

Memories
Sermon by Dr. Jim Nelson
May 24, 2009

He was born sometime around 1905 in Pasadena, CA, long before Los Angeles was a sprawling metropolis. He grew up a Universalist, at Throop Memorial Church, and as a teenager used to build cars out of used car parts with his friends, and drive down to Newport Beach to hang out. It was mostly open space then; Newport was a cluster of beach shacks and homes. People from LA would go down there in the summer to escape the heat of the city.

His Dad was in construction and had been a bridge builder for the Southern Pacific Railroad. If you have ever been in the Hotel Coronado in San Diego, his father built the great staircase in the lobby. In the twenties, his Dad built schools in Orange County, and Al's job was to go out in the early morning and shoot doves for breakfast for the construction crews.

Al and Eula married in the early thirties and moved to Newport and began to sail when they could. He built a boat in their backyard, then another. Once he built a concrete boat. During the war he worked in a battery factory and they were both part of a civil defense team which watched the Pacific Coast for enemy ships.

After the war, someone asked him if he would sail his boat from Seattle down to Newport - this person would pay for the trip up to Seattle. Al said he would - he had not been on the northern coast since he worked on a steam logging ship in the late twenties. And so he did. That led to another request, and combined with odd jobs, he made his living sailing other people's boats up and down the west coast.

Twice he sailed to Hawaii; he went through the Panama Canal several times. Al and Eula visited the Galapagos twice in the fifties - before the current tourist and scientific tours began. He sailed Delores del Rio's boat many times - once for her birthday party. He was her favorite skipper. Eula went on most of his trips, but never as crew - she said she would help but not take orders. Al probably knew the western coastline as well as any one ever has.

He and Eula never missed a Sunday at church. Al believed deeply in God and believed that God was love - he grew up a Universalist - and that the only way God could be known was through love, not through thinking. He never quite understood why Unitarians had to think so much and believed it got them into more trouble than out of. He smoked Lucky Strikes, dabbled in stocks, and when Eula died, she left the entire estate to the church. It was a sizable sum. They had no children.

Al died one morning. He and Eula had gotten up after a warm morning in bed, had their coffee and fruit, and Al went to take their newspapers to the recycling center. There, he had a heart attack and died.

Eula called me and I met her at the hospital where they were still trying to revive him. We sat there, holding hands and saying nothing. In a bit the Doctor came out and told Eula they could not revive him and asked whether she wanted to go in and see him. She said 'no' she had seen him alive for 57 years and didn't want to see him dead. I asked her if I should go in and say good-bye. She squeezed my hand and simply said 'Yes.'

He was stretched out on a table, covered to the shoulders with a sheet. He had died not many minutes before. I took his hand - it was cool. And I said 'Good-bye, old friend. Good-bye for me and good-bye for Eula. Take care.' And I hugged him.

I had seen dead bodies before - my Grandmother's, my Dad, a number of patients at St. Es - but I had never touched a dead person, and it was remarkable to me how lifeless Al was. How much it was him and how little it was him. It was clear that life is more than just an organic process - that there is something animating about life, some force, some power, some quality which is not quantifiable and is mysterious.

But - and this is what was most amazing to me - it was also as if light had gone into him. The life was gone, but he was not dark. I will never forget that impression of light. I remembered this last year when Noel Vore died –light went into him, not out of him.

Today we are taking some time to remember how vital that life force is and to give thanks and be grateful for the gift of life - for the life we have and for the life others have shared with us. This is a day to look backwards - to do so so that our gaze forwards might be clearer and better, so that we might bring more light into our lives.

We will create a memorial bouquet in a little bit, but I would like to take a minute of silence first for all of us to remember someone who has died.

Silence

My friend Al lived a good life - though his obituary was small, his heart was large. He made no splash in history but he sure touched some people's lives. His legacy was very local; he had not made the kinds of public contributions others had.

He was kind, engaged; he believed the important things in life were those things close at hand - friends, partners, families, and his church. He was not afraid of adventure and of taking risks; he sought not just to help make the world go round but to urge it forward.

