

The Holy Road

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Have you ever heard a song or a piece of music that made the hair on the back of your neck stand up. Have you ever heard something that is both dark and foreboding and yet hauntingly beautiful at the same time? Well I have. It happened the first time I heard a song called "The Helvegen". The song is written in the style of, and borrows quite heavily from ancient Norse sagas. But the music is... well, quite Gothic sounding actually. I thought about having it as one of our hymns today, but really wasn't sure how well that would go over. It is both unsettling and yet oddly intriguing. And it fascinates me no end.

That phrase "Helvegen" comes from the ancient Norse peoples that inhabited Scandinavia and the southern shores of the Baltic Sea. It can be literally translated as the "Way to Hell". But that modern rendition completely obscures its original meaning. Hel, spelled with one "L", was their word for the world of all the dead. And while there are different descriptions of this realm, none are of a place of eternal damnation or fiery infernos. If anything, the Norse Hel was a bit chilly. This is a reference to the fact that one of the most well-known signs of death is the dramatic cooling of the body. A fact this song, which draws its imagery from Norse Sagas, clearly eludes to. The journey to the otherworld is a cold one indeed. And the song "Helvegen", by the group Wardruna, is essentially a Viking funeral song. I had never heard a piece of music before that was both frightening and beautiful at the same time. Then it struck me, that pretty much sums up my response to this mystery known as death. It is scary and it is frightening and yet there is for me, something deeply spiritual about it too.

It occurred to me that many cultures and religious traditions have depicted these last stages of life as a journey. For the Irish Celts it was a journey by boat to the "Blessed Isles of the West" located beyond the mysterious "ninth wave". For the ancient Greeks, the other world, Hades, required a walking journey followed by the famous ferry ride across the river Styx. In our Judeo-Christian heritage there is the walk through the "Valley of the Shadow of Death". Beyond this lies the "Pearly" or perhaps "Golden" Gates. But this idea of journey, by boat, or even by stairway, is a recurring motif. For some of our First Nations people, most notably the Cree people of northern Manitoba and Ontario, it's called the "Three Day Road" to the land beyond.

It is interesting that for many there is a certain amount of time between when the body becomes lifeless and when the soul finally departs. And many traditions include a special farewell to the soul as separate from the funeral. Whether these result from a dream-like fantasy created by a quickly fading brain no longer receiving input from the body, or if it is a metaphor for an actual spiritual reality, I will leave it to each of you to decide.

When I first gave my sermon topic to Shawn, I had not yet started my SPE unit at Dorothy Ley Hospice. But I just knew that my experience there would be life changing. I had no idea what that would be. But I knew that this experience was going to give me something I was going to want to share.

So here I am some three months later at the end of that experience. For those of you who don't know, SPE stands for Supervised Pastoral Education. It is essentially a field placement for those studying Professional Ministry or Chaplaincy or Spiritual Care. Typically, SPE Units, which are a requirement of a Masters of Divinity programme, offer on the job training as a Spiritual Care person at a hospital, long-term care facility, prison, and for the first time in Canada, a hospice. Yes, I had the honour and distinction of being one of the very first in Canada to receive SPE training in a hospice setting. So like a kindergarten kid running home after his first day, I got lots to talk about.

Now SPE may be new to hospice, but many in this congregation are not. Some of you in fact are probably more familiar than I. Some of you have been involved for many years. So I also return home with a sense of humility to temper that enthusiasm. There is also a deep sense of the sacred for me in being privileged to walk with those who know that they are dying and that they do

not have a whole lot of time. Concerns over privacy and confidentiality must also, likewise, temper my remarks.

There were three things I was told years ago that one did not discuss in polite company. These were; sex, religion, and politics. By those standards, I cannot help thinking that Unitarians, and Unitarian Ministers in particular, are pretty darn rude.

But there was another topic one does not discuss in polite company. And this topic is so stringently banned that we don't even include it on the list of prohibited topics. Its mere mention is that strenuously avoided. That unmentionable topic is death. Our societal or collective anxiety over our own individual mortality and that of our loved ones is so pronounced that most of us simply do not want to talk about it.

At a basic and natural level, this is hardly surprising. After all, the instinct of self-preservation is common to most life forms. If it does not exist on an individual level, we see it on a collective level. Were one sacrifices their life so that life may continue for others. But always there is this ultimate belief in the preservation of life. Life is valuable and precious. Death, on the other hand, is the extinction of all that we hold dear. For many people, by no means all (for those struggling with depression – and for many with terminal illness, death is an end to suffering). But for many, death is a great evil to avoid even discussing until some-one actually dies.

