

The Mysteries of Healing and Dying

Rev. Louise Green -- October 31, 2010

Text: "Word Has Reached Me" from *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*, by Alice Walker

Yesterday, I stayed home with a cold, and watched TV. And so it came to be that I watched all three hours of the *Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear*. Was anyone else there, with Steven Colbert and Jon Stewart? The program made me laugh hard, sometimes out loud. Moved me away from that sinking feeling I have these days when listening to public political discourse. It actually did restore some my sanity, and banished some fear. Jon Stewart gave a speech at the end directed at what he calls, tongue-in-cheek, the very small "slice of America between pinhead and patriot". Those who listen briefly to the scorched earth diatribes, by mistake, and then change the channel quickly! His sincerity was unexpectedly moving to me. I appreciated his simple plea for more of us to live with kindness, common sense and compassion. I heard his call for more sanity, and less fear, as a call for action that is life-giving, instead of life-draining, for gestures that build up our communities, instead of tearing them down.

The whole event started in reactive jest, and then, became so engaging that tens of thousands showed up from all over the country. In fact, Stewart told us there were ten million people at the Mall, in a demographically perfect diverse crowd! The final message was actually aimed at the heart of what I think matters most in living--kindness. It reminded me of a quote by Rabbi Abraham Heschel: *When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people.*

Our lives are made up of very small choices mostly, hour to hour, day to day. Within that framework of regular living, there are also big events we did not choose. These temporarily alter the present tense, taking a turn down a new road. Perhaps you know this in your own life, or have observed it in the life of someone else. Have you ever just heard the doctor give a hard health diagnosis, or said searching prayers next to a hospice bedside, or held someone's hand right after a serious car accident? We enter the new road with shock, surprise, grief, or fear. The world slows down. Small things drop away. The kindness of those around you means everything.

You come to depend quickly on the generosity of accompaniment. There are the spontaneous gifts of close family and friends, maybe also the acts of strangers. You need more sanity, and less fear, and rely on acts that are life-giving, instead of life-draining. A limited safe space is created, where you can *be*, while others around you *do*, with generosity and compassion. On this unpredicted road, things you thought were highly important simply melt away. You and the circle supporting you are bound together in a narrow sphere. It's not clear for how long. There is ambiguity and the loss of wider perspective. There is unknowing in direction and outcome, and the open-ended journey looms. In these most challenging situations, which do increase in number as we grow older, we admire kind people very much indeed.

Through these disruptive events that alter daily living sharply and sometimes cruelly, we enter mystery. By mystery, I mean time out of regular time, an energetic space, a new configuration of living. You could define it with biology and quantum physics, and also with the language of soul and spirit. I have observed this over half a century of living, years that contained some hard

disruption, and also tremendous gifts received. I claim no prescient corner on this mystery, or any special knowledge as a minister. However, I do know that experiences in my lifetime, in the life of my family, in the lives of congregants, have had some common denominators. A car crash when I went through a windshield, the death of my father, my diagnosis with breast cancer. You have your own list.

Alice Walker's poem about her sister dying references this mysterious transformation: there had been sharp disagreements and estrangement with her sibling, distancing and enmity. Yet when word reached her with the urgency of "not much time left," she unexpectedly moved to connect. She declares that the love they shared as children is not lost, though they had been lost to each other in recent living. Walker discovers a well of generosity in her self, one that perhaps surprises her in its depth and beauty. She can genuinely send her sister ease and peace. She wishes for her the gift of letting go, into the river channel, on the sound of mantras chanted across miles.

In these times out of time, unpredictable circumstances occur, sometimes moving people closer to healing. Healing is different than a cure. Healing may happen in any situation--even if the ultimate journey is towards death. People surprise you with their accompaniment, patience, or tenacity. Long-held barriers between two people, or within a family, drop down. Yielding to what is happening physically often brings movement in other realms--psychological, emotional, spiritual. Someone you thought was passing over suddenly rallies, confounding medical opinions. Another person you believed had much more time simply lets go into the last breath, months ahead of predictions.

In these times out of time, because the world has become circumscribed, much distraction is eliminated. A stark truth emerges, a reality that we avoid most of the time. This is the poignant fact that we are *all* moving towards death. Alice Walker writes of this truth with elegance:

Sweeping up the petals/of flowers/that surround/
my door/I see your face/all our faces
swept away/by life's good/broom
whenever/&/wherever/we fall...

These oddly beautiful, pared-down periods present the chance to deeply receive the kindness of others and be grateful. They offer the opportunity to "aggressively re-prioritize" your life, as a friend of mine put it, one who lost her young husband and the father of her two little boys to cancer. The strange gift of life-threatening, life-changing situations is that they contain *both* the mysteries of healing and of dying, along with the temporary inability to know the difference. Not knowing the path ahead can set us free, free to let go completely.

On this morning when we celebrate the lives of those All Souls members who have passed, it is fitting that we have some New Orleans jazz in our service music. If you have ever seen a jazz funeral, or a second line parade, you know that life mingles with death, sorrow right beside raucous joy, music as the medium that transports and binds us. They get it right, in lifting death into the cycle of living, reminding us that the wheel keeps turning, and all is part of the same circle.

Don't hold on to the fear that drains you. Restore and embrace whatever sanity brings you life. Do it now, the only time you know for sure that you possess. Blessed Be and Amen.