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22 September 2013
UUFP, Paris

Reading

*Did you ever think there might be a fault line
passing underneath your living room:
A place in which your life is lived in meeting
and in separating, wondering
and telling, unaware that just beneath
you is the unseen seam of great plates
that strain through time? And that your life,
already spilling over the brim, could be invaded,
sent off in a new direction, turned
aside by forces you were warned about
but not prepared for? Shelves could be spilled out,
the level floor set at an angle in
some seconds' shaking. You would have to take
your losses, do whatever must be done next.*

*When the great plates slip
and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen
to lie in what you trusted most, look not
to more solidity, to weighty slabs
of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered
beam to save the fractured order. Trust
more the tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that's often torn but always healing. There's
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
your room, your precious life, they all proceed
from love, the ground on which we walk together.*

(Fault Lines, by Robert Walsh)

Sermon

Life, Death and all the bits in between

These past few months have been a time of strange but very rich and real blessings for me. On April 3rd I was informed that I had colon cancer. Not news I wanted to hear, as you can probably imagine, but news I had occasionally fantasized about hearing, wondering what my reaction would be. Would I lose it? Would I rant and rage against the universe for picking on sweet little ol' me? Would I reach for the whisky bottle and descend into the pit of self-pity? In the event, I did none of those things. I kind of shrugged and thought to myself, "Well, what do you know? Ain't life interesting? Always full of surprises."

AT the end of April I had surgery for the removal of the section of my transverse colon where the grade 4 tumour was located, and after a ten day stint in hospital while my body got over the ordeal, I was released for a six week period of enforced house arrest. I was told I had to spend my time doing very little but lazing on the chaise longue eating peeled grapes and reading trashy novels. Which is pretty much how I spend my time anyway. I was also told that, statistically, for a man of my age with the type of cancer I had, I now had a 56% chance of surviving for the next five years. In other words, there was a 56% chance that I had been entirely cured by the surgery. But to improve those odds, to approx a 74% chance of survival, in early July I started a six month course of chemotherapy designed to kill off any otherwise undetectable micro cancer cells which might still be swimming around in my body and which, after a while, would have a look at my liver and decide that would be an excellent place to set up camp. Contrary to my worst fears and expectations, the chemo has been quite manageable. I am fortunate indeed.

But I am fortunate in another much, much more important way. I have been a Unitarian all my life. It has been a rich and significant part of my life, and for the past thirty two years it has also been what has paid the mortgage. Of course, in that time, I have been witness to some of the suffering of this world, both on the grand scale of world events and in the intimacies of people's lives. I have accompanied them on their own dark journeys, and offered what comfort I could, and in doing so I have always known that it has not been just me that was doing so. In some incomprehensible way in being with others on their dark journey I have represented something mysterious far greater than me.

One of my most telling and humbling learning experiences happened to me early in my very first ministry. I had gone to visit an elderly woman in a nursing home. She was peripheral to the congregation, I had never met her before, and frankly I regarded my visit as a chore, the main benefit of which to me being that I would have done it and would not have to do it again

for a while. Added to that was the fact that it was a cold day and I had cycled to the nursing home and had gone from the brisk fresh air outside to the overheated airless room inside, with the inevitable result that I immediately started to fall asleep as I sat at her bedside. As we chatted about who knows what, I had two dominant thoughts running through my head. The first was: How long do I have to stay until it is okay for me to leave? The second was: How can I keep myself awake?

What you need to know is that I was not being a very wonderful pastor to this elderly dying woman. I was bored, I was inattentive, I was impatient to be gone. Finally, when I deemed I had stayed long enough to have earned my departure, I made to leave but she grasped my hand, looked me in the eye and said “When you are with me, I feel the presence of God.”

