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Spring Burial: The Legend of the Service Tree

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

“We grew up thinking that if there wasn’t pavement under our feet, we were lost,” Marc Kaminsky said facetiously, as he sat with his longtime friend George Getzel, who lay dying in a hospital bed at Calvary Hospital in the Bronx, talking about spring. They were two Bronx kids, now two aging, brilliant intellectuals. They knew each other from their time at Hunter College School of Social Work in the ’70s. Struck by George’s tranquility in the face of mortality, Marc asked his friend, filmmaker Menachem Daum, to videotape their conversation, and Marc sent a copy to me.

In his better days, George told Marc, he loved to visit the New York Botanical Garden in all four seasons. Each time it would be a totally different world—the garden was a symbol of nature and birth, and growth and decay.

“You discover this natural world,” Marc remarked. “You take this literal fact and use it as a symbol of immortal life.”

“I was especially close to the service tree,” George continued. “It’s an indigenous tree



George Getzel. Courtesy of the author.

in northeast America. It’s a tree that’s barely a tree—it might be considered a bush—but it’s a tree. It actually fruits, it has a sweet little fruit that comes out of it when spring warms up, but it’s the first tree that blossoms in the woods. It has soft, large flower petals, light pinkish-white, and if you can reach out and smell it, the tree has the most delicate perfume—really beautiful. It only blooms when the earth around it is unfrozen.

“Our ancestors—at least the ones in North America—had a real problem when people died during the winter, because they couldn’t bury them; the ground was too hard. So what they did was wait till the service tree bloomed, and then they knew they could bury the dead because the ground was soft enough. Otherwise, the bodies would have to be kept in coffins stacked in barns. That touched me deeply.

“So for the last few years, when I could still walk, I’d been trying to hit one of my holy places—the service tree. I would go into the Bronx botanical garden to walk on a trail through 50 acres of virgin forest that had never been cut, and there is the service tree, and I try—it has a life of flowering of, like, three days—so I always try to imagine, ‘Is the ground soft?’ ‘Will I make it?’ And sometimes I make it and sometimes I don’t, and the service tree’s spent flowers are on the ground, but I think that it is emblematic of my notion of immortality in life: a brief time, a beautiful fragrance, and then passing, disintegrating, falling to the ground, and renewal.”

Alone with his mortality in the hospital late one night, George spontaneously texted Marc some of his spiritual musings. Marc later lined the text out as a poem. It ended:

Humankind calls out for compassion
For one’s self and then the other
The spent perfume of the petals
Of the service tree
Fall to the forest bottom
When earth loses its chill

“The last four lines” Marc told him, “sound like the poem that Zen priests wrote just before they died.” It was as if George were musing about an eternal spring, with ground soft enough to accept his body, a universe that still had a place for him, even after his death.

“So here I am in bed, and I’m fading away, I’m losing weight, there are changes,



Checking for blossoms on the serviceberry tree. Photo by Amanda Dargan.



The Service Tree. Courtesy of the New York Botanical Garden.



and people visit me, and they say, 'I really want to go to the botanical gardens with you,' and then a little sadness comes over me—'cause that's not possible anymore."

George was a faculty member at the Hunter College School of Social Work, now the Silberman School of Social Work, for more than 30 years. As someone who avoided the limelight, he wouldn't have wanted anyone to walk in his footsteps. "If anything I do is truly worthwhile in my eyes or in the world's eyes, I don't want to be copied," he said. "I just don't want it—I'm me, you're you. But I do want to inspire."

And so, as spring rolls around after a bitter winter, I was inspired to call the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx and ask if they knew about the service tree. The Garden arranged for horticulturalist Jessica Schuler, Director of the Thain Family Forest, to meet my wife and me at the reflecting pool the next Saturday. We traveled into the woods that she knew so well, and we stood in front of the tree George had loved. Though it was the first beautiful day of spring, the service tree had just a tiny splash of pink on the buds. Perhaps, the ground wasn't yet soft enough to bury the dead.

I told Jessica about George, whom I never met, and his metaphorical interpretation of the service tree. Jessica told us the tree's Latin name is *Amelanchier arborea*, but that it had had a variety of common names and etymologies in early North America: shadbush, because it often grows in riparian forests at the edges of rivers where the shad run. It was also called "Juneberry," because it often fruited in June. And it was called "serviceberry tree," because it

bloomed when the ground was no longer frozen, and it was time to bury the dead and hold a service.

Back in the hospital room, Marc felt that the space around himself and George was getting greater and greater, and that on the other side of that space was death, but that the space of life was also looming larger. George continued to express his deep and thoughtful perspective on life in the face of imminent mortality, making connections between blossoming and withering, growth and decay. "I remember holding my wife's hand when she was dying," George told Marc, "and having a great sense of intimacy, the same as when I held my hand over her belly when she was pregnant. There's this mixture. Even in the face of the grim realities of life that nauseate you and shatter your dreams, I've found—with difficulty—deeper meaning.

"We all hold down to something that we would hope would have permanence," he continued. "Something that would lead us beyond our grave and have something of eternity tied to it. We discover that the idol—be it money, position, your own children, the neighborhood you live in—it's not forever and it falls apart and isn't what you thought it was when you were a young man. It becomes moth-eaten and dissipates, and then with that—and here is where I think the faith of an older person, the circumstance of an older person, is useful—it's followed by new growth, new possibilities."

George Getzel died on January 7, 2018. The serviceberry tree he loved so well will bloom again next spring. ▼

Please email your thoughts, stories, and responses about the poetic side of life to <steve@citylore.org>. Steve Zeitlin is the Founding Director of City Lore. He is the author of *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness* (Cornell University Press, 2016).



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