



July 28, 2020

Susan Sontag was an American writer who died in 2004 and, in my opinion, was one of the most creative and thoughtful Americans of the last quarter of the 20th century. Her life was overtly and intentionally counter to the roles and expectations assigned to women by the dominant patriarchal systems that defined so much of the value and worth of the human person in the 20th century.

She raised significant and serious and, in hindsight, my opinion, crucial questions that impinge on the very survival of the American democratic experiment that is so assaulted and challenged today by the pandemic and the lack of moral and intellectual competency to deal with it.

She suffered three different diagnoses of terminal cancer and survived all but the third; she addressed to superficiality and consumer driven nature of our common life correctly, in my opinion, predicting that our obsessive valuing of recreation and entertainment over substance in education and our common life would not bode well for us in the long run, as we are experiencing today.

She was one of the first people to embrace AIDS and the victims of AIDS with a medical/human/compassionate embrace and not with the hypocritical judgmental disgust of so many in the political, religious, and cultural patriarchy.

She was Jewish by birth but embraced no denominational affiliation in life but in death; she could not accept that all of life was just a waste of time, that we are simply dust and to dust we return and asked her son to take her back to Paris to be buried, not cremated, in the Cemetery Montparnasse, and you see her grave in this picture.

You cannot see well, but the debris or what looks like debris at the foot of the grave are actually “souvenirs,” which literally means “the act of

remembering". It is a custom in Paris when you visit a grave to leave your bus or metro ticket on the grave as a sign that you are remembering.

It is a custom among Jewish people, but lots of us do it, to put little stones on a grave marker when they visit, and you can make out a few little stones on her grave. The custom has varied meanings, but the one that I like is that, while flowers are important as symbols, like life they fade and wither, but the stone has a certain permanence that has solidity to it, and death is a rather permanent state of being from our perspective.

It was a common practice of shepherds in ancient times when sheep were grazed on common plots of land to hang a small pouch around their necks with small pebbles corresponding to the number of sheep in their flock that were grazing so that at the end, they could account for their own sheep.

An accounting system of sorts.

The idea with the stones and graves was that God kept his pouch close to the heart with the stones of God's flock for eternity, thus signifying that in the finality of death there was hope of being kept close to the heart of God.

I like that, don't you?

There used to be a small English language bookstore in Paris that I would visit, and the owners became friends with Susan Sontag and were invited to her funeral, and once it was my great privilege to hear them tell of that day and that time.