

## ***AUTUMN REFLECTIONS ON MORTALITY***

A sermon by the Rev. Charles Stephen, Jr.  
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20, 2011

I don't remember a lovelier November than this has been, but still it seems to me to be a dark month, not one the poets would ever acclaim. No "Oh to be in England now that November's there" or "Autumn in Paris". Robert Frost did write a poem called "November". but it has none of the beauty of his poem called "October" with its lovely beginning, "O hushed October morning mild" and later lines:

Begin the hours of this day slow.  
Make the day seem to us less brief.  
Hearts not averse to being beguiled,  
Beguile us in the ways you know.

My favorite lines about November are these by the 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet, Thomas Hood:

No warmth, no cheerfulness, no  
healthful ease,  
No comfortable feel in any member-  
No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no  
bees,  
No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no  
birds,  
November!

So we turn to "Autumn Reflections on Mortality." I have a long lifetime of reflections on mortality, of course, but this past summer I received an e-mail from the Second Unitarian Church in Omaha, asking if I could give a sermon on Death to their congregation in late October. I was in Maine at the time, and while I seemed to be quite contented sitting on the deck and watching the lobster boats in Penobscot Bay, with all my thoughts far from my mortal state, I agreed to do so. So today is my second opportunity to reflect on mortality.

I don't remember how I came to know that I would someday die. Perhaps the death of a pet helped in my understanding, or the death of an elderly and house-bound neighbor woman who lived next door and would ooh hoo to me from her upstairs window. I knew her only as ooh hoo. But then she was gone from her window, and I am sure neither of my parents used that as an introduction to a discussion of death.

This is not to say that I had no anxiety about mortality as I was growing up, only that it was never much of an issue for me then. Or at least I don't think it was. This was not the case for Freya Stark, an English woman, who in her book of essays, "Perseus in the Wind" wrote this:

Pictures of one's childhood are as fragmentary as the relics of the sailor's way which wanders through the south of England; a stretch emerges here and there, though most of it has vanished or been transformed. Amid these half-obliterated memories I can see, quite sharply, my first meeting with the image of death.

I must have been about four years old and a nurse was putting me to bed. .... Standing there on the eiderdown, being buttoned into a long nightgown that lay about my feet, I asked if my mother would live forever.

"No", said nurse, "not forever; but for a long time."

"How long?" said I. "A thousand years?"

"No", said nurse, "Not a thousand years."

The finality of time was borne in upon me. Hours afterwards my parents, coming up to bed, found me half asleep but still sobbing at the top of the stairs, where I had crept a little nearer to those dear ones who in a thousand years would be dead.

Somewhere the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay used the line, "Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies." It isn't so, of course, and while some parents might prefer that their children remain unaware of what is happening in their lives, sheltering them from possible anguish. Keeping them innocent in a sense, it is also likely that most children come to understand rather early that death comes and is final, universal, and inevitable.

Early this past summer I had reason to look at "Charlotte's Web", E. B. White's children's classic, a book I had first read to one or another of my children many years ago. I had just read and was writing a review of a new book entitled "The Story of Charlotte's Web", a book about White and his love of animals. When E.B. White's book first came out some children's librarians and editors gave it negative reviews because it dealt with the subject of death. I began my review quoting the first line in the book, "Where's Papa going with that ax?" The reader soon learns Papa is planning to take the ax to a newly born runt pig. But a little girl, the one who asked the question, saves the pig, names him Wilbur and takes care of him. She raises the pig until it is sold to a neighbor who has plans to slaughter it. Enter Charlotte, a spider, a friend of Wilbur's.

She decides to trick the farmer into thinking Wilbur is special, writing messages about him into her web. She rescues Wilbur, but cannot change her own biological fate, a brief life that will end in the autumn. She helps Wilbur deal with his fears about death, and tells him that her life will soon be over. She prepares her egg sac of children and says she feels "a little tired, perhaps, but I feel peaceful." Her forthcoming death is described as

part of the natural process of living, growing, and dying, and is not feared or protested; but neither is the sadness avoided or denied. Wilbur gives her a wink, she waves one of her front legs at him and then comes the line: "She never moved again."

In Maine this summer I gave my 12-year old granddaughter, Alexis, a copy of the book, and she read it quickly. "How was it?" I asked. "Sad", she replied, "but good."

Earlier in the book when a handyman sees the message woven into Charlotte's web, he falls to his knees and utters a short prayer and concludes that it was a kind of miracle. But it was placed in the proper perspective by an old country doctor, who says, "When the words appeared everyone said they were a kind of miracle. But nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle."

That, of course, was the author speaking about his own view of the natural miracles of life and death. Charlotte dies near the end of the book, but it does not come as a surprise to the reader. Children reading the book will be prepared for Charlotte's death. Early in the book it is a sparrow that sings about how "brief and lovely life

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is." And if Charlotte knows that her life lasts but a season so does the reader who has read "Summer was half gone. She knew she didn't have much time." And even the crickets sing, "Summer is dying, dying."

