

# “The Right and Silver Sadness”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

On November 13, 2005

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

Sometimes people cry at funerals and memorial services, as well as at committals and wakes. Surely this is the least surprising observation I will make in this church year, maybe in my whole ministry.

Actually, the way we do them here, memorial services are usually times of remembrance, celebration, and happiness, and often people laugh, or at least experience an inner grin at recalling how wonderful or singular the person was in this way or that. But they are also often times for tears, sad times, times of parting, times of loss.

At a memorial service here just a few years ago we sang a lovely, touching song from the hymnal, one that sometimes brings a tear or two even on a Sunday morning. And on that day, there were tears aplenty, as people really got in touch with the sadness of their loss, not having this person in their lives any more. One wonders, too, if part of the sadness isn't being in the immediate presence of human mortality and the fact that all of us and all whom we love will in time die, too, just as so many others have before, others who may have been brought back to mind by the occasion and the words and the music and the setting.

As I was aware of the sadness in the room made manifest by the tears that accompanied the singing of the song, an odd phrase came to mind, “the right kind of sadness.”

Without any outside help, I can think of reasons to beware of this idea. I don't want to be confused with folks who think that suffering is a blessing, and we should be grateful for chances to be sad. And I know the dubious implication of the idea of a “right kind of sadness” is that there are wrong kinds of sadness, and maybe better kinds of sadness and even a best kind, and who am I to rank anyone's emotions? Aren't we supposed to affirm people's emotions in all their multiplicity without passing judgment?

Well, I guess. Certainly in some settings. If you come to tell me that you're feeling sad about whatever it is, I promise, I will never say, oh, pshaw, that's nothing to be sad about.

But I know in me there are sadnesses sometimes that don't do me much good, ones that I wouldn't mind putting into proper perspective, so if I'm sad it's about something worth the emotion.

There are enough of those things around much of the time. “Sufficient unto the day are the problems thereof,” said Jesus, and that's probably true of sadness, too – not because life is picking on us, but because life is – among its other characteristics – sad.

One could go even farther. You may know that Freud said that “The best psychoanalysis can do is to return the patient to the more normal level of human misery.” Life has its joys and delights, its satisfactions and blessings – I'm just getting warmed up for next week's Thanksgiving Sunday service – but no one can avoid failure, disappointment, losses, and all that makes for sadness, some of it matters of significant size, like a death that brings the family and community together where they can feel held by each other's company and the familiar words of comfort and consolation, by the music and the peace of this place, where they can experience a right kind of sadness, a sadness about something of true moment, a sadness in a safe place.

Which can happen here or home or elsewhere. There is a rather long reading that

could fit into a variety of sermons by its ending fits right into this one. It was written by my colleague, now retired, Clarke Dewey Wells:

“My brother MacKenzie Wells died Thanksgiving night in Kalamazoo, Michigan, at 41, a victim of phlebitis and a fierce independence (and paranoia) which kept him from getting any help for his inflamed left leg. Maybe he wanted to go, it was suggested. Life had been difficult for him. A strong and powerful athlete, he was permanently benched his last two years in high school by an injured knee; a skilled engraver, he had long since been made technologically obsolete by advances in his printing trade; his grades were bad, his luck was bad, his social life didn't work out. He grew sullen, unattractive, easy to dislike. He spent a lot of time alone, or drinking, or in the mental hospital at Kalamazoo. As one of his buddies put it, Mac was frustrated.

“The words weren't said at the funeral, but going through my head were Hart Crane's lines from ‘The Broken Tower’:

And so it was I entered the broken world  
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice  
And instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)  
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.

“But there are, as in any death I suppose, retrievments out of the night. (The phrase is Whitman's.) My brother's wife of the last six years whom he had met in the hospital told me they drove to Mackinac Island last summer, that he enjoyed walking on the beach there, that he said it was peaceful; that in their tiny house he liked to tinker and fix things; that when he was working and not drinking he was very kind to her, and that Mac had made her life happy because ‘he needed me and no one else did.’

“As I heard her another recall was inevitable, from Steven Crane this time:

There was a man with a tongue of wood  
Who essayed to sing,  
And in truth it was lamentable.  
But there was one who heard  
The clip-clapper of this tongue of wood  
And knew what the man  
Wished to sing,  
And with that the singer was content.

“I thanked his widow, and in the cold Michigan winter wind my brother-in-law and nephew and I and others carried across Hillside Cemetery in a gun-metal casket my brother's body to his grave. A Methodist minister read scripture. My father's headstone (Edgar Dewey Wells, 1950) was at my feet. I stood behind my sister and mother, seated, and put my left hand on my sister's shoulder and my right hand on my mother's shoulder. “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.... Here we have no continuing city,” we seek one to come.’ I do not believe in the resurrection but I think it is a magnificent idea.

