

“Silken Ties of Love”

A Sermon by

Rev. Doug Inhofe

Unitarian Congregation of Taos

Taos, New Mexico

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Opening words: “A Noiseless Patient Spider”, a poem by Walt Whitman—a piece that betokens the strangeness of the human condition: our being conscious of our own mortality

Readings: a piece by Nietzsche, from the front of Walker Percy’s *Lost in the Cosmos*, and the lyrics from Darby and Jerry and Grace Slick’s “Somebody to Love”, the Jefferson Airplane 1967

Close of sermon: “The Silken Tent”, a poem by Robert Frost

Music: Prelude, Martha Grossman, *Liebesträume*, “Dreams of Love”, Franz Liszt

Special Music, “You and Me” and “We’re Still Young”, Jackson Price, vocals and guitar

Postlude, Martha Grossman, *Kettletoft Pier*, Maxwell Davies

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Part I.

Trying to understand ourselves, like Walt Whitman’s noiseless patient spider,” we try often to catch hold of something . . . call it a feeling . . . and then, if we’re lucky, to sense in it what it’s like to *be alive, in this skin, in this moment*, and then we try to describe it before, like the dream we’ve just left, the feeling vanishes and we’re now back to the start, fully awake.

Burning the midnight oil, fully awake, writing this sermon, I was hoping to find a more direct way to dissect the human condition, to get where poetry takes us emotively but to do it more . . . what? more intellectually? . . . or, at any rate, to do it *differently*, to find a new model to tease out the tenderness and awe that we feel when we reflect on the human condition, to speak of our awareness of our fragility and anxiety and tentativeness . . . of our determination and self-regard and love for others . . . and then, finally, of the wonder and bewilderment flowing from this awareness. The poetic meets the inevitable. The metaphoric meets the physical. Face to face.

The human condition is not tragic, but it is strange . . . strange enough that humanity's surprise might be that there is *anybody* who is *not* clinically depressed. It's not us, it's the condition!

There must surely be a workable way to face it, one where all the parts work together to generate meaning in a kind of positive feedback loop, where we can live moment by moment, immersed in our awareness, our human-ness, and yet also take comfort that we can live lives, moment by moment, that are consciously rewarding to us.

I got into the matter in reading Iris Murdoch, a British philosopher and author whose literary life led to acclaim and awards before her rather public mental decline with Alzheimer's led and her death, in 1999. (There is a movie from a bit later, entitled "Iris.")

Consider this. In her novel, *Nuns and Soldiers*, Gertrude is married to Guy, who in his early 40's is dying of cancer. The book opens with Guy on his death bed, sometimes rambling, sometimes making great sense. After his death, Gertude reconnects with a school friend, Anne,

and together they take a short trip. Here's how Murdoch puts it, when Gertrude returns from the trip to what had been Guy's and her flat, now simply her flat.

“Gertrude looked about her. Putting the key in the door she had felt sick, . . . ready to faint. It was really beginning now, her life without Guy. The rest had been an interlude. She had, with quiet self-regarding prudence, changed the flat a good deal before she left had [on her trip]. She did not want to come back to the exact scene which she had made and lived in with Guy. She did not want that terrible *absence* to spring upon her once again. But what struck her now was how unchanged it all was, and the absence, it was there: that special form of Guy dead which belonged in the flat and now appeared again, claiming its tribute of a grief renewed.”

These are the words Murdoch chose to describe this feeling. Gertrude is the spider venturing on, launching her filament.

Guy's death meets Gertrude's life.

Pitting one against the other lets us sit in the feeling of her grief for as long as Murdoch will stay with it, as long as she'll keep writing the words that tell us how Gertrude feels, what she sees, what's there, what's not. It's a beautifully long look at something that, unlike a dream, does not go away but stays put, on page after page, letting you walk around it and take its measure from all angles.

Grief, seen this way, can be the instantiation, the darkness visible of what we're trying to describe in the first place. To me, it comes close to capturing what it means to be alive. Perhaps its essence is the very present awareness of our love for another, our love for something, regardless of the pain. We would not give up the love to avoid the pain.

Guy's death, Gertrude's life. Iris Murdoch's putting them together, it seems to me, is life affirming.

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Part II.

Now take another step. Take Guy out of Murdoch's equation. Replace it with you, with your death.

Your death, your life.

