

June 10, 2020

The Cemetery Montparnasse is right in the heart of the thriving neighborhood in Paris that was the center of art, literature, sculpture, motion pictures, and music, especially American jazz, at the turn of the 20th century lasting up to the occupation of Paris by the Nazi's in June of 1940.

Just inside the main gate of this cemetery are the graves of John Paul Sartre and his friend/lover/colleague Simone de Beauvoir who because of an open relationship that they agreed upon spent a summer in an apartment at Well's Street Beach in Miller with another lover, Nelson Algren.

John Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were complex people, both were deep and broad thinkers, both writers and critics of literature and culture during and, especially, after World war II, living and working and writing in Paris with the exception of de Beauvoir's affairs that took her away from Sartre at times.

Sartre was a part of a school of philosophy that was called existentialism/phenomenology, my major in college. Sartre believed that a person had to forge and find meaning in life and that that process was a task that many avoided accepting unquestionably what the Catholic Church imposed on French culture and French people and denying any implication that Catholicism has failed as evidenced by the World Wars of the 20th century.

Simone de Beauvoir, on the other hand, was concerned with the oppression of women, the violence toward women, and the general exclusion of women from positions of responsibility and influence.

As you might imagine, they and their colleagues were routinely condemned by the Catholic Church with attempts to marginalize their thinking and influence.

Anecdotally, it was their thinking that in large part legitimized cremation as a valid alternative to burial in France that has, since, led to the popularity of cremation in our time.

One of the responses to Sartre and de Beauvoir's influence by the Church was to ban cremation and make it a moral issue for Catholics. That ban has been lifted since 1967, by the way.

The ideas of Sartre and de Beauvoir and their like caught the imaginations of the young and fueled anti-Catholic sentiment and encouraged free thinking and writing and living unhindered by censorship and moral standards, especially sexual, by the Church in Paris and beyond as we rolled through the 60's on our way to Woodstock, The Beatles, and beyond.

My whole point in all of this is to tell you that their graves in Montparnasse Cemetery lie between the mausoleums of a Catholic religious order of priests and a Catholic religious order of nuns and are just across the walkway from the mausoleum for the priests of the Archdiocese of Paris.

Irony? Chance? Grace? The hidden workings of the Spirit?

The differences that we use in life to build edifices of power and importance that we use to persecute and penalize, all unravel at our deaths and, at the end of it all, we find it all so out of our control, don't we?

If we could just learn to be a little bit more curious and a little bit more uncertain before we die, it might be just a bit easier to be the human beings that we are created to be.