“Flying back to Boston I thought myself not particularly affected by my brother's death. Though only a year and a half' separate us we were never close in interests or regard and I hadn't seen him in many years. So I [was grateful to] the members of [the] congregation for giving me the opportunity to talk about him [on] Sunday morning. And along with [their] ministry, that on Friday of Beethoven and the Boston Symphony, to weep straight thru the Missa Solemnis.”

That is a right kind of sadness.

In his novel *The Collector*, John Fowles writes of “The sense that everything must

end, the music, ourselves, the moon, everything. That if you get to the heart of things you find a sadness forever and ever, everywhere; but a beautiful silver sadness....” There is also, I believe, a gladness at the heart of things forever and ever. But there is that beautiful silver sadness, an inescapable part of being in love with each other and life.

At far remove is the “pervasive sorrow in our modern society” that the author Jack Kornfeld ascribes to our addictions, “the compulsively repetitive attachments we use to avoid feeling and to deny the difficulties in our lives.” For instance:

“One of our most pervasive addictions is to speed. Technological society pushes us to increase the pace of our productivity and the pace of our lives. Panasonic recently introduced a new VHS tape recorder that was advertised as playing voice tapes at double the normal speed while lowering the tone to the normal speaking range. ‘Thus,’ the advertiser said, ‘you can listen to one of the great speeches by Winston Churchill or President Kennedy or a literary classic in half the time!’ I wonder if they would recommend double-speed tapes for Mozart and Beethoven as well. Woody Allen commented on this obsession, saying he took a course in speed reading and was able to read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. ‘It’s about Russia,’ he concluded.

“In a society that almost demands life at double time, speed and addictions numb us to our own experience. In such a society it is almost impossible to settle into our bodies or stay connected with our hearts, let alone connect with one another or the earth where we live. Instead, we find ourselves increasingly isolated and lonely, cut off from one another and the natural web of life. One person in a car, big houses, cellular phones, Walkman radios clamped to our ears, and a deep loneliness and sense of inner poverty. That is the most pervasive sorrow in our modern society.” [*A Path with Heart*]

Well, let’s hope that isn’t any of us – though one does recall the conclusion in the book, *A Geography of Time* by social psychologist Robert Levine, that “Boston, not New York, is America’s fastest city.”

But we can hope that even so, we manage to stay connected with one another and the natural web of life, so our sorrow is over the things in life that truly are sad, and some things are. That is the way of it – life involves illness, loss, conflict, estrangement.

You may know that the 14<sup>th</sup> Century reclusive nun and mystic Julian of Norwich said, “All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.” I think those words are just lovely ... and nonsense. I apologize to those of you who have the saying in needlepoint or calligraphy. I know it is of solace to many. But I don’t think they are true. I think life is grand ... and tragic. Some things are not well and never will be. That is the cost of living, that there come good causes for sadness. It comes with being alive and human. It’s not that we desire to be sad, but there are times when it’s called for.

Such ruminations on mortality arise easily this time of year, amid the many early November holidays that deal with the dead, and as the last leaves fall. In such a season, David Bumbaugh wrote:

“In autumn, I am reminded that while great nature moves in ever-repeating cycles of endless return, individuals -- plants, animals, human beings, even the stars -- move from beginning to end, from promise to fulfillment, from birth to death. The leaves flutter down from the trees, clothing the earth with transient, spectacular beauty. The air fills with the melancholy music of crickets singing the approach of winter and the hum of hurrying bees collecting the gift of late-season pollen from the brief glory of the autumn flowers. Autumn rains fall from leaden skies stripping leaves from the trees and leaving asters dark and colorless, like the sad cinders of burned-out stars. I see all of this and am

saddened by the great truth that nature in its endless cycles sweeps all of us away, to make room for a new time of growth and promise and fulfillment.”

Bumbaugh himself found comfort that “even in my sadness I know, with a deep knowledge which is strangely healing, that this moment of fulfillment, of spectacular beauty, of transient glory is, somehow, central to our purpose, our reason for being, our high destiny; that in our dying we return from the finitude of our linear lives to the infinity of nature's cycles, that even as we are born and die, we remain forever part of this great process -- we were part of the process before we were born and will be after we have died -- eternally part of the coming and going, the beauty and glory which is autumn -- that we are embedded in the implicative purpose and design of an undefinable whole.”

Maybe so, maybe not. But the endless cycles, they shall sweep us all away, as surely as this year's oak leaves are falling. And even those of us who end up mostly having “missed the drought, overcome the weeds, and survived the bugs [to get] home safe enough” [from the reading by Max Coots, “Gratitude for the Garden”] took some damage along the way, and knew others who did we cared about a lot.

What makes the silver of that sadness shine is that we experience it together, gather when the sadness is especially abundant, and know it in our hearts in the times in between, know the sadness at the heart of things, forever and ever, along with the joy, know that far from all manner of things will be well, but that this sadness we share is natural, unavoidable, and right. May that knowledge and that sharing bring us comfort and strength. Amen.