

32963 Faith Column, 5-12-11
By Rev. Drs. Casey and Bob Baggott
Community Church of Vero Beach

Famous Last Words

Someone has been interested enough in the dying words of famous and infamous people to collect and publish them. And Christopher Orlet in the *Vocabula Review* wrote a fascinating little article about them. Here are just a few of the best “last words.”

From Ludwig von Beethoven, these words so in keeping with his life and profession: “Friends applaud, the Music is over.” Also in keeping with his profession, from French grammarian Dominique Bonhours, came these last words: “I am about to die, or I am going to die; either expression may be used.” Asked by the firing squad commander if he had a final request, condemned prisoner James Roges said, “Why yes. I’d like a bullet proof vest.” From legendary ballerina Anna Pavlova: “Hurry. Get my best swan costume ready.” And this waspish last remark came from author Oscar Wilde: “Either that wallpaper goes or I do.”

These apt and even humorous last words got us thinking about what sort of verbal legacy we might like to leave behind. What should our last words be? Have you thought about your final message to the world? What would you want to say?

Several years ago *Spirituality and Health Magazine* published an article about the American short story writer, Raymond Carver, who died suddenly and left an errand list in his jacket pocket that became, inadvertently, his last words. The list was an odd mixture of the ordinary and the sublime. The list said, “eggs, peanut butter, cheese, bread...” and then, with question marks following them, these last three words: “Australia? Antarctica? Eternity?”

What could have been going through Carver’s mind that led him to create such a list? At first the combination of words seems incongruous, but perhaps the final errand list that Carver left behind reveals something significant that we often fail to notice. Maybe all of our lives must be, in fact, just that odd combination of the ordinary and the sublime.

It’s true that some of us are tempted to focus entirely on the ordinary. We may find ourselves excessively concerned with the next social obligation we must fulfill, or the next meal we’ll eat, or the next car we’ll purchase. But inevitably, even if we try to focus only on these ordinary things, something intervenes and draws our attention to greater concerns and deeper matters. Perhaps a death, or a health scare, or a relationship challenge awakens us and demands we adopt some new and wider perspective for our lives. Living with concern for only the ordinary is not enough.

On the other hand, some of us try to lose ourselves entirely in the sublime, denying the everyday demands and concerns of life. This, too, is an insufficient stance. We can’t expect to flee from life’s ordinariness. As author Jack Kornfield put it in his book of this title, “After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.”

What blend of the ordinary and the sublime have you fostered in your life? If you wrote out the contributing features in each category, what sort of list would result? And if you wove these aspects of your life and its most meaningful commitments and concerns into a statement for posterity, would you be pleased to offer these as your last words?