

# Valentine's Day/Ash Wednesday: Musings & Photos



by Guest post by Larry Racioppo  
Feb 13, 2018

*Photographer Larry Racioppo is back with another guest post for Brooklynology, this one musing on this year's rare congruence of Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday.*

Today is the first time since 1945 that Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day fall on the same day. This rare occurrence has made me think about the significance of each day and what they symbolize: Ash Wednesday – death, Valentine's Day – romantic love.

What I learned about Ash Wednesday in Catholic grammar school is summed up here:

*"...we use ashes made from the burned palm branches distributed on the Palm Sunday of the previous year. The priest blesses the ashes and imposes them on the foreheads of the faithful, making the sign of the cross and saying, "Remember, man you are dust and to dust you shall return," or "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." As we begin this holy season of Lent in preparation for Easter, we must remember the significance of the ashes we have received: We mourn and do penance for our sins. We again convert our hearts to the Lord, who suffered, died, and rose for our salvation. We renew the promises made at our baptism, when we died to an old life and rose to a new life with Christ Finally, mindful that the kingdom of this world passes away, we strive to live the kingdom of God now and look forward to its fulfillment in heaven." -Arlington Catholic Herald, February 17, 1994.*

But what I remember is marching with my grammar school classmates from our homeroom down a tall metal fire escape to the side entrance of St. Michael's. Shushed and prodded by a Sister of St. Joseph, we entered the dark church and lined up to receive our ashes. As the priest rubbed them across my forehead, I wondered if I had gotten a real cross or just a smudge. (I would not find out until I got home after school and looked in the mirror.)

I did not really think about the ashes' meaning or symbolism then. But now, as I face my own mortality, I do.

I don't remember the last time I actually received ashes, but it seems that I usually knew when it was Ash Wednesday because I often went to my local church to take photographs. I started in 1971 at St. Michael's and continued at St. John's on 21st Street. When I worked in Manhattan, I photographed my coworkers and passersby on Gold Street.



