

My dad passed away on Thursday, April 22, 2021, at about 3 pm. He was 91 years old, a good run by any measure. A series of health scares over the previous 15 years, including multiple cancer surgeries and an incapacitating stroke from which he almost **totally** recovered, made us well-aware that our time with him was an extravagant gift purchased by his almost super-human will to stay with us.

I visited twice in the last two months of his life, watching as, step-by-step, his body finally began to fail him. The first visit was focused on how to get my mother help in caring for his increasing needs. It seemed all the doors were locked from the other side. One morning, he passed out on the already arduous journey to the bathroom which led to ten hours in the ER, a do-not-resuscitate order, and, finally, access to excellent in-home hospice care courtesy of Medicare. Needs and services appeared to come together magically, and I was able to return to my duties in Marshfield confident that both Mom and Dad had everything they needed to navigate the foreseeable future.

True to form, Dad held on, defying the expectations of all those seasoned experts who predicted his passing in days, if not hours. **A month and a half later**, I returned to assist my mother attending to him for what would be the last two weeks of his life

on this earth. In short order, he lost the capacity to visit the bedside commode, suffering the indignity and intense discomfort of being diapered and bed-bound. I attended every changing, occupying his hands carefully to keep them from wandering into, shall I say, unsanitary regions. I say carefully, because he gripped my hands with a strength far beyond what that frail, emaciated body could believably muster. If I'd allowed him to grab fewer than three fingers, I am sure he could have broken them. He held on to me as if he was holding onto life itself. The physical memory of that strength sometimes makes me wonder if, in that grasping, he left something of himself inside me, something invasive and a little scary.

There was profound certainty in those rare moments when I could offer exactly what he needed, a hand to hold, loving eyes to see and be seen **by**, a swab of cool water to wet his mouth. There was a needling guilt that the bone-deep fatigue I had to endure would only be relieved by his death. And the endless second guessing — were my efforts to comfort extending his misery? Or shortening the life he loved so much? Eventually, Dad's hands stopped grasping, a peace settled in, and it appeared he was ready to greet his fate with what looked very much like a smile.

Now, three months later, the question that haunts me is “What’s next?” Dad’s needs answered that question right up until HE had no “next,” in this life anyway. I will confess that, against the backdrop of that certainty, I strain to hear the answer now. Death touches every one of us; everyone’s experience is unique, and many, maybe **most** stories deserve far more sympathy than mine. I share it because to a large degree we are all in the same boat, post-Covid (if we are post-Covid), post-faith in our democracy, post-faith in common truths. Reading the morning news, it feels very much like we are walking hand in hand with a loved one in full knowledge that that loved one is about go on ahead without us. The “BIG NEXT,” but not for us. What’s next for us? What is next? What IS Next?

I was led to this week’s two scripture readings by this question. The famous passage we read from Ecclesiastes seems rather obvious. First, a time for this, and then a time for that. A time for staying home and a time for going to get a haircut (I swear it’s NOT too la-ate!). Don’t get used to either one, because it will change in God’s time, willfully oblivious to our perceived needs or expectations. Don’t even ask. You can’t know; you can’t change it, so let’s go have a good meal while we have something good to eat.

But a careful reading of Ecclesiastes (read it! it's a short book, twelve chapters) might reveal that it is a question of scale. From an individual's perspective, high times and hard times come and go like day and night. From a community's perspective, we see the good suffer and the evil prosper. Where is the sense in that? But there is a scale that exceeds the grasp of the human mind. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book on Ethics, says it this way, "So long as we live, so long as we do not know the boundary of life, death, how can we possibly say what life is in itself?" The book begins with his conclusion, "The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge." If we invalidate our knowledge of good and evil, then what? Perhaps that is what Matthew's Jesus meant by hungering and thirsting for righteousness, rather than self-satisfying our hunger with the first meal at hand.

So, what's next? Reflecting on that question, two other questions press to the front of the line. "What's here?," and, "What's gone?" In the case of my father's passing, I am still here. My love for him is still here. My memories of him, good and bad, are still here. He was a good man, but he wasn't perfect. My

hope that he could change, that he could change me. Still here. My unasked questions. Both my desire to serve him and my capacity and the resources to do so are still here. What becomes of them? My mother is still here. Well, not here, here. She is in Indianapolis, but I think she might be joining us on the live stream. Her name is Carolyn. Can I get you all to say, “Hi Carolyn!” On three, ready one two three, “Hi Carolyn!”

In the case of the morning news, Black folks are still carrying the promise of equal justice. Children at the border whose parents have still not been found are still here. The reality of climate change is spreading across our awareness like the rising sun at dawn, or the smoke of an uncontrolled burn. Those who cannot trust the outcome of their personal investment in our democracy are still here. Those who face overwhelming obstacles in making their own investment in that democracy are still here. Covid, and at least for now, the vaccine’s ability to protect us, are still here. All of these, and everything else are poised to greet, if not welcome, what is next. Whatever it is, what’s next will not have an easy time of it.

What is gone? My dad is gone. He was here, and then he was gone. There is a hole, a place he once filled, a place only he could fill, that is empty. It is a thing that is not a thing, a real and

present here that is not here. I am sure you have your own empty places. Loved ones, loved activities, loved places. Things are slowly coming back but they are not the same. There is something radically holy about the holes left by the ones who have left us. There is something about the gaps that always have us looking to what is next, that define our relationship to what is still here.

