

## **Sermon: The In-Between Times**

Rev. George A. Burn

Sunday January 15, 2006

### **INTRODUCTION**

**It is my sense that most of us get caught up in the busyness of our daily lives. We arise in the morning, read the paper, take the kids to school, go to work, spend time there doing what we do for a living, come home, eat dinner, take the kids to sports, perhaps have a little TV and bedtime ritual, and head off to sleep to start the whole process over again the next day.**

**It doesn't happen very often, but occasionally our daily lives are interrupted enough by a traumatic event, that we stop to reflect upon our past and perhaps count highs and lows, achievements and failures. Sometimes it's only in the midst of a crisis, that we have the time to take stock of where we have come from in order to assess where we are now. It is a shock wave that breaks open the door to this space. Life as a process is far different than life portrayed as a list of achievements.**

### **LIFE AS A PROCESS RATHER THAN LIFE AS A LIST OF ACHIEVEMENTS**

**This kind of information about a person's life is more than we ever find in the obituaries. There we read, places of employment, hobbies, children, service in the military, academic degrees...in short a highlight list. I for one, in providing a funeral, want to know the person behind**

**the facts. How did this person become the person they were? Where were they raised? What did they do when they weren't working? If you've received a gift from having this person in your life, what would it be? Why are you different because of them? These are profound questions because they get at the very core of who they were.**

**I can evaluate my life and its highlight and low light list very well...my successes and my failures, my losses, my gains, some wonderful achievements and some terrible regrets. In between these spikes of highs and lows, like a sign wave are extensive periods of nothing in particular, but which in reflection now, contained lots of emotional and spiritual angst. I began to think about this theme several years ago in relationship to my life and its process. I remember some mentors who helped shape and mold me into the person I am today. These were people whom I can say were instrumental in pointing me toward change, who spoke redemptive words, not always kind words, but words that awakened me to the tasks I needed to undertake in order to change.**

**About 12 years ago, in the middle of some therapy and looking divorce squarely in the face, I wrote a poem called**

### **Untitled and Unfinished**

**I gather together the fragments of my heart and mind strewn across the  
arena of my life,**

**Placing some back into the boxes from which they have been recklessly  
dumped out.**

**My inner child contemplatively surveys each piece, once again to begin  
assembling the puzzle of my life.**

**This time there are more pieces than before, perhaps even more  
importantly, a frame is finished, offering for the first time an awareness  
of the boundaries in which my life has been governed, perhaps even  
confined.**

**It is my soul, which illuminates the scene and guides me through the  
reconstruction. I trust my soul to guide me. It is my higher power who  
sits peacefully and supportively behind me, offering words of  
encouragement and nodding with a smile when a piece falls into place. I  
am loved.**

**George Burn**

**January 21, 1994**

**I realized that this poem was completed almost 12 years ago to the day.  
How life has changed since then. I was lost, searching, asking questions,  
filled with doubt. Now I am confident, satisfied, remarried, have a  
wonderful blended family, and job satisfaction. When I think back to  
where I was, I realized that it was the process that enabled me to reach  
where I am at this time.**

**As a Christian Minister, it urged me to look at the Bible from a different perspective. I began to look for the in-between times in the stories and found a surprising number. I will highlight a few.**

**Abram left his home near the Euphrates River in current day Iraq and traveled to what is now Israel to become the father of both the Jewish and Islamic faiths. He left without a destination. He did not know where he would settle until he arrived.**

**The Israelites were captives in Egypt and were released by Pharaoh and through the leadership of Moses, left bondage for the desert of Sinai. They wandered we are told, for 40 years until they reached the promised land of Israel.**

**Jesus before beginning his ministry went into the desert to face temptation. When Jesus was crucified on Good Friday, and before the resurrection on Easter Sunday, the disciples had to face the terror of that empty Saturday, the prospect that they too would be found by the Romans and crucified, and they hid, wondering what do to now that three years of their lives following their leader were apparently lost with his death.**

