

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 22 March, 2009

Nine Lives

for my beloved colleague, Rev. Daniel J. Kane, on his ordination day

On January 15th, Captain Sully Sullenberger¹ and his crew of four landed U.S. Airways Flight 1549 on the Hudson River, preserving the lives of all one hundred and fifty-five passengers and crew: a miracle, and a mystery.

The Week ran an article called “Flight 1549's Charmed Passenger.” “Maryann Bruce,” it reported, “may have been the only passenger aboard ... who wasn't terrified....² That's because she had already escaped death six times before the jet ditched in the ... river last week. 'I'm the woman with nine lives,' says the forty-eight-year-old business executive from Cornelius, North Carolina. 'I thought, number seven; here we go again.'

“An inveterate traveler, [Maryann] Bruce was in Hawai'i when a tsunami hit, and in California during an earthquake. She's flown through a hurricane, and survived an avalanche while skiing in Colorado. She was in the World Trade Center when it was first attacked, by a terrorist truck bomb, in 1993, and witnessed the twin towers' destruction on September 11th ...[2001,] while aboard a flight from Charlotte to Boston. Of Flight 1549, [she] says, 'It never dawned on me that I wasn't getting off that plane.'

“Her relatives call her a jinx, but she interprets all her close calls differently. 'I think I'm a good luck charm!' Nor will she let the latest disaster discourage her from resuming her travels. 'I'm the type that just figures you've got to get back on the horse. You never think it's going to happen again, you gotta live life, and I don't want to live life being afraid.’”³

I pray that Maryann Bruce has more than nine lives! At the rate she's going, with only two remaining, she might just make it to a half-life!

1 Capt. Chelsea Sullenberger III

2 Christina Boyle, *New York Daily News*

3 *The Week*, 1/30/09. See theweek.com/article/index/92523/Flight_1549s_charmed_passenger

I am captivated by stories of people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but, somehow, escaped with their lives ... and a new perspective from which they view their experience as having been in the right place at the right time. The very first story that got me going on this jag was told by my friend, Anita, who, as a young girl, was trying her best to keep quiet during her infant baby brother's nap. Her parents, too, had fallen asleep. Anita was hungry. She decided that, rather than walk across the creaky floor and risk awakening the baby and angering her parents, she would travel via the clothes line strung between her bedroom and the kitchen, which hung outside their New York tenement window.

Anita had watched her mother put out the wash dozens of times; she knew exactly what she was doing. Things were going brilliantly after she had let herself out the window and walked her hands across, hand over hand, making the pulley propel the line forward and move her toward the kitchen. The hitch came when she reached dead-center, and her weight was too much for the pulley. She hung, suspended, over the concrete courtyard five stories below. She remembers taking one hand off the rope and blowing on it, as it had gotten hot and a little rope-burned, and then the other. Finally, her arms were just too tired, and she let go.

Obviously, she lived to tell the story, though it was touch and go for a long time. This was in the olden days, before magnetic resonance imaging; doctors performed surgery to have a look inside, to see what was broken or otherwise not as it should be. Her scars are amazing! When she finally returned to her neighborhood, there were those who couldn't believe that she had survived the fall. She distinctly remembers one elderly woman speaking to her very soberly, a kind of mixed warning and blessing: "G*d," she said, "must have saved you for something."

Survivors often describe this urgent sense of needing to divine a higher purpose for their lives. My maternal grandparents and great aunt lived through the flu epidemic of 1918, which killed an estimated 50 million people – more than died in World War I.⁴ They talked about it often, always with a mixed sense of grief and wonder that they had been spared. I feel it – perhaps some of you do, too – about having escaped dying with AIDS. Second and third-generation survivors of all manner of death-defying lives also have reason to pause and reflect, and that probably includes every one of us. There's something called survivors' guilt, but, from a spiritual perspective, I'm more compelled

4 W.W. I claimed an estimated sixteen million lives. The influenza epidemic attacked one fifth of the world's population, killing an estimated fifty million people. See www.archives.gov/exhibits/influenza-epidemic/

by what we might call survivors' divine directive, the sense that what we are called to do with our lives is much bigger than our small plan, and fits into a higher order.