Professor Jonathan Lear wrote a book titled Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation. He told the story of the last great chief of the Crow nation, given the English name Plenty Coups, and how he oriented his people to face the late 19th century clash of civilizations, and his people's eventual subjugation to the American government. Lear quotes Plenty Coups, "[W]hen the buffalo went away, the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this, nothing happened."

A key to understanding this expression, "nothing happened," lies in Plenty Coups' name. A coup, the French word for blow, was a symbolic death blow. A Crow warrior received great honor, *as a Crow*, for scoring a blow against an enemy in battle without killing him, and without being injured himself. Plenty Coups was named for the many coups he had scored in

battle against rival tribes. Once intertribal violence was forbidden by the US government, the Crow's pathway to honor was erased. A coup without the possibility of being killed in mortal combat was just a game of tag.

And yet crops were planted, meals were prepared, children were raised; life did not stop. In fact, Plenty Coups, on behalf of his people, negotiated a much better situation with the US government than the rival tribes received. Plenty Coups was even honored to be the sole representative of all First Nation People to attend the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. The warbonnet and coup stick he laid there, 100 years ago, are still on display.

There is value for us in this story of navigating what's gone, what's still here, and what's next. The honored tradition of meeting a deadly enemy with the very real possibility of being killed, turned the engagement into a communication, unilaterally rendering a life and death struggle into a sustained relationship, a game as it were, what you could call "Playful Wisdom." To coin a term. The defeated enemy in this case was not simply taken out, but allowed to live as a symbol to the rival nation that the Crow had defended their boundary. Imagine if our public discourse which so often demands that our enemies either come to our

side or else submit to elimination were defined in terms of healthy boundaries, permeable to a point, and flexible enough in their maintenance to uphold both self and other.

Plenty Coups was also known for a vision he had on a quest as a nine year old boy. The vision was translated by the Crow elders as a statement of the inevitability of defeat at the hands of the US Army. The vision ended with a great wind that felled every tree in a mighty forest except for one, the one that contained the lodge of the chickadee. Nine year old Plenty Coups (not his name at the time) heard a voice in his vision say,

“[The chickadee] is least in strength but strongest of mind among his kind. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee-person is a good listener. Nothing escapes his ears, which he has sharpened by constant use. Whenever others are talking together of their successes and failures, there you will find the Chickadee-person listening to their words. But in all his listening, he tends to his own business. He never intrudes, never speaks in strange company, and yet never misses a chance to learn from others. He gains successes and avoids failure by learning how others succeeded or failed, and without great trouble to himself.”



We have had a windowsill bird-feeder for years now, and I have come to love the chickadees. All the other birds fly away when I come to the window, and open it to fill the feeder. The chickadees always stay right there and they watch me. Their bravery always gets them first dibs. They aren't stupid. If the cat pops up, or the dog noses in, they are gone in a flash. They know that it's not strength or size that best weathers what's next, it's being able to stick around, maybe suppress first impulses to stick to old pathways, to listen, assess the situation, and then act appropriately, even, one could say, wisely. Plenty Coups carried a chickadee totem in his medicine bag for the rest of his 84 years.

We usually think of what's next in terms of time which, I am sure you know, was invented to keep everything from happening all-at-once. But it also can refer to space, as in what is next to me. The word in fact shares a root with the word near, as does the word, neighbor. Jesus invites the lawyer in our second scripture lesson to ask today's question another way, "Who is my neighbor."

You know the story. The priest and the Levite are hurrying to church; nothing wrong with that, I hope. I did it myself a short time ago. The problem, at least from the robbed man's

perspective, was that their sights were on a project farther up the road. Maybe they were focused on maintaining the health of their community overall, certainly a worthy goal, and couldn't be bothered with the problems of just one man. Suffice to say, the blinders were on, and the man's suffering did not impact their inner world enough to provoke a compassionate response.

Enter the Samaritan. Raise your hand if you know the Israelites and the Samaritans were sworn enemies? The whole point of Jesus' ironic gut-punch is that the guy helped his enemy. There may be a parallel here with the Crow coup tradition. What better way to display the security of your boundaries than to nurse your sworn enemy back to health out of your own resources. The rescued man would live forever with the memory that his enemy had the chance to kill him, or simply just let him die, but he didn't. Whatever the reason the Samaritan stopped, the difference between the first two who passed by and the one who stopped to help is that as the scripture says, he came near him.

When I was caring for the most immediate needs of my dad, I was not afforded the luxury of grieving the eventual loss of his presence, although I'll admit it was never far away. I was not invited to ponder whether he would go to heaven or whether I

would see him there. As important as that question was to him in better days, I was surprised that it didn't come up for him either. Those distractions were just ideas, concepts, that were utterly obliterated by the nearness, the nextness of my father, his discomfort, and my all too limited capacity to relieve that discomfort. The priest and the Levite were focused on an idea. How often do we focus on the idea of racism, of immigration justice, of income inequality? Do we distance ourselves from the suffering of others with our ideas about abortion, marriage equality, poverty, notions of reward and punishment? Are we more focused on being right than doing right? You can't do anything that isn't right in front of you. What's next?