Aside from our natural instinctual aversion to death, there is yet another complication - Religion. What happens to us after we die has been extensively debated by theologians, philosophers, and religious leaders of all stripes. And there is no clear consensus on this issue either. It is a particularly tricky topic among Unitarians. Our openness to diversity is wonderful, it truly is. But unless we truly feel real and full acceptance with absolute unconditional positive regard, talking about our beliefs with others can seem a little risky.

Since this is a sermon about death, and having been a member of this congregation for several years, I'll take that risk for the next few minutes. Unitarians have an expression. "We need not think alike to love alike". You may not agree with me, and that's okay. But this is the story of how I have put together my experience this summer and what I have taken from it. In the end I believe that I arrive at a place we can all share – regardless of what our particular beliefs may be.

Back to the Helvegen, the word Hel actually means death in old Norse. But it also means "Holy". And "vegen" is translated as "road". So in one sense it could perhaps be called the Hell-Road. But in another sense it is the "Road to the Holy". Or perhaps, the road itself is Holy. That is how I approached my time at hospice. This was my summer of the Helvegen - a privileged honour to companion with those walking the Holy Road.

And while this road leads us all to the same place, at the same time, it can go in so many different directions. And so it was hard to decide exactly which route to take for the next hour and a half that I have for this sermon. (That's a joke by the way. Sermons haven't been quite that long here for about a hundred years or so).

Any number of episodes from this summer could have formed the basis of a sermon. I could have told you about the family dog that remained at the bedside of her master. How she would allow herself to be lead outside only when she needed a washroom break. How she broke free from a family member who had dragged her on a leash to a nearby park. How she somehow made it past the electronically lock doors and plopped herself at her master's bedside again and refused to budge, wanting to spend whatever time was left with one she so obviously cared about. I could have reminded you all how human beings are not the only creatures on earth capable of love, devotion, sadness and grief. But I won't.

I could have told you about an unapologetic and avowed Hedonist – and atheist, who reminded me again of the awesomeness which is our physical universe. But I won't do that either.

I won't because something happened while I was preparing this sermon in North Miami Florida, Thursday afternoon. Fortunately nobody died this time. But as I watched the news footage, I thought, "Here we go again."

A behavioural Therapist working in a group home was trying to do his job, which was looking after an individual with autism. This individual had run from the group home with a toy truck in his hand. Someone reported the man with autism as having a gun. Police were called. The behaviour therapist can clearly be seen and heard, lying on the ground with his hands raised, explaining to police what had happen. Police shot the therapist anyway. Then, after shooting the man, they threw him on his stomach and cuffed his hands behind his back.

I work in a group home. I work with people with autism. And I thought, wow, that could have been me. But then I realized that of course, that would never happen to me, why? Because I am not black, that's why. For the first time in my life I felt something I had never felt before. And I knew this wasn't logical. But I still felt it. I felt ashamed of the colour of my own, white skin. And I realized in that moment that my heart truly went out to every African-American. Because I truly realized that nobody, but nobody, should be made to feel ashamed of, or be judged by, the colour of their skin.

If I have learned anything this summer, working in hospice, it is the fundamental importance of the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.

It does not matter who we are, or what we do, how famous, how poor, where we were born, what prayers we say (or don't say), what languages we speak, or don't speak. We all have this in common; we were all born and we are all going to die. I knew when I started this sermon that I was extending the metaphor of the Helvegen beyond its original mythic intent to include those who were approaching death rather than those who had recently departed. Because what happens after we live doesn't much matter. Even if we believe in a literal heaven and hell, it's what happens here and now that determines what happens after. And if not, well than what's next really does not matter. Either way what matters is today. And today in hospice, and everywhere, dignity, respect, compassion, diversity, and inclusion are absolutely essential for all of us - for our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

We are all going to die. It is not an "if", and not thinking or talking about it won't change that single most important fact.

We are all walking the Helvegen. We are all walking along the Holy Road. Where it ends, nobody knows. I am sure by now many are curious about this song so I will conclude by reading the lyrics translated into English.....

Who shall sing me,
Into death-sleep sling me,
When on the path to Hel I go,
When this track I tread
Is cold, so cold, so cold.
I sought the songs,
I sent the songs.
Then the deepest well
Gave me tears so harsh
From All-father's pledge.
Who shall sing me,
Into death-sleep sling me,
When on the path to Hel I go,
And this track I tread
Is cold, so cold, so cold.
Early, or at the day's end,

The raven still knows when I fall.

When you stand at the gate to Hel
And when you have to tear free,
I, I shall follow you
Over the sacred bridge with my song.
And you will be free from the bonds that bind you,
You will be free from the bonds that bind you!

The second you were born you set foot along the Holy Road. May we learn what it means to
companion one another with love, compassion, and empathy.

So Mote It Be.