

Caring for What Remains

Andy Bachmann, preached 2-8-2009

From Psalm 90: You have always been a refuge to me—before the mountains, before the earth, before the world; from endlessness to endlessness you are...Help me to understand how to count my days, how to embrace my life, that I may nourish a heart of wisdom.

From Matthews gospel, ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.’

On the shores of Plum Lake, in Northern Wisconsin it is usually pretty easy to tell when adverse weather patterns are on their way. Living out in the elements, it becomes quickly apparent when the barometric pressure begins to drop. The air can take on a certain sweetness, and it is not uncommon to watch the front line of clouds march into the area from the south and the east. When the weather comes in from the north, rolling out from the icy waters of Lake Superior, rolling back the summers warmth and humidity, it can be spine tingling to feel the drop in pressure and temperature; and to feel the child like emotions rise up again like an anxious dog ducking for cover under the desk.

The benefits of our location on Plum Lake is that we are on a peninsula, so when the weather patterns come in from the north, or the east, or the south, we can prepare ourselves.

But sometimes, if I’m not paying attention, it can sneak in behind me from the west, and catch me totally unaware, and force me indoors to wait, and to watch, until the storm blows over.

One summers day a few years ago I was caught by surprise by a wind and rainstorm that crept up on me from the west. One moment it just an over cast day, and the next moment the sky took on a gray and menacing demeanor, and the rain fell immediately, fast and furious. I ran inside our lodge dining hall, and stood before a wall of windows, taking in the beauty of this fast and ferocious rain shower. When suddenly, one of the giant pines by the lakeshore, a beautiful tall hemlock that must have been over 80 years old, a tree that I had known my whole life, suddenly lurched forward, tore it’s roots from the ground and came crashing down with an earth shaking boom. To see it fall was heart wrenching.

It was like watching someone I knew and loved crumple to the earth before me, and I knew life would never be the same.

The first time I encountered death in my role as a minister, it was like a storm front sneaking up on me from the west. It was my first day working as a chaplain at Elmhurst Hospital. I chose to cover the cardiovascular floor, because I had been an active participant in my father's two heart attacks. (No, I wasn't the cause of the heart attacks,) but when a heart attack strikes, when a disease strikes, when an illness or an accident or sudden tragedy strikes, it is not just the singular individual who is affected. Everyone is affected. Everyone is a participant. So I thought, based on my experiences, the cardiovascular unit would be a good place for me, where, hopefully, I could help others through what I knew would be some very very difficult days. On my first day on the unit, the first morning, after my orientation, I received the call on my brand new pager in my brand new white coat, that there was a death on my unit. And the family was on their way. And it was my job to bring the family in, to spend time with the deceased, and to ease their transition into this stunning new reality as best as I was able. This was not how I anticipated spending my first day.

I wanted to run. I wanted to hide. I had never seen a dead body before that I could remember, and I did not want to start on that day. But my Clinical Pastoral Education director told me to go. The other chaplains gave me a few suggestions, and they sent me out the door. But I couldn't do it. Thank God for Jim, another chaplain, who offered to guide me through, taking the point, and letting me observe as we set out to perform this most solemn and sad duty. In some ways, I'm embarrassed now to think of how I reacted then. To think that I was so squeamish and uncomfortable in simply being present with a dead body speaks more to my issues with death and dying than it does to the act of death itself. But over the next 100 days working as a chaplain at Elmhurst hospital, I would have numerous times to confront my own discomfort, and come to a much healthier understanding of death and dying.

To be honest, I don't think it is that uncommon for us to be uncomfortable when confronting issues of death. Our culture, one funeral director has said, has failed us, and

left us no guiding light with regards to dealing with the loss of a loved one. I witnessed this first hand while working as a chaplain. It seemed to me that the bereaved were afraid to look upon the face of death; and they would stand at an uncomfortable distance, afraid to make contact with this person who was an integral and important part of their life. I can understand that. I've lived that discomfort. One reason, I believe is because in our culture we have been trained to believe that the dead are unclean or are disgusting, or somehow contagious; even though we know that is not so.

But still, we keep our distance. Another reason might be because we don't want to deal with the reality of death. And that is understandable. Seeing a person that we love in that state does not compute in our brains, let alone our hearts. But, from my experience, once contact is made, and we allow ourselves to be fully present to the reality of life and of death, we are allowed a very intimate opportunity to begin to say good-bye. One friend I have who was able to be present with his father as he died spoke of a settling peace coming over him, and he was grateful for the opportunity to be there with his father as he passed. When he knew that his father had passed, he got up, gave him a kiss, and sat with him for an hour. It can be a blessing to be there in the final moments of life, but this is not often the case for most of us.

Unfortunately death is like birth in that no two are ever the same. While we have some general ideas of how life ends, or begins, and each of us knows that someday that baby will come, or someday my loved one will die, the timing is never ours to control. As my friend Bill said to me, 'I knew my father was going to die. I didn't know it would be on Wednesday.' Death, like birth, is rarely conveniently timed or placed. And death, like birth, ushers us into an unknown world that all the books and all the movies and all the advice we can receive matter little in light of our own experiences.

