

The Life That Maketh All Things New

Rev. Gary Kowalski

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I think that my grandfather was puzzled when I decided to become a minister. He had eight uncles who were Baptist preachers and spoke as if he had narrowly escaped a similar fate. His attitudes about religion were probably shaped by the small town of Shannon, Texas, where he grew up. There were only two churches in town, the Baptist and the Methodist, and most folks belonged to one or the other without too much rivalry or competition. At least until the Holy Rollers came to town and stirred things up, people would go to the Baptist chapel when the Baptist minister was in town and then worship with the Methodists when their circuit rider came through. It was an ecumenically minded little community. There was one man who lived on the outskirts of town who claimed to be something called a Presbyterian and another who called himself a Republican (an aberration practically unknown in Texas in those days), but these eccentricities were tolerated in Shannon. People were pretty much free to do their own thinking and my grandfather always tried to keep an open mind.

My grandfather would have made a good preacher. He loved to talk and tell stories. He had a hundred of them and many could even be repeated in church. He had the instincts of a moralist with the saving grace of humor that preserves a preacher from his own pomposity. There were tales about Aunt Tidy and Uncle Mood and the early pioneer era from the era when his family moved to Oklahoma in the last land lottery in 1901. My brother has one of his paintings of the sod house where they lived on the prairie, a half dug-out, his pet pig running up the hill to greet the young boy in his overalls carrying his lunch bucket home from school. Our grandfather liked to recall those "good old days" but never pretended olden times were always easy or that he would trade the present for the past. He was an artist by training and profession, and in art as in life he was always a realist. He was a keen observer of nature and human nature. He could paint the shadows as well as the light. He was tough-minded but had

an eye for those flashes of brilliance and beauty that are the artwork of a higher creativity.

He was the sort of person who liked to read and think and ponder over the “big picture” of what life means and how we came to be. He was born in 1894--before the discoveries of Freud or Einstein, before the Wright Brothers first plane or Henry Ford's tin lizzie--but he lived to watch astronauts walk on the moon and was up to date as the morning headlines. There were books by Lewis Thomas and Carl Sagan and Jacob Bronowski on his shelf, for he had an interest in the world of nature and the investigations of science. He had a sense of wonder before the spiral chamber of the nautilus, at the joining of mathematical perfection and eye-pleasing curves within a single natural form. His curiosity was coupled with a sense of reverence that could be called spiritual. He wrote:

Me a mystic? God only knows.
If I am one I'm glad it shows.
For folks who think their way secure
Their path is plain and heaven sure
Adventure not, nor dream, nor hope
In Mystery of Heaven's scope.

He was a doggerel poet and some of his verse was pretty doggy, but he knew many of the classics by heart. I was fortunate that I happened to be visiting him a few days before he died, and we had a chance to spend an evening together talking poetry, arguing and misquoting passages from the *Rubiyat* and *Tintern Abbey*. I think he was at home with the poets even more than with the scientists, for the poets fed his inwardness and touched the springs of faith.

His was a faith that included doubt and skepticism. He loved to quote from Edward Fitzgerald:

O come with old Khayyam, and leave the Wise
To talk; one thing is certain, that Life flies;
One thing is certain, and the Rest is Lies;
The flower that once has blown forever dies;
Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out the same Door and in I went.
With them the Seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with my own hand labour'd it to grow:
And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd--
"I came like Water, and like Wind I go"

He was not religious in any dogmatic sense. He felt the impermanence, uncertainty and effervescence of mortal existence. He realized the finitude of his own mind and body within the trackless millennia of time. But this realization was never reason for despair. For in his own way, he was a person of faith and deeply spiritual.

A few years before he died, my grandfather gave me a brown paper folder full of ruminations and jottings that he accumulated at odd moments of musing in his life. The thoughts were on diverse subjects--time, eternity, evolution, life and death--and most were fragmentary at best. He called them "birdseed," crumbs or scratchings not to be taken too seriously. I'd like to share a few of them with you now.

Most all high moments in life (he wrote), whether of sorrow or happiness, are generally embroidered with tears. Moments of high emotional impact are the punctuation marks in the story of human experience that would otherwise be a tale of drag and dull existence.

A sense of humor, when we view the frustrations of human experience from a distance, makes us laugh. But when we move in close and identify with those same frustrations it makes us want to cry.

