

Fragile Nets of Meaning

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It was one of those perfect late summer mornings...
deep blue sky...the sun shining brilliantly... the air still sweet with morning dew...
and there I am...looking my best...
in neatly pressed shirt and pants...hair just so...
on my way to my first day of CPE (or clinical pastoral education).
I'm excited...and a little anxious.
The hospital where I'll be working is about forty-five minutes from my house so I
give myself a little extra time allowing for heavy traffic.
But on this morning...this perfect morning the roads are clear of congestion and I
arrive with some time to spare.
I park my car...sit back for moment and breathe...
I'm feeling pretty good...even confident.
I get out of the car and make my way to the rear passenger door to fetch my
sports jacket and then it happens...
the automatic sprinkler system hidden in the grass next to where I've parked
turns on...
in an instant the front of my beige, neatly pressed dress pants are completely
soaked waist to knees.
That confidence I had just a moment ago...gone...
that time to spare I had arrived with...gone...
perfect morning?... ha!

"We look for things to stay the same," Ysaye Barnwell reminds us, "but in the twinkling of an eye (or in my case the tinkling of a sprinkler), everything can be changed."

Life is filled with uncertainty... no one...not one of us... knows for certain what each day will bring. Indeed, the only thing we do know, is, as the ancient philosopher Heraclitus observed, "change alone is unchanging." It's kind of scary when you think about it.

That life is uncertain is one reason people look to religion, religious scriptures, and the writings of great people across traditions and cultures, including the Jewish teacher and philosopher Nachman of Bratslav, who, writing about

uncertainty called this world, “is a very narrow bridge.” Adding, “the essential thing is not to be afraid... at all.”

So, there we have it. Life is uncertain...but above all, don't be afraid.

Wow!

That's not helpful at all.

Or at least that's what I recall thinking when I first read these words. I wanted something more....something I could understand...something I could grasp...or cling to. But that's the point, isn't it...there is nothing to cling to...nothing to keep uncertainty at bay. The Buddha realized this sitting under the bodhi tree... and the non-dogmatic strains of other religions teach us the same. So, if uncertainty is inevitable, how is it...or is it even possible to not be afraid, at all?

Let's talk about walking a tightrope. After all there's nothing quite like a story about crossing a tightrope over a deep chasm to put a lid on fear and uncertainty.

The story of the tightrope...our reading this morning... is kind of a strange story. We've got a group of students...a Rabbi walks in and the students ask the Rabbi how to serve God. The good Rabbi taken aback by the question and says, “How should I know?” but then decides to tell them a story. A story about a couple of friends, accused of some crime before a king who loves them but apparently cannot acquit them because the law is the law. Then the king offers a strange verdict in which the friend's lives will be spared if they can safely cross a tightrope stretched across a deep chasm.

According to the story, the first friend makes it across and so the second friend, hoping to do the same, calls out saying, “Hey...tell me how you did that... how'd you get across?” The first friend answers, “I don't know anything except this: whenever I felt myself toppling over to one side, I leaned to the other.”

At first this answer sounds like pretty common sense advice...pay attention, seek balance...no real surprises or especially helpful hints here. Now, I've read and reflected on this story many times. It is one of those multi-layered wisdom stories, which probably accounts for why it is still told today. And what I have found as I've reflected on this story more and more, is that I've become less and less concerned with the specifics of precisely how the first friend crossed and more interested in the ways this story begins to look and sound familiar and relevant to my life and experience and that of the people to whom I minister and talk with every day, especially that admission, “I don't know....”

Listen again to the whole answer the first friend offers when asked how they made it across the tightrope, “I don’t know anything except this: whenever I felt myself toppling over to one side, I leaned to the other.”

This is not a “how to” answer...the specifics do not offer some set of fool-proof instructions for life and its uncertainty. Rather, it is a more subtle and honest response: “I don’t know how I made it... but here’s my story.”

All of us have stood at the edge of that chasm...surprised or caught off guard...frightened even, by life’s uncertainty... an unexpected diagnosis or death... a rejection letter from a school, a failed business venture...or wounded relationship... a tense church year... and yes, even soaked pants on the first day of a new job...we’ve stood there and wondered how we’re going to make it through, how we’re going to manage walking our tightrope without plunging into the chasm of cynicism, rage, or despair.

