

Memento Mori

July 19, 2020

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We are fighting like mad for life. It is awe inspiring, this uprising for life, in the very midst of the threatening cloud of death, the covid pandemic. Awe inspiring! humanity's strength and passion affirming life! This is resurrection life, Mayflower, this is it!! We are experiencing it, the undefeatable eternal power of life that God infuses into humanity. Resurrection life rising up in the very places and times terrorized by death. In spite of our collective depression and anxiety, the life force is rising up!!

Life is rising up against death. Out of George Floyd's tragic death has come one of the most powerful uprisings in human history, sweeping the globe with astonishing speed, astonishing numbers, astonishing diversity, astonishing power. In small towns and metropolis, some places with more whites than people of color, non-violent uprisings with the crystal clear assertion that every human being is made in the divine image and that we are one; and with the emphatic voice of resistance: no more state sponsored violence of black people, no more racial caste system, no more white supremacy. The old mindset is done. We are pulling it down right now.

Life is rising up against death. We are witnessing in more powerful ways than we've ever seen in our lifetime. The stories of nurses and doctors and other workers in health care, how they keep going in to the hot zone day after day, all around the world these essential medical workers are going in, often for 12 hour shifts, they go in because they can do no other.... Their calling into medicine is so strong, that they are willing to serve even if it means their life....This heroism we are witnessing is astonishing.

And the giant-all-hands-on-deck-all-brains-sharply-attuned-project--much like the Manhattan project at Los Alamos, but this one is for life, and it is spread out around the globe, one of the largest and most urgent science research projects in human history, to create vaccines and cures--this is yet another uprising for life. No one is giving up. If anything they are growing more intense in their work every hour!

And continued life for the planet... as temperatures go up dangerously, 2020 will most likely be the hottest year on record, finally the issue of climate change has risen to the top. And the debate is crystal clear; the stark differences lifted up; no hedging, no buying time, no subtlety, no softening, no denial, what's the point anymore?... Everything's being laid bare with the pandemic. And the choice couldn't be clearer. One candidate continues to ignore the science and the danger and the other candidate is ready to pivot during this pandemic swiftly and boldly to clean energy jobs and other solutions. As this clarity is taking over the headlines it feels possible, now finally, that life for the planet is rising up against climate change death!!

More good news..., the indigenous people of this land, the water protectors and land healers, and their allies are rising up to stop the pipelines across this land, nonviolent actions are being readied in our state, if needed, to stop Enbridge. The old fossil fuel mindset is done. We are pulling it down now. This great power of life is rising up to save this beautiful earth.

And in our own lives, we are fighting like mad for life. Re-wiring our brains to make as automatic as possible new ways of being, living, moving through our days so that we might keep ourselves and our loved ones alive. Walking in the streets with our six feet distancing radar and quick side steps like inhuman automatons; washing our hands raw to get the possible, invisible kooties off, and disinfecting, get it off that package, off that fridge handle, off that door handle, get it off; thinking hard about what touched what... no wonder our brains are so tired... admiring exuberantly your two year old granddaughter's face mask, "let's see it on, oh how great!" while wondering to yourself what in the world has happened to us.... And when she tentatively comes closer and reaches for your hand, you must move away with tears in your eyes.... How much psychic energy we are expending... this perversion of our very way of moving and being in the world, but still how astonishing the will to foil the demon covid and to fight with everything we have to stay alive and not spread death....even this, hard and sad though it is, is resurrection power for life....

Yes, there is some ignorance and some selfishness and too many are trapped in unsafe conditions...Still!, let us not miss it! We see it around us and in our own lives-- this relentless, tenacious, heroic willfulness for life.. We're not giving into death, death at the hands of police, death at the hands of fossil fuel industry, death at the hands of Covid.

But, in this holding on to life with everything we've got, in this marvelous resilience at the core of human character, in this resistance to death with every movement in our minds and in our bodies, let us also tend to our souls. (Remember what Parker Palmer says: the soul is like a walk animal—exceedingly shy.)