Whether or not it's true, I love the idea of living *as if* it were true, as if each of us is here to answer a higher calling and fulfill a greater purpose than we might even imagine. Believe it or not! These are the words of spiritual activist and author Marianne Williamson:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’

“Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”⁵

*

On March 18th, 1937, The New London School in New London, Texas, exploded with five hundred students and forty teachers inside, killing two hundred and ninety-three people.⁶

One little girl stayed home sick that day. Her teacher and every one of her classmates – her entire class – vanished. I wouldn't have known anything about this tragedy except that that little girl grew up and, more than sixty years later, her daughter was working with me on the morning of September 11th, 2001. With all of us, my coworker followed the stories of those who had been saved by some extraordinary coincidence, and, from her unique perspective, wondered who would be telling the stories as her mother and then as she and her siblings tell their story to this day.

Why was her mother spared? It's not ours to know; why some are saved and some are not is a mystery. The fruitful reflection on why we have lived to see this day, why each one of us is here, today, is one we can only answer with our lives. Educator and author Parker Palmer says, “Let your life speak.”

5 Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* (Harper Collins, 1992), Chapter 7, Section 3, pp. 190-191

6 see nlse.ort

Our friend, singer and songwriter Cris Williamson, is writing a memoir. Here's a sneak preview; just one story. Cris writes, "Dad had been shot in the head in the war, shot by a German soldier with a machine gun. He was in the ski troops, the Tenth Mountain Division, newly created near the end of the war. Their job was going to be to get the Germans out of the Alps. They trained in Colorado, ... on Vail Mountain. Dad learned how to ski, he learned mountaineering techniques, and he learned that the Rockies were where he wanted to spend the rest of his born days. Though wounded, he made it home, but I knew he knew some things about life and death ... more than anyone else I knew. He brought his helmet home, the one with a hole in it where the bullet had come through into his head. I used to put my finger through that hole and wonder at these things. I was worried that it hurt him, but he assured me that it did not. He said he had wanted to go to sleep, to lie down with his cheek upon the earth and sleep forever. A buddy picked him up and piggybacked him off that mountain and into a field hospital, saving Dad's life, and thereby engendering mine.

"Years later, that man, Stan Jones, and my dad stood in the back of The Drinking Gourd, a folk club on Union Street in San Francisco where I was playing, and I had a huge, telescoping moment, where I realized that I wouldn't be on that stage at that moment if that man hadn't saved my dad's life. Three lives intertwined.... Later, I wrote him a letter thanking him for that act. I would not be here today if not for the retrieval of my father that day on a battlefield far away. There were many instances in my life where I learned again and again about the interconnectedness of things. These things quicken a Spirit already furthered by living amidst such overwhelming evidence that the Mystery is alive and afoot!⁷

Cris's album, *The Changer and The Changed*, is one of the best-selling independent releases ever produced. In the extraordinary way that only music can change us, that album changed me, and so many of you, I know ... and if you don't know the album, you want to hear it, because I suspect that it will change you, too. And so we are changed by Cris Williamson, by her dad, by Stan Jones.... *keep going!* And so the web is woven, and so we take our rightful place on it, with a choice about living as if it matters.

My spiritual companions, I invite you to reflect on the trajectory of the lives of these survivors: those who escaped both World War I and the flu epidemic; those who

⁷ from the first draft of the chapter entitled *Lost: Summer, 1957* (as-yet-unpublished memoir)

lived to tell the tale of the New London School explosion, and World War II; my friend, Anita, after a five story fall; those who survived the plague of AIDS, and the 9/11 attacks; and Maryann Bruce and all the passengers and crew of Flight 1549. How absolutely extraordinary, really, that we arrived alive this morning! All of which is to say that I invite you to join me in reflecting on our lives, all of us who have lived to tell the story, *as if we were saved for something*. That – that amazing, saving grace – is up to us.

I'm thinking of the words with which I love to close a memorial service – a benediction, a blessing, and a call to life for the living.

May this person's death (I like to say),
 Recall us to our own destiny
 And strengthen us in our devotion
 To those who remain with us.

As we, by times, think of them, and what more they might have become,
 May we think of ourselves and choose to live
 The kind of lives they would have wished us to live.

So may their life be an eternal influence
 Upon those whom they did not linger here to meet.⁸

Amen.
To life!

⁸ adapted from Elma A. Robinson