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For the last few months and especially the last weeks I have thought of many possible topics for today. Each one is a tidy aphorism and cuts the speechifying short, something my children would appreciate. But how to choose? Which one is THE one which most aptly sums up my experience and knowledge and is the best gift I could give to you today? It's dizzying! When you have approximately one such opportunity a year, it's hard to pack in all those valuable nuggets so that you end up with one perfectly faceted gem of a talk.

My experience as a wedding musician comes into use here and it is this: the bride calls, wanting music for the wedding. What music, I ask? Well, she doesn't really know; they like all kinds. So I've finally learned to ask what they do not like, and by this route we come more easily to decisions about what the music will be.

My talk today, therefore, is about things I know nothing about. I hope this may offer insight into an important part of our lives and of this chapel, just as looking not at a star gives you the only possible view of it.

The purpose of the chapel is the promotion of religion. It says so in our brochure. What is "religion" in this context? It is probably not just the passing on of doctrine or the management of conflicting or competing societies, as it has sometimes become historically. There are already many places to study one established creed or another. I think and hope it means the promotion of the search for some ephemeral, dynamic, uncaught, essential energy.

To not illustrate, here is my story about something I do not know anything about:

The past few weeks I have been remarking with wonder and some emotion that a year ago I knew nearly nothing about spinal cord injuries and absolutely nothing about having a child severely injured by one. This is the anniversary of Noli's accident. I've often heard people say during this year "All your priorities change in a split second, don't they?" If that means your whole life changes, yes, it's true. Another frequent observation was "It's amazing how your whole life changes in a split second, isn't it?"

Invariably I was cheered by this remark. It always made me remember that Noli's conception took about a split second, and that completely changed my life. Those splits seconds are what life IS.

This is the talk about what I don't know, so I'll tell you a few things I do know or did know: "Noli's had an accident. He's in Concord Hospital. He's going to live." Annie, at seventeen, made this important phone call the most perfect way possible. Simple. True. Being told in the hall at the hospital that the injury was "low, C-5 or C-6" I knew that that meant high and it meant quadriplegia. While Noli was waiting to have the halo applied to his head I knew, that of anybody in the world he was going to be able to make something rich and wonderful of this sudden veer in his life.

"You are going to be able to do this."

"Do what?" he asked.

"Do whatever you need to do to cope with this injury."

I knew that he would manage a great deal more gracefully and creatively than any of us could. Sweet Honey in the Rock's song cycled through my head and soul: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and the daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. Though they are with you [yet] they belong not to you." The halo looks a great deal more like a crown of thorns. The thorns are screws applied directly to the skull through the skin, and blood trickles from each one.

Now I dream about him nightly, and about his brother Jesse often. For all my certainty about his fabulous spirit, I relax about how he's doing physically only when I see him. This is usually once a week, for a night and the days surrounding it. He needs a lot of help. I need to see him. He has, for those of you who do not know, been out of rehab since Thanksgiving and is living with Jesse in Upton, Massachusetts. Jesse, with friends, has started up a motorcycle business in Salem, New Hampshire, and is still racing. ("They come through you but not from you. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.") Jesse crashed in Ohio ten days ago. He is racing today.

Recently I arrived at Noli's 45 minutes late. My lateness meant his catheterization was late. Dysreflexia had set in. Dysreflexia usually means elevated blood pressure. It can

escalate quickly to the point beyond pounding headache to stroke, heart attack, or death. It is the warning sign that something is wrong below the level of the injury. Once the cause of the dysreflexia is discovered and treated, recovery can be slow, taking hours or days.

Noli was really exhausted as a result of this episode. But he was gracious to friends and guests as usual, and stuck to his routine and schedule. Once he was settled in bed for the night, I was sleepless with worry and checked on him frequently. Going near his door I'd hear his breathing, a little rough but steady, reassuring me that his body, on automatic pilot and with the strength of a 27 year old, was going to re-regulate itself. One time, though, I walked down the hall and heard nothing. Thinking he might be awake and breathing the quiet breath of sleeplessness I spoke his name quietly at the open door. Nothing. If he was sleeping I didn't want to disturb him. I crept to his bed and listened carefully for his breath. Nothing. I put my hand on his chest. It was still. A quad could be still. He was still and he was cold. In a moment my body was infused with such heat I can describe it only as Heat. Heat.

With an awful refusal to believe he'd been taken I called his name. After only a moment he groggily said "Yes" and he started breathing. Again.

"I was just checking on you."

