

While We Live

A Sermon by John Parker Manwell
and Phyllis Lenoir Hubbell
The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
Adelphi, Maryland
January 25, 2009

READING (JOHN)

Our reading this morning comes from the Hasidic tradition of eastern Europe, probably from the 18th century.

The Rabbi of Berdichev once saw a friend hurrying along the street, looking neither right nor left. "Why are you rushing so?" he asked. "I am pursuing my livelihood," the friend replied. "And how do you know?" continued the Rabbi, "that your livelihood is running before you, so that you have to rush after it" Perhaps, it is behind you, and all you need to do to encounter it is to stand still. Yet, here you are running away from it. Stand still, my friend."

And from the wisdom of this story, a contemporary rabbi, Bernard S. Raskas, adds these thoughts:

Stand still. Look at your spouse. Love now; for who knows what tomorrow may bring.

Stand still. Look at your children. Share in their experiences of growth, for soon enough they will grow away from you.

Stand still. Look at your friends. Don't take them for granted. To have a friend, you must continue to be a friend.

Stand still. Look at the sunset. Admire it today. Tomorrow it may be cloudy. Or tomorrow the sunset may be here . . . and you may not.

RECORDED MUSIC "When I'm Gone" Phil Ochs

There's no place in this world where I'll belong when I'm gone
And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone

And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't feel the flowing of the time when I'm gone
All the pleasures of love will not be mine when I'm gone
My pen won't pour out a lyric line when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't breathe the bracing air when I'm gone
And I can't even worry 'bout my cares when I'm gone
Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't be running from the rain when I'm gone
And I can't even suffer from the pain when I'm gone
Can't say who's to praise and who's to blame when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

Won't see the golden of the sun when I'm gone
And the evenings and the mornings will be one when I'm gone
Can't be singing louder than the guns when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

All my days won't be dances of delight when I'm gone
And the sands will be shifting from my sight when I'm gone
Can't add my name into the fight while I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't be laughing at the lies when I'm gone
And I can't question how or when or why when I'm gone
Can't live proud enough to die when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

SERMON

***PHYLLIS:** So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.*

Often when I meet with couples about to be married, I speak to them of how they envision their future. I ask them what they will be doing in five years? In twenty? Imagine for a moment, I say, that they are 93-years-old looking back on their life together. “What do you hope you will have done with your life?” “What kind of person do you hope you will have been?” Many of us have difficulty looking even five years ahead. Many of us don’t even know by the time we are forty what we want to be when we grow up. The years go by, one day at a time, without our noticing, without our deciding to live each day while we’re here. Many of us are busy rushing off somewhere every day of our lives, “looking neither right nor left.”

Daniel Everitt, our church administrator, called us late Wednesday afternoon. He had been in a bad accident. His car was totaled. He was safe. Aside from being shaken up, he seemed fine. But he might not have been.

Our lives can change in an instant. Our perfect health, our perfect bodies, even our lives can be snatched away. What if tonight were our last night? What if tomorrow were our last day? What should we be doing today?

Sometimes it takes a serious brush with our mortality to open our eyes to what’s really important. Forrest Church, the long-time minister of All Souls Church in New York City, tells how his father, Frank Church, on coming out of military service after World War II, enrolled at Harvard Law School. He made the law review in his first year, an honor earned by very

few. But it was a tough winter in Boston, and his wife, now pregnant with Forrest, made it clear that she wasn't ready for a second winter in New England. So young Frank gave up his law review appointment and transferred to Stanford. There, he would learn that the worsening back pain he was suffering was caused by cancer. He was given no more than six months to live.

But as it happened, the Stanford Medical Center had just developed an experimental program of radiation therapy. For the next six months, Frank Church went to class in the mornings, studied in the afternoons, and was violently ill in the evenings. He dropped to 125 pounds – but the cancer was gone.

He probably would have died had he stayed in Boston. But he lived, and his brush with death changed his life, which continued for another thirty-five years. At age thirty-two, living in Idaho, he became the youngest U. S. Senator. He played prominent roles in the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960 and 1964, cosponsored the Nuclear Test Ban treaty, opposed the Vietnam War and was a leader in conservation legislation. Both Frank and his wife savored those bonus years. He lived as if each day might be his last. They took risks. They made time for life, and love, and public service. They lived, fully, intentionally each extra day they received.

