

## Congressional Cemetery *Circle of Life* Dedication Remarks – 3/19/23

Thank you, Jackie. It is indeed a welcome day to commemorate the *Circle of Life* – in partnership with Congressional Cemetery – with all of you here with us.

And accompanied by Bataala !! Their inspirational performance is a rousing launch for today's ceremony. They will be *drumming* at various times during our gathering -- to kick off the auction, during the participatory laying of stones, And towards the end--they will play their Samba-Reggae rhythms to lead folks to the warm & cozy chapel for refreshments & socializing.

What's brought us to this hillside on the eve of Vernal Equinox and Spring's blustering re-awakening? Appropriately enough-- Simply an homage to nature. And to those –in life and in death -- who help preserve it for generations to come. These surroundings are a tribute to those interred here. But this hillside especially recognizes those who have chosen natural burial as their final gift to the earth.

This *Circle of Life* is an 'interpretive' monument. And it will have different meanings for every person who visits over time -- depending on their beliefs and experiences -- and their stage of life.

For children, the *Circle of Life* will likely bring to mind the story of the Lion King -- when Mufasa teaches Simba about the important connection between all living creatures -- and the inter-generational cycle of birth, growth, death, and renewal.

For others, a walk through this contemplative space while reflecting on the artwork, might just be a quiet time to appreciate the present moment, secure in understanding that the rhythms of nature's ebb and flow, giving way to another day, and another season.

For me, the *Circle* is a meaningful touchstone – It feels like a connection to the much longer through-line of history and civilization. In this National Historic Landmark, among the thousands of venerable gravesites and tombs, this unique hillside has a profound Sense of Place. It's a rare sight – in a city – to be able to look out on this vast open horizon – and not see a Single Building. This is exactly what it looked like hundreds of years ago when Native American and others -- -- stood here.

My only hope IS -- that this site, and this enduring monument -- will be preserved – and appreciated -- by those who come upon it, —As I did-- a hundred years from now.

*(share this description later inside Chapel if too cold & windy on hillside)*

Throughout history, sacred circles -- made with stone carvings, and aligned in symmetry with elements of nature -- have reflected the traditions of ancient cultures the world over.

Centuries ago, this area was inhabited by Native Americans. The Nacotchtank, the Anacostan, and the Piscataway roamed throughout this region. And under open horizons like this, indigenous tribes created ceremonial circles -- to express their gratitude to the earth, to follow the sun's path -- as an annual calendar on when to plant and when to harvest; -- and to bury their dead.

Thousands of years before that, ancient cultures at Stonehenge, and Machu Picchu, and Angkor Wat -- moved heavy rocks over untold miles to construct intricate monuments with universal symbols of nature; to celebrate the solstice and the equinox, to bury their ancestors, and pay homage to religious deities.

While their funeral traditions differed, most cultures interred the deceased in keeping with the laws of nature. This age-old process, now called 'green burial,' allowed bodies to decompose naturally and replenish the earth.

In fact, this is how our Congressional legislators, Senators and Congressmen who helped to govern our country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were interred. Many of them within these hallowed grounds.

Congressional Cemetery was established in 1807 -- to provide a place for those who passed away while serving in office at the U.S. Capitol. The deceased were often hundreds or thousands of miles from home and their remains could not be transported across such long distance -- And over too many days.

Chemical embalming -- the process of forestalling a body's natural decline for extended periods of time -- only became popular in this country in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although early embalmers were able to preserve President Lincoln's remains -- so that his body could make the 13-day, 1,700 mile journey back to Springfield IL in a slow-moving funeral train. As a result, thousands who wanted to pay their respects to the fallen leader, were able to see him in his open casket coming home.

These days cremation and embalming are the most common methods for bodily disposition. Although both take a toll on the environment.

In the last decade, there has been growing interest in more eco-friendly means of interment. The *Circle of Life* is a living memorial -- to those throughout these cemetery grounds -- who have chosen this simple and sustainable end to their existence.

My friend, Nancy Brennan, envisioned a natural burial as her final wish. Nancy was essential in bringing this *Circle* to fruition. She helped to select granite samples, interview stone masons, and helped choose the images to portray the seasons. She would be here today -- if God had not had other plans. Instead, last fall, Nancy consecrated this piece of earth -- with her own body and spiritual being. She's now at rest in the green burial site there by the last granite circle -- that accordingly reads: 'From Earth We Are, To Earth We Return.'

Nancy was amazingly comfortable in her final months talking about the beauty of connecting one's end to the beginning of life for other living organisms. We mulled over how our transforming energy and matter would ultimately create the rich soil to nurture these flowers and trees. Over the years, those trees and flowers would grow and feed pollinators -- and provide forage for the beehives at the bottom of the hill. In cycle of life, those insects will in turn be eaten by birds.

