CENTER VALLEY – On any given day on our university campus, passers-by encounter an array of personal appearances. Hair color varies from bleach blond to bright orange, with even a few shades of blue mixed in. Silver rings dot young faces in a variety of places, from ears to eyebrows, and even in noses. Some might say that these fashion trends (or the lack thereof) make a statement about the present generation – young people striking out on their own and “marking” their territory as distinct individuals in an otherwise crowded and sometimes faceless sea of humanity.

The celebration of Ash Wednesday comes with its own mark and its own statement. On this day, Christians around the world celebrate the beginning of Lent, the forty-day period of preparation for the solemn feast of Easter. Catholic Christians, in particular, commence this season by having ashes placed prominently on their foreheads in the sign of a cross. Created by burning palm branches from the previous year, this blackened soot signals the fragility of human existence. Bearers of this brand of death are told to “remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”

Such a stark reminder hardly seems needed these days. There are enough ashes all around – from the crumbled ruins of the World Trade Center to the crash and burn of Enron and other companies. Should we not, instead, avert our eyes from the specter of tragedy and death and consider the prospects of building a brighter future? Would it not be better to take whatever steps we can to eradicate the suffering that so unnecessarily burdens our lives?
No one would deny that we should look to the future and to do so with hope. We need not, and should not, give in to despair. Ash Wednesday provides a sensible reminder of what is entailed in moving forward.

The Christian display of ashes recalls more than the inevitable fact of our physical demise. It represents more than a merely traditional form of religious asceticism. Neither morbid nor gothic, the ashes one wears mark the gateway to a more meaningful human existence.

The way is not around suffering but through it. That suffering is inevitable is a fact of our experience. That suffering is often unexplainable remains a truth of our consciousness. No one wants to suffer, but everyone does in some way. Animals may feel pain, but only humans suffer. How we respond to this reality is what sets people apart.

Since September 11, we have learned to count as heroes those who face suffering head on, even choosing to do so in the face of insuperable odds. The fire fighters and rescue workers we now admire for their bravery deserve that acclaim because they chose to discount their own suffering in favor of the good of others. The business executives we now chide for defrauding their employees are dishonored because they put their own well being ahead of their employees’ benefits.

Ash Wednesday, with its visible link between living and suffering, raises the stakes of human honor. It reflects the Christian belief that, ultimately, life arises from the ashes, specifically from Him who submitted himself to death on a Roman cross for the sake of the world.

In a culture that strives mightily to eliminate all suffering – through pharmaceutical products and medical marvels – Ash Wednesday reminds us of the truth that we cannot escape our own mortality. Said positively, it affirms life as a gift, whose beginning and end is not of our own choosing. As Pope John Paul II states in his message for Lent this year, “because it is a gift, life can never be regarded as a possession or as private property, even if the capabilities we now have to improve the quality of life can lead us to think that man is the ‘master’ of life.”

We know there is more to life than dust and ash. Rightly do we desire a meaningful existence. In the pursuit of our well being, we face a choice each day: to dwell amid the ruins of our human fallibility, susceptible to the anxiety and despair that attend it; or to arise from the dust of our daily troubles with the hope-filled resolve of forging a better world.

Our resiliency in the face of suffering, whether as a result of terrorist attacks or unethical business practices, remains the hallmark of our human character. We have seen how heroic sacrifice can transform the mood of a nation. Ashes this Wednesday remind us of the divine source of that character and that spirit. And they invite us to give witness to the gratuitousness of life through our own generosity in service to those in need.

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