

Taking It One World at a Time
A Sermon Across the Thinning Veil
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
November 3, 2019

Paul Cavazel loves to drive his sports car fast. Very fast. Along the Seine River in Paris, through the Place de la Concorde, into the tight crooked streets of Montmartre. Paul Cavazel, citizen of Paris, architect, rogue, lover of Beaujolais wine and Galouise cigarettes.

I first “met” Paul in a talk given by Dr. Kathleen Rusnak, entitled, “Because You’ve Never Died Before,” and many of my observations arise from Rusnak’s reflections. No, Paul is not a patient from my days as a hospice chaplain. He’s a wonderful creation in literature, sketched by the writer Françoise Sagan in her slender but powerful novella, entitled, A Fleeting Sorrow. In it, we accompany Paul for one fateful day in early autumn. He learns in the morning from a doctor covering for his regular MD that he has terminal lung cancer with a six-month life expectancy.

Paul’s day, as it is exquisitely described takes us not only through the five classic stages of dying identified and named by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, but also beyond those categories into the heart and soul of this man’s denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

The book pulses with experiences many of us may recognize from work or life. Paul tells a friend who pooh-poohs the news, he skips work and eats a hefty four course meal with wine at a bistro where he is a regular, he races along the Seine and barely misses being crushed by an oncoming truck (and then regrets his sharp reflexes because a quickie death might have saved him some anticipated suffering).

He buys drinks for everyone in a rundown bar in a part of Paris where he had been a stranger, he muses about an old love and frets over how to tell his ghastly news to both his wife and his mistress (both of whom turn out to be nearly as narcissistic as the main character.)

He regrets the demise of his marriage to Mathilde whom he tracks down in a centuries-old courtyard graced by a single tree; he grieves at the realization that he has never ever owned a dog. When he cries, his tears are rife with anger and frustration and even self-disgust. He calls what’s happening to him, “The opposite of life, of my life.”

He wonders if its all a horrid mistake, he wonders how to live while he’s dying, he asks himself whether there will be unbearable pain, whether there will be companionship and comfort. He even quotes Appoloniare to underscore how lonely he has become in his knowledge of his imminent demise. “Now you walk through Paris, all alone,” speaks the poet,” Among the madding crowd but still alone.”

The world of the dying is different from our world in so many ways, not the least of which is the sense of being alone, no matter how many companions, family members, hospice workers, saints, angels, or supreme beings may accompany us.

Coping with terminal illness is hard work and it creeps into every corner of the patient and the family's life. And the dying person is the forgotten griever. In tangible terms, often he or she has been moved into a central space in the home: a place with room for a hospital bed and other medical equipment; a welcoming space for visitors to congregate amidst the familiar sights and sounds and smells of his or her life story – the photos and the furniture, the birdfeeder in the window, the fireplace and the TV set. The patient is dying in the living room, amongst the living and all the trappings of the non-dying.

But, then, we could flip some verbiage in my wordplay around and argue that he or she is also living in the dying room. Hospice can enable the patient to live with dignity until they die, and ultimately to die well, free of pain, with grace and peace (however you define these terms).

In their book, Final Gifts, Maggie Callahan and Patricia Kelley note that a pending death in the family affects everyone and stirs up a jumble of emotions that have been shaken loose by confronting human limitations and our inherent finitude. It stirs up many questions like: How can this be happening? Why me? (Or why her or him?) What is it like to die? Why has God abandoned us? How can I bear to be parted from my loved ones? Is it possible to find any peace or meaning in this event?

One may ask: “Can I use the remaining time I have to grow personally, to share treasured moments of living and even mend some of what might be torn, while coping with the many losses death will bring? How can I find my way through these dark and unfamiliar woods?”

Callahan and Kelley employ the term “Nearing Death Awareness” to define the special grasp of reality that an actively dying person may possess. This unique and very individual awareness offers the chance for life review, spiritual healing, and in some cases, even one last whirl at full immersion, deliberate living.

We saw this play out in the heart-rending story of Brittany Maynard, the 29-year-old terminally ill newlywed who moved to Oregon to take advantage of the state's Death with Dignity act (one of only 9 states in the US with a Compassionate and Choices law). You may know that AZ has Death with Dignity legislation pending and if this is important to you, please contact your representative.

Brittany wept openly about her fate, yet she savored every moment she could, every day with her husband and family. She scratched the Grand Canyon off her bucket list and posted radiant snapshots on Facebook. Originally, she had intended to end her life compassionately and consciously on November 1, 2014 but wanted to postpone that decision because, in her words, “I still feel good enough, and I still have enough joy — and I still laugh and smile with my friends and my family enough. I feel alive.” Ultimately, Brittany did end her life that day, as planned.

Brittany Maynard is an embodiment of the rallying cry embedded in our quote from the Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox, "Do not live too far in the past or in the future. Live now. Do not be afraid to die today but expect life." Tarbox was moving through the journey of her own terminal cancer when she wrote these words, and a hospice patient will likely interpret them differently than you or me, but the message is universal.

We are all actively dying – it's built into this perishable equipment. We are freshness dated, whether we are 29, 49, or 79. And, if we are not awake to life now, then when?

Will we wait until we have a close call or a near death experience or receive a fateful diagnosis like Paul Cavazel to notice that we are alive; stunned into the awareness of the breath moving in and out of our lungs, our hearts beating in our chests, our eyes drinking in the beauty embedded in everyday things, our hands entwined with those we cherish?