We’ve also stood at the other side of the chasm, and having just crossed our tightrope, looked back and wondered, how’d I do that?

And if we listen, we begin to hear a voice or many voices, of friends, a loved one, God, or even our own voice sharing a story about difficult times, about not knowing, stories about tightropes and crossing chasms.

We all face uncertainty in our lives...no one..not one of us is immune. Indeed in the story of the tightrope, even Rabbi Israel when asked “how one is to serve God?” offers, as his very first response, “How should I know?” Now he could have faked it or dismissed the student’s question and said something like, follow the rules in Leviticus and Deuteronomy... or observe the Ten Commandments. But no. Rabbi Israel is a wise and humble man...a man of integrity. For him God is mystery...life is mystery and mystery cannot be addressed or served, for that matter, with easy answers, and so he admits to not having a definitive answer to the question and instead offers what he does have...a story, a story about not knowing, yes a story about paying attention and seeking balance... but also about love and friendship and the sharing of experiences.

“Stories,” writes Rabbi Howard Cooper, “are our human attempt to address the mysteries of life through image and metaphor, through art. In the absence of certainty, our stories, says Cooper, serve as “fragile nets of meaning to catch us as we fall.”

On a perfect late summer morning I stood in the parking lot of a hospital with soaked pants. I can tell you that I dried my pants by getting back in the car and turning the heat up full blast, my back arched against the seat to get as close to the vent as possible...but those details, as comical as they may be, aren't especially important. What is important is that by the time I made it inside to meet my new colleagues, I was late, I was all sweaty, my pants were still a little damp and really all I wanted to do was go home and yet... in that moment... I took a deep breath, stepped out onto the tightrope and slowly crossed to the other side.

I don't know exactly how I made it across, but this is my story:

I introduced myself to my colleagues and told them what had happened. Laughter filled the room...and moments later people were sharing stories of their own embarrassing moments and of times when things didn't go as expected. There were laughs...and there were tears and as we laughed and cried together our individual stories began to overlap...sewn together by threads of shared experience and emotion.

In that moment and throughout our year together, we created for one another fragile nets of meaning...stories of not knowing and of surviving...stories that supported us through some of our most challenging days at the hospital and stories that could help us better listen, empathize, and respond to the people we served.

I can't claim all of this would not have happened through some other means, but somehow that perfect morning gone awry brought me into relationship with others on that day in a way a perfectly predictable day couldn't have.

And this gets at the heart, I think, of Nachman of Bratslav's saying, "The whole world is a very narrow bridge, but the essential thing is not to be afraid, at all." I still don't know if no fear, at all, is possible or... even wise. But I do know this: uncertainty, scary as it might be, has its gifts, blessings we might otherwise miss if we're consumed by fear. True, few of us would ask to face the most difficult moments of uncertainty in our lives if given the chance to avoid doing so, but if we're able to face uncertainty with a little more acceptance and a little less fear, then, in that moment of not knowing we stand a better chance of allowing life to emerge anew...in the stories of our lives.

One of the most memorable prayers I've ever heard was offered by a colleague in seminary. In her prayer, she asked to be surprised in life. Her prayer speaks beautifully and boldly to the power of accepting and living more comfortably with uncertainty. Something we saw the witch, her cat and their companions live into

together in Room on the Broom, our story for all ages as they faced multiple winds of change: storms, a broken broom, and a menacing dragon.

None of us know for sure how this day or the next will end. In any given moment we may find ourselves as individuals, friends, family, or a community standing at either end of a chasm...staring across a gaping hole dividing what is from what we want or need...wondering on one end how we'll ever make it across or on the other amazed we made it across.

In our lifetimes we will face and cross chasms innumerable times. And so, whether we're about to cross or have made it to the other side, may our preparation for and recollection of the journey begin the same way: with an admission of not always knowing...of being unsure...of accepting uncertainty. And from that place of not knowing, may we be ready to give and receive, listen to and hear each other's stories, those fragile nets of meaning to catch us as we fall.

Amen and Blessed Be