggesting worthy causes for donation that everyone can be glad to support. President Abraham Lincoln said it best. To paraphrase his Second Inaugural: "with malice toward none, and a charity for all."

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