I am not hung up on death, but it is the one and only absolute reality in my future. In eighty-four years, I have not seen one shred of evidence of the existence of a soul or spirit that is separate from the physical being of man. I believe the seat of consciousness is the brain and that there is no conscious entity apart from the physical workings of the brain. When the brain dies there is no more consciousness.

How does a man of eighty years face the life before him? On what does his spirit feed? What does he expect from the daily round of duties that never cease to crowd in upon him? As we grow older the burdens of others accumulate on us also--more and more of the people we have known seem to acquire greater loads of grief, loneliness, and physical handicap.

The highest moment in human experience comes, and in most of our lives all too seldom, when someone close to you, either young or old, takes your hand or puts an arm around you and in a quivering voice says "I love you so much." In that moment you suddenly know what life is all about, and you know that it is definitely worth living.

To hear again the birds in early morn and to see the flowers kissed with dew. To see a smile on a face that loves you. These things keep alive the forces that prevail in one's life and fill the heart with gratitude for being allowed to live another day.

I am not an atheist, nor am I an agnostic even though the whole conception of God remains an unanswerable question to me. I am somehow plagued with a faith that persists in spite of all reason and speculation. If God is only a myth I will die and never know the difference. If he is my creator who has endowed me with a mysterious relevance to him, in due time I shall know.

My grandfather used to joke that he still had all his buttons, even if they were sometimes in the wrong buttonholes. It's been many years now since he died, but in retrospect his passing changed the way I feel about the end of life. As a much younger man, it was a turning point for me. Illness and infirmity will never be pleasant to contemplate and as I approach seventy I better admire his acknowledgement that aging is a challenge, mentally and physically. From this vantage, the prospect of death looms larger, no longer a distant possibility but waiting nearby not so far around the corner. Maybe I'm simply more mature now (let's hope so) but I no longer think of death as the

enemy of life. Since his passing, I no longer consider it an intruder or interloper in the ultimate scheme of things. Losing my grandfather brought me a sharp stab of grief but also brought me a measure of acceptance. It made me feel that the most important life is the life that is ongoing: the life that passes on from grandfathers and grandmothers to fathers and mothers to daughters and sons, which renews itself in every generation. I've come to feel that my own individual life is part of a much grander and richer life which flows through me and through every living creature. I've come to believe that there's some primordial aliveness in the universe itself, in the wind and sea and even in the stones. In the lines of William Wordsworth, lines that my grandfather might have been able to quote from memory:

I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of thought,
And rolls through all things ...

In this season of resurgent life when even the cactus blossom and the entire earth is roused to a bustle of activity, the divinity which courses through things is almost palpably present. On this day of solstice, when the light is again at its zenith, tipping once more toward the shortened days and onset of winter's darkness, we sense there is a rhythm and balance to the world that can be trusted. Birth and death, the light and the dark, are not as different as they seem, but are the twin children of Creation, two aspects of a single interpenetrating Reality.

This Reality is known by many names, the Oversoul, the Infinite, the All, Adonai. But It's character is the same whatever it's called, dependable and gracious and good. Though the people we love and we ourselves will one day die, this Reality which brings all things into being and pours through all in ceaseless transformation need not be feared. We can respond to it with gratitude and joy. In gladness and grief, in loving and in letting go, in the world which is dying and the world always coming to birth, we can pronounce a blessing upon life.

I invite you to pray with me now:

Life that maketh all things new,
Flow within us to give us strength for the enjoyment of our days,
For the enrichment of our relationships,
For the building of caring community,
Flow within us as the courage to bear sorrow and disappointment,
And the calm to accept death without fear,
As faith to believe that despite adversity and hardship life still has meaning.
Life that maketh all things new,
Flow within us as friendship and fellow feeling,
Flow within us as the search for wisdom and the quest for truth,
Flow within us as the compassion which makes itself of service.
Flow within us as laughter and dance and song.
Life that maketh all things new
Lure us to more abundant living,
Enchant us once again with myth and story,
Bewitch us with the beauty which lies everywhere at hand.
Tease us with your playful spirit,
Life that maketh all things new,
Creator of earth and its creatures,
Soul of the universe,
Conspiracy of change,

May we be open to your enlivening presence. Amen.