

Sightless Among Miracles

September 17, 2000

"Days pass, years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles."

Those words of a Jewish Sabbath prayer remind us that the true miracles are those which surround us every single day of our lives, if only we had eyes to see, and ears to hear, and hands to touch.

"Days pass, years vanish. . . ." Another birthday approaches, number forty-nine, but I don't need that near half-century mark to tell me the truth of those words. Since childhood, I have had a keen awareness of what the poet calls "Time's winged chariot hurrying near." If nothing else, my children remind me with each encounter: is this my little boy? Had I known how quickly he would grow up I would not have wished those childhood days and years away. I would have borne more patiently with toddlerhood, been less aggravated and more grateful. Oh, I loved my children much, but I would have loved them even more. Too late for me, but not for some of you!

During my recent trip to Minnesota I visited my old church in Hanska.

It was my very first church, so of course it holds special memories, both good and embarrassing. Some of my early sermons, in particular, deserve to be forgotten. But everything about that place is so clearly remembered, as befits an experience which so exquisitely combined fear and excitement, novelty and expectation, self-doubt and hope. My son Ben was born during our time there. I became a father there, and, insofar as I am one, I became a minister there.

The church sits in the middle of the Minnesota prairie, a mile from town, on the highest point in the county (about fifty feet). For this native Mainer it was a revelation of distance and space. It was there that I learned to love the prairie and to see that it is a kind of vast, inland ocean. In the evenings, Sabrina and I would sit on the steps of the little pioneer museum next to the church and watch the approaching thunderstorms as they made their way across the miles of open land which surrounded us.

It's been fifteen years since we left, but still it seems like yesterday, and still I find it amazing that I was there at all. Yet it all seems so familiar, so much the same, though a walk through the little cemetery at the top of the hill behind the church brings home the passage of those years as nothing else can. So many members of my mostly elderly congregation have passed on since I left that I was reminded of T. S. Eliot's plaintive, "So many, I had not thought death had undone so many."

I confess that I was often lonely there, sometimes unhappy, and that I was in a hurry in those days, to have a family, to move on to the next church, to move up in the world, to get on with my life. I didn't realize that that was my life. But almost in spite of me that place held me for a time, and as I have grown older that brief stay on the prairie has taken on a greater and greater significance and importance in my life, in my sense of who I am and what I am about. "Days pass, years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles." Indeed!

I think it may have been John Lennon who said, "Life is what happens to you while you're making other plans." Only in retrospect do we learn the truth of that observation. Those years in Hanska were, if not the best, then at least among the most intensely experienced years of my life. Yes, I was alive during those years! They have a poignancy that is way out of proportion to their length. I am grateful for them and cannot escape the feeling that somehow I didn't really deserve them. Life isn't fair, of course, but sometimes that actually works in our favor.

It was a gift to revisit that place on a day when no one else was around, to have it to myself, and to be able to reminisce and to consider again the mystery of time's passage. As I do at least a million times a year, I vowed to never take a day for granted again, knowing that I will, knowing that it is inevitable that I will forget the miracle of all my days. But I try.

Boston Globe columnist Chet Raymo also reminds us that we usually walk sightless among miracles. In a recent "Science Musings" column, Raymo reminds us once again that the scientific and the sacred are not so very far apart, after all. His exploration of what constitutes an "adequate step" through the world is reminiscent of the Chinese philosopher Lin Chi's warning, that "If you love the sacred and despise the ordinary, you are still bobbing in the ocean of delusion."

Would that all of our steps through this miraculous world could be adequate ones! Would that all of my years could be as intensely lived as my three brief years in Hanska. Would that every day, every moment could be as deeply rewarding as that day visiting my old church, painful though some of my memories of it must inevitably be.

If we love the sacred and despise the ordinary, we are deluded. Raymo reminds us that the ordinary is the sacred. "Every pebble and wildflower has a story to tell," he writes. "That flake of granite picked up in the path was once at the core of a towering mountain range pushed up across New England when continents collided. That purple loosestrife beside the stream emigrated from Europe in the 1800's as a garden ornamental, then went wantonly native in a land of wild frontiers."

