

“Finding Life in Death”

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26 October 2014

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading – “Down at the Cross” - James Baldwin, from *The Fire Next Time*

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns, and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return.

Sermon: “Finding Life in Death”

It grabbed my attention every time she said it.
Which was, of course, the point.

Whenever my brothers and I would be causing
too much of a ruckus with our roughhousing,
my grandmother would warn us that,
“if you kids don’t quiet down, you’re going to wake the dead.”

It was a disconcerting thought to me at ten or so;
old enough to understand that pets and people die,
but just young enough to be confused by the notion
that maybe the dead weren’t as dead as I had been led to believe.

Maybe there was more going on than met the eye, I thought.

Maybe there was something to all those zombie movies
we stayed up late to watch on Friday nights.

Maybe the ghosts and skeletons we so artfully created
out of bristol board and crepe paper at school
pointed to something that hadn't yet been fully explained.

My grandmother's colourful use of metaphor was lost on me for a time.
Yet the older I grow, the more I see that the dead are very much with us.
At hand at every turn, if we're attentive, if we're awake: "¡Presente!"¹

Here, in blessed and sometimes complicated memory,
guiding us even still from the grave,
and sometimes haunting our lives years and decades after they died.

We round a corner or encounter a particular sound or scent,
and "¡Presente!," suddenly they are with us.

And the line between life and death isn't as clear
as it seemed just a moment before.

It is this mysterious and confusing space between life and death
that captured the imaginations of our distant ancestors.

Cultures throughout the world have long grappled
with the mysterious meaning of life's end—
trying to understand the one-way path that leads from birth to death.

Every human society has developed rituals to contend with this,
life's hardest and non-negotiable fact:
that we mere mortals, all of our life, face a sure and certain mortality.
That no one will get out alive.

It can be and often is argued that the religions of the world
have come into being to wrestle with the question of "why?"

¹ ¡Presente!" refers to a Central American tradition of calling out the names of the dead and disappeared and others responding that they are present. We use a similar ritual in our service on the Day of the Dead.

Why do we die?
Is there meaning to be found in death?
Is there something more that will make our lives worth
the cost we pay for them with our deaths?

Many strange and elaborate answers have been given over time,
from traditions that accept and honour the finality of death,
to those that see it merely as a gateway to some great beyond,
whether that be heaven or hell,
nirvana or another shot at life on earth thanks to reincarnation.

For the earth-centred traditions, especially in the northern hemisphere,
the season of autumn itself—when the harvest was complete,
and the green growth of summer wilted away—
was a regular reminder of this journey we are all on,
from the cradle to the tomb.

“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.”

Much of Christendom has long honoured the dead at this time of year
with the Feast of All Saints on November 1st,
and the Feast of All Souls, the feast for the less saintly...,
for the rest of us, on November 2nd.

The night before All Saints’, or All Hallows’ Day, as it was called,
was the time when it was thought the restless spirits of the departed
roamed the earth before their big day.
And it came to be known as All Hallows’ Eve, or Halloween.

This tradition was most likely a Christianized version of Samhain,
the Pagan observance that honoured the belief that the veil, the boundary,
between the living and the dead was at its thinnest and most permeable
at this time of year.

Of course, though many people in our culture
no longer hold those particular beliefs,
the routine sight this month of so many ghouls and ghosts and goblins
on the street or on the subway is an enduring reminder
of that earlier conviction that the dead aren’t that far away.

And while we may not believe the dead will literally roam through the city

this coming week, this season invites us to remember.

To see, if nothing else, the scattered leaves at our feet
as *momento mori*, countless reminders of our own mortality.

With the crunch of leaves underfoot, let the sound awaken us,
bringing to mind those no longer with us,
and taking to heart the always timely message
that our days on this good earth are numbered.

A message sounded so soberly and so sadly
in the senseless deaths we witnessed this week.²

A message we must struggle not to forget.

For knowing our time is limited
focusses us on making the most of whatever time we have.

As Dr. Johnson put it in a letter to James Boswell in 1777:
“Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight,
it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

And so it does.

It’s why we speak of “bucket lists,” and why we ask what we would do,
if we knew we only had a day, or a week, or a year to live.

I was recently deeply moved by the story that Atul Gawande, a surgeon,
tells in his new book, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*.³

The story is actually about his daughter Hunter’s piano teacher, Peg.

Martin, Peg’s husband, had called to say that she was in hospital.

² This sermon was preached on the Sunday following the violent attacks in St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, and at the War Memorial and Parliament Building in Ottawa, leaving dead two soldiers, as well as those who attacked them.

³ Atul Gawande, “The Best Possible Day,” *The New York Times*, 5 October 2014.

