

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Cherish

I have to steal myself to take it from the shelf, to summon the willingness to look at my daughter's baby book. I can't be too tired or unsettled or upset in any way ... and if I'm not already, I will be after a page or two. I'm almost certain that every man pictured in the album of Jamie's first year is dead.

She was born in 1988. I was serving our congregation in Provincetown, at the epicenter of that AIDS crisis, long before retrovirals. Though I had waited three years, her birth could not have been more incongruous amidst all that death. O, look! Here's Jamie with Preston Babbitt as he introduces her to a giant stuffed polar bear wearing a Christmas scarf. He spent a fortune on her at FAO Schwartz. And here she is, wrapped in a brightly colored Peruvian blanket, lying on the white pillow next to Rodgers Baker. His eyes shine with fever and wonder and love.

That's enough for today.

I look at those photos, and once again, I am filled with the tragedy of those senseless deaths. But I am also moved – how do I say this? – I am so grateful to have loved and been loved by those men, and I am inspired by their lives and deaths to live, really live, and to cherish this extraordinary gift, the against-all-odds opportunity to wake up to this day, this very present moment.

To cherish: In search of the right verb, I ran through admire, adore, appreciate, care for, dote on, embrace, enshrine, fancy, harbor, hold dear, honor, love, prize, revere, treasure, value, venerate, worship, and finally came to rest at *cherish*. I'm still not certain it's strong enough; maybe there isn't a word for what I mean. But let's try; what I want to say is:

To honor our dead, we are called to cherish our lives.

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In Buddhist teachings, what are traditionally called “the four reminders” are reminders to “make a continual effort to return to the present moment.” The first reminder is of the preciousness of our birth. The second reminder is of the law of impermanence – everything changes. The third reminder is of the law of karma, of cause and effect. And the fourth reminder is to stop sleep-walking through life, and wake up.

This is a sermon about the first reminder: to remember how precious it is to be alive, and to cherish that priceless gift.

My colleague Jane Ellen Mauldin and her husband were on their way home from their first adults-only vacation in years. Jane was pregnant with their third child; they were well aware that this would also be their last adults-only vacation in a long time to come.

Heading home, they flew into a terrible storm. Thunder roared and the plane was tossed around with mounting intensity. Jane's initial optimism gave way to dark thoughts about everything that could go wrong. She thought of how disorganized the airlines had seemed at the gate. She noted how young the pilots seemed. And she remembered that, while attending a wedding many years ago, an old woman had read her palm and pronounced, emphatically, that Jane would have two children, and die young. Jane prepared to die.

She writes, “First, I told Harry I loved him. He looked at me kindly and patted me on the knee. Next I thought of how my children would respond to the news of our deaths. I cried as I thought of their grief and pain. I knew ... they would be raised by loving family members. They would be all right.

“Then,” Jane Ellen Mauldin continues, “I turned to the serious business at hand.... Would there be a long, dark tunnel? ... I focused my concentration on the light that I thought was sure to come. Would there be a rebirth...? I did not know the answers. All that seemed important was to feel peaceful ... and loving.... Felt deep in my heart, [that] seemed ... the most appropriate way to meet death.

“And then the plane broke through the clouds. It had stopped twisting and churning and headed ... for the runway. As we touched down, a loud cheer erupted throughout the aircraft.... We were safe. We were not going to die at this time. I broke into sobs, shaking with the intensity of [the] experience.

“A few minutes later, as we [prepared] to [deplane], I found myself perturbed with the ... people ahead of me. I complained testily to Harry. He looked at me quietly. ‘You don't sound like someone who just thought she was [about] to die.’”¹

Right.

Well? Can we do it? Can we walk around in the world with that kind of peace, that kind of love – the kind of peace and love befitting the hour of our death? Most of us mere mortals *can't sustain* that level of attention and gratitude. It's fair to say that we get distracted. But we can make a spiritual commitment to practice the first reminder: we can seek to remember *to remember* the preciousness of our birth.

I do understand that life does not always feel precious. No one born into a body escapes suffering. However, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, said, “Just because you're feeling depressed doesn't mean that you have to forget how precious the whole situation is. Depression is just like weather – it comes and it goes. Lots of different feelings, emotions, and thoughts, they just come and go forever, but that's no reason to forget how precious [life] is.”²

While it's not necessarily helpful to try to cheer up by comparing ourselves with people who are living through famine or war or all manner of natural and unnatural disasters, it is worth noting that we're not living in ancient Pompeii or Nazi Germany. On the other hand, we may envy the freedom and choices of people with their heads in the lap of luxury, but riches can bring on their own kind of spiritual slumber, devoid of meaningful work, lacking a sense of empathy, and separated from all the possibilities that living in the world proffers for waking up. I think of former Filipino first lady Imelda Marcos, the Steel Butterfly, with twenty-seven hundred pairs of shoes ... and no soul.

Forty years ago, a friend said something to Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön about this that continues to help her. I heard her repeat it ten years ago, and it's helped me. So now I'll tell you. He said, “Whatever you do, don't try to make ... [terrible] feelings go away. Anything you can learn about working with your [fear, your anger, your grief] – anything you can do to work with those things [and all their ugly relations] – do it, please, because it will be such an inspiration to other people.”³ So in spite of everything,

1 Rev. Jane Ellen Mauldin, “Not Dying,” in Mary Benard, Ed, *Singing in the Night*, pp. 31-32

2 Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape*, p. 99

3 *ibid*, p. 100

and because of everything, cherishing our precious life is a powerful spiritual tool: it honors our dead, it helps us to wake up, and it can inspire all those whose lives our life touches.

Where do we begin?

My friend and teacher Sylvia Boorstein speaks about “inclining the mind in the right direction.” She writes, “I believe, absolutely, that the mind tends to clarity, ... and that effort and mindfulness and concentration – all inherent qualities of consciousness – can be cultivated to the point of being self-activating when the mind is confused by challenge. I also believe,” she continues, “that the unconfused mind tends naturally to benevolence, and that being able to feel warmly and compassionately [toward] oneself, [toward] others, and [toward] life itself is the antidote to suffering and the cause of happiness. I don't think the mind needs a lot of instruction, but I do think it needs to be encouraged and continually inspired.”

Sylvia Boorstein then goes on to recount the story of her French neighbor and bicycling companion, Jeannette. Jeannette, a longtime member of the Club Vélo de Saint Genis des Fontaines, often leads the rides. She is approaching eighty years old.

Last year, Jeannette broke her leg in a bike accident, when she looked back to check the riders behind her, skidded against a curb, and fell. She spent three months in a cast.

Sylvia asked her, “Do you feel anxious these days when you ride?”

“No,” answered Jeannette. “I try not to think about it. And I pay more attention to the curb. And look,” she adds, pointing at her bike. “I had to have this pedal built up because my leg is shorter now, and, otherwise, I couldn't balance myself. But this way,” she says, triumphantly, “I can go out with the club again, and that's what I want to do. It's not a big deal. You just have to figure out what to do so you can keep on going.”⁴

Beloved spiritual companions, even in the face of death, may we give thanks for life. Grateful to have loved and been loved, may we be inspired by death to live, and to *honor* our dead by cherishing the extraordinary and precious gift of life. Let us incline our minds in the right direction, and figure out what to do so we, too, can keep on going.

4 Sylvia Boorstein, *Happiness is an Inside Job*, pp. 160-161

Let's go on now, together.
I am so grateful to be going on with you.