

The Birds on Our Shoulders

Jamaica Plain, September 11, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

'It's like the Buddhists say, we have a little bird on our shoulder, and every day the bird asks us, "Is today the day to die? Are you ready? Have you done everything you need to do?"' So says dying Brandeis professor Morrie Schwartz in Tuesdays With Morrie, the account of his death from ALS.

Today on September 11th we have two birds of death on our shoulders, and they're not little ones. They're big birds, maybe vultures or eagles. They speak of the tragic deaths four years ago on September 11, 2001 and the horrendous loss of life recently from Hurricane Katrina. Our quest for security from terrorism after 9/11 has led us to war in Iraq, where we find ourselves in a terrible quagmire of death.

As I mentioned in last week's sermon, a traditional local cocktail in New Orleans is the "hurricane." Hurricane Katrina stirred a deadly drink made up of high winds and water, lack of preparedness, local National Guard units stationed in Iraq, denied requests for federal funds to shore up the levees, degradation of the delta, a natural defense from hurricanes, to build channels for huge oil supertankers, and a mixer of good old American racism, since many of the people involved are poor and Black.

On Friday, along with Rev. Terasa Cooley, our new District Executive, I attended a planning meeting hosted by the Black Ministerial Alliance at Trinity Church. The meeting was to co-ordinate religious groups' efforts to assist the Southern evacuees coming to Massachusetts. Congregations will do things like help individuals and families negotiate social services, register children for school, and find housing and jobs. We heard that the first 107 evacuees were overwhelmed by Massachusetts' hospitality, "better than Southern hospitality," one person said. The 107 people brought with them 8 dogs, 3 squirrels, a goat and a snake (sounds like something out of the Life of Pi).

I hope our congregation will be able to participate in this program. I think it's wonderful that people are willing to extend extensive charity to those who escaped death in a natural disaster. However, the issue of justice bothers me. Somehow, we can see the image of God, the holy refugee, in the victim of a hurricane. Why won't we see that image and help the poor of our own state? I heard at the planning meeting that a wealthy suburban UU church had offered one of their parsonages for New Orleans evacuees. Now, I know a family in Dorchester that could use that house. And Friday the Globe reported how homeless peoples' shanties had been demolished from under the bridges of the Back Bay. We've created our own displaced persons, and certainly the politicians won't be lining up to meet them.

Speaking of the two birds on our shoulders, one New Orleans resident said recently, 'This is like 9/11, except on 9/11 people died fast. We're dying slow.' Fast or slow, we are all going to die someday. The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich said that the three basic spiritual questions were: 'What is the meaning of my life?', 'How do I deal with my guilt?', and 'What about the fact that I'm going to die?' Most of us are pretty good at denial concerning the last one question.

I had the following conversation with a friend this week: I said, "I just read the obituary of a man that I tried to get a job from once." Silent response. "His name was Arnold Silverman." Pause. "He owned Goodspeed's Bookshop." Silence. Pause. Then my friend said, "The Patriots looked strong playing the Raiders." And I responded, "Yeah, they did."

We heard today "When Death Comes," by Provincetown poet Mary Oliver, whose long time partner just died recently. In her poem "The Summer Day," Oliver asks the haunting question, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Good question.

Over the years I've used an exercise by the late Indian writer Tony DeMello. You are to imagine that it is the last day of your life, and list things like: these people formed me; these ones I loved; these losses I suffered; these things I accomplished or created; these

places are holy in my heart; these ideas brought me freedom and meaning; these books I've cherished; this music lifted my spirits; this food I found delicious; and, I have come to understanding these things about faith.

I like the DeMello exercise. Even though I've done it numerous times with varying answers, it leaves me with a sense of joy. I think of the 12 Step Program line - "Is it important?" Meaning, is it REALLY important? Other slogans or mantras that have helped me on this subject include my friend Stella's comment (she survived the Holocaust in Poland) "There are no dead bodies, right?" Kind of puts things in perspective. "Is it worth dying for?" Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "Create your life as if you were creating a work of art."

The Shakers used to say, "Work as if you'll live 100 years, and work as if you'll die tonight." A lot of the work will simply remain undone for most of us. No matter how hard we work, and no matter how much sleep we miss. When we walk together, as we did this morning, we also walk with those who are part of our Unitarian and Universalist traditions. When Unitarian saint Henry David Thoreau died, he left 14 volumes of journals, including some of his best writing. He planned to write a comprehensive natural history of Concord, Massachusetts out of some of the journals. Thoreau had thought he'd live another 40 years, but instead died peacefully of TB at the age of 45.

Thoreau was someone who, in the words of a current County song, managed to "live as if he was dying." I promise not to try and sing the song; when I start singing my kids go "DAD!" The singer in that song, effected by his father's death, decides to takes risks and connect more deeply with others and faith. With our "one wild precious life" we need to "live as if dying." That means to let go of security; to risk caring and showing compassion, to be willing to sacrifice for something greater than ourselves; to try to be more loving and so grow into likeness to the holy. As a nation, we need to risk finding our true security in our liberal democratic values of an open free society. As a church community, how do we want to "live as if dying" our "one wild precious life?" What risks are we willing to make to connect more deeply and to help others?

Ireneaus of Lyons, a 3rd century theologian, wrote, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." Though we have birds of death on our shoulders, let us be more fully alive and walk together this year with joy!

May we truly live our one wild and precious life.

Reading: Chris Hedges, from *Losing Moses on the Freeway*

In 1983, I was in a United Nations camp for Guatemalan refugees in Honduras. Those in the camp had fled fighting. Most had seen family members killed. The refugees, when I arrived on a dreary January afternoon, were decorating the tents and wooden warehouses with colored paper. They told me they would celebrate the flight of Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus to Egypt to escape the slaughter ordered by Herod of the children.

Why, I asked one of the peasants, was this an important day? "It was on this day that Christ became a refugee," he answered. I knew this Bible passage by heart. I had heard my father read it every year in church. But until that moment, standing in a muddy refugee camp with a man who may not have been able to read, I did not understand it. This passage meant one thing to me, and another to parents who had swept children into their arms and fled to escape death.