

Footprints in the snow

On December 12 last, I awoke to the first snow of the season. The pristine white blanket covered the ground as the morning greeted the surprising gift. Donning my winter gear and insulating my hands with thermal gloves, I set out for my usual morning stroll along the road by my house. I knew that the sheep would be waiting for me to feed them their daily ration of food. This morning, because of the snow ground cover, they would blend in with the environment because of their coats of white wool.

My footprints crunched the freshly fallen snow as I walked along. My footprints were the only human footprints on the road as they marked my journey. As I walked along, I noticed lots of other footprints, not human but animal; the footprints of wild rabbits as they danced erratically along on the snow. Their footprints were pattern less, as they crisscrossed the road while my footprints were measured and standard.

Having completed my animal chores for the morning, I came home to prepare for a funeral; the funeral of a sixty-four year old neighbour. The night before, his wake lasted into the late night as people arrived from near and far to sympathize with his wife and extended family.

Years earlier, I was privileged to be invited to be part of his wedding celebration while I was on vacation from Mississippi. A few weeks later, I was invited to his home to relive the wedding day again as we viewed a video of the wedding.

We both attended the same elementary school. He was in the same class as my younger sister. When she died of cancer three years ago, he arrived in his red jeep. He parked it outside the house and stayed there for a long time crying. Finally, he was able to compose himself and visit.

At the stroke of noon, his funeral began to a packed church and an equally large number outside who could not enter. What was it about this man that drew such a large crowd to his funeral?

First of all, he was a people person who never met a stranger. It didn't matter if you were pope or pauper; politician or privileged; person of wealth or person of low morals; he didn't differentiate. He was more concerned about what was on the inside rather than what the outwardly appearance reflected.

He had a laugh that was both unique and infectious. Driving along the road, he waved to everyone he met and passed no matter whether they were friend or stranger. If he saw someone thumbing their way to a nearby town and he may be going in the opposite direction, he would turn his vehicle around and take them to town, staying with them until they had completed their shopping or business when he would take them home again.

Why, on December 8th – the Feast of the Immaculate Conception did he decide to sit down in his chair at home and take a dose of poison to end his life? Basically, the mystery continues. It defies logic and common sense that someone with such an enthusiasm and appetite for life should end so tragically.

Following his funeral, my thoughts reverted back to my morning walk in the fresh snow that morning. As I walked along the unsullied snow covered road, I was reminded of the beauty and often innocence of life. I noticed how a fresh fall of snow can camouflage a multitude of imperfections beneath its surface. A fresh fall of snow can project an idyllic picture of harmony and togetherness. But, as the footsteps of humans and the erratic ones of animals, the pristine nature of the snow can be savagely brutalized and lose its beauty. Later, as cars roll over it, immune to its beauty because of their practical purpose, the snow becomes a cesspool of slush, mud and aggravation.

So, it seems to be with life. Life starts off with newness, beauty, freshness, potential and often ends up tainted by the harsh realities of life that can, in reality, become guided by demons which are often beyond control while, at the same time, lurk beneath what often seems, on the surface, an idyllic life.