

Life before and after the comma

Thirty years ago this year, I was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church. Just about every week during that time I have delivered a sermon. Weekly sermons, homilies, *divrei torah*, *dharma* talks, and so on are common in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and other faiths. But I have had the opportunity to address this congregation only at five-year intervals. I am grateful to my friend and colleague the Rev. Joy Fallon for sharing the pulpit, and believe me, I tried to talk her into preaching today. But she is better at twisting arms than I am!

A young Jewish boy took his best friend, a Baptist, to synagogue with him one weekend. To the best of his ability, he explained to his Baptist buddy what was happening in the service: why the rabbi said prayers in Hebrew, the sacredness of the Torah scrolls as they were removed from the ark, and so on. The following weekend the Baptist kid returned the favor and took his Jewish friend to his Baptist church. He explained what was happening in the service: why the deacons passed the offering plates and presented them at the altar,

and so on. When it came time for the sermon, the pastor slowly and ostentatiously took off his expensive watch and placed it on the pulpit. The young Jewish boy said to his friend, “What does that mean?” His Baptist buddy said, “That doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

What is it that draws us back to Harvard every five years? We spend only four years or so in this place. What power does it hold over us? It is partly, I think, because those four years are so significant. They are the years in which we make the transition from child to adult, from freedom to responsibility. But I think it is also because Harvard gives us the opportunity to be a part of something larger than ourselves.

Poet Archibald MacLeish, who taught at Harvard from 1949 to 1962, said, “It is only at our life’s end, when our generation in this place begins to ravel out and vanish, that we really come to understand the greatness of the university. When we were students here we are lost in a daydream in which we saw the university as the possession of the living. . . . Not until one’s own generation comes to its last few

survivors, not until the generations of the dead include our own contemporaries, do we see what Harvard is and who has made it what it is – that long succession of the ... dead who bear the living on their shoulders . . . It is they who thrust the living forward like the breaking of a wave that never breaks but lifts and runs and reaches.” (William Bentinck Smith, ed., *The Harvard Book* (Harvard University Press, 1982) p. 19. Slightly altered.)

In my church during the service of holy communion we proclaim that “angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven” join their praises with ours. So it is here today in this place. What we do here is also a kind of sacrament. As we read out the names of our departed classmates, they are one with us and we with them. Today, we are on one side of the great divide and they on the other. But one day we will join them on the other side. Until then, however, it is our duty to say their names and remember them.

If you like I have joined Medicare and AARP, have noticed that your step is a bit slower and it is easier to forget names, then you, too, may have come to the realization that not all the botox, skin peels, knee

and hip replacements, nor any of the other products and procedures guaranteed to restore youth or slow aging will long hide or delay the fact that “earth’s joys grow dim; its glories pass away. Change and decay in all around I see...” Or to borrow a song from that OTHER university: “we will pass and be forgotten like the rest.”

In the brief comments about our classmates whom we remember today, I was moved to read about a mother and health care consultant who was described as “exceptionally loving, kind, witty, and intelligent... the best spouse, mother, and friend imaginable. She will be remembered for her grace, humor, and selfless generosity.” Or another classmate who was passionate about Huichol culture and “enjoyed fishing and made apple cider and maple syrup” and taught “genetic engineering and American jazz at the local high school.” Or Matthew Freedman whom I remember from freshman year when we both served on a committee to raise awareness of world hunger. I find it wonderful that he dealt with his final illness by making “a graphic journal of his chemotherapy and radiation treatment regimen.”

The rest of our deceased friends –husbands, wives, partners, fathers... mothers, sisters, brothers... their passing leaves an emptiness and grief that, in time, will become less painful but will never completely heal.

This memorial service invites us to pause, think, perhaps meditate or pray or at least slow down in the midst this weekend. Without this pause, this comma, if you will, we would rush through our reunion and not remember the classmates who have gone before us. More importantly, we might not stop to think that one day our names, too, will be read out at this service.

Punctuation is as important in life as it is in the written word. We all enjoy the exclamation marks: the weddings, the births of children, the achievements: partnership in the firm or tenure, making it to the top of the mountain (either literal or metaphorical). And we all endure the question marks: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the end of a marriage or love not returned. But I think that commas are the most important punctuation marks in life. They invite us to slow down, pay attention, look around, and perhaps re-orient ourselves.

So, think of this reunion as a comma, and do not rush to the period, that comes at the end of this weekend... or of life.

In the play *Wit*, an elderly English professor underscores the importance of punctuation when she criticizes her student, for having used a poorly edited version of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* as the basis for an essay. "The last line," she says, "should read, 'Death' comma 'thou shalt die.' Only a comma separates life and life everlasting."

On this day we may be wondering if the professor was correct. Is death a comma or a period? And if it is a comma, what comes after? Surely religion has the answer, because religion is mostly concerned with what happens after the comma, with "life everlasting" rather than life in this world, right?

Well, I don't think so. In my opinion, it is a mistake to believe that religion is more concerned with what happens after the comma than with what happens before it, with life in the next world than with life in this world.

We do well to remember and honor our classmates who have gone before us, who await us at the final reunion of the Class of 1978. But we do better to honor them by living our lives fully and energetically, by being as engaged in this world as possible.

These reunions give us a chance to remember and reflect about who we were forty-five years ago, about who and what we hoped we might become and perhaps, even who we still might be. In reading our Forty-fifth Class Report I was struck frequently by the number of you who have already experienced life after death. I mean, how many of you have found that life goes on after the death of a parent, a spouse, or even a child; how many of you found new love after divorce; or a new and more meaningful career after retirement, and how often the new career involved giving your time, energy, and financial resources to helping the hungry and homeless or seeking solutions to the global environmental crisis.

My religion has a name for the new life that begins when the old one has died: we call it resurrection. Resurrection can happen any time.

The only prerequisite is that first we must die. The death may be literal or it may be one of the thousand ways that we die throughout our lives.

Perhaps we would fear death less if we made its acquaintance, if we realized that it visits us not once but many times, and that it is death that makes life infinitely precious. It is the very shortness and finitude of life that makes us cherish it and find it meaningful. Treasure every moment with the people you love because we are given such a small handful of them. Take full advantage of this reunion, this comma in life's narrative. Laugh and perhaps even cry with old friends or make new ones.

So, is death a comma rather than a period? Does only a comma separate life from life everlasting? That is a question we must each answer for ourselves. But I want to suggest that you will find the answer (or that the question becomes irrelevant) if you follow poet Wendell Berry's advice and begin right now to "practice resurrection:"

Every day do something

that won't compute. Love God.

Love the world. Work for nothing.

Take all that you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it....

Ask the questions that have no answers.

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

...

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.

Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful

though you have considered all the facts.

...

In one of his parables, Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard points out that a student is allotted only so much time to complete an exam and whether she uses every minute of the test period or just a small fraction of the time, it makes no difference as long as she is finished before the time expires. But what if life itself is the test? If that is the case, then it would be tragic indeed to be finished with life before life is finished with us.

But life is not finished with any of us. Whether you believe that only a comma separates life from life everlasting or that death is (as the British say) a “full stop”, we have all the time we need to lead a full and meaningful life. And our friends and classmates who have gone before us would surely expect us to do no less than to take up the tasks they left behind, to complete our own unfinished business, and to be joyful even though we have considered all the facts.