

Life before Death

March 28, 2010

A seminary friend of my mine graduated a year ahead of me and thus was ordained a year before me. Ordination, at least in those bygone years, were opportunities to invite the sexiest minister you knew to preach the ordination sermon which was meant to bestow blessings, wisdom, friendship, and love upon the newly ordained. Simultaneously, the ordination sermon was to lift the congregation right out of their pews with awe and wonder for the appreciation of ministry itself.

When I asked my friend who would deliver his ordination sermon, he said he was going to do it himself. That was about as unorthodox as doing your own vasectomy. At some point you have to give it up and trust others to perform the job. But he was determined, and at age 26 he felt so secure in his abilities that when I asked him what the title of his sermon was, he said with the utmost confidence: "The Meaning of Life." I winced, feeling intuitively this would not go well. My friend resigned from the ministry after 10 months.

This thing called life, framed between birth and death, is permeated with more uncertainty than the clear assuredness many feel about what transpires after death. The meaning of life weighs heavily upon us. Why are we graced with such a gift? How are we to understand a purpose before we die?

George Clooney in his last film, *Up In the Air*, has a conversation with the groom about to marry his niece. But this fellow gets cold feet on the day of the wedding. Clooney approaches the young man gently, hoping to convince him to marry his niece after all. The two men engage in a series of comic exchanges repeating the rhetorical question: What's the point? What's the point of marriage, what's the point of life, what's the point of anything because you're just going to grow old fast and die. But the conclusion reached was that since there was no point to anything anyway, he might as well marry Clooney's niece, which he did.

I find it not very satisfactory that life before death can be summed up in the notion that there is no point. But finding the point remains extremely vexing. In Sufism, the point is...the reason we are alive is ... to arrive at that level where we no longer seek something else. (Oh!) The point is no longer seeking to be told by another who one is. The point is no longer demanding reassurance. But there is also the whole infinite depth of **what** is remaining to be revealed. And as you might expect... nothing is revealed to those who seek it. Hmmm, so what's the point?

The point is, in Sufism and in probably most religious philosophies, to strip away our superficial selves and become authentic. We live to arrive at the core of who we are. Should you arrive there, you become free: In our authenticity we are free of competing, free of exploiting, free of all fear including death, poverty or failure. Once you are free of failing – and just imagine how sweet that thought...to be free of

failing, you understand the point of it all...which is to strip down to one's most naked self in order to live freely.

I am very fond of the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, whose writing bridges both Christian and Buddhist thought. I like the story he tells about a man compiling a book entitled *Success*. And the author asked Merton to contribute a statement on how he got to be successful. Merton replied indignantly that he was unable to consider himself successful in any terms that had meaning. In fact, he had spent his life strenuously avoiding success. It just so happened that he wrote a book, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, that became a best seller, but that was by pure accident due to his own inattention and naiveté. He promised to take very good care that that would never happen again. And then he wrote this guy the punch line to his whole diatribe, which was: "Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success." Merton never heard back from the guy and had no idea if he ever published his testimonial about success...or not achieving success.

Merton's point about success obviously concludes that if you obsess about success you forget how to live. If you concentrate only on becoming successful, he says, then your life is wasted. It's sort of like keeping score when you're playing a game. If you're too intent on winning you will never enjoy playing.

Life before death. A blueprint doesn't seem readily available. And yet there are abundant blueprints for life after death telling us where we're going, how to get there, and what it's like when we arrive. Although civilization still awaits a first-hand report from the other side of life, our actual experiences dwelling in life before death feels like wading through muddy waters. What's the point, we ask over and over again.

But we have choices and we make choices. In the Pulitzer prize winning novel, *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout, (a must read for anyone here who hasn't), there's a drab story within a story that goes like this: "...an ordinary, balding, kind of out-of-shape man came home for lunch every day and sat at the kitchen table with his wife, eating sandwiches and talking about things like getting the lawn-mower fixed. But the man's wife wanted more from life than Saturday trips to the hardware store and eating sandwiches every day just because lunchtime had rolled around, and by the end of the story, the wife had packed up and left, and the man stopped coming home for lunch. He just stayed in his office at lunchtime, not eating anything." ("What's the point," was most assuredly asked by both the husband and wife in this story. But the wife clearly chose something else).

I'm thinking about life before death not because I identify with trips to the hardware store as a highpoint of my week, nor do I think I suffer any crises in authenticity although living with real, true blue authenticity is awfully difficult to achieve. I don't have to worry about becoming successful although I wouldn't mind writing a best

seller. I often play tennis without keeping score, but I do keep score in Scrabble so I still have a lot to learn about myself.