On that day in Wisconsin, when I saw that beloved tree fall, and the storm had passed, it was as if we didn't know what to do. We stood around the fallen tree, began to collect the fallen limbs, and put them in a pile. But it was a full day before we got the chainsaws out. And even still, there was not much that we could do. So we called the lumberjacks to come out, and to make quick work of this tree that had been witness to the life and

growth of so much of my life. With efficiency and thoughtfulness, the woodsmen took care of what remained of this once beautiful and majestic tree.

It can be the same way with our deceased. Often when death arrives, there is confusion and mystery about what to do. Sometimes the business of death, and the busyness of life can step into the mysterious void that is left behind. One thing I learned from Larry when I came to this church is that when one of our members dies, we go to the body, as quickly as we can, and we send them forth with a blessing and a prayer. As strange as it may seem to have to remind you of this, please, let us know when these things happen, and we will be there. I find it can be comforting. Hopefully it is a helpful step as the sadness and the grief slowly settle in. But the loss of a loved one is like a slice from a knife; quick and clean at first, but taking a long time to heal. When I've lost someone I've loved, I think, 'OK, OK, I can get through this, I can get through this.' But often 'getting through it simply means being able to hold myself together enough to get through the funeral, the memorial service and the condolence line. The actual work of the grieving process is more like re-assembling the pieces of a broken heart, only to discover that one of the pieces is missing.

I still stand on the shore of the lake, and feel like something is not quite right. I'll walk to the remaining tree stump, and try to remember that giant tree; the shadows it cast, the sound of the breezes through its limbs. But it's hard to recollect. And still, it just feels like something is missing.

Unfortunately there is no cure for the mourning process. There is no right or wrong way to mourn. Grief is not something that people just 'get over.' It is something that we have to go through. One person has said grief is a journey, it is not a destination. And for those deaths that affect us deepest, there is never a time when those thoughts and memories will go away. But I think that's ok. I think that's a good thing, because it allows the essence of those whom we love and lose to live again.

Often at memorial services here we use this quote from St. John Chrysostom; ‘those whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before. They are now wherever we are.’ When the memories come, there is the reminder of those missing pieces of our love and our life, but those missing pieces can help to remind us of the beautiful things we took from those saints of our lives. The memories can also help transform us, to live out those good things we learned from them, AND to make the most of our numbered days on earth. As the psalmist prayed, ‘Help me to understand how to count my days, how to embrace my life, that I may nourish a heart of wisdom.’ For me that wisdom of the heart becomes most present in times of loss and mourning. How ironic that it takes a meaningful death to encourage me to live a meaningful life.

Times of death are also times for us to celebrate life. That is what funerals and memorial services are for. We help to ritualize the end of one world, and the beginning of the next. But as one young woman recently pointed out to me, memorial services tend to be more for the living than for the dead. She is correct. But what I think she neglected to realize is that by celebrating the life of the dead, we affirm their impact on us, on our world, and we reach out to those who remain, to surround them with our love and care.

As a family of faith, we are called to act on behalf of the loving hand of God that reaches out to those of us who mourn. We are the ones who can make Jesus proclamation that those who mourn will be comforted come to life. And if you are reaching out to those who mourn, I would simply recommend that you do for them what you would wish done for you. No words but an expression of your sorrow need be spoken. Leave the theology to the Saints. Don’t worry. God is an ever present source in a time of need. But there are other ways we can show we care. Give a hug. Share a smile. A laugh. A memory of the departed, and a story of how they impacted your life. Hold a hand. Go for a walk. Sweep the floor. Do the dishes. Fix that leaky faucet. Drop of a meal, or, better yet, cook a meal, break the bread, do the dishes and leave the left overs.

But give the space and the time, and the opportunity to mourn. With no need for explanation, and no time frame to finish.

Up on the shores of Plum lake, the view still doesn't look the same. And it never will. But that beloved tree is still there. It's mulch now holds the shore together, where it's roots left a gaping hole. So the tree is still there, and there is some comfort in that. And we've planted a new tree, right by where the old one stood. While it can never replace the old tree, that's ok. It doesn't have to. It has it's own life to live; it's own stars to reach for. And the new tree was planted as a memorial to one of my counselors who died way before his time. A fitting place, I think. While I won't live to see that tree reach 80 feet high, my grandkids will. And when they do, wouldn't it be great if they think of me?

Prayer

Oh God,

Some days the words simply won't come. And, though the heart longs for your presence and your comforting words, there is only a void.

Give us peace, O God.

To the hearts that long to be filled, give love.

To the souls that seek forgiveness, forgive.

To the grief, the sadness, the tears, give comfort, and the blessings promised by Jesus so long ago.

Strengthen our hearts and hands, O God, that we might embrace and lift up our fellow travelers on the journey when they have no strength to carry on. Give us the compassion to open our hearts of love enough to share our abundance when others feel the drought.

And remind us again of the promises given, that we will someday rejoin our hearts with those saints who have gone before, and will together take flight into your beautiful resurrected dawn.

Amen.