Al had a larger vision of the world - he believed he served some larger good and he believed he could not do it alone. I doubt he was afraid of death - he certainly was not afraid of life. Here I have thought of Tom Yeakle and Noel Vore, Charlie Burkner and Fran Turney, Rei Osaki and Marynette Fauvre. There are so many others – such a great cloud of witnesses worth our remembering.

I have been reading three poems for this sermon, two by Mary Oliver and one by Czeslaw Milosz. The poems by Oliver are titled 'When Death Comes' and 'White Owl Flies into and Out of the Field' and the Milosz poem is 'An Appeal.' Here are some lines from Oliver

When its over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.

I don't want to end up simply having visited the world.

This poem has always struck me as so true - I sure don't want to end up merely having visited the world, or end my life frightened and full of argument. I don't understand those people who look for what is wrong always, or look for what to criticize, to look for injury. I don't get it. But we all know people like that - perhaps you are like that. There is probably some of that in us all. I don't understand why people carry grudges or can't forgive all of the little hurts and disappointments. I don't get it. I would much rather be a bride married to amazement.

This is not meant to be a pollyanna - we all do experience sorrow; we all grieve, and we all will die, and there is a long list of philosophers and artists and theologians who claim that it is because we die that our lives have meaning at all. And one great function of faith is to help us with this fact - that we are alive and we all will die.

In his poem, Milosz meditates on what life means, and, how intractably mysterious life is. He knows sorrow and he knows joy, and the question he asks the reader is whether we can truly feel as though this earth is our true home. He answers his own question by saying 'And yet, I affirm, this is the earth of wonder. It gives us the gift of eternal youth.' Milosz is saying that in spite of sorrow, in spite of tragedy, in spite of sadness and injury, this world is full of wonder, and that keeps us alive - eternally young.

And so I have been thinking this: maybe we are born in darkness and we grow into the light until we become lightness itself. Maybe, when we take care with our living, we are washed with light, that is, we

are freed of the burdens that so often keep us from being free. Perhaps the point of our living is to be alive, to keep life in our minds and not death. Perhaps what this means is that we should always live with gratitude - even when times are dire, perhaps especially when times are dire, to remember that we can be grateful.

Maybe, when we think about those who have died, when the memories are warm and close in our hearts, when the lessons of their lives are real for us - then we are washed in so much light. Maybe this is how our lives are meant to be - a growing toward the light. Perhaps this is a caution for us not to dwell too long in dark places, in the shadows, but to seek the light.

Milozs writes:

In you, as in me, there is a hidden certainty
That soon you will rise, in undiminished light,
And be real, strong, free from what constrained you.

Or, this, by Mary Oliver - from one of my very favorite poems; it's called 'White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field'

maybe death
isn't darkness, after all,
but so much light

Maybe death isn't darkness, after all, but so much light ...

Memorial Day was originally set aside to honor and remember those who had died in service to this country, yet it is well worth remembering all of those who have died - for all of them -- the dead -- have in their way served this country of faith. Anyone -- like my friend Al who stood for freedom and justice, for equality and love -- they can be remembered this day.

In a minute now we will create our memorial bouquet, and I will invite you to come up and place a flower in a vase - if you didn't bring one, there are plenty down here in the front, and as you say the place the flower in the vase, say the name of the person.. Many can do this at one - but speak their name ...

And I will say my father's name. He was a good man, my Dad. He died in 1980, around Christmas time, following a bout of pneumonia. He was 70 years old. He fought in W.W.II; he lost a brother in the Normandy Landing. He landed on Omaha Beach several days later and he would tell us about the bodies stacked up like cordwood. He met Ike. He was president of every church we attended. He was a very handsome man. His favorite musician was Lawrence Welk. He had a wonderful sense of humor; he loved my Mom so much, and us kids, too. I never saw him angry and he was as gentle a man as I have ever known. I am proud to be his son.

And he is now, undiminished light, real, strong and free, nothing but light ...