

“LEARNING CONQUERS SADNESS”

At a house of shiva it is a custom to learn. The practice of studying in someone’s memory may seem arbitrary. One could as easily sing, or observe only silence. While it is a characteristic Jewish tribute to learn in someone’s honor, it never occurred to me to wonder why, precisely, until I read Merlin’s advice to King Arthur in T.H. White’s “The Once and Future king:”

“The best thing for being sad,’ replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, ‘is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then – to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.”

Learning teaches us that the world is larger than our concerns, and infinitely full. Though we may feel hollow in our grief, the world is full. Not all the meaning and wonder has been taken from the world in our loss. Learn something in honor of those who have died. Fill the world up anew.