Raymo recalls the 19th century naturalist Robert Lloyd Praeger's concept of walking with "reverent feet," "stopping often, watching closely, listening carefully." Those could just as well

be instructions for the religious seeker as for the budding naturalist. And like Raymo, I know that in my religious quest I have usually fallen short of walking in that way..

But he concludes that "No step of series of steps can ever be fully adequate," which may be for the best. In the religious quest as in the scientific, the complexities of any given moment would be too great for us to bear. It is as T. S. Eliot wrote in another poem, "Mankind cannot bear too much reality."

I do not believe in the trivialization that "God gives us only as much as we can bear." No, I believe that God, or the universe, gives us far more than any of us can ever bear! There is more than we can ever understand, more than we can ever feel, more than we can ever express. There are losses too great to be borne and loves too great to be adequately told. I do not claim to understand it, I only know that if it were not so, then life would not be worth living.

We will never be up to the task of living our lives fully, but we should try. We must try. We must strive to take adequate steps through all the days of our lives, though it will often be painful to do so. Because it is only as we learn to feel deeply and honestly that we are able to attain our full humanity. It is only then that we are able to empathize with others in their struggles to bear with the realities of their lives. And we need one another in the living out of this paradox.

It is unfortunate that too often it is only the new or the old that elicits our most heartfelt and "adequate" response to the world and our lives in it, and that we miss the miracle of the present moment. That is why the Buddhists urge us toward "mindfulness," toward awakening to the here and now. For what are our memories of the past or our experiences of the new and novel except for a heightened awareness of the ordinary?

Most of my memories of my days in Hanska are of the most ordinary events: a winter walk beneath the stars, red-winged blackbirds swaying on cat tails, the way a flat landscape becomes a rolling landscape upon closer inspection, throw-away moments with people I realize, in retrospect, I loved, places along the roadside, a child, my child, reaching to be picked up at a particular time and place in circumstances long since forgotten.

And most of what was fresh and new to me during my travels in Europe this summer would qualify to the locals, I am sure, as perfectly unexceptional. To me it was revelation like my first visit to Minnesota. Would that we could awaken every day to that which one day we will recognize as the essence of our lives, the meaning of our living, life itself. But perhaps it is not possible to do so.

I struggle each and every day with this reality of passing days and vanishing years, some days more consciously than others, of course. It is always there for me as an unanswered question, just below the surface of my being. To me there is no greater mystery, no deeper religious

question than this passage of time, and this gift or curse of memory. There are moments when I am convinced that it is all an illusion, that it is only from our limited human perspective that time appears to be passing us by, and that the eternal really is now, if only we could see it that way. But then the reality of time hits me once more. Those remembered days and people really are gone, into a mystery so impenetrable that I am forced to avert my gaze as from the Holy of Holies, lest it consume me whole.

The only antidote I can think of is that one of adequate steps and reverent feet. Mindfulness. Awakening to the here and now. "Stopping often, watching closely, listening carefully." This is holy ground where we are stepping. This once-only day of our lives is the only one of which we can be certain--better pay attention to it!

Of course, none of us can do justice to this gift of life. None of us can pay attention as fully as we ought. But most of us could try a little harder, beginning in this very moment, to take those adequate steps wherein we, too, come to realize that our every day path through life is an unseen blessing. That realization is a recurrent miracle, one that we can experience over and over again.

My grandmother Gertrude, on her desk calendar, kept daily track of the weather and her bird sightings. Anyone who knows its vagaries might think that keeping track of Maine weather would be an exercise in diminishing expectations, and perhaps it was. After all, how many consecutive days of overcast can a sane person stand to log? And what's the big deal about yet another chickadee at the window feeder? But I believe that it was Gertrude's way of taking those adequate steps, reminding herself that even sameness holds a key to the miracle of life, and that we need to remind ourselves daily that it is really so.

May all of us, too, walk with adequate steps through this amazing world of ours. May we tread reverently, and gently, on all our paths. And may we strive to be awake, lest we squander our days and years, lest we, too, pass sightless among all the miracles that be. I wish it for us. So may it be.

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