JOHN: Forrest Church includes this story in his newest and doubtless last book, Love and Death,¹ written after his own diagnosis of

¹ Forrest Church, Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow (Boston: Beacon Press,, 2008) pp. 13-15.

imminent death from cancer. He, too, is discovering how it is that illness can concentrate the mind. As I look out across this congregation, I have no doubt that many of you have had this same experience, as you or a loved one have had to confront your own mortality.

My own heart attack two years ago caused a major change in my life. I was alone in the house when I began to feel a crushing pain in my chest. I felt too weak even to get up out of my chair, but after forty-five minutes, I managed to call for help. In the hospital, they told me I was having a heart attack. I was lucky. I didn't die that night. With diet and exercise, I may now be in better health than I was before.

But Phyllis and I both began to think very hard about what we wanted to do with whatever healthy days remain for us. Phyllis concluded that she didn't want to take a ministry that would take her away from our children and grandchildren for extended periods. I began to realize that one of the "main things" in our lives is our six wonderful and nearby grandchildren who are growing older before our very eyes. I thought of this Friday night, as we baby sat two of them, five and three. Reading their bed-time stories as they climbed into our laps, and tucking them in, left me feeling closer to them than I ever have before. As I sat at the foot of his bed for a few moments, in the shadowy light, three-year-old Nick looked up and said, "You look like my poppa!" After that I was no longer tempted to return to my book. I savored that moment for the rest of the evening.

PHYLLIS: Phil Ochs' song is about using every day we have fully, intentionally, finding the main thing and making sure we make the main

thing the main thing. But what is the main thing? Each one of us is different. The main thing, for all of us, begins with looking at our lives, you could say listening to our lives. Who are we? For what do we most long? Listening sounds easy, but so many of us live in the pressured day-to-day world of work, and raising families. Advertising is ubiquitous, calling to us to spend our attention and our time on things. Popular culture seduces us into living the life of someone else, not our own. To paraphrase William Wordsworth, “Getting, spending, watching television and surfing the net, we lay waste our powers.”

Our lives are filled with activities and images, noise and constant motion, and it isn't easy to listen to our souls – especially in our modern era which is suspicious of the very idea of soul. Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh invites us to meditate every day on our own death. While it may seem macabre to keep the image of our own death in front of us, for me Thich Nhat Hanh is inviting us to heighten the sweetness and clarity of our lives in this image. For me as a westerner, that image heightens the sense of urgency to use each moment well. We do not know that we will have tomorrow to do the things we want to do, to be the kind of people we want to be, to leave a heritage that we are proud of.

This week was a historic time of celebration, as we as a nation did something we were proud of, whatever party we belong to, Republican, Democrat, Libertarian or Green. We showed the world and ourselves that we have moved one giant step closer to judging one another on the content of our character. Dr. King did not live to see this day. Medgar Evers didn't live to see this day. Frederick Douglass didn't live to see this day.

Soujourner Truth didn't live to see this day. Medgar Evers didn't live to see this day. Martin Luther King didn't live to see this day. Thurgood Marshall didn't live to see this day. But they did all they could to ensure it would someday come while they were here.

Our President has called us to in these difficult times to remember our responsibility to each other and to the world of which we are so much a part. He has called all of us to service for all who are in need – our children, our schools, our country, our planet. But yes, he also invited us to take time together to celebrate in the biggest party our nation has ever seen. Now it is time to get to work. Work, service, coming together are all important parts of our precious moments here together.

This week I heard a story that stuck with me. A group of people were stuck on the Mall after the inauguration. The streets were too crowded to even begin the journey home. A group started to clean up the trash left by the millions of guests at the party for our President. They could have huddled together griping about the weather, the crowds, the economy. But instead they used those moments of their one precious life to pitch in. They will tell their grandchildren someday that they were on the Mall that day and inspired by the moment, that they helped clean up. As Phil Ochs would remind us, there won't be trash to pick up, when we're gone, so we might as well do it while we're here.

Today is the only day we can be sure of. Knowing that, the colors are brighter, music more poignant, love sweeter, justice more urgent.

Knowing that, we understand that this is the day we must watch the sunset,
play under the blankets with our children, witness to justice.

Phil Ochs writes : *Can't live proud enough to die when I'm gone*
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

This day, with its bracing air and its golden sun is the best birthday gift of
all.

Let us use it well. Let us use it well.