I'm thinking about Palm Sunday as the quintessential image of life before death as the storyline folds neatly into the suffering of Good Friday and then Easter which of course represents the Life After Death which purports so many more experts than on the topic of how to live before dying.

Before getting at the heart of the Palm Sunday story where Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem and the people place palm leaves in his path and shout Hosanna, I want to mention that a friend sent me an article from the Boston Globe about how the holy days have changed even in mainline churches in this present era of our ours. You might be interested to learn that the University of Minnesota offers an eco-palm program that ensures that the palms ordered for your worship service are fair-trade quality, and the leaves are harvested in Mexico and Guatemala in an environmentally sensitive manner by workers who get paid a fair price. So maybe next year we'll order the eco-palms for our service, not for theological reasons but to be politically correct.

The important thing to remember about Palm Sunday is that Jesus made a decision to enter Jerusalem. What if he had chosen not to go there? Different story altogether, and Kazantzakis tried to demonstrate this with his own story in *The Last Temptation of Christ* where Jesus had the option (a temptation) of living out his life as a regular guy and to die a normal death. And probably frequenting the hardware store every now and then and having a wife and kids, or as Zorba would say: The whole catastrophe.

But Jesus chooses to go and live his passion. He swings into action as a reformer. He clears out the traders from the temple, he turns over the tables of the money-changers, and he struggles for the rights of people against the love of money. The chief priests were indignant over the threat to their privileges. (Might there be something comparable going on in our country these days?)

In Jerusalem, Jesus before death, we have a profile of a man who threw himself fully into the struggle to change systems of injustice and cruelty. And Jesus had the same disdain for successful materialism as any of the great religious leaders in history: Monetary success leads inevitably to a kind of numbness in life. Life after death is so pivotal in Christian theology and yet this Passion Week where Jesus goes on a tear, represents a tangible blueprint of what life before death could possibly mean: Have the courage to take on the hierarchy of power and work for justice. And you know what – you might fail, but free yourself from the fear of failing.

Joseph Campbell, reminiscing a bit in his latter years, says that sometimes when you look back over your life it seems to be almost as orderly as a composed novel. And just as in Dickens' novels, little accidental meetings and so forth turn out to be main

features in the plot, and also in your life. And what seem to have been mistakes at the time turn out to be directive crises. And then he asks: Who wrote this novel?

If I understand Campbell correctly, he's telling us that we are the authors of our lives. And perhaps if life before death weren't such a confusing proposition, we'd do a better job of writing our lives or composing our lives or just living it. If life is all about making choices then it may be best to figure out WHO's making the choices, and then we come back again to the Sufi ideas about stripping the layers of superficiality to discover WHO we really are. It's somehow all entwined, isn't it? Who am I when I am not lusting after success?

In T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, we are given an image of a world where people live not out of their own initiative, but out of what they think they're supposed to do. The conceit of the Waste Land is that everyone is leading a false life. The vitality of life has fully eroded. A wasteland is an apt image, and the experience is not alien.

There's a bizarre story told in therapeutic circles about a woman from the hills of West Virginia, who when she was a little girl walking through the woods, heard wonderful music. And when she got home she forgot what it was. This woman is now in her late 60's and she feels she has missed her life. The psych interpretation is that the song she heard in the woods was her calling.

Is that what life before death means? To follow the music? To follow one's calling? Sounds so simple except for the fact in a world with so much emphasis on success, and fear of not achieving it, the song may be heard but easily put aside and forgotten.

I like the story of Huston Smith asking a guru: What does human life lean toward? And the guru said, "Something more." (Not worth a trip to a cave in India, I think).

A group of us have just completed the course on Building Your Own theology. If I had to summarize what we might all come up with, it's that life is a journey of insights, not answers. Sometimes we wish we had more answers, but perhaps we might do well to simply settle for a few insights and consider ourselves fortunate. With so much of religion focused on life after death, we hunger for insights on how to live before that day comes when we return to that great mystery from whence we came.

So what's the point? What does it all mean?

Do we listen to the prophets who try to awaken us from our slumber?

Do we peel away our superficial selves and wants and desires?

Do we stop feeling afraid of failure?

Do we stop seeking something else?

Do we shun success?

Do we stop keeping score?

Do we write our own lives and follow the music?

Yes.

They're all in there somehow...all in that difficult struggle to find life before we die and to discover what the point really is.