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As a reader of poetry I have long been attracted to the poetry of death. To the poetry of mourning. "I weep for Adonias, he is dead" wrote Shelley and I have never forgotten the line since I came across it half a century ago. Having long ago accepted my mortality I have been deeply moved by the ways others have expressed their natural sadness at the universal loss of death. Shakespeare has one of his kings speak these lines:

***Let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the deaths of kings.***

I have always found comfort in the literature of death, as I have often felt great displeasure- and have tried to avoid - the religious claims of death's denial, of the hopes of other lives, of other fates, of fables of salvation and holiness and heavens and hells, of eternal bliss and eternal punishment. Swinburne's lines from the ending of his poem, "The Garden of Prosperine" are:

From too much love of living,  
From hope and fear set free,  
We thank, with brief thanksgiving  
Whatever gods may be  
That no life lives forever;  
That dead men rise up never;  
That even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

There are, of course, other poems with themes of anger or despair. They are important responses to our mortal state even if they do not provide much comfort. There is, for instance, Dylan Thomas's familiar lines from his poem about the approaching death of his father, "Do not go gentle into that good night/ rage, rage against the dying of the light." It is a theme that echoes Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem, "Dirge Without Music", which ends this way:

Down, down, down into the darkness of  
the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the  
tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the  
witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am  
not resigned.

I came across William Cullen Bryant's poem, "Thanatopsis" early in my life, and it has regularly served me as a counter weight to the themes of protest, as eloquent as

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they often are. Bryant asks that we live,  
so that when our own deaths approach we go  
not

**... like the quarry slave at night,  
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and  
soothed  
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy  
grave,  
Like one who wraps the drapery of his  
couch  
About him, and lies down to pleasant  
dreams.**

The contemporary poet, Donald Hall, has written that he weeps at familiar poetic passages about death. I read, he says, "in order to weep." When I first read those lines I knew he was speaking for me. He wrote "Whatever the reason, when I find someone's death insupportable, I look to poetry. I find solace in entering someone else's grief."

After I recently read those words from Hall, I realized that I had been doing the same thing for years. Last spring we watched the HD production from London of "King Lear, and I must confess I waited with some eagerness for the ending lines from the King, holding his dead daughter, Cordelia, and crying out:

**Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have**

**life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come  
no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never...."**

My eye were moist and with each "never" I came to better understand the grandeur of Shakespeare who teaches us about the ubiquity and importance of sadness in the living of our days.

I've long enjoyed the intrusion of humor into our mortality. Over the years I have collected a number of "New Yorker" cartoons featuring the figure of Death, in a cloak, his face hidden, and carrying a scythe. Each has Death appearing near a door of a house or room. The caption of my favorite reads: "Relax, I've come for your toaster." Another has a wife asking, as Death is leading her husband out the door, "Hey, don't I get a receipt?" And another has Death saying to a man of color, "You'll be happy to know that race played no part in this decision."

Is humor a way of masking our anxieties? Our fears? It was Francis Bacon who wrote, "Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark." And the theologian, Paul Tillich once wrote that "The horrors connected with death are a matter of the imagination", and that we mask the image of death so that it appears as if it were something foreign,

something inhuman, something that violates the human condition. Traditional religious believers in a future, supernatural life after we die, can find comfort in that faith, but also find almost immeasurable anxiety and questions about life's purpose, and God's plan and of the nature of the eternal life that is promised them.

I've been reading a lot of late about Lucretius, who lived in ancient Rome around 50 BCE, and who wrote a book entitled, "De Rerum Natura" ("On the Nature of Things") A new book by Stephen Greenblatt, "The Swerve" tells us about Lucretius and of how a 15<sup>th</sup> century lover of ancient manuscripts tracked down copies of the book in a search through ancient libraries and churches. Lucretius was a follower, in a sense, of Epicurus, who recognized that the key to life was that we all sought pleasure. We try to avoid pain. The best way to live was to live simply. He also argued, and here Lucretius clearly followed him, there is no reason to fear death. One does not experience his or her own death anyway. His epitaph reads, "I was not; I have been; I am not; I do not mind."

Some people, he wrote, worry that they might end up being punished in an afterlife. Nonsense, he said. The gods are not interested in their creation; they exist in

their own realm and don't get involved in the daily occurrences of our world.

Several centuries later Lucretius wrote about death and of how the fear of death in the world he knew and lived in "warps human life." It comes from fear of the gods. What human beings can and should do, wrote Lucretius, is to conquer their fears, accept the fact that they themselves and all the things they encounter in life are transitory. Therefore embrace the beauty and pleasure of the world.

Or as someone wrote "as one deserves a good night's sleep, one also deserves to die." When I preside at memorial services I often use a line that the Nebraska-born poet-scientist, Loren Eiseley, said he would like placed on the gravestone for himself and his wife, the simple words: "We loved the earth, but could not stay." That, for me, sums up the love of life and the sadness that is always a part of life.

But now we must finish. "There is no way to live richly except in the presence of the dark realities. They are woven into everything we do, everything we witness in the world. That which we cherish most is intertwined with that which we know might not last. Success is intertwined with

failure and is more meaningful, more treasured because of the possibilities of failure. Love carries with it the threat of withdrawal or loss of love and we cling to it when we have it with an intensity that would be unnecessary were love permanent in our lives. We prize most highly those aspects of life that are not permanent; and life is forever intertwined with death, making life more precious, more meaningful. And one cannot come close to an understanding of life without a full awareness of the nature of its limits. If we try too hard to evade this reality we only superficially understand life itself, and are only superficially able to live it.

"There is nothing morbid about thinking and speaking of death," Walter Kaufmann once wrote, "Those who disparage honesty do not know its joys."