Our soul needs us to not forget we are mortal.

I wonder whether, in our fight to stay alive, we are ignoring the wisdom of the soul, ignoring the spiritual practice of memento mori, which is at the heart of every great religion and every great piece of art.

I wonder whether, in our vigilance, our rigidity, our necessary defensive living, in the intensity with which we are holding on to life, whether we are forgetting about the wisdom of letting go and trusting...

I wonder if we are divorcing our medical scientific mind from our spirituality; and that as we obsess over when the vaccine is coming? And what are the cures? and what are the solutions... that we are thwarting reflection and discussion of finitude and mortality. (Huska)

I wonder if all this time we spend pouring over the news and trying to keep up with the science and shaping our daily life accordingly whether we are giving too little time to prayer or meditation, and so forgoing those eternal moments when we dissolve into the oneness of being... and practice deep trust...

I wonder if, when you are down on the dock this summer, you will remember as you always do, that time in your 20s when you were living with pronounced death anxiety, and one day while down on the dock you were given a revelation, you discovered a metaphor that felt so true and it became a balm for your soul... *When I die I will go to that place from whence the North wind blows...* Will it come to you again this summer or will you somehow block this reflection, either from exhaustion or fear?....

I wonder if we are working so hard against death now, that we are forgetting the circle of life.

But our soul needs us to do this. To remember that we will die, that just as surely as we have a birth date, some day we will have a death date. St. Benedict instructs us to keep death daily before our eyes. The psalmist asks God to teach us to number our days that we may gain a wise heart. The ancient scholar St. Jerome had a skull on his desk to remind him to use his time well because someday it will be otherwise. This is not morbidity. It is not resignation. It does not lead to a regression to a simple faith that promises reward in heaven. It does not lead to existential despair. Rather, memento mori, remembering that you will die, is the beginning of wisdom.

It takes a lot of soul energy to repress this truth that one day we will die. Energy that can be used for living. Somehow in being free to die, one's whole life comes into focus. To be given a glimpse of this, leads to grace somehow. To be awakened to the now of life.

When the word of death

presses its way quietly,

insistently in the mind

reminding us

there's no time to waste

in choosing love

this day is precious,

*this moment—this one—
is all we have
why wait
why leave upspoken now
a single word
that love would speak
why leave undone
a single gesture
love would express
what could possibly matter more
than love now (Berke)*

Could it be, yes, I think it so, that we can do both and we must. Fight with everything we have for life... And know that someday we will die.

We can do both and we must... Pray over the hopeful news of vaccine production **and** read again the beautiful words from the Tibetan book of the dead... “Do not let your thoughts wander... when you meet the light... you lose attachment to life... your fear of death lessens... you feel peaceful and serene... you forgive all things... you feel gratitude towards all... and you swiftly and truly attain the unsurpassed path... you slip beyond effortlessly...” (Campbell)

We can do both and we must... Hold two blessing signs at your front door, both true, **“rise up with power”**, and **“memento mori”**....

Yes, hold firm, clear conviction in these times.... Death of black people at the hands of police is not ok. Death of the planet is not ok. Spikes in pandemic deaths are not okay. But my death? Someday? OK....

Do both, somehow....holding on...while letting go....

And there is yet one more thing that we must surrender, that we must let go of... And this is so hard for those who have lived their life according to the lord's prayer, devoted to building the kingdom of God on earth...The harvest... We will not see the fruits of our labor. Frederick Douglas, Black Elk, Shirley Chisolm, they did not live to see what they gave their life for ... They were prophets of a future not their own.

In the words often attributed to Oscar Romero but are the words of Bishop Untener. I end with this...

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.... This is what we are about. We plant a seed that will one day grow. WE water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. WE may never see the results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders. We are prophets of a future not our own.

What I'm trying to say this morning is easier to preach than to practice. But I promise that I will try, along with you, to fight for life, to accept that I will die someday, to, with the time I have left, work for the kingdom of God on earth.

Will you join me?

Sources

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