We laughed about our future life, when we essentially would be able to fly. We looked forward to that. Because we both admired the freedom of birds. ;- )  
I also have a site at the bottom of the *Circle*. And much to my son's amusement (Andrew is here) I gave him a site as a Christmas gift. It was quite a joke among his friends when they compared what their parents had given them for Christmas.

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[AUCTION] -- So let's have an Auction. Just lucky you're here today!  
You'll notice the garden benches around the hillside. We're going to auction off the option to dedicate this 'Tree of Life' bench with your name, or those of your loved ones. You can see a sample of an engraved brass name plate on this bench.

On a warmer day, you might visit and sit on your named bench. Maybe enjoy the solstice or equinox from this vantage point. Or just know that you are part of the *Circle of Life*, and this gift to posterity.

All funds go to the Assn for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery.

So let's start the bidding at \$150. And we'll take bids in increments of \$ 50 each until we have a donor whose name will be engraved on the brass plate.

I can't mimic patter of an auctioneer, but Batala, could you give us a drumroll?

Here we go – Do I hear \$150 for bench naming rights? \$200? \$250? To have your name engraved on this distinguished brass plate – a bespoke creation by Engraving Studios in the UK.

Congratulations! the winner is.... Tell me what name for engraving after the event.

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[THANK YOU's]      *(Possibly deliver these recognitions later in the Chapel)*

Before we begin our stone laying ceremony, I want to recognize some of those here who helped to create the *Circle* and have provided stewardship over this gathering space –

First and foremost, our Congressional Cemetery partners --Jackie Spainhour and Sarah La Rocca -- who have seen this project through -- as the *Circle's* artisan works and landscaping evolved over time. Others on the staff (Margaret, AJ & Lily) were also key to this effort. But sadly, they are attending a Celebration of Life this afternoon for another prominent member of the Congressional community.

I want to thank my longtime friend and collaborator, Kay Tatum, who has been integral to this project from the beginning. Kay stood with me on this hillside four years ago -- when we selected green burial sites. She has been a trusted ally for over 35 years; and will be one of my eternal roommates in these surroundings.

I'm grateful to Niv Fishbein, owner of FRAM Monument Company, who sourced, and engraved, and installed the granite circles. And patiently worked through all the details – which, of course, exceeded by far --what either of us expected.

I appreciate the excellent work of graphic artist and photographer, David Posey, who meticulously adapted each image to produce the precise line drawings we needed to cut the stone engravings. To Mary Belcher, who created the lovely watercolor rendering of the *Circle* in the brochure. And to Eileen Powell, garden whisperer, who will help green this hill in future.

And we're forever indebted to Casey Trees, who over 3 years ago, planted this sylvan 'tree-henge.' The eight linden saplings are in exact alignment with the directional points of the compass. Just imagine them in 50 years, as they've grown to be 60-80 feet tall, each one spreading their branches 20 ft around – to provide a shaded and peaceful outdoor sanctuary. Of Casey Trees, it can truly be said "Blessed are those who plant the trees under whose **shade** they may never sit." Thank them for DC's tree canopy.

Fianlly, thanks to all of you who came out on this chilly day – either out of curiosity; or because this has meaning for you. Or because you're a faithful friend.

May we all follow the inspiring example of President Carter and spend our final days in grace, peace and humility – knowing that we each have an essential role in the ongoing cycle of life.

[STONE-LAYING CEREMONY]

‘Now it’s time to cast away and gather stones together.’ Some of you may recall that verse from a song that Pete Seegar wrote and adapted from a chapter of Ecclesiastes. **To everything there is a season** –  
(later popularized as “Turn, Turn, Turn” by Judy Collins and the Byrds)  
Whenever I’m working in the *Circle*, that song is like a music worm floating thru my head.

While I don’t have the voice to sing (lucky for you) -- I just want to share a few verses – as we conclude this commemoration of the *Circle* --

There is a season -- and a time, for every purpose – under heaven

“A time to be born and a time to die.

A time to plant, and a time to reap.

A time to laugh, a time to weep

A time for silence, and a time to speak.

A time for love -- a time for hate.

And a time for peace – before it’s too late.

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In the tradition of stone circles, each member of the community is invited to add a stone with their blessing. Thus creating a holistic synergy in spirit that is greater than the sum of its parts.

WE invite you to select a stone from one of the baskets and place it alongside a season, or image that has meaning for you.

In this way, you’ll be contributing a part of your energy to the Spirit of the Place. And it will be here as a touchstone, when you return in other seasons.

While you select and place your stone –

Batala will give us a harmonious stone-laying accompaniment --

After which, we’ll follow the drummers to the chapel for refreshments.

We hope you will stay and socialize, enjoy some food, hot tea and homemade bread.

Batala, it’s all yours!