“She’d been treated in 2010 for a rare pelvic cancer requiring chemotherapy, radiation and radical surgery.
She returned to teaching and refilled her student roster in no time.”

“She was in her early 60s, tall, with a lovely, gentle way that made her immensely popular.
Two years later, [though], she developed a leukemia-like malignancy caused by her treatment.
She went back on chemotherapy but somehow kept teaching.
Then for two straight weeks, Peg postponed Hunter’s lessons.”

That was when Martin called from hospital.

“He put his cell on speaker for Peg.
She sounded weak and spoke in long pauses.
She said the leukemia treatment was not working.
It had impaired her immune system, ...
making her sick with fevers and an infection.”

“Imaging also showed that her original cancer had come back in her hip and liver.
The recurrent disease caused immobilizing hip pain and made her incontinent.
That was when she checked into...hospital.
She didn’t know what [else] to do.”

There was nothing left for the doctors to offer.
And Peg was utterly hopeless.

“They were giving her blood transfusions, pain medications and steroids for the fevers caused by her tumour.
They’d stopped giving her chemotherapy.”

She had reached that moment that has become the focus of great debate in our time.

Incurable “by established means,”
should she seek out experimental treatments?

Or should she just give up?

Neither option was the right one for her.

Dr. Gawande recognized that other questions needed to be asked.

So he asked his daughter's piano teacher:

- 1) what was her understanding of her health condition?
- 2) what were her goals if her health worsened?
- 3) what were her fears?
- 4) and what were the trade-offs she'd be willing to make and not make?

To the first question, Peg "said flat out that she knew she was going to die. There's nothing more they can do, she said, [with] an edge of anger in her voice."

When he asked about her goals, she said she "didn't have any that she could see were possible."

When he asked about her fears for the future, she "named a litany: facing more pain, suffering the humiliation of losing more of her bodily control, being unable to leave... hospital. She choked up as she spoke."

"She'd been there for days just getting worse, and she feared she didn't have many more."

They "talked to her about stopping life-prolonging therapy and going on hospice, but she didn't see how that could help her. Someone in her position who was offered "death with dignity" — assisted [dying] — might have taken it as the only chance for control in the absence of other options."

"But hearing her fears, [Dr. Gawande] suggested that Peg try hospice. It [would] at least let her get home, [he] said, and might help her more than she knew."

"Hospice's aim, at least in theory, [he] explained, is to give people their best possible day, however they might define it under the circumstances."

It had been quite a while since she had had a good day, and it became something which she could hope for.

Within a couple of days, Peg was home.
And the news was shared with her students that she was dying.

Hunter, just 13, was brought low by the news that Peg could no longer teach,
but she hoped to see her teacher one last time.
Her parents warned that it wasn't likely Peg could manage a visit.

But to everyone's amazement, a few days later,
they "got a surprising call from Peg.
She wanted to resume teaching.
She'd understand if Hunter didn't want to come.
She didn't know how many more lessons she could manage,
but she wanted to try."

"That hospice could make teaching possible for her again
was more than [anyone had] imagined.
But when her hospice nurse arrived, she asked Peg
what she cared most about in her life,
what having the best day possible meant to her.
Then they worked together to make it happen."

It wasn't easy. There were countless challenges to manage.
But Peg's "anxieties plummeted as the challenges came under control.
[And] she raised her sights."

"She was focused on the main chance," he husband later said.
"She came to a clear view of how she wanted to live the rest of her days.
She was going to be home, and she was going to teach."

"It took planning and great expertise to make each lesson possible.
The nurse helped her learn how to calibrate her medications"
so she was at her best with her students.

"She had no children; her students filled that place for her.
And she still had some things she wanted them to know before she went."

Peg lived for six more weeks after going into hospice.

"Hunter had lessons for four of those weeks,
and two final concerts were played.

One featured Peg's current students, all younger children;
the other, her former students from around the country.”

“Gathered in her living room,
they played Brahms, Chopin and Beethoven for their adored teacher.”

“A week later, she fell into delirium and, a short time after that,
died peacefully in her bed.”

So much of what we know about death and dying
we learn from watching others die.

And so much of what we can know about life and living
we learn by studying those who've gone before us,
particularly in the ways that they lived out the end of their lives.

Friends, we rarely have little more than an inkling
of what any given day will bring.

Of all the hard lessons of this week, that may be the hardest to accept.

That much of the world around us is out of our control.
And that life is more fragile than we can sometimes bear.

Yet, may we embrace that very fragility as the key to life that it is.

May we strive to have just one good day today,
and another tomorrow, and any and all the days that are to be ours.

May we live not in fear of what may come,
but live, instead, in spite of what will most certainly come.

Yes, we are going to die, so let us live.

Let us live the best possible day each day that we can,
because, in the end, we're going to die anyway.

Amen.