

“Between the Quick and the Dead”

Sunday, October 30, 2005

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Fountain Street Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

“Between the Quick and the Dead”

READING

A tale from the days of the early Hasidim, retold by Elie Wiesel, and retold here again.

In the days of the Baal Shem Tov (often called by the contraction Besht), whenever Israel was threatened by calamity, the Besht would go to a certain place in the forest, build a special fire and utter a special prayer. And the Holy One would deliver Israel from disaster.

After the Besht died, calamity again threatened Israel. But the disciple of the Besht did not know where to go in the forest. So he went out into the forest and built the fire and said the prayer. And it was enough.

After this rabbi died, again disaster loomed. But this time, the rabbi did not even know how to build the fire, so he went into the forest and said the special prayer and again it was enough.

Years later when another catastrophe approached, the rabbi knew that there once was a place in the forest and a special fire had been built. He even knew that a special prayer was said, but he did not know how to do any of these things. So he stood alone and prayed to the Holy One saying, "Israel is in danger and I do not know what to do. But you do." And it was enough.

A Reading from Jorge Carrera Andrade (trans. Muna Lee)

*I shall lose my earthly dwelling place
and find myself once more mother-naked
The stars, the fishes,
will climb again the courses of their inverted skies.
All that is color, bird or name,
will become once more a scant fistful of night,
and over the spoil of cyphers and feathers
and love's body, compounded of fruit and of music,
we fall at last, like dream or shadow,
the unremembering dust.*

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RESPONSIVE READING

ONE: In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.

ALL: In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember them.

ONE: In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember them.

ALL: In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer, we remember them.

ONE: In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn, we remember them.

ALL: In the beginning of the year and when it ends, we remember them.
 ONE: When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember them.
 ALL: When we are lost and sick at heart, we remember them.
 ONE: When we have joys we yearn to share, we remember them.
 ALL: So long as we live, they too shall live, for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.

from Roland B. Gittelsohn (adapted)

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SERMON

I think it was a fall day, crisp to the skin and the eye. I was very young, because I was sitting in the back seat, when we passed a cemetery that was unusual to the eye somehow. The large headstones sent a shock through me because I realized at that tender age that this was my ultimate destination.

Years later, in the ragged burial grounds of Massachusetts where I first worked, I realized I was not unique in my feeling, for more than a few old slate stones carried this fragment of doggerel prophecy:

*Reader note as you pass by
 As you are now so once was I
 As I am now so you shall be
 Prepare for death and follow me.*

My colleague Forrest Church noted that religion is the human response to the dual facts of being alive and having to die. Simple facts they are and yet they occasion the most profound of questions. What is life, what is death, what do they mean, what do I mean? Tough questions that we rarely face directly, until we have to. And nothing forces us face them more than the presence of dead. Whether or not their graves literally speak those rough rhymes as they do in New England, they force us to think them.



Since the questions posed by the dead are universal, the responses are sometimes similar. I became acquainted with this fact in college when I had to read a wonderful 19th work called *The Ancient City*, by Fustel de Coulanges.¹ I was thunderstruck when I read it. He described the ancient religions of the Mediterranean as emerging from a cult of ancestor worship. Each family had a household altar in which a fire was always burning. This invoked and represented the *lares*, the spirits of the ancestors, who hovered about to protect the living. The family tomb was an equally venerated place, to which the family would repair from time to time to make offerings. Each person looked forward to the time when they would join the ancestors and become one of the *lares*.

I was thunderstruck because this was so similar to what existed in east Asia, notably Japan, and also China and Korea. And yet there was no evidence of connection. While not universal, ancestor worship turns up regularly in history and culture. The details vary and subsequent developments change it, but the pattern is quite common.

In seminary this kind of study is called the History of Religions, which seeks to find a universal grammar of religion. I use the phrase "universal grammar"

quite deliberately. A few years ago I read about an accidental experiment in Nicaragua where deaf children were grouped together and began to form their own sign language. This language is unaffected by Spanish in structure and use, but it follows the rules of linguistic development posited by linguistic scholars, notably Noam Chomsky. He and those like him assert that our brains are designed to create language. Far from being a secondary tool of the mind, it is the way the human mind works. As the author of the article then put it, we are hard-wired for language.

That phrase "hard-wired" also turns up in recent writings about the religion and the human mind. One of them says we are "hard-wired" for God, meaning that to be human is to be religious. Religious scholars have been saying this for years and I take a little umbrage that no one noticed until a biologist said it. But who cares so long as we get the idea out. Anyway, language and religion seem to be built into our brains. But what has this to do with "being alive and having to die?" Well, at the risk of arrogance, I can explain both the principle behind our "hard-wired" brains and the riddle of life and death. And I will do it in less than 10 minutes. I can do it in less than ten seconds. I can do it in one word.

Relationship. As a famous story goes, an arrogant Roman tried to mock Rabbi Hillel by demanding he stand on one foot and recite the whole Torah. The sage stood there on his foot and said, "Do not to another what is hateful to you. That is the whole Torah. Now, go and study."² Relationship is the whole truth, now let's go and study.



