

“Living the Questions – A Celtic Evening Reflection”

At Grace Episcopal Church - Sunday, Feb. 17, 2019

Five years ago Buff’s son Weir gave me a book titled “Being Mortal.” About the world of medicine, of living and dying and what is known as end-of-life-decision-making. Who knew then that the thin space between heaven and earth would beckon Weir into dealing with a diagnosis of cancer? Then, too soon, draw his father through that thin space, not as a result of his Alzheimer’s but a silent, sudden, heart attack.

I avoided the book at first. Was it because I didn’t want to face what was slowly but surely claiming my husband? Or maybe because I thought I already knew it all? With all the roles I had played in my vocational as well as personal life, didn’t I already know all the questions that needed to be asked, the conversations that had to happen?

Soon after finally reading “Being Mortal” I faced one of those human life events that require us to re-define what life will be like after it. Retirement, not by choice but because time I couldn’t stop took me to the mandatory retirement age for the position I held. It felt like a kind of death. Don’t some of our life events seem like a death, a dying to one way of living, until we find out how to live into another way of being?

Later in what I now call my “in-between” church year (one I spent here at Grace sitting out there where you are) I was the very short term “Interim” for another church in our Diocese while the Rector was on a ten-week Sabbatical. There I met Joyce (not her real name). Not in church but at home in hospice with fast moving terminal cancer.

Images of time with Joyce are still strong. The path to the door of her home lined with flowers planted to welcome butterflies, inviting them to stay awhile. Her husband hovering at the door. Joyce cocooned in bed, head covered, other covers pulled up to her chin, despite summer’s warmth.

She and I connected in that mysterious way that sometimes happens when one soul senses kinship with another.

Joyce had set her mind on what was waiting for her. My image was of someone at a doorway, pausing before stepping across its narrow threshold to enter a new but strange landscape. Not frightened, just resigned, even somewhat impatient, believing that it was time to do it and she better get on with it.

On one visit I sensed a change. As I entered her room, a strong energy struck me. It felt like a power to be reckoned with. Joyce lay still, a stiff resolve about her – anger, even. I asked the usual open-ended question, “How are you doing?” She looked up at me and snapped, “I’m just lying here waiting to die!”

Time stood still. I felt profound loss, not just for her, but for the words I couldn’t find. I’ve known that emptiness before. When I have nothing, absolutely nothing to offer, my mind and heart paralyzed.

Annie Lamott writes that there are only three one-word prayers needed in life. One is “Help!” I went with it, silently. Then words took shape from somewhere deep inside. I heard myself say to Joyce, “So, how do you feel about that?” Quick as a flash, she answered, “I hate it.” I found more words, “What do you want to do about it?” She shot back, “I want to live!”

Something the “Being Mortal” book author was trying to say two years earlier flashed in my memory. A question that summed up what is really the only question that is important at such a time. I voiced it. “So, Joyce, how now do you want to live?”

On my next visit I was pointed, not towards the bedroom, but the living room. There was Joyce, dressed in bright colors, no head covering, an inch of soft fuzz gracing her elegant head, her eyes dancing. She beamed at me. Filled with stunning aliveness, she shared stories of recent afternoons sitting with family on the deck in the sun, a bit of renewed appetite, who was visiting, and so on. I thought, “Wow!” another of Lamott’s essential one-word prayers. Joyce was living into her answer to the question the week before. It was beautiful!

My time at that church ended. I had to say good-bye to the people, including a very much alive Joyce, who on one of my last Sundays slipped through a side door after the service had begun. When I caught sight of her, my eyes teared. I didn’t want to lose her. There were a few strangers at the church that last Sunday, a search committee, scoping me out as a possible part-time priest for their small church families. Sometimes the world overlaps: an ending turns into, yet again, a possible beginning. One door closes while another slips open.

Months passed. Then two calls, one from Joyce’s priest and one from her daughter. So, I came, walked one last time along that again to be butterfly lined pathway when Summer came. Entered the bedroom where

Joyce lay in a coma peacefully cocooned, surrounded by family. They shared the amazing unfolding story of Joyce's life since I had last seen her: the Christmas party she and her husband had, how she danced into the night, how she lived many of her last days with a special grace. After prayers I left. Then almost immediately learned that Joyce had slipped over the threshold waiting for her. Journeying on. For her, once again, to live into the question, "How now shall I live?" And I sense the Source of all life welcomed her generously and simply smiled.

I have a card Joyce sent me. Two butterflies hover over flowers framing the words, "I bless you and thank you for being in my life." Can she ever know how much God blessed me through her? Even now, I whisper another Lamott one-word prayer, "Thanks!" Both to Joyce and to the Source that shaped questions within me for her, but ones obviously also meant for me as life too quickly, too starkly would bring me face to face with those same questions. Ones we are all called to explore when we face the deaths, big and little, that occur as we live this "one, wild, and precious life" spoken of by the poet Mary Oliver.

I share this story as I am trying to live life after the sudden death last April of someone who traveled life with me for over three decades. Dealing with a profound ending yet sensing that the Creator, the Re-Creator of my life wants me alive – really alive. And it is as if I hear the voice of Joyce quizzing me this time. "So, Torrence, how now do you want to live?"

Ram Dass said it well: "We're all just walking each other home."

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