

Sermon: A Graceful Exit, 5 18 2014 Hope and Fear

Imagine a confluence of events so odd as this- while living in Boston I heard the Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhism and activist for peace, speak at Gillette stadium, home of the football team the Patriots. It was a humid, overcast Saturday afternoon and I was saying a silent prayer so familiar to most of us –please don't rain!- as I entered the uncovered stadium. I don't go to many football games, I don't recall ever going to a pro game, so I was blown away by the size of the stadium- hundreds of rows of seats ascending to heaven, higher and higher into the gray sky. Below a huge prairie of AstroTurf, unnaturally bright green, and a tiny, bald man in saffron robes laughing with the sound guys, tough south Bostonians dumbstruck at this playful, gentle celebrity. The big show didn't start for a while so I wandered the vendors, the usual beer and hot dogs replaced by small-statured Tibetans selling mala beads and incense, jewelry and saris. A lot of the jewelry shared a similar theme- skulls. Bracelets made up of tiny porcelain skulls, large chunky black skulls on a choker, a ring circled with red bony heads. A teenage boy quipped- who knew that Buddhists were so goth! I feel like I'm at a Marilyn Manson show!- when the elderly Tibetan vendor grabbed his hand. It was gentle yet forceful-pay attention. "You must meditate on your death every day," she said. "The bracelet will remind you- you will die, no matter what happens in your life- you will die."

Well that quieted us down! The crowd broke up and we wandered back to our seats. But it made me wonder- how would my life be different if I meditated every day on my death? How would any of our lives be lived differently if every day we remembered our own mortality?

Every month our congregation explores a theme, and this month our theme is Hope and Fear. What greater fear is there than that of death? The fear that birthed religions, psychology, philosophy- three schools dedicated to one question: what does it mean that we are alive and will one day die? Where did we come from-before, before we were born? Where are we going-after? Fear of death unites us in common humanity, it drives the reckless accumulation of wealth, fame, prestige- we want to live forever, somehow, even if only in the memories of those still alive.

Fear of death is linked to all our big life anxieties. Think of FOMO- or fear of missing out. Sure it is a recently named phenomenon- Facebook and Twitter mean we see what fun everyone else is having and we feel left out. But is this really a new conundrum or just good old death anxiety rearing its ugly head? After I die I will miss out on everything! Every barbecue, every birthday party. I don't want to be left out for the rest of eternity! I don't want to die!

And the existentialist classic: Does my life mean anything if eventually I will be gone, everyone who knows me will be gone, anything I ever did or said or felt will be forgotten...The tree I planted will grow old and die, the child I nurtured will perish, along with their children...does any of this matter?

Now before we fall into existential despair let's lay this beast of a question to its own eternal rest. Of course what you say and do matters. Our actions ripple across generations, unseen by us after we die but still powerful. Think of a pebble dropped in a pond- circling out from the stone's point of impact are ripples, ripples that lessen as time passes, yes, but continue on even after we can see them with the naked eye. Some people's ripples are bigger and longer-lasting

than other's- Ghandi, MKL, Hitler- good and evil both have a ripple effect. But all of our lives all have an impact, they all cause movement for generations after we inhabit this earth.

For a few years I went to church with a tightly-knit family, a mom, dad, and two boys. The first time I went to their house one of the boys answered the door, closely followed by a very enthusiastic, very hairy dog. The boy, about five, said "This is my dog. His name is Harry. He is usually a good dog, but not always. He loves peanut butter." He was a solemn little boy, very serious and dignified, and next he introduced me to his older brother, about 8, and then his parents. Of course I already knew these folks, but what happened next I didn't expect. He took my hand in his soft little one, and led me into the living room. On the wall was a picture of an infant in a beautiful, handmade frame. "This," he announced, "is my other brother, Sam. He died when he was very small but it wasn't any body's fault. I love him very much and I can talk about him or ask question about him any time I feel like it. It is okay to be sad that he died."

The baby Sam, longed for by his parents for so long, healthy at birth, gone soon after. Little Sam, named after his grandpa and watched nearly every second by his fascinated big brothers- they stood over his crib staring, wide-eyed- he burped! He smiled! Can we feed him? Can we hold him? But one night in his sleep he just stopped breathing, and was gone. It was nobody's fault. It was okay to be sad.

