

“After the Hurricane...”

Part Five

“What Our Dead Would Have Us Know”

A Sermon for the Memorial-Yizkor Service

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After the hurricane, we've been speaking personally during these High Holy Days sermons. I've tried to make them more like frank and trusting conversations between friends. We have asked each other some probing questions on some very personal subjects:

- How do you spend your time?
- What are your doubts about God?
- How much do you figure you're worth?
- And, what is your attitude toward your sexuality?

I hope you will continue your own explorations of these profound subjects. In short, you go on home and try to finish these sermons for yourself! But, one subject remains for us to examine, and it is a dialogue, conversation between each one of us and the stirring memories of our dearly departed.

At this most tender hour of the entire year, I ask you, After the Hurricane, "What would our dead have us know?" If they had the chance, what would they exhort us to remember now? What should we remember as the end of this holy day draws nigh, and as we prepare to leave this sacred house to return to our homes and dear ones for another chance at life?

I.

Here's my guess, in part inspired by my teacher, Dr. Morris Boyd. First, I think they would tell us, "Don't die before you die, because that's no way to live!" Have you read Sonny Brewer's wonderful novel, *The Poet of Tolstoy Park*? That's your homework. Buy the book and read it, because it's a real treat! I'll tell you just a little, because it bears on this point: "Don't die before you die – that's no way to live!"

Brewer's novel is based on the strange-but-true story of Henry Stuart in the 1920s. Henry, at 67, is a retired professor of education – a widower living alone in Idaho, enjoying the occasional company of his two grown sons, and the more reliable attention of his good friend, the Rev. William Webb.

This minister had good-naturedly tried everything to get Henry to return to church. But, Henry had refused ever since his wife's death, though as Brewer describes him, "Henry was at ease with his belief" that everyone gets to Heaven by his own route.

But, one day, Henry's doctor diagnoses him with an advanced case of non-contagious tuberculosis and gives him less than a year to live. Henry can't do anything about it – there's no treatment, and he doesn't even seek a second opinion. Instead, Henry seeks a more comfortable winter climate and for several other factors, moves all by himself to a utopian community based on the ideals of Leo Tolstoy located in

Fairhope, Alabama. Here he intends to build himself a simple cabin in which he can spend his final months perfecting his soul, as he puts it, and contemplating what really matters, a la Henry Thoreau.

An eccentric to be sure, Henry gives away almost all he owns and decides to spend the rest of his life shoeless. Against the strenuous objections of his sons and his preacher pal, he moves 2500 miles away for this last chapter of his life.

I'm not going to tell you any details, except to say that Henry does attain new insights of spiritual clarity, but not alone, and not for only one year – nor even in the next 20 years! But, he learns the way to deal with life's great puzzles: don't die before you die, but *carpe diem* – “seize the day!” – to claim a vigorous new life. And he does! Read the book and you'll get the charming, inspiring details.

II.

So, that's the first thing I believe our dead – those whom we so lovingly remember this holy day – would say to us. And second, they would urge us to “Die before you die, because it's the only way to live!” At first, it may sound like a contradiction of the first thing, but it is an enhancement. In other words, don't hold back, “this is a take!” Don't die with your songs unsung. My friend William Sloan Coffin, Jr. advises:

...the only way to have a good death is to lead a good life. Lead a good one, full of curiosity, generosity, and compassion, and there's no need at the close of the day to rage against the dying of the light. We can go gentle into that good night.

In 1941, reflecting on the inspiring courage of the people of Great Britain who single-handedly stood up to the Nazis and saved civilization, correspondent Edward R. Murrow reflected, “There is something glorious about it because they are living a life, not an apology.”

Our dead would challenge us in a similar fashion. Are we frozen by a fear of failure into missing what we most lack – depth of life and depth of our humanity? Beyond mere survival, you and I must live our lives with significance.

The Talmud teaches us why the day of a person's death is hidden from them. Because...

...if a person knew he or she were about to die, they would not engage in anything useful to the world, if they knew their death day was far off, they would not engage in good works, but say, ‘There is still plenty of time.’

And also, Rabbi Eliezer teaches: “Repent one day before your death.”

His puzzled students once asked, “Well, how will a person know?”

Rabbi Eliezer replied, “No one can know, so repent today, and then tomorrow, and thus all your days will be filled with repentance.” I’d translate “repentance” to worthy, quality living. Put it this way:

We are clueless how to live until we learn how to
spend ourselves in life all the way to our death.

Don’t take life for granted. Give yourself away!

Don’t sit out a dance on the sidelines. Get yourself in there and kick up your heels. Let God bring your soul home full of life, but your body on empty.

III.

1) “Don’t die before you die, because that’s no way to live,” and 2) “Die before you die, because it’s the only way to live,” and now, finally, “Don’t wait for eternity, because eternity has already begun!”

I’ve had people tell me, “Rabbi, let’s not think about life in the World to Come. Let’s take it one world at a time.” And I answer: we’re already living in the eternal. God is more than a final destination. God is a constant Friend and Companion through it all.

Or, think of it this way: “Heavenly Life is the way heavenly people live life here on Earth. Thornton Wilder advised us:

All that we know about those we have loved and
lost is that they would wish us to remember them
with more intensified realization of their reality.
What is essential does not die but clarifies. The
highest tribute to the dead is not grief, but gratitude.

Don’t you find that those who are profoundly grateful will cherish life and treat the proverbial “other guy” in a gentle, kinder fashion?

I heard the story of an old, frail man sitting on a bus, bumping its way through town. He clutched a bouquet of flowers in his hands. Across the aisle sat a young girl, whose eyes came back again and again appreciatively to the man’s flowers. As he rose to leave the bus, the old fellow handed the bouquet to the young girl, saying, “Miss, I can see you love these flowers, and I think my wife would rather you have them. I’ll tell her that I gave them to you.”

Accepting the flowers, smelling their fragrance up close, she could see just as the bus pulled away, that the old man was walking through the gate of a small cemetery.

History records that too few of the German clergy stood up to the Nazis, but one who did was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In one of his *Letters from Prison* before the Nazis executed him, Bonhoeffer wrote:

Nothing can make up for the absence of someone we love... The dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh, but as a precious gift in themselves.

You know, as you and I grow older, I think what happens is that our lives become transferred. First, not always, but more often than not, we say a teary farewell to beloved grandparents and great-aunts and uncles. And later in life, the losses become more severe and harder to sustain. I remember my Mom telling me sometime after Dad's death that more and more, her brothers and sisters and many of her closest friends were now gone, and yet, she had no fears. She said, "It will be like going home to so many who are already there." So, there is a quality of the Eternal that suffuses us in life, right here, all along the way.

In ways that continue to surprise us, we can still hear their voices. Our dear ones converse with us in a new way, of course, but they remain connected: still loving, and still a powerful presence in our lives. Speaking personally, they urge each of us –

Don't die before you die, that's no way to live!
Die before you die, because it's the only way to live!
And, don't wait for eternity, because eternity has already begun.

After the hurricane, don't you sense it all the more: the Eternal is now, because we live it each and every day!

Amen