

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.  
Ecclesiastes 1:2,14

A few weeks ago, I happened to notice one morning how much time I spend in front of the mirror, and to what end? There's only so much I can do these days to make myself look young again. It reminded me of the Teacher's comment in Ecclesiastes 1 that "All is vanity." Or more literally, "a futile chasing after the wind." We humans strongly resists the notion that life is in a constant state of change. We're in denial about it. Everybody else might be getting and looking older but not me. But the bigger problem is that I'm constantly looking for some answer that will guarantee me some sense of security. Alas, whenever I seem to find an answer to the question of the day that is perplexing me, there's always another question that takes over, and on and on it goes.

These days, I'm trying to spend more of my time staying focused on the moment and relying on what I've experienced to be true over the years instead of relying on my stinking thinking, my addiction to my way of thinking. Two experiences keep me sober these days. 29 years ago, the compulsion to take the first drink or snort the first line was taken from me. The desire vanished into thin air.

The second experience I've had over the years is what I call synchronicity, that meaningful coincidence experience when random events coalesce to remind me that I am not alone, that a power greater than myself is my constant companion and guide. I had a moment like that not too long ago when I was bedside with a couple grieving over the loss of their 15 year old son. I was at a loss for words, feeling helpless, but somehow, I stayed with them for the last 3 hours of their son's life. No words, just listening presence, validating their pain. Sometimes that's all we can do. Be present, acknowledge that there are no simple answers, let the grieving person know they are not alone just by being present in their moment of pain.

My relying on experience falls in line with what the practical book of Ecclesiastes teaches. What is translated as vanity of vanities, the Hebrew Havel, Havalim, is better understood as **mist, vapor, breath**—in other words, that which appears and vanishes

into thin air. Havel also means “insubstantial,” “impermanent,” as empty and as transient as breath. The teacher’s message isn’t that life is vain or futile, but rather that it is transient and empty of permanence. Ecclesiastes is a guidebook to living without permanence, surety, and security while still finding joy in living.

In fact, throughout the rest of the book, Koheleth, or the teacher states that **Everything—pleasure, pain, toil, love, wealth—is fleeting**, and that clinging to any of it only leads to more suffering. Which is why a better translation of verse 14 reads, “I have examined everything done beneath the sun and—behold—it is all fleeting and impermanent, leaving you anxious and disturbed.”

In fact, as far as the Teacher is concerned, it’s time to get practical. To summarize, he recommends that to recognize life as havel is to **release our grip** on what we cannot keep. It is to embrace the world not with grasping, but with **gratitude and presence**.

When we understand that nothing lasts, **we begin to simply cherish what is**. . .not for its *permanence*, but for its *presence*.

And then, Jesus enters into the equation when he reminds all of us that hoarding treasure for ourselves is also no guarantee for safety and security because no one ever knows when this moment might be our last.

**And in a world that seems to be spinning out of control more and more, day by day, I believe both passages are calling us to show up and behave authentically in all that we do and say, including this advice from Parker Palmer: “We could bear witness to family members, friends, neighbors and others in our circle—including MAGA devotees—that our commitment to human rights, the rule of law, the claims of truth, and constitutional democracy demand that we resist a tyrannical regime that refuses to abide by those cherished norms.**

The Colossians passage also reminds us that greed is just another form of idolatry. Remember when Michael Douglas opined in the Movie “Wallstreet” that “Greed is good?” No it’s not. Especially when greed is used to protect the white status quo by ripping immigrant families apart, is just wrong. . . The renewal of hearts and mind that Paul is referring to in this passage and elsewhere results in the opposite of what we are seeing. As our hearts are renewed in Christ, there is no male and female, no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythians, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! By the way, the Scythians were the most barbaric of the so-called barbarians. Paul’s point? **There is no social, ethnic, or cultural boundary that should stand in the way of Christian unity. No One should be excluded, especially when they don’t seem to fit into our neat and tidy world!**

Pride, arrogance, superiority are all defensive postures we learn early in life as we try to navigate all that life is throwing at us. In order to survive, we conclude that we have to build a wall around ourselves that ultimately turns our hearts to stone. But Koheleth offers us a different path. . .By accepting that change is inevitable, we can begin to let go of the illusion of control.

How does that happen? In Breathing Under Water, Rohr writes,

“To keep the heart space open, we need several things. **First**, we almost all need some healing in regard to the hurts we have carried from the past.” **Secondly**, we need to be in right relationship with people so that others can love us and connect with us at deeper levels, and so we can love and connect with them. Sometimes all it takes, is to listen, really listen to what the other person is saying and feeling and then join them there and letting them know that you understand.

Turning a heart of stone into a heart of flesh is not an easy task, God knows. In fact, in his little overview of Mystical Sobriety, Jim Finley points out that a lot of us have a tendency to resist letting go of our pride and ego by asking one question after another. Even Thomas Merton who said: “God my god, it’s always the same thing, the

same question that nobody knows how to answer.” (During the night, during the day, you’re so gentle with me, sometimes it feels like you’re not there and then, I wonder if you are there). “Eventually we start to realize that God is the one asking the question about us and we don’t know the answer to God’s question. Furthermore, we don’t even understand the question.”

That question that God is asking goes something like this:

“So John, (or whatever your name happens to be), Why don’t you surrender yourself over to me in your inability to even know how to begin to do the one thing that will give you the thing you’ve been longing for; the one thing that will give you the deliverance you’ve been longing for all this time.

As it turns out, mystical sobriety is finding the freedom to let go of the “question-asking self” that wants to remain the base of operations enslaved by all the unsubstantial, unanswered questions. God is asking, “What if all your unanswered questions are irrelevant and inconsequential?”

“And what if you surrendered yourself to your powerlessness to do the one thing that will deliver you from your need to answer all your unanswered questions? As we say in recovery, what if you just let go and let God?

And, when you realize that all this sounds beautiful but, you don’t know how to do it, raising one more new question, then (God) will go on say “That’s the point, so go ahead, give it a try, sit in your powerlessness, in my presence, breath by breath.”

Breath by breath, moment by moment, breathing in the love of God, breathing out all the unanswered questions, letting go of the false self which would “sooner live in a win/lose world than allow God any win/win victory.” (BUW, p. 20)

And so, as we close, let’s return to Havel, Havelim

Find a moment to sit quietly.  
Take three slow breaths and  
Whisper the word: **Havel**.

Notice what is present around you—  
The sound of breath, the warmth of light, the stillness of your heart. And then, Let that  
moment be enough.  
Let that moment be everything. Amen!