This model says to us, yes, I know you can't explain why you are here, and, yes, you can't square the wonder of life with the fact that you must die. But imagine this anyway. Imagine that you could reflect—like Gertrude—on your own death. To do this, intellectually, at first, imagine that you had decided, as a response to a personal struggle, to die a suicide, but then you didn't. You are still alive.

We can stand our own life up against our own concept of death.

This is not, I hurry to say, a suggestion to simply summon up some more moxie, some more of the old "win one for the Gipper" positivism.

No, it's different. The juxtaposition of these alternatives can be life affirming. As we ponder the human condition, as we find ourselves using the poet's language to describe the indescribable—words like ineffable or ephemeral or transcendent or mystical—we find it difficult to stay with, to stay in, our pondering. Instead, we opt out. We begin dinner or call a friend or open a book. Having a secure hold on the immeasurable magic of life, this very

moment, and taking sustenance from it, are themselves, well, evanescent events. They come and go.

Evanescent. As you see, it's tough to forsake using poets' words to talk about what's really before us! It's understandable. Our lives are the subject of contingencies beyond our control. Beyond anyone's! Constructs that gave us meaning fall away, our daily routine becomes not enough, suddenly everything is glossed with amazement. Is what I'm doing meaningless now? Is life worth the struggle now? Is this all surreal?

Stepping outside of ourselves, if we can, might work. We can make our own meaning as we go. We can live our lives meaningfully by being conscious of the very difficulties, day by day ("one bird at a time," as a they say), and in doing so gain a sense of unity, of structure, that can be the very meaning we seek. This is the positive feedback loop I mentioned—we become happy about, even proud, *of our awareness* of how we are indeed able to make it up as we go along. We are just like Gertrude, articulating to herself how she feels in that very moment when she returns to her empty flat. Our survival means that we can do it. We do not resent the necessity of having to make it up as we go along—it is the way things are. We're willing to face the future, unknowable as it is, as if it were opportunity incarnate. Even if we're fearful it isn't.

This is not a madcap way, it is a responsible way to be. It means that we are adaptable, innovative, intelligent, appropriately wary of the future, and genuinely happy about the resources we've gleaned from the past. We have prepared for the worst, but we are free . . . to like being alive.

But what if you don't feel that way. There are many examples of people who didn't and who, having thought about it, expressed contrary feelings. Cato, over two thousand years ago,

said that he did not care to live in this deranged world, that it wasn't an honorable way to live, and that he would therefore—as it's translated—“take my leave.” Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, told god that, if he existed, “I respectfully turn in my ticket.”

Once these options are taken seriously, a curious thing happens. *To be or not to be* becomes a real choice, where before you were stuck with *to be*. And thus with your pain. Your choice then was how *to be* least painfully, and, of course, there are many unfortunate answers. Drink, drugs, sex, you name it!

But now, in your pain, you're really serious. If you elect the suicide option, what happens then? Walker Percy, in *Lost in the Cosmos*, wrote about this question, about the “your death, your life” equation as a useful, fundamental model for your own self-awareness. So, what does happen next, if you elect the suicide option. As Percy explains, very little indeed. Regarding others—and I want to be very explicit here . . . all this is intended as an intellectual model, it is definitely not advice to you if you're feeling suicidal this morning—but regarding others, as I was saying, if you elect the suicide option, many are hurt, to be sure, many irreparably. But for you, very little happens indeed.

This is, of course, a purposeful understatement. *Nothing happens*. As Percy tells us, “all that stress and anxiety were for nothing. Some people talk, they're shocked, they miss you for a while, and they resent your departure. . . . In a surprisingly short period of time, everyone is back in the same rut, as if you had never existed.

“Now, instead, consider the alternative. You can elect suicide, but you decide not to. What happens now? Why not live instead of dying? You are free to do so. You are like a prisoner released from the cell of his life. You notice that the door to the cell is ajar and the sun

is shining outside. Why not take a walk down the street? Where you might have been dead, you are alive. The sun is shining. You feel like a castaway on an island. You can't believe your good fortune. You feel for broken bones. You are in one piece, sole survivor of a foundered ship whose captain and crew had worried themselves into a fatal funk. You are taken in by islanders who, it turns out, are worried sick themselves—over what? Over boredom, anxiety, status, depression . . . and here you are, lying on the beach.

