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## A dream lies buried here

Tombstones are bequeathed to perpetuate an indelible respect carved in stone. They vary from monolithic to diminutive, flagrant to subtle; each sustains a loss not forgotten.

CAMERON FRENCH

Where can you walk and sense the tranquillity of life with every footstep? In the same place you find century-old sculptures, manicured lawns and trees that have graced generations of families.

Here you escape the incessant drone of the urban heartbeat and forget that the city's shadow is but a stone's throw away. The answer is a niche of history that captures a legacy for descendants past and future. It avails itself to the living while embracing the dead. It is much maligned and misunderstood: the cemetery.

Despite what Hollywood would have us believe, cemeteries are anything but poltergeists of terror. Jason's awakening from his grave must be profitable indeed. (Halloween Part 8 is it now?) To those who spend so much time and effort ensuring that cemeteries are designed for the living, it represents an intellectual offence. Cemeteries are vibrant dynamic havens, resplendent with colour, wildlife, architecture and artistry.

Take a walk through a cemetery and see the magnificent masonry, meticulous landscaping and tender prose. As you enter the lych-gate, gaze upon the sculptured dedications to the deceased. There are pillars, slabs, obelisks, mausoleums, monuments, columns, and tablets. Battered by the harshest adversary of all -- time -- they stand tall, erect, and defiant. Scarred but unrelenting, these tombstones are bequeathed to perpetuate an indelible respect carved in stone. Majestic memorials of granite and marble rise from the earth. They vary from monolithic to diminutive, flagrant to subtle; each sustains a loss not forgotten.

In Mike Filey's superb Mount Pleasant Cemetery: An illustrated guide he notes the religious, cultural and literary symbols that adorn many of the graves. The Greeks favour the laurel wreath (victory); Estonians the sun (giver of life), Ukrainians wheat (life; broken wheat denotes life cut short). The Chinese symbols include water lily (purity), the bamboo (integrity) and the pine tree (sincerity and generosity). A few conventions transcend nationality and religion. The olive branch with dove denotes peace or safety. An eye in the triangle is the eye of God in the trinity, all-seeing, all-knowing. Ivy represents immortality as it stays forever green.

Take the opportunity to read some of the inscriptions. The notations range from names and dates, to biblical passages to gentle words of love:  
Called to a Higher Court

What we keep in memory is ours, unchanged forever.

Step Softly, a Dream Lies Buried Here.

The epitaph is the final opportunity to bid adieu. It offers an opportunity to transcend cliché. It is a tribute, designed to epitomize the deceased's lifestyle in concise format. One lifetime's achievements, philosophy, perspective, summary, become etched in stone for generations to contemplate.

I chanced upon a handsome woman and her middle-aged son seeding the soil atop a grave in a small church cemetery. The headstone was a fabulous red-granite boulder, in striking contrast to the rows of rectangular marble. The family told me how they had visited a number of quarries in search of the ideal stone.

Here it was, a showcase of their reverence. They were tending to the grave, ensuring its grassy top, a polished facade, a tiny garden. Some plots are laden with bouquets, some lie unattended. Many people care for their own in painstaking fashion. Loved ones uproot the weeds, fertilize the soil, plant flowers, and dote over them with love and affection. Others leave behind a bouquet, candle, or wreath as an expression of their devotion.

At any cemetery you are looking at snapshots of history. You will learn about fathers killed in industrial accidents, mothers slain by the perils of childbirth, sons and daughters stolen by fate long before they tasted the joys of adolescence. Politicians, business tycoons, celebrities, and anonymous citizens lie side by side, oblivious to their stature in death. Natural disasters, personal tragedy, disease and old age: all claim their victims here.

Cemeteries are not graveyards. That ghastly term applies to the holding areas for mass-murder victims. Graveyards are haphazard, careless, and indifferent to the living and insolent to the dead. Devoid of planning, they represent convenience to killers, a necessary by-product of their brutality. Cemeteries are the antithesis of graveyards; inherently artistic, orderly, planned in explicit detail, demonstrating care and respect for both life and death.

If you should seek the calm and quiet that urban life rarely permits, look to a cemetery to fulfill that lack. You can behold art, history, and nature in consummate harmony. There you can escape, dream, walk, relax, and best of all, savour the joys of life.

*Cameron French is a cemetery enthusiast who resides in Scarborough, Ont.*

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