

The Examined Life: Where Did I Come From?

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
28 October 2018

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.

It was news that came so much sooner than I expected.

Five years ago, on a Friday night,
out at a pub with friends after seeing a show,
I received word my father had died suddenly that afternoon.

I wrestled with what to do.
In the moment, I couldn't quite decide
if I wanted to be among friends, or if I'd rather be alone.

Emotions flooded through me,
as I grew increasingly numb.
(Our bodies can serve us so well,
sometimes, when heartache strikes.)

In the end, I stayed put, and waited on my veggie burger to arrive.

Eventually, conversation around the table
drifted to more mundane matters,
though my mind remained in a very different place.

Part of what made the experience so odd for me
was that I really had no memories to return to.
I had no relationship to speak of with my biological father.

He and my mother had divorced by the time I was a year old,
and my mother had been given full custody.

Though my mother and step-father made clear, from an early age,
that I had another father and could meet him whenever I wished,

it's an invitation that never quite felt safe enough to accept.

So, it wasn't until I was 26 that we actually did meet.

It was a brief encounter, lasting only an hour or two.

Our conversation was stilted.

We seemed to share few areas of common interest.

My most vivid memory, aside from being shocked that he had a full head of gray hair by the age I am now—which puts my persistent little white patch in some perspective—is that he seemed confused by my apparent inability to carry on much of a conversation about football or baseball.

And he didn't seem to understand my attempt at humour, when I quipped that I was more into watching women's figure skating and men's gymnastics....

Still, the news of his death hit me hard, and I pretty quickly decided that I would attend his funeral.

On one hand, I knew this was likely to be the best and last chance I would ever have to better understand the man who had played a pivotal part in bringing me into the world.

The funeral was something straight out of a Southern Gothic novel.

I had made clear to his family—a group largely made up of his many siblings—that I wanted to keep a low profile.

I explained I would sit at the back of the church, and that I simply needed space to take in the service, and the experience.

That plan didn't work out too well.

Though we were strangers to one another, his family deferred to me—as the oldest child—

to decide whether we would delay the start of the service
for the arrival of one of my two half-sisters—
siblings I had only learned about even having two days earlier.

Eventually, the minister in me knew
the service had to get underway.

The church was full of people who were waiting,
many of whom likely needed to get back to work
later that afternoon.

I told the family I thought we needed to begin.
And, so the funeral director ushered in my father's family
to the front rows, and I took my seat in the back pew.

Halfway through the service,
the woman I assumed to be my sister finally arrived.
She made her way down the aisle to sit with the family, up front.

An animated conversation broke out in the front pew,
and, then, to my horror,
my aunts and sister turned around,
all looking expectantly in my direction.

I tried to look away.
I tried to pretend I didn't see their inviting gestures.

But, before I knew it, my sister
had bounded to the back of the church
and was dragging me to the front.

And, yes, this was the first time we met,
making our way up the aisle during our father's funeral—
so it seemed rude, if not impossible, to protest this turn of events.
I wasn't given a chance to explain myself.

I felt I had no opportunity to insist
on what I most needed at that very awkward and public moment.

Now, this being a Southern-style funeral,
the coffin was open, and, as is the custom,

most everyone in attendance filed past,
and then offered their condolences to the family.

It was truly surreal.

I had suddenly been cast in the role of this man's child,
a role that was, by even the most generous assessment,
highly complicated.

But I shook hundreds of hands
and accepted people's kindness, as best I could.

As the service came to a close,
everyone left the church and took their places
in their cars for the procession to the cemetery.

The funeral director indicated that my sister and I
could have as much time as we needed,
alone in the church before the casket was closed.

My sister and I had a difficult but intimate conversation,
standing there over the body of this man
who was our common bond,
but who neither of us had been close to.

Again, though, my minister mind knew
that we needed to keep things moving.

So, I nodded to the funeral director,
who moved in and closed the lid, with me being
the last person to take in the image of my father.

Pall bearers moved the coffin to the hearse.
My sister and I took our places with family in the front limousine.

When we arrived at the cemetery, on that hot June afternoon,
there was a brief graveside ceremony.

The coffin was lowered into the ground,
as final prayers were said.

Eventually, everyone else drifted away,
leaving only me and one of my father's sisters.

As the cemetery workers began their work,
we each dropped a rose on top of the casket.

And there we stood, until the grave was filled.

It's a practice of mine to always remain at a grave
until it is covered.

