

Seasons of Life: A New Year's Homily

Reading:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it... The evening star must be drooping and spreading her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of the complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in; and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old. I think of Dean Moriarty... I think of Dean Moriarty.

From *On the Road* (J. Kerouac)

I know it's my bias showing, but I consider that concluding paragraph Kerouac's *On the Road* as one of the premier pieces of writing in the annals of American Literature.

It's a poetic ode, written in prose form, to the America of the late 1940s that Jack's been traveling around. He romantically writes about the evening star shedding "sparkler dims on the prairie" and "blessing the rivers" and cupping the mountain peaks and "folding the final shore in"—in Walt Whitmanesque type of language. But then he throws in this line: "And nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody but the forlorn rags of growing old." It's a little jarring. One moment we're sailing along over prairies, rivers, mountain peaks, and shores, only to get whacked by the "forlorn rags of growing old."

Kerouac's central character in the book gets the same treatment. Throughout the text we get Dean Moriarty, the crazed companion of the road who travels with the protagonist Sal Paradise. Dean is a wild, exasperating—and, more often than not, hugely irresponsible—free spirit who opens up the shy and introspective Sal (who is Kerouac's persona) to what Sal calls "joy, kicks, and darkness." But the last we see of Dean—who is based on the real life person of Neal Cassady—he's standing alone on a New York City street corner wearing "a ragged, moth-eaten overcoat," while Sal Paradise and the new woman in his life, along with another couple, ride off in a limo to a Duke Ellington concert.

The forlorn rags of growing old... Dean alone in a ragged moth-eaten overcoat... this is where Kerouac's road actually ends. It baffles me to this day how the critics of this book who ridiculed and dismissed it as little more than a tribute to mindless hedonism could not see where Jack was really going with it. He was trying to show both the overlay and the underlay of the road, and by extension, of the life journey. The overlay is that of joy and exuberance; believing that what you are searching after is somewhere out there waiting to be tracked down. Somewhere along the way "I would find the pearl" as Kerouac's Sal Paradise puts it. There's a "pearl" out there somewhere awaiting our discovery. Such is the promise of the road.

Then there's the underlay in the book of tragedy and loss; of the road slipping by with the specter of nothing at the end: "Dean alone in a ragged moth-eaten overcoat...the forlorn rags of growing old."

Kerouac saw both sides of the road, even at the age of 29 when he wrote the book. The tragic irony of his life is that he himself succumbed to the road's shadow side once the demons of success and celebrity finally came his way, and drove him even deeper into the alcoholism that had long plagued him, and eventually took his life.

One of the ways I've tracked my own life journey has been to read *On the Road* at different times in my life. My experience in doing so is similar to that of others I've been in conversation with who do the same thing. You read the book in your 20s and you key into the enthusiasm and the wildness and the craziness. You key into the hope and the promise of finding your own "pearl" somewhere along the way; and you just want to get out there and go for it. To go back to the very same text at subsequent stages in one's life, as I've found anyway, is to discover the novel's more sobering underlay.

I can still be attracted to the wild and crazy side of *On the Road*. But what I've also come to see, in periodically revisiting this text, is that part of the life road and journey is the acceptance of loss, the acceptance of tragedy is a part of the life journey along with joy.

I've also come to see that a deliberative and dedicated pursuit of one's pearl, knowing that there will be setbacks and disappointments during that pursuit, is more rewarding than a desperate kind of reaching and grasping after one's pearl. I think on these things as another year comes round.

Several years ago one of my friends and colleagues in the UU ministry, the Rev. Chuck Gaines wrote a little Christmas meditation which, while done in a different style from *On the Road*, offers a similar message. And it works just as well as a New Year's piece as it does for Christmas.

Chuck wrote: "I have (now) lived more than half the Christmases I shall ever see and I know I won't get everything I want or have hoped for." Among the hopes and wants he mentions, I'll cite two. They are: 1) Immortality. 2) Being able to control life "so that I'd never feel hurt or sad or afraid."

Rev. Gaines is being deliberately tongue-in-cheek in saying he wanted immortality. We all know, usually before our age even hits double-digits that we're not around forever. But there is a time in one's life when you feel you have all the time you need to accomplish all you want to do, which is a kind of de facto immortality. But as the seasons of our lives move along we find that part of the growth process involves casting off some of our long held hopes and expectations in ways that can actually lighten the life journey.

May I suggest a New Year Resolution for you: Make a personal wish or hope list for yourself, and then look at any you may be ready to relinquish at whatever season of your

life you've reached. You might find such an exercise liberating. It may allow you to see what it truly worthy of your hopes and desires in the year ahead.

Another item on Rev. Gaines list is this one: "I never asked to be God, but I expected to be able to control life so that I'd never be hurt or feel sad or afraid."

It is not an irrational hope or expectation to want to live with a healthy level of self-respect and to be at peace with oneself and with your personal past. But the idea of being able to control our lives, and Life in general, to the point of never being hurt or feeling pain or despair or sadness may not be really be a pearl we want. You see, the only way to get such a pearl would be to eliminate all the risk factors in your life, and to never invest yourselves in the lives of others, to never care; it would mean, in effect, ceasing to be human. "A rock feels no pain, and an island never cries" as Paul Simon reminds us.

Control of one's life is a hope we want to see realized up to a point, but only up to a point; because it is a willingness to let go and be vulnerable to such things as hurt and fear and sadness and loss which, ironically enough, makes genuine human relationships possible.

"Something's lost and something's gained in living everyday," as Joni Mitchell wisely counsels us. Jesus said pretty much the same thing when he spoke of the necessity of losing one's life in order to find it. Such is one of the paradoxes we learn to live with during the seasons of our lives. We have to decide, to choose, what it is we want and need to let go of—to lose—in order to find what we truly want and need; to find what the nature of the pearl we seek really is.

In pursuing our roads we learn to live in the push and pull of the joy and exuberance and excitement that life does offer, and that many writers and poets have celebrated; and in the empty moments and the vacant places we also encounter, and which our writers and poets also tell us about.

As we move through our seasons with their joys and their losses, having a community like this one where you can bring your lives, at whatever stage and condition they may be, is crucial I feel. And it's a place to remember the lives that have blessed you—as we have done here today: Lives that on one level we have lost, but in so doing we gain the enrichment they continue to give us.

If there is one New Year Resolution we can each make for ourselves today, may be it that our lives will be recalled as fondly as the ones recalled here this morning. In this way, the Seasons of our lives—with their losses and their gains—will find their true legacy

Stephen Edington

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