

## ***The Trouble Is, You Think You Have Time***

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*There is one simple thing wrong with you – you think you have plenty of time...If you don't think your life is going to last forever, what are you waiting for? Why the hesitation to change? You don't have time for this display, you fool. This, whatever you're doing now, may be your last act on earth. It may very well be your last battle. There is no power which could guarantee that you are going to live one more minute.*  
—*Journey to Ixtlan*, by Carlos Castaneda

**Ancient Witness:** Acts 17:26-27

As we being the liturgical season of Lent, it is that time on the Christian calendar when we are reminded of the fragile beauty of all life, including our own.

And I'm reminded that for the commendation after the funeral service, often at the graveside, in the Book of Common Worship it says,

*You only are immortal, the creator and maker of all. We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to the earth shall we return. This you ordained when you created us, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

There's a certain grace that can come when we celebrate those who have died—a deepened awareness, a more profound realization, of what the Buddhists call *impermanence*. In Buddhism there are three basic facts of existence, and impermanence is one of these facts, that, if we truly embrace it, leads to enlightenment and liberation. It's an undeniable, inescapable truth of reality.

But the problem is, this is a very difficult thing to truly embrace. We resist it; we deny it. And then, we deny that we deny it! We are masters at denying our impermanence! Jack Kornfield summed it up beautifully in *Buddha's Little Instruction Book*, when he wrote, "The trouble is, you think you have time."

We forget this over and over and over. Sure, there might be brief interruptions, but our agenda quickly takes over again. Realizing that we don't have time and feeling this urgency is very uncomfortable. As T.S. Elliot wrote, "Human beings cannot bear too much reality." And so, even when we do remember, mostly it is only just a shallow, fleeting, intellectual recognition, not a deep embrace of the heart.

Carlos Castaneda had his character, Don Juan, say,

*This is one simple thing wrong with you—you think you have plenty of time... If you don't think your life is going to last forever, what are you waiting for?*

*...This, whatever you're doing now, may be your last act on earth. It may very well be your last battle. There is no power which could guarantee that you are going to live one more minute.*

And so all the faith traditions say that there are these processes over which no human being has control, such as the process of growing old, or of falling sick, or of dying. From the outside, this process looks like a downward path, and it is unavoidable. However, truly embracing this is the path to liberation. As Anthony de Mello stated simply: "Enlightenment is cooperation with the inevitable." It sounds deceptively easy, but is incredibly difficult, requiring diligent practice.

And so this is what I want to reflect upon this morning. How do we deal with our mortality and the impermanence of our lives? How do we understand it and make sense of it?

The great theologian, Paul Tillich, said that being human means that we experience existential anxiety, that is we are aware of our finitude and the threat of non-being. And the only way to truly deal with this anxiety is through union with God, through participation in the divine being.

But most of the time we simply deny and suppress our impending nonexistence. We live as if life will last forever. We focus on acquisition—of experiences, of relationship, of possessions, even of moral qualities. But all these will end. All of these are good things; don't get me wrong. But they avoid the deeper spiritual reality. Once in a while the awareness of our mortality, our impending death breaks through and shakes us up. We might have a close call, a diagnosis, a loved one who dies. But then we go back to business as usual.

Jesus talked about dealing with anxiety, about breaking out of the mode of building up and acquisition. And he concluded by saying, like Tillich, that the way that we do this is to "seek first the kingdom of God." (Matthew 6:33, Luke 12:31) And the kingdom, it seems to me, is not a physical place but a state of consciousness, a felt awareness of our union with God. Jesus is saying, "Don't wait until you're on your deathbed, after you do everything else. Don't put it off, saying you have plenty of time. You don't. Do it first!"

So, from a spiritual perspective, the *primary* goal is *not* to delay embracing our death, but to learn from it, to learn from the impermanence, to learn from the limitations, to *deeply accept* and embrace the reality of the situation—things as they are—to resist the urge just to skip over the reality and to find a "solution" for our *own agenda* and to satisfy our ego. Our agenda even might be very good! It might be progressive! It might be great! But it is no substitute for the Mystery we call God! And so, sooner or later it must inevitably be dropped. Why not do it now?

The famous Zen master, Dogen, said,

*Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Each of us should strive to awaken. Awaken! Take heed! Do not squander your life!*

And so the goal is not to have a greater sense of urgency to do what we're already doing, only faster! The idea is to have an urgency to *change our agenda*. To awaken.

And so I want us to focus on that spiritual dimension this morning. Much of our existence—how we live our lives—is *determined by us*. Especially in the first half of our lives, we decide the parameters, the focus, where and how we are going to spend all of our time. We are in control (or at least have the illusion of it.)

But there are some boundaries which are *decided for us*. There are some limits, no matter how hard we try to avoid or overcome them, that are universally experienced by human beings. Try as we might to create our own worlds, we all eventually discover the boundaries of this world.

In our reading from the books of Acts, the author writes:

*God made all of humankind to inhabit the whole earth, and allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of their habitation, so that they would search for God, reach out for and perhaps find the One who is not far from each one of us.*

As we grow older many of us experience these boundaries, these limitations. We might experience them simply as a problem to be solved. How do we deal with our decline, meeting the boundaries of our habitation, on a spiritual level? We can meet them with despair, as *barriers to a full life*. We can panic, become impatient and angry. We can get frustrated and mad that we can't do as much as we used to do. We can look for something or someone to blame. We can become depressed, feel inadequate or even give up.

Or we can take them as reminders that we are all creatures, shaped and molded by a Love much greater than we, and that a *truly full and abundant life* is measured by encountering this Presence. As the psalmist wrote:

*So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart.*

Look, truly facing our nonexistence is scary and painful. I don't want to minimize that at all. But the acceptance of our death, can teach us a spiritual wisdom, *if we allow it*. It is a wisdom we do not attain willingly. The ancient Greek poet, Aeschylus, (quoted by Bobby Kennedy at Martin Luther King's funeral) wrote:

*The one who learns must suffer.  
And even in our sleep  
pain that cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
and in our own despair,  
against our will,  
comes wisdom to us  
by the awful grace of God.*

It is *within* the boundaries of our habitation that the grace of God can become our source of healing and wholeness. It is *within* the limits of flesh and blood that the divine Word chooses to dwell. It is

*within* the sounds of whistles and sirens that we still get up in the morning, surrounded by an incredible sense that the Sacred Presence is with us. And it is *within* the allotted times of our existence that we might search for God and sense that God is not far from each one of us. The experience of limits, of loss, and of impermanence can bring true wisdom.

In a book by Richard Rohr called, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, he says that there are two halves of life. The first half is concerned with surviving successfully. It's about growing, achieving, striving, and moving up. But the second half of life is the growth of true spiritual maturity.

When he says that you will enter the second half of life, he doesn't mean it in a strictly chronological way. Some young people, especially those who have learned from early suffering, are already there, and some older folks never make it there.

And his main point is that the way down is really the way up! Coming face to face with the stark boundaries of our living, with our mortality and impermanence, can be an opportunity of deep spiritual growth and discovery. Rohr writes,

*Most of us tend to think of the second half of life as largely about getting old, dealing with health issues, and letting go of our physical life, but the whole thesis of this book is exactly the opposite. What looks like falling can largely be experienced as falling upward and onward, into a broader and deeper world, where the soul has found fullness, is finally connected to the whole, and lives inside the Big Picture. (p. 153)*

Friends, we are all invited to that further journey, a journey into the second half of our lives, a journey toward spiritual maturity. May this be a place where we do just that. And as we experience impermanence, limitation and loss in our lives, may this task of finding fullness for our soul rise to the top of our list.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*