So ingrained in me is it to not be an Hysterical Mother I said no more. He slept. I watched a while. I didn't tell him the story next day. What if he worried that he might, some other night, not wake up? What if I couldn't communicate that moment of heat, which "came through me but not from me" ? I went back to my bed and fell easily asleep. There was no need to keep watch. Though it didn't jive with my usual maternal concerns, I knew it didn't matter. That is the knowing which we all seek, even when unknowing.

I think this is called grace. I have seen it countless times when, at the funeral of her husband, a woman serenely attends more deeply than ever to her friends, family, and guests. It is not that she is stunned. It is not shock. It is grace. It is a gift from that other space between life and beyond. I think Antonio Machado 'didn't' describe it when he

said "Between living and dreaming there is a third thing. Guess it."

Thomas Moore is a contemporary psychologist and mystic. In his book called "Care of the Soul", he writes with love and acceptance about these gifts, and offers, because he is logical and verbal as well as insightful, a kind of training manual for Westerners. He writes: "What is the source of this soul power, and how can we tap into it? I believe it often comes from unexpected places. It comes first of all from living close to the heart, and not at odds with it. Therefore, paradoxically, soul power may emerge from failure, depression, and loss. The general rule is that soul appears in the gaps and holes of experience. It is usually tempting to find some subtle way of denying these holes or distancing ourselves from them. But we have all experienced moments when we've lost a job or endured an illness only to find an unexpected inner strength."

I think it is more than strength, because that "strength after loss" model makes it sound like scar tissue. I think it is illumination. I think it is a view of the unseeable. And, in other words, I think it is grace.

When I once told Noli I was thinking about collecting writings about the spiritual benefits of catastrophic illness, injury, or loss, he said "There are no benefits." Well spoke! Nobody seems to think paralysis is a benefit. Yet his life, and his philosophical approach to it, would, in many a monastery, be called a practice. Like his first life, this has to be classified as a mysterious gift. These "intimations of immortality" can be silent and unfamiliar. We must not reject them. They can be silent and familiar. We must not discount them. They can be unwelcome. We must not judge them or distance ourselves from them. We must accept them, embrace them and learn from them/

Who has been through the Big Pines Natural Area? Who has been by? It's just up Route 113-A a bit. Who thinks it's a path by the river like the one a mile or so closer to town? Beautiful, mossy, and known? I have passed by the Big Pines for thirty years, approximately 15,000 times. Yesterday I went into them with Paul and Eb. I can tell you it is not what I rationally and reasonably knew it to be from going by.

It is the same with the dark corners, the by-ways, the interstices of our lives. If you

explore them with open eyes and hearts you will not need catastrophic loss to know grace. A woman I knew told me she was losing her mind. It was some time after her husband had died. Not only were her days and nights different because he was gone, her whole world view had changed. Her dreams and her perceptions of color had changed. She thought she was losing her grip on reality, and was growing truly anxious because she thought she was insane. I believe she was seeing, perhaps because of her closeness with her husband, into some unexpected realm, but it was not madness. It was unfamiliar. It was unsettling. It was clarity.

I didn't tell Noli the story of that night until this Thursday. I tell it to you but cannot explain it. I told it to my friend Phil who knew about the final training and test for some Tibetan monks who climb into the mountains in the winter, strip to their skin and sit meditating in the cold. They are then wrapped in wet blankets. When the young monk generates enough heat in meditation to dry his blanket, he is ready. I don't know what it is, but I believe it.

In thinking about preparing this service about grace and the promotion of religion in this chapel, I thought "You all know I am not a scholar of the Bible. And I know that most of you are not scholars of the Bible. We are Lay persons. Yet we are not Lay Persons. We all strive to be expert persons. But we may achieve more by welcoming the unknown than by trying to perfect the known. We can "let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace".

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Look in. Look out.

"The Tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named  
is not the eternal Name.

The unnameable is the eternally real.  
Naming is the origin

of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.

Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations

arise from the same source.

This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

The gateway to all understanding."

Lao-Tzu said that. Kahlil Gibran said that. The Bible said that. Thomas Moore said that. Winston Churchill said that. (What he said was "Too often when men stumble over the truth, they tend to pick themselves up and stumble off as if nothing happened." We wonder "What is Life?" We look for clues all about us, in books, in friends, in sermons, in workshops. Look also at what comes through you. ("It comes through you, but not from you...") We live in grace. If it doesn't seem so, that is your cue to turn it over and see the other side.

Let us pray.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Thy sight, oh Lord.

Amen.