

John Karbula
Laity Sunday, April 29, 2007
Ecclesiastes 9:3-10

Good morning. It is a humbling experience to be here. It also makes me really appreciate what Hal and Sharon are faced with on a weekly basis. I must confess to you that I don't believe I have anything particularly profound, or unique or special to say – but I also feel oddly comfortable sharing with you, because Plymouth is a special place and it is a joy to share my spiritual life with all of you. The blessing of belonging to this spiritual community is profound, even if my own life and spiritual journey are, I believe, pretty ordinary.

Matters of the spirit, are, for me, essentially a mystery. I think I have felt this way a long, long time, but my ability to articulate this happened only as I got older. A spiritual life and its importance for me go back as far as memory. Raised a Roman Catholic in a small Iowa town, I have no memories that don't include church, and the life of the spirit. My parents were devout Catholics, but, though I didn't realize it at the time, I was constantly picking up from them that how you lived your life was a far more important expression of the spirit than where you went to church or the specific beliefs you held. Mom and dad were givers: it was not something they ever talked about, but it was how they lived and all of us (I am the oldest of six) were along on the journey. So, giving out Christmas gifts to needy kids, my mom and dad inviting people to dinner or for holidays who might not otherwise have had anyone to share a meal with, supporting their church monetarily and with countless hours of volunteer service: I grew up around all this and later, as an adult, it affected me deeply.

But my early spiritual life was very Catholic. I was an alter boy, we went to Mass every Sunday, and I was always just naturally interested in Scripture and the sermon's of the priest. As a teenager, I found myself strongly influenced by Father Kurt. A close family friend, Father Kurt was a learned man, who, when he discovered my interest in the life of the spirit, opened up his personal library to me and talked with me about what was then my favorite subject: world religions and beliefs and why they were different in their particulars but often similar in their underlying beliefs. His humor, his caring, his knowledge and his devotion to service affected me profoundly, and I began thinking seriously about a life in the priesthood.

As a college freshman, I entered a “pre-seminary” program run by the Sacred Heart Fathers. They owned three apartment buildings in Chicago, and there were 45 young men in the program. We all went to various colleges in the Chicago area, but shared a spiritual and communal life in the apartments, which were all within a few blocks of each other on Chicago's north side. There were two requirements to the program: you had to major or minor in philosophy, and after two years, you had to either exit the program or enter the seminary.

Well, for many reasons, I left the program after only one year. I simply had discovered that I did not want a life as a priest. I had also discovered that I had a complex spiritual life that extended beyond the well defined boundaries of the Catholic faith.

This began a second phase of my faith journey. No longer bound by Catholicism or even by Christian beliefs, I began ranging far and wide to explore my spirit. In this period, which extended through the rest of my college life, my time in New York City before I met Julie, my beloved wife, and

for the first ten years of our married life together, time spent both here in Colorado and also back in New York. During this period, I discovered Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, the Tao te Ching, Ecclesiastes, Epictetus and others. I also discovered that for me, any text was sacred as long as it spoke to my soul, and that life itself was sacred each and every minute: this was the most powerful lesson of Ecclesiastes – that this life is the only life you have and so, we must treasure it for what it is, and find joy in what we have.

A few key passages that I discovered during these years are “cornerstone” texts for me: they help me define the life of the spirit. I would like to share a few of them with you this morning.

The first is from the novel *Blood Meridian*, by one of my favorite writers, Cormac McCarthy.

“The truth about the world is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness, it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream bepopulate with chimeras, having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a muddy field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning.

“The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world, more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has it’s own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others.”

Then, the “Great Gray Poet,” Whitman:

“I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end. But I do not talk of the beginning or the end. There was never any more inception than there is now, nor any more youth or age than there is now, and will never be any more perfection than there is now. Urge and urge and urge, always the procreant urge of the world. Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase, always sex, always a knit of identity, always a breed of life. To elaborate is no avail, learned and unlearned feel that it is so. Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in the beams, stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical, I and this mystery, here we stand...”

And then, the opening passage of the Tao te Ching:

“The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name. The unnamable 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.”

Finally, a portion of Ecclesiastes from this mornings reading:

“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

Plymouth is the third phase of my spiritual life. As you can see from these cornerstone passages, and from the places I take them, Plymouth is the perfect place for me. I cannot say with any certainty what life is about or what I mean by God, or how to define my spirit or the spirit of others. I know, in many, many ways, that the life of the spirit is vital to my life – indeed I feel that life would be impossible without a spiritual life. But mine is not a typical, linear, Christian life. And here, in this wonderful place, among you, my fellow travelers on a life of the spirit, I feel accepted, and loved and know I have a home.

Much like my parents, I find the life of the spirit more in life than in literature. Though I have shared with you this morning some key written elements that attempt to guide my spiritual thoughts, longings and beliefs, I must also share that I find the spirit in life more than in books.

In my life I have been so blessed. Raised by loving parents and among extended family, I always felt loved and accepted from my earliest days. I was also blessed with parents who totally accepted me, my brother and my four sisters exactly for who we were and never wanted us to be anything other than ourselves. I think, perhaps, I mystified my parents sometimes, but rarely: no matter where my life journey took me, I traveled secure in their love and acceptance. It is a gift I have striven to extend, though imperfectly of course, to my own two beloved children.

When I was 26 years old, I met my wife, Julie. We married a year later, and this June, we celebrate our 24th wedding anniversary. Words cannot possibly express the depth of her presence in my life. Clearly, one of life's greatest mysteries is how I got so lucky – I certainly have never done anything to deserve such fortune. But living life with her is enough. Each day together is blessing.

Of course there are my own daughters. Watching them come into the world, and being with them as they have grown up reminds me every day of what a miracle it is to be alive. Again, words cannot touch it or grasp it. But eating dinner together, or traveling together, or watching them go off for the evening with their friends – laughing and happy and filled with the joy of being young and full of energy – these things fill me with joy that is truly mysterious, indescribable and as pure as life can possibly be.

Like everyone here, and like everyone who has ever lived, I have had my ups and downs. Life brings us challenges and difficulties. Eventually, we all face the greatest mysteries: why do we experience hatred, or physical harm or intractable dilemma's? And everyone who lives, lives with death. The ultimate mystery, the ultimate darkness toward which we all stumble.

I know it is not wise, but I often wish I could be better, or smarter, or more able to make a positive difference in this world. I am so ordinary. I feel so hamstrung by my weaknesses and faults. I know of course, that the Tao also says that all comparisons are wasted energy. But nevertheless...yet, as my mom told me years ago, the deal with life is that you end up dragging who you are through it. So, I wake up each day, and do my best, knowing that one lifetime is not enough to get it right, but striving, as Ecclesiastes reminds me, that this is it – the only life I have and the only one I ever will have, and though I will never understand it fully, I can at least live it fully, embrace it all, the best and the worst and everything in between, and know and believe in my heart that that is blessing enough. And indeed, it is.

Thank you for allowing me to share with you this morning. I doubt I offered much, but I brought the only thing I have – myself – and it is a blessing to share that with you this morning.