Let me assure you again, I had not been dispensing pearls of pastoral wisdom or psychological insight. I had not been “present” for her. Really, I was a fraud. And yet, unaware, I had brought her the presence of God. In the same way we may all bring the presence of god into each and every one of our interactions: with the woman at the grocery check-out, the co-worker, our child, our partner, the stranger on the street. Each connection with another provides us with the opportunity to be the presence of god, whether or not we are up for the task, whether or not we are aware of it.

I have preached pieties and platitudes aplenty about the roundness of life, how death is a part of life, the universal condition of being granted the gift in the first place. I have believed, in theory, that we are interconnected in ways we cannot understand, and that we are, each of us angels, messengers of God, representatives of that which transcends reason but which is the very foundation of that which makes life rich and real.

All of this I have known and believed in theory. And now I know it to be true through this profoundly rich experience. Because what has sustained me through this interesting and challenging time has been two things – one theological and the other personal. The theological strength has come in being reminded and reassured in the deep faith that life is a precious gift, a gift to be savoured, certainly, but also to be used as agency for good. What a joy it is to be alive, and how much greater that joy for knowing it is not forever so that each day truly is the bringer of delight. The personal source for strength has come from gratitude that for most of my life I have been paid to do the work of my heart. What a privilege to be granted opportunity to bring some succour to the world. You need to know that when you do so, as many have done to me these past six months, you are bringing with you the presence of God. When you send a card or an email of love and support to a friend who is ill, when you say the kindly word, however unaware you might be of it, when you do so, know that others

may experience the presence of God. Beyond your ability ever to know or guess, you have been part of *“the tensile strands of love that bend and stretch to hold you in the web of life that’s often torn but always healing.”*

The universe obviously has a perverse sense of humour, but then we knew that already. Also back in April, just days before I got my diagnosis, I was telling the world that I had a book published, Twelve Steps to Spiritual Health. The next thing I was telling the world I had cancer. It was transparently a marketing ploy to tap some sympathy sales. One of those steps is Reconciling with Mortality. I had not expected to be confronted so immediately or directly with my own need to do so, but I have been working on it. When confronted with one’s own mortality, there is the inevitable temptation to take stock of one’s life and what one has done with it, and to see how well one has done with one of the other steps, which is to do meaningful work. By a rough reckoning, in my working life as a Unitarian minister I have preached about 1500 sermons. Some might say I have preached one sermon 1500 times. I have attended more committee meetings than I would care to count, done hundreds of rites of passage, eaten potluck suppers, stood on the picket line, written words of challenge and of comfort. That work has been meaningful for me, in the hopeful faith, or is it faithful hope, that it has been meaningful for others also.

What I want to say to you today, you who have your own occasional dark journeys as well as your moments of basking in radiance; you who have your struggles to find that to which you can cling as the plates shift beneath you, as what you had thought was so solid and secure tumbles and crumbles around you; you who rise again and again to breathe clean air and do honest work; what I want to say to you is that all around you, all around us, is that which cannot be seen, the tensile strands of love that hold us in the web of life. Steady. Safe. Serene.

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It has been in those strands that I have experienced myself to have been held anew, and indeed it has been healing. How could I not be grateful? How could I, and all of us, not say Blessed be. Amen

Meditation

Take a few moments of sitting quietly. Close your eyes. Think about your breathing.

Breathe in/breathe out/breathe in/breathe out/breathe in/breathe out.

Listen to your breath, feel your chest expand and contract with each breath in, each breath out.

Dear Breath of God,

Blow on us with your life-giving power.

Fill us with your spirit, that our hearts may be made glad and our bodies strong;

Each time we inhale, filling our lungs with life-sustaining oxygen, may we take in your spirit, so that our chests expand with the wonder of you within us.

Each time we exhale, may we bless the world and all about us with your power and beauty and joy.

We cannot live without breathing. Breathing is the very essence of life. To stop breathing is to die.

We cannot live in our spirits without breathing you in. You are the essence of our lives. To stop breathing you in, is surely to die in our spirits.

Dear Breath of God, fill us with your power and your goodness. Sustain us with your beauty and your joy.

Amen