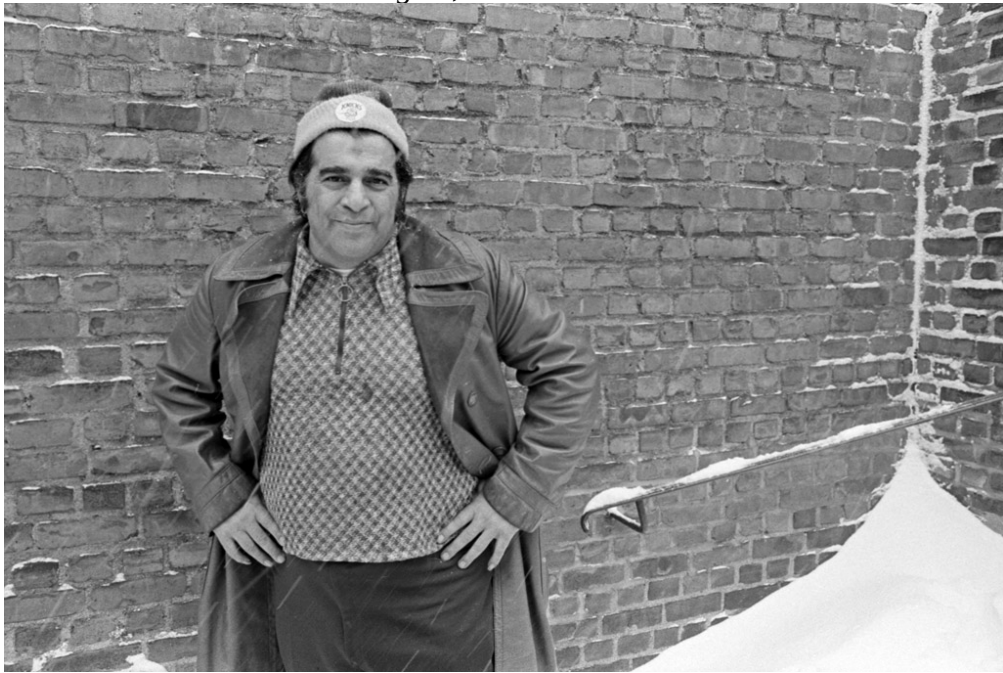
*Two Teenagers, 4th Avenue. 1971*



*Woman and Baby, 4th Avenue. 1973*



*Teenagers, 4th Avenue. 1973*

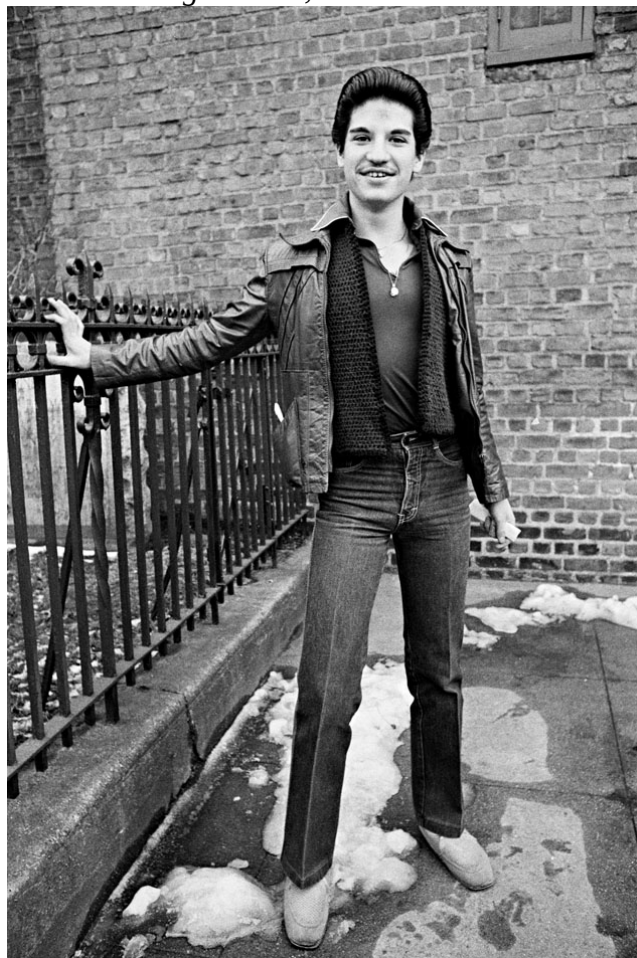


*Big Nick, 21st Street. 1975*





*Young Woman, 21st Street .1975*



*Young Man, 21st Street. 1980*



*Luz, Gold Street, Manhattan. 2009*



*Bill, Gold Street, Manhattan. 2011*





*Passersby, Gold Street, Manhattan. 2009*

Today Valentine's Day is a commercial celebration of romantic love in a variety of ways far removed from the remembrance of the original Valentines – [Roman saints](#) who were martyred in the Third Century.

My Valentine photographs look at love, but also loss. Romance is fragile: its start a joyous rush, the journey often uneven, with an uncertain ending.



*Butch and Debbie, South Brooklyn. 1978*





*Run over Candy Box - Inside & Outside. 1985*



*RIP Angel and Victor, 9th Street. 2004*





*RIP Sanela, car decal. 2007*



*Broken Heart Graffito, Park Slope. 1975*





*Abandoned Stuffed Bear, the Bronx. 2002*

And even when love does last and sustains a couple over many years, can there be a happy ending? How do we mortals face our "...return to dust"?

In 1817 Scottish poet Lord Byron wrote "So We'll Go No More A'Roving" on this topic:

*So, we'll go no more a roving*

*So late into the night,*

*Though the heart be still as loving,*

*And the moon be still as bright.*

*For the sword outwears its sheath,*

*And the soul wears out the breast,*

*And the heart must pause to breathe,*

*And love itself have rest.*

*Though the night was made for loving,*

*And the day returns too soon,*

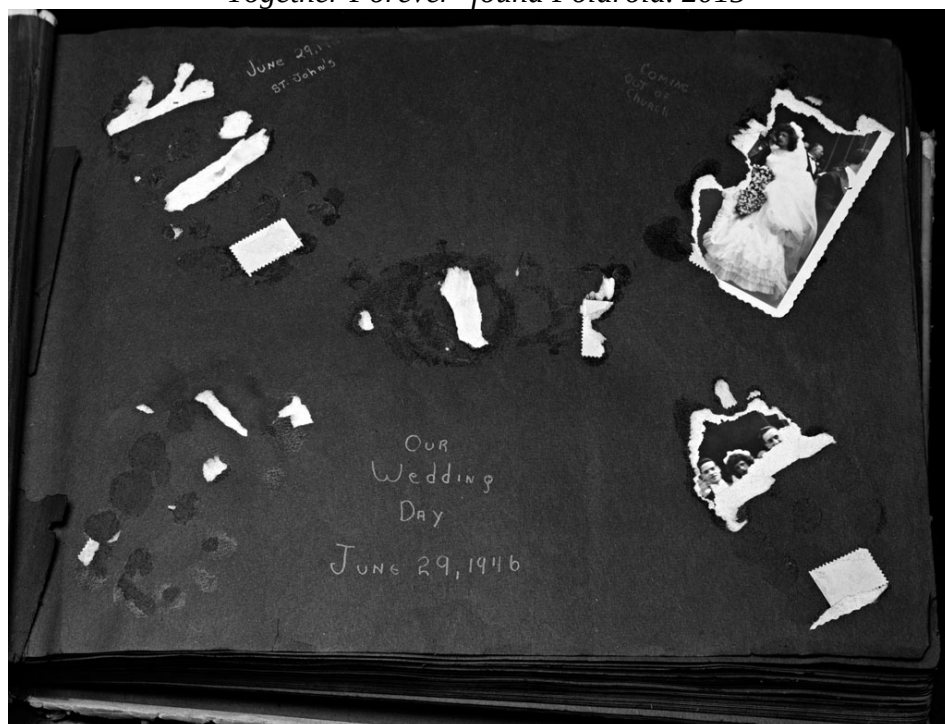
*Yet we'll go no more a roving*

*By the light of the moon.*

In 1955 English tenor Richard Dyer-Bennet set this poem to music and recorded it as a moving ballad. There are [live performances of his version](#) as well as ones by [Joan Baez](#) and [Leonard Cohen](#) on YouTube.



*'Together Forever' found Polaroid. 2015*



*Anna's Wedding Album, 18th Street. 1980*





*School Auditorium, 21st Street. 2003*

*All photographs are copyright Larry Racioppo. Visit Larry's website [here](#).*