“You are free for the first time to consider the folly of the human condition, consider the incredible-perhaps-impossible difficulty of making meaning out of chaos. You are free for the first time to pick up a shell on the beach and look at it. You are even free to go home and, like the man from Chicago, dance with your wife. You have nothing to lose from being alive. You have the option of being dead, but it is good to be alive. You can laugh. You can go to work because you don't have to.”

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Part III.

Have you ever wondered why, in the fifteenth century, when Columbus and others were sailing all over the world in very small wooden ships, held together by pegs and moved by sails, larded with unrefrigerated food, on voyages in uncharted waters, to destinations filled with pestilence . . . have you ever wondered why anyone would sign on to such an excursion?

Was signing on as a sailor, to sail into the unknown, a bit like the decision we just talked about, one not to die a suicide but to live instead? Staying in the 15th-century cities was itself a suicide of sorts, and living on the high seas was the better part of the few choices on offer. As a dweller in those cities, you could resort to strong drink to blank out the existential terrors, or you

could try to wring control from the world of chaos by fixing God and the angels so they were on your side.

Or you could set sail!

Religion and magic were as indistinguishable, one from the other, as were science and magic. Death was always at hand. The individual was not buffered from fatal disaster. Sudden death could whisk you before God for his eternal judgment, without any chance of confession or forgiveness. Hell gaped, it torments graphically illustrated for you, in living color, on the walls of your parish church.

Thinking about death meant believing in magic, which itself held forth sidestepping the inevitability of death altogether. Not surprisingly, magic clung closely to religion, And so saints in heaven too an interest in affairs down below, in crops and animals, and if the saints were not appeased they might turn nasty, ruining the crops, spreading disease. Candles and offerings kept them sweet, and a sprinkling of holy water kept baser spirits away from the cradle and the marriage bed. Death was shockingly close to every minute of your life.

Is this thinking still with us? And, if so, does it create anxiety in your life—the one you're living now? In other words, would your awareness of the certainty of your own death be less troubling, today, if we could leave behind all the magical thinking that, in years past, was just part of the already-packed baggage? We'd be set free, we'd be happy to pick up a sea shell, to see the sun shining . . . we'd be happy to be here, to be who we are, to welcome the opportunity to give it a try, to grapple with chaos, to enjoy the task of being engaged, to be in the flow of our lives.

Religion has sold immortality, long ago, and thinking about sidestepping death has led to a seemingly ever-present awareness of it. The undeniability of death became a profit game, but only for the institutions. Not the people. It seems to me to be much the better part of coming to terms with our own mortality to form the habit of having death continually present, to confront it and all its strangeness and all its certainty. That's the problem. And the solution—as difficult, *as strange as it seems*—is to make dying our profession. To learn how to die is to learn how to live.

Seeking to escape death is to remain unfree, enslaved. Instead, by confronting our fears, we can find our freedom. Concede only that the human condition is strange, and it then seems only fitting that facing death, head on, could—in *its* own strangeness—lead us to self-control, serenity, courage, and even happiness.

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Let me finish today in two ways—one fairly robust, the other more delicate.

The commitment to love a project, a pet, a person, or even yourself, hands you a way of being that is not time limited. Love does *not* usher in a finite game that has rules and a whistle at the end so you can stop playing and go back to your “real” life. No, to love is to embark on an infinite game, one that's never over, one that pays dividends continuously. Knowing that you are playing this game, what will be your only one—your last one!, makes you all the more committed to playing it as well—as constructively?—as lovingly?—as it can be played. Thus you are more attentive. And thus you are more alive.

My more delicate ending is from a poem by Robert Frost, “The Silken Tent.” It is a fitting counterpart to Whitman's “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” that being so overwhelmed by the

universe, because it answer's Whitman's question, whether our dreams will ever find a place to catch hold.

The poem is only fourteen lines, but it says a lot. It says we are bound together by countless silken ties of love. Listen how it implies, so subtly, that we are almost always unaware that these ties are actually doing anything for us. The ties, or the "guys"—g-u-y-s—mentioned in the poem, are the ropes that are tied to the top of the tent's central pole that, of course, holds everything up.

Each tie, each guy, is you, is your love. There are as many ties as there are people. The tent is the construct we've made to protect ourselves from Whitman's vacant vast surrounding, his measureless oceans of space. The tent ties us all together. Frost's tent *is* this congregation.

It's us!

May it be so.

[poem]