**After Jesus resurrection, there was a long period described as 40 days before the disciples took in upon themselves at Pentecost, to take the mantle of his teaching and go out to transform the world.**

**Sacred leaders other than Jesus experienced similar transformations. In her book “Sacred Contracts: Awakening Your Divine Potential” Caroline Myss lists the stories of Mohammed, Buddha, and Abraham and follows this with the analysis:**

**“The great religious leaders had to find their sacred contracts in order to overcome their own limitations, fears and shadows. You and I may never become fully realized beings, at least in this lifetime, but all we actually need to do is strive to realize our fullest divine potential. It may not be the same potential as the masters of the faiths, but it’s our potential and that is all that is expected of us”.**

### **DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF LIFE**

**When we begin to look at life as a journey, we must include the story of our birth, our childhood experiences and the environment in which we were raised. We carry that baggage with us throughout our lifetime. We are given a set of tools and understandings of the world, the opportunity to alter those, and to face the challenges of life and the developmental changes that we face in a normal life, and to grow through it all. I invite you to think back with me, if you will, for a moment about your early life, the home in which you were raised, where you went to school, when you graduated. Then move on into leaving home. What was that transition like for you? When did you go and under what circumstances? If you are married or are in a committed relationship, I invite you to think about how you chose a partner. If you have had children, think about the moment between conception and birth as an in-between period of bonding of thinking of yourself differently,**

perhaps exploring in your own mind the capability you had to be a parent. Some of us have experienced adult children leaving home to be married, go off to college, or into the military. What is or was the “letting go” process like for you?

### **POIGNANT MOMENTS IN LIFE’S JOURNEY**

In the hospital, I work with people who face illness, so with greater or lesser anxiety. The diagnosis of disease brings with it a whole list of fears and throws mortality into consciousness. People are asked to sort through the process of putting their life on hold, some as a momentary inconvenience, while for others, the plans and dreams of life have altered forever. I am currently facing the prospect of retirement within 6 years, and am beginning to process what it will be like to leave my career of almost 50 years. This is an in-between time, making plans, but not knowing when and if they may fall down in mid-flight. The ultimate task of life is facing death and so often, we bargain with it for a while, but must face it head on. Allowing that truth to move from our head to our gut is a process. I have lost one parent to death, and realize with my mother’s advancing age, that when she dies, I will be orphaned.

When you consider life as a process, mostly of in-between times, you get to understand life more from the perspective of an emotional and spiritual journey filled with decisions, both good and bad, challenges, some easy and some hard, and adjustments to changes in the environment around us as well as within ourselves.

**In your life evaluation process you may have hit upon moments when there were opportunities to alter your past, change your patterns, habits or addictions, and begin to live your life in another direction. Sometimes there are poignant moments, like when searching under a rock, that you discover treasure. From that moment on, life is lived with a new perspective.**

**Carolyn Myss talks about her workshops and how people share the stories of their lives in which they recall how one experience led to another, forming a finely linked chain that connects the to the whole of their lives. She tells the story of one man named Jim, who said, “I had an accident when I was eleven that left me partially paralyzed. After my accident, I was afraid of everything, and I believed that I would never have a normal life. Then one day I decided that rather than focus on my fears, the time had come for me to learn to accept that all things happen for a reason. Everyone needs to learn that truth in some measure, but for it amounted to releasing my attempt to control my life. Especially after my accident I believed that as long as I demanded order, I would minimize any more unexplainable, undeserved traumas. Now I look at everyone as energetically connected to everyone else, and of course, to me. I look for one thing that each person brings into my life that contributes to my empowerment. Regardless of whether a relationship is positive or negative, or difficult, my attention focuses on holding the thought that this invisible purpose leads to divine empowerment”.**

**Whether you agree with this man’s perspective or not, his idea of life as a process, and his response to trauma, and his emotional choices with regard whether he would see life as a victim or empowered by what he could learn from the experience are valid for everyone.**