As a minister, I feel a sacred obligation
to see people to their final rest,
and to stay until the very end.

And though I have carried out that sacred task countless times,
never had I been so impacted by the ritual.

For this time, it was deeply personal
in a way it had never been before.

Seeing the body of my father buried
has been one of the most powerful experiences of my life.

Watching the remains of one of my parents
being lowered into the ground and covered over,
felt like one of the most profound and primal experiences
one can possibly have.

As I left the reception that afternoon
and began the long journey back home,
tears flowed from places I didn't know existed within me.

I grieved the loss of what was,
and I grieved the loss of what never was.

Even more, I mourned for what I then knew would never be.

Such is the painful dance that any of us does with the grave,
when our grief for loved ones lost
leaves us and our world forever changed:

as we relinquish any outstanding dreams,
as we contend with possible feelings of regret
for things left undone or words left unsaid,
and as we reckon with the deep finality of death,
for them, and for ourselves.

Engaging the world of grief is such an important part
of living an examined life.

For no one avoids it, at least for very long,
and certainly not forever.

To be alive means to come to terms with loss, one way or another.
To confront the ache of having those we love be with us no more.

And, yet, grief can also be such a strange and generous teacher.

Over these past five years,
I have been amazed and deeply comforted at times
by the relationship that has continued with my father.

With the passage of time,
as I have absorbed the stories from his life,
I have come to a deeper understanding of who he was,
of what he was contending with,
of what his gifts were, and of what demons he had to battle.

At his funeral, I learned that when he died,
he was carrying a photo of me with him.

Even with him gone, there has been healing of a wound
that had been with me since I was a toddler.

Even though it had been some sixteen years since we had talked.

Even though he never responded to my letter coming out to him.

Even though I had misunderstood,
at least on some level, his many years of silence.

Today, I keep a photo of him on my desk at home.

I notice him almost every day.
And while I've never actually talked to his photo,
there is a sort of conversation that has unfolded
between us over the years.

Two Sundays ago, we celebrated here
the life of Vicky Sanderson's mother, Catherine.

As people were sharing during the service,
a friend of Vicky's explained that
though she had never met Catherine,
after hearing stories of her life,
she was coming to appreciate the many ways
that she sees evidence of Catherine living on in and through
Vicky and her children.

When I asked Vicky if I could share this story today,
I explained that I wanted to do so
because I felt it so powerfully speaks
to the question of where each of us comes from.

Where do we come from?

We come from the stars.
We are of stardust made.
We are the strand of being passed through eons.

We are a link in the long chain of life
passed down through complicated generation
after complicated generation.

We carry within us relationships
that have borne the burden of human struggle,
and the joy of human being.

All of it culminating in me and you, and you, and you. . .

The poet Mary Feagan writes:

I am a millions-of-years-old wonder.

I am an international – no, cosmic – treasure.
I ought to be safeguarded in a museum somewhere
like Paganini's old violin.
I ought to be gasped at,
talked about in hushed, amazed, reverential tones.
Viewers would touch me gently and feel lucky.

Daily newspaper headlines could say,
“Mary Feagan Exists Again Today!”
Radio and TV shows could discuss me, my ordinary events—
that I saw a bluebird with my millions-of-years-old eyes
and heard it sing with my highly advanced, evolutionary ears;
that my graceful hands with opposable thumbs
fed my sensitive mouth delicious strawberries that it tasted.

Then, without a conscious thought, my brilliant brain
directed my masterful, complex digestive system
to assimilate and use them for fuel
to wash dishes, write poems, hold babies, laugh, and give kisses.

No one would completely understand or dare to finally say
how my marvelous magical, famous, fine self exists, really.
I am just, bottom line, a millions-of-years-old wonder.
[And,] you are too.

As I stood over my father's grave,
it was this awareness that overwhelmed me.

The link of life that had led to me
lay there before me.

Dust to dust.
Ashes to ashes.

And, yet, sad as I was, standing there, filled with grief,
I also felt deeply, deeply blessed.

I felt knitted into the universe in a way I never had.

The stardust passed to me at birth was mine

to do with what I would and could.

While that had always been true.
I was newly aware of how true it was, and is.

May the same be true for each of us.

As we examine our lives,
may we come to know from whence we've come.

May we reconnect with the stars that gave us birth,
through the very people who gave us life.

May we allow the best of them to shine through us.

That the pulse of ancient stars, through our lives,
will give light to ages still to come.

So may it be.

Amen.