When an infant dies we might assume they go without a ripple- they weren't alive long enough to say wise words, or show kindness, or start a revolution. But my favorite memory of baby Sam was in coffee hour. Sam's dad Harvey was cradling the baby, oblivious to the rest of us, staring into Sam's eyes, unconsciously mimicking the baby's expressions. Oh! He formed with his lips,

and then stuck his bottom lip out as the baby did, looking ridiculous but so sweet in that tender moment between father and son. Sam made a ripple there, as we saw a grown man completely in love with his baby. Sam caused a ripple when his brothers learned that it is okay for boys to cry, after their dad wept at Sam's funeral. Another ripple when Sam's parents leaned on our church family for support and we gave it, bringing over meals, taking the boys for a few hours, sitting with mom and dad while they cried and cried. Sitting with each other while we cried and cried. Sam taught us that we were tightly woven enough in community to weather this very worst of storms. Sam taught us that grief takes time, as years past and still his birthday was hard, still Christmas was hard.

I won't say that Sam lived and died so that we could learn these lessons, that it was all a part of some bigger plan. I don't believe in a God that would deliver such excruciating pain for any reason. But I do know that the ripples we leave behind are what make our lives matter. Yes, eventually we will be forgotten. Eventually no one will remember that my favorite flavor of ice cream is moose tracks, that my parent's called me Katydid, that I love the smell of wisteria. But my life will leave ripples. We do impact each other, we do influence our world.

Being a Unitarian Universalist minister can be frustrating because we are so low on easy answers. I wish that I could say "our lives matter, and after we die we are reunited with our loved ones in heaven." Or "this life is hard so be kind and you can have an easier life in your next incarnation." But I don't know if any of that is true. I wish I could promise you heaven but honestly we will just have to wait and see. I know that every soul who has gone before us has experienced death, and for me that makes it a less scary transition.

I also know that there is something about the temporariness of life that makes it that much sweeter. Gather our roses while we may, for tomorrow we die. There is literally no time to waste, we have no guarantee of a do-over.

The philosopher Nietzsche proposed this thought experiment: what if time and space was turned upside down and you were destined to live this life, the one you have right now, over and over again, in exactly the same way, for all of eternity. Nothing would change, birth to death your life would be a TV show rerun again and again. How does that feel? Your stressful birth, awkward teenager hood, first love, first heartbreak, becoming a parent, becoming a grandparent, career milestones, career disappointment, physical ailments, mental ailments, wow moments....think about that for a moment. Living this life, again and again.

So what do you think? Two choices. `A: "No way would I go through that again!" Or B: "Okay, it's been fun, I could go again?" Nietzsche theorized that your response to that question reflected how you felt about what you had built from your life. Have you lived your life well? If so you respond with B, "okay, I could live this life again. It might not be the most fascinating option, but I have created a good enough life for myself that I am willing to repeat it. Excellent. Nietzsche would say you have mastered amor fati, or loving your fate. He believed that regardless of the difficulties life throws at us we chose how we respond, we create our own destiny.

But if you chose A- "no way am I doing this again!" it is time to give your life a good looking over and figure out what you need to change.

Now this is just a thought experiment. I am sure Nietzsche had days when he thought- there is no way I am doing this life again, it is too hard, or too dull. But if every day you think that your reality is too hard to imagine doing over again, it's time to look for things in your life that can change. It's time to build a life worth repeating. And not just for you- the lives of those who die embittered, heartbroken, or disappointed ripple as well, in ways that are not positive. Maybe making your own life happy is the best legacy you can leave to future generations.

The title of this sermon is "Hope for a Graceful Exit" because that is the goal. We know we have to die, even without a Tibetan skeleton bracelet reminding us, we know we have a terminal illness called life. When we can accept our own mortality with a minimum of fear, we can leave the world with magnificent ripples as our legacy. I cannot promise you eternal life, I can't promise you reincarnation. I can promise that your life will be richer if you remember it is a temporary condition.

What kind of ripples will you leave? Does anything need to change so, if somehow Nietzsche's thought experiment comes true, that you have a life worth repeating through eternity? It is natural and normal to be scared of death, but don't let fear keep you from living a full life. Realize your mortality, and live.