

The Reverend Cody J. Sanders, Ph.D.

May 19, 2020

Forest Hills Cemetery
95 Forest Hills Avenue
Boston, MA 02130

Dear President Milley and Board of Trustees,

When I moved to Jamaica Plain five years ago, my greatest delight was living in an apartment just steps away from the storied Forest Hills Cemetery. Before my furniture even arrived, I had purchased and read Kelleher's history of the cemetery. I now visit the cemetery a few times each week, walking the gentle hills and wooded groves of Forest Hills with my partner and two dogs. Every friend who visits me receives an increasingly involved tour of the Cemetery, and I have brought many parishioners from my congregation in Cambridge down to witness the Cemetery's beauty. I am certain that I am one of your biggest fans and consummate promoters.

In the May 15 update to the Corona Virus (COVID-19) Bulletins page on the Cemetery website you state, "Upon re-opening, please be advised that dog walking, bicycling and jogging are no longer permitted within Forest Hills Cemetery. We require all visitors to be respectful of our primary purpose which is to bury the dead and to provide a peaceful and tranquil setting for their families and friends." I would like to think with you about this statement as a member of your local community, an ardent supporter, and a scholar working in the area of religion and funerary praxis.

I affirm your commitment to provide a "peaceful and tranquil setting" for families and friends to visit their dead. But, more broadly, we should also ask: To whom do the dead belong? The social imagination that gave birth to the rural garden cemetery movement, of which you stand as one of the greatest progenitors, cultivated a necro-space that expanded notions of our relationship and proximity to the dead. No longer the exclusive purview of clergy in consecrated churchyards, or relegated to morbid city burial grounds pointing us to our own impending death, rural garden cemeteries gave us a way of drawing close to our dead in sites of beauty, memory, and even recreation.

In his "cultural history of mortal remains," *The Work of the Dead*, Thomas Laqueur argues that the dead body matters "because the living need the dead far more than the dead need the living" (1). He continues, "there is the recognition, even if unspoken, of the power of the dead in deep time to make communities, to do the work of culture, to announce their presence and meaning by occupying space" (22). My observations of Forest Hills over the last five years point to a continuing legacy of community cultivation between the dead and the living in our local neighborhoods through the park-like atmosphere and expansive welcome of Forest Hills.

As Laqueur says, "All sorts of strangers are intimate neighbors in the dust" (310). And the dead of Forest Hills are neighbors to the living in your surrounding neighborhoods as well. The dead are even neighbors to our more-than-human companions who walk on leashes with us through this city of the dead. Forest Hills is home to a lasting testament to this bond between human and canine in one of the most beautiful dog sculpture gravestones I've ever observed, adorning the Henry and Lucinda Barnard grave. Community building between the living and the dead in a place of natural beauty is central to the original mission and evolving purpose of the Cemetery.

In her exploration of Forest Hills Cemetery, *Unlikely Icon*, Diane Kelleher makes this point unequivocally, saying, "Designed to engage the living, cemeteries came to be conceived, executed, and perceived as rural parks" (x). Forest Hills founder and architect Henry Dearborn himself advanced the idea that the newly devised rural cemetery would "teach the community to pay more respect to the dead"

(Linden, 146), and would do so by bringing more people into regular proximity with the place of the dead. So successful was this novel notion that Forest Hills' predecessor, Mount Auburn, became an international tourist site for world travelers, and was so popular a recreation space among Bostonians that, at some points in its history, tickets had to be used to limit the number of visitors flocking to its sublime landscape. This popularity was only eclipsed with the advent of the public parks movement.

I reiterate this history that you no doubt already know to simply say that your statement of Forest Hill's "primary purpose...to bury the dead and to provide a peaceful and tranquil setting for their families and friends," is but one of its purposes. Children riding their bicycles slowly through the cemetery grounds followed by their watching mother strolling behind, joggers moving through the winding pathways, dogs (leashed and picked up after) enjoying the tranquility of the space with their human companions – these are all scenes I observe on a regular basis and they are heartening reminders that the philosophy of Dearborn is still alive at Forest Hills.

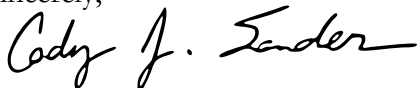
In the seminal work on the rural cemetery movement, *Silent City on a Hill*, Blanche Linden notes that with the emergence of the rural garden cemetery movement with Mount Auburn in Cambridge, most people had yet to adopt the practice of visiting the graves of their loved ones (163). With the novel "cemetery," visitation of graves as sites of memory and mourning not only became commonplace, but the new cemeteries – more parks than graveyards – became sites of communal gathering. In our current era, we are witnessing the decrease in cemetery visitation as places of memory of our deceased. Many people I work with on a regular basis manage never to even attend a funeral well into young adulthood and beyond, and never consider visiting a cemetery or the grave of a loved one. The work of bringing the living into proximity with the dead in spaces of natural beauty could not be more important than it is at this point in our history.

I write because I fear that your new policy will diminish the purpose of bringing the living in community with the dead. Unless you have other statistics to support a contrasting view, it seems most likely that this policy will greatly reduce Forest Hills' visitors from the surrounding neighborhoods. For me, personally, no longer allowing leashed dogs through the gates would almost completely eliminate my ability to make regular visits to the Cemetery which, of necessity, need to coincide with the task of walking my dogs.

The new policy will also undoubtedly diminish the unique reputation of Forest Hills Cemetery. I understand the need to maintain decorum and the beauty of the grounds, and I fully support the monitoring of unleashed dogs or disrespectful visitors. But I have also enjoyed bragging to my Cantabrigian parishioners of Forest Hills' generous policy of allowing dog walking in the historic parts of the cemetery, or picnicking by the pond – all activities they are not allowed to do at their local and beloved Mount Auburn. While I love Mount Auburn dearly and visit it on occasion, it has the feel of an outdoor museum and playground of preservationists. Forest Hills, in contrast, feels like a community space akin to the park-like environs many founders of the movement imagined. Forest Hills is likely neither to become museum-like, nor attract the number of tourists of your sister cemetery, Mount Auburn. Your unique gift is a community that loves you and wants to visit you regularly. For a cemetery in this era, that is a gift not to be taken for granted.

After the necessary visitor limitations that the pandemic has brought about subside, I hope you will restore the visitor practices to their full pre-pandemic regulations. I would be glad to think with you about these matters further if I can be of help to you in any regard. Please feel free to contact me at any point if further conversation is desired, and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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