

“Joyful Words of Thanks—Even Now”

The writer and philosopher William Segal lived a comfortable, privileged and interesting life. Then, he was nearly killed in a car accident. To understate the case, it changed his life. His friend and business associate, Tracy Cochran, writes of this incident:

“How can we find balance and peace in the midst of pain and turmoil? A legendary Zen Buddhist master once sent this startling note to a friend:

‘Lucky man,’ wrote Soen Nakagawa Roshi, the abbot of Ryutakuji monastery in Japan. ‘One accident like yours is worth ten thousand sittings in a monastery!’

The accident the Zen master mentioned was a devastating car crash. The ‘lucky man’ was William Segal, 67, a magazine publisher, artist, and spiritual seeker. Segal received the message as he lay in a hospital bed in New York. Both hips were shattered, his skull was fractured; and all the bones in his face were broken.

‘That’s why I have a different face,’ Segal told me.

During his last years, I often visited William Segal in his apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The walls were lined with self-portraits painted over many years, so I could see how much he had changed. I could also see the intensity and persistence of his interest in who he was.

“What’s it all about?” he would ask people, including me. “What do you think?”

All people who go through serious calamities or illness or loss go through a transformation, Segal believed. We long for life to return to normal, and old comforting routines do reassert themselves. But another view remains underneath, bringing a degree of understanding and equanimity. Nothing is ever the same because it is irrevocably clear that we are not as solid and independent as we think. And life is a gift that can be taken away...

Lying in the hospital, helpless and in pain, Segal learned to see and appreciate the goodness in small acts, the young woman who mixed his drink (his jaw was wired shut) with care to get the taste just right, the man who cleaned at night, a recent immigrant who performed his job with great care and economy: ‘There was in every gesture the nobility of doing what life required of him,’ Segal wrote.

Suffering contains an inner door. Segal found it and opened it, moving from a tight and fearful focus on his own dire life situation to an interest in life itself. What would happen next?

I have had a good life, haven’t I?’ he marveled sometimes.

‘What do you think we’re here for?’ he would ask, the long horizontal span of years and experience forever matched by a vertical wish to know himself and to know God.”

Tracy Cochran’s article about William Segal is something I chose to quote at length, both because I have direct personal experience of the *metanoia* (or profound change of mind and direction) that can

result from a catastrophic car accident, and because what Segal said to Cochran is relevant to anyone living through a “serious calamity.” And right now, we are all living through a series of calamities.

To not only endure such challenges, but to learn and grow from it, we have amazing guidance in the scriptures that today’s service offers. Paul tells the Romans how to live together as followers of Jesus Christ. Those instructions are like a map of how to get from wanting to follow Jesus to actually getting on the road with him. The person who wants to join Jesus on the Way might try two techniques that this section from Chapter 12 of the Epistle to the Romans offers.

The first is to memorize the passage, verses 9—21. To memorize a spiritual text is literally to embody it. The text becomes an inner spiritual resource, and living with it, as one must do to memorize it, enriches one’s understanding of the guidance Paul is offering.

The second is to take one of the instructions from the passage each day, and live with it by trying to live it out. Regard it as an invitation from a spiritual father to deepen your inner practice. Regard the instruction as a prayer to be prayed by keeping it close to you for a day.

Now, take a look at the Gospel passage for today. After reproaching Peter for saying that he must not live out his destiny in Jerusalem, Jesus said this about following him:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose their life?”

My own experience of a catastrophic car accident, which was quite similar to Segal’s except that there was no damage to my skull or face, was that four months in bed to heal from the accident allowed me to really look at my life, and to consider what I meant when I claimed to be a Christian. I had been so busy rushing around, working, taking care of my children, and, somewhat ironically, helping to lead retreats on the weekends, that I barely had time to take a breath.

The accident gave me time to pray, to think, and to ask myself what I wanted my life to be like. Allow me to suggest that this time of pandemic, when life has taken an outwardly imposed different direction for nearly everyone, is a good time to review one’s own experience, to offer joyful thanks for the many God-given blessings of life thus far, and to ask God where one needs to put one’s foot next.

And now—back to the scriptures of the day. The prophet Jeremiah offers a bitter pill--wishes for retribution towards one’s enemies. Contrast this with Paul’s warning to the Romans: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” Jeremiah observed the exile of his people from the homeland that Yahweh had said was theirs, and he was not happy. Yet his complexity as a human being, in whom many voices spoke, also allowed him to say, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.”

Allow me to suggest that memorizing the words of Paul to the Romans, and of Jesus to Peter and his disciples, is a way of **eating** the holy Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and making it real for others, in sharing those words. Human beings are complex, and Jeremiah the prophet was no different.

Primary among his motivations was the love of the Word of God. Yahweh promised him, “If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth.”

Bitter though his words sometimes were, it is useful to remember his words in the scriptures known as the Lamentations of Jeremiah: “Yet, this I call to mind, and therefore, I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love, we are not consumed, for his compassion never fails. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, the Lord is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him.”

In this challenging time, we are called to be, ever more, the people who love the house in which God dwells, and the place where God’s glory abides. Have faith, have gratitude, celebrate the many blessings of being followers of Jesus. Following his wishes, let us set our minds on divine things, not on human things. Thus, we gain the whole world, and our eternal lives, in the process.

AMEN.