I wonder if Brittany Maynard had read Walden by Henry David Thoreau. I think she would have related to his answer when asked what he thought the afterlife would be like. The sage of Concord responded, "I'm taking it one world at a time." How can we do otherwise? All we truly have is the here-and-now.

In micro terms, all we genuinely possess is the moment; beyond the illusion of control, the past is gone and the future is yet to be. And that extra hour everybody but us Arizonans gained at midnight...well, East Coasters - enjoy the extra sleep, but it's not going to give you the ability to outrun mortality.

Buddhism informs us here. Actively dying people have a rich opportunity to practice *present moment living* -- to examine what has value for her, to confront his regrets, to see the world around him almost anew, to replace anger with acceptance. Individuals in the state of Near Death Awareness report seeing loved ones through the thinning veil, there can be (often is) a softening of gruffness and a willingness to be vulnerable and repair relationships.

In Sagan's novella, Paul notices the leaves falling by the Seine in a different way, the taste of wine, the mustache of the waiter at his favorite bistro, even the way his hands look as they clutch the stirring wheel.

Many forces in Western culture have conditioned us to worship youthfulness and to be afraid of aging and dying. But there is another option – using our finitude as a spur to practice present moment living NOW. To go into your personal woods to live simply but deliberately, with expectation rather than with dread, and to humbly allow the forest to find you in your joy and your sorrow.

To drink from a half-full glass, regardless of what is in it – water, wine, or Pepto-Bismal. To proceed with what the theologian Paul Tillich calls "the courage to be" in the face of our finitude; To push life out of our inner tombs of pain and disappointment and turn our faces towards the sun anyway.

This topic has spurred a number of bestselling and moving personal accounts of nearing death - The Last Lecture by CMU professor and UU Randy Pausch, Being Mortal by Atul Gawande, When Breath Becomes Air by neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi, and The Unwinding of A Miracle by Julie Yip-Williams. Death salons such as Death Café, The Conversation Project, and Death Over Dinner have become worldwide phenomenon. People want to

explore more honestly and socially about their mortality and this is a positive development. I'm hoping we can host events like these here at Beacon.

For individuals who subscribe to doctrinal theologies of salvation and damnation, death remains a very scary gambit, because they believe the afterlife may hold eternal suffering or eternal peace for them, and it's a bit of a dice roll.

In the 1700's, the anxiety about this was so intense that some Puritan believers ended their own lives in fear they would not be saved upon death. An ironic and twisted logic, but sadly true.

We Unitarian Universalists shed these eschatologies long, long ago. We are a this-worldly, here-and-now religion. "Taking it one world at a time" is embedded in our principles, our ethos, and our work establishing a beachhead for justice and beloved community, right here, on earth among the living. Do not be afraid to die today, but expect life. That is our creed! Can you strive to embrace that expectancy beyond your fear or your own fleeting sorrow?

The Rabbi Lawrence Kushner recalls a time for us when he confronted this question, a time when, as he put it, "a tiger jumped out of the forest." He was scheduled for a CAT scan after having trouble holding onto his razor while shaving. He writes: "Suddenly, everything I did was infused with meaning. I couldn't take anything for granted. The most trivial sensations became gifts. The smell of my children's hair. My wife's kiss. The cat purring. The morning coffee. Each was too precious to let go of."

I relate to Kushner's experience and perhaps you do too. Despite having gotten beyond the mystique of Death, having been amidst it so often in my hospice work, I cannot deny the forethought of grief over the specter of leaving the continuum of my own life and my children's lives.

And the same holds true as we grieve those who have passed into the mystery. This can often be more than a fleeting sorrow. For Rabbi Kushner, though, the CAT scan turned up nothing. "Idiopathic" the Doctor said. "I got a reprieve. Whoever pulled my file must have put it back in the "life cabinet," Kushner jokes. Then, in all seriousness, asks: Would that there be some way of getting to that heightened gratitude for life without the terror?" Please find some quiet time and ask yourself this question.

I'm thinking now of Paul Cavazel the reckless remorseful Parisian, from our opening story. Are you curious about what happens to him at the end of his earth-shattering day in *A Fleeting Sorrow*? Well, he receives a phone call from the doctor (whom he's taken to calling Dr. Hamster"). The doc apologizes profusely for mixing up Paul's' medical tests with another man who has a similar name. Paul doesn't have cancer after all. He's fit as a fiddle. Healthy as the proverbial ox. Hope your day wasn't too awful, and all that.

Paul is filled with such confusing emotions that all he can do is flee. He has never been so close to his feelings, more self reflective, more vulnerable, or come to love the world more than he has during this fateful day.

He packs off to a charming old hotel on the Rue Fluerus where he intends to stay for as long as he wishes or needs. The author Françoise Sagan writes: "He felt his entire being slowly filling with something he knew was happiness.

Something triumphant and modest at the same time, solitude was making him drunk.”

Paul has lived deliberately (if somewhat recklessly) on this one extraordinary day and he cannot go back to being lost in distractions. And although Sagan doesn't say this, I'd like to imagine that when Paul decides to go home, he'll finally get himself that dog.

Blessed be, Blessed we, and Amen.

© 2019 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.