Brain science is making huge strides, and it all seems to confirm that our brains are a giant network. This network is only potential at birth, with only a basic input and output system in place, (BIOS for you computer junkies). Each experience stimulates cells which literally create electric charges that go from one cell to another. Repeated experiences create pathways or strands. Over time we form patterns of pathways, connections between cells that, by use and reuse, organize our sensations into expectations, turn anticipations into to imaginations, and so on. Our conscious minds are a network of intercellular relationships, which is created from our relationships to the world outside.

Language is the human relating thing. The deaf children of Nicaragua had no language as individuals. Not until they met and had to find ways to communicate, did they create this new language. Alone they each simply had signs and gestures, but together they formed a language to communicate with each other. But as we also know, the language between people also connects us to their own minds more deeply.

It is by relating to things outside ourselves that we create the world inside ourselves. The inner life that is personality, character, values, memories, and so on, is only possible by interacting with the outer world, especially other people. Relationship is vital to personhood.

We should not be surprised, then, when we take our need to relate beyond the limits of empirical sense.

Who has a pet? Does the pet have a name? Why? Not be-

***Relationship
is the whole
truth, now
let's go and
study.***

¹ La Cite Antique (1864).

² For more information, go to: www.Wikipedia.com

cause of the pet, certainly, but because of you.

We cannot connect except that we relate, and we cannot relate except as persons. And what is religion but a desire to relate with the whole self to being, itself? The history of all religions is the story of people trying to relate fully to the universe.

If this is true, and I believe it is, then there must be some relationship between the living and the dead. Whether they have one with us is beyond empirical proof, but there is no doubt that we have one with them. We literally live among their bones, from the cemeteries around us, to the books we read, the buildings we inhabit, and the language we speak. Relating to the dead is thus not just primitive superstition but warp and woof of our daily life. Only most of the time we don't notice, until we pass a graveyard, go to a funeral, or are in some way reminded of the fact.

It is by relating to things outside ourselves that we create the world inside ourselves.

And that brings me back to the place where I began. The dead, our kind who have ceased to live, take us to the edge of the universe. We know that they are no more, and yet we also know that they truly were. We also know that we shall spend all but an eyeblink of eternity in that company. Hardly prisoners of the past, the dead are harbingers of the universal future.

They are our ancestors. What could be more sensible than to revere them as quasi-gods? Though our rational minds tell us there are no ghosts or *lares* lurking about, we know that their lives are still in effect.

We of Anglo-Saxon descent have among the most tenuous of relationships to the dead. Whether deemed unseemly or morbid, backward or superstitious, our Protestant religious culture has made a point of keeping the dead quiet and out of sight. After all, they're dead, and we are about life.

We don't hold funerals much. We prefer to call them memorial services, even celebrations of life. In our eagerness to purge religion of superstition we may have removed more than necessary, in this case the ancient longing to revere our ancestors.

Not so in Mexico this weekend. *El Dia de los Muertos* is a pre-Colombian practice which merged with the Roman Catholic holiday of All Saints. Celebrated in a variety of ways, the common elements are a household altar, the *ofrenda*, where ritual objects are assembled to welcome the annual visit of the dead, and the cleaning and dressing of family graves.³

A dear old woman I know grew up in Mexico, and she remembers that El Dia "was never a fun event," although in other regions there is a festive quality. She remembers observing it on the evening of November 1st, but some place observe for days. She remembers what is virtually identical in all Mexico: the table with a candle, incense, water, food favored by the deceased in life, flowers, and a memento such as a photograph. It was believed that on *El Dia* the dead revisited their homes, and those who welcomed them would enjoy blessings through the year, while those that didn't would suffer ill fortune.

We literally live among their bones

Like all rituals, there are those who believe in them firmly and those who find them foolish. I prefer to approach them as poetry, with many meanings ranging from the nonsensical to the profound. Whenever we approach rituals, our own or those of other faiths and cultures, we should listen for the poetry.

It is the poetry of death I leave with you, or more accurately, the poetry of the dead. Those who formed us and shaped us, though dead, are still present in our sinews. We see it in the faded picture, in the nose or eyes we now possess. We pause and realize that a certain day or hour, even a lifetime, is forgotten except in

memory. We alone have the sound of a voice, a gesture, a scent or a touch. These are the poems they leave, whose meanings are myriad and hard to share.

The dead give us more than we can fathom. In each of us is all that went before. We carry more than we ever knew and forget more than we realize. But it's there, and like the rabbi who had forgotten the place and the fire and prayer, we may think it is of no use even to try. But it is. For someday it will pass from us to others. And whatever memory they have will be their only hope. In the end, the future depends on the dead. And our deaths will be good if we can bestow on those who follow us the blessings we received from those who went before us. And so we pause this day in their honor, the ancestors, the gods of our hearth and hearts.



³ Carmichael, Elizabeth. Sayer, Chloe. *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*. Great Britain: The Bath Press, 1991.