**In my Bereavement Group ,“Growing through Loss”, I share the story I heard at a conference from a well known writer, Spiritual Director and Counselor, Parker Palmer. Parker shared at a chaplain’s meeting his process of trying to deal with a mid-life depression and going to the survival course Outward Bound. He said, “After surviving in the wilderness for one week, the last task was to repel over a 100’ cliff. I was the last to go. I had strapped on my harness, and slid over the wall with my face pressed to the side of the cliff. I looked down and slid to the first crack, which was 10’ down. There was another crack in the wall 10 more feet down so I slid that far. But now the wall pushed away from me. I pushed away from the wall holding myself in midair, and I froze. The guide who was already on the ground looked up at me and said, Parker what’s going on? Here I was, PhD in counseling, Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisor, and Spiritual Director and I don’t believe what I said. What I said was, “I DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT!” The guide simply said, “Parker if you can’t get out of it, get into it”. It was then I realized that I couldn’t go back up, that I had been taught the technique for getting down, and slowly released rope until I touched that ground”.**

**In grief work, the truth is that the best way out of it is through it and I suppose that this applies to almost anything in life that takes us into the**

**middle ground between where we were before and the unknown.**

**Ashleigh Brilliant, a Californian who has designed cleverly written and, often paradoxical, little post cards called “Pot Shots” has one that says, “Having lived through some hard times, I have become a living example that hard times can be lived through”.**

**I met a woman recently who came from another country to visit over Christmas just on the heels of finding out that the husband she adored who was bigger than life physically and emotionally, had been having an affair for 10 years. On top of that she developed double pneumonia and nearly died twice in our ICU. She called me frantically to talk when she had made it out of ICU to the floor and began to relate her painful story, but somewhere in the middle of telling it there was a transformation in her affect, her face began to light up and she said, “I’ve just had an epiphany. Even though the last ten years have been a lie, now from this distance I am able to see the truth for what it really is. Even though I almost died, I feel as if I have been born anew...to absolute truth, to the new sunny day, to the desire to get out of here on this lovely day and live!”**

**I felt as if I had experienced a sacred moment in this woman’s life and was privileged to hear her new birth. I had been present for her self-discovery. She said, “I used to think that I couldn’t breath without him and now I’m breathing on my own. I made a choice while I was so sick to live or die and I don’t know where that came from, but I know that from now on my life is my own”.**

**In the midst of the worst moment of her life, she had found a joy beyond compare, a new birth, a revelation. This will be the first of many ah-hahs in the creation of her new life.**

## **RULES FOR LIVING IN THROUGH IN-BETWEEN TIMES**

**Living through these transitional periods can be both anxiety producing and exciting. Things and people we used for our security have altered, and we are making up life anew. We have to rethink ourselves, to redefine who we are under the current circumstances, to ascertain what has changed and what still remains. We are searching for new truths.**

**I have come up with several ideas about how to survive these times. Perhaps in your journeys you have found others.**

**Take life one day at a time – if you live in the past you live in remorse. If you worry about the future, you live in anxiety.**

**Be gentle with yourself. Self blame and feelings that you should be better at living through change are false expectations.**

**Gather food every day...like the Israelites in the desert, who needed to work some each day.**

**Look for surprises...new friends, new internal discoveries, new understanding, and new direction.**

**Keep a journal. We may not be able to see any change in our life unless we record our history. Reflective writing gives us an opportunity to review our progress and emotional transition.**

**I want to conclude by asking you to think about, and if you are in the mood to do so, respond to any of these questions or offer your reflections on what has been said this morning.**

- **Are you aware of any in-between times in your life at present?**
- **What are the secrets, if any, that living in these in-between times have revealed to you about yourself?**
- **Are there broader implications of these thoughts that you see operating nationally or internationally?**

**Rev. George A. Burn**

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