

We've all heard the phrase life is a journey. I've grown to believe its true. But a journey to where? And a journey for what purpose?

I've heard it argued that human life should, or at least could, lead to life ever after in heaven. I've heard it said that life is a recurring journey on the road to Nirvana, a state free of desire, aversion and delusion. And I've heard it said that life is a journey that ends at death of the human body.

I don't now what's true with a capital T. I don't know exactly where the journey leads. And I suspect nobody knows for sure. But we all adopt a position on the question at some point. We may well change our position several times as we travel the journey of life, but we do adopt a position, even if that position is "I don't know" or "don't care."

For myself, I'm inclined in the direction of reincarnation of some sort. I suspect we all come back in some form or another, in order to learn what we didn't learn in a prior existence. Perhaps that prior existence was here on earth, in human form. Or that prior existence was in a different life form altogether, maybe in a different dimension and we are here to learn about life in a body.

But these are thoughts, suppositions, just beliefs. I don't really know. And I accept the "answer" may well be above my pay grade. That said, I have reached some conclusions that inform my journey. I have beliefs that I choose to live by. I believe it matters how we live our lives. I believe there are better and worse ways to live. I believe we should live our lives with however much awareness we can muster. I believe we should live our lives with conscious intent, tethered to an identifiable belief system.

I also believe we should live with personal integrity, driven by conscience, instincts and rational thought combined. Each taking its proper role in the driver's seat, as circumstances dictate. And I believe we are each given a "cross to bear," sometimes more than one.

It seems to me, there are a few dominant themes in our lives, patterns of recurring issues perhaps. Maybe it has to do with issues of commitment...too much or not enough. Maybe it's a sense of inferiority or superiority; good luck or bad luck. You get the idea. Maybe you're even familiar with your own life patterns of recurring issues.

You might be surprised to hear good luck could be a "cross to bear". We could be expected to always be successful, to never err, which could easily become a burden. It could lead us to view any failure as monumental. Repeated success, making or having lots of money, being particularly attractive are all issues I'd put in the same category. There is an upside *and* a downside, a cost and benefit to each.

The question becomes, how do we deal with it? If we make lots of money, how do we behave towards those who don't have what we have? Do we act as if we are superior, better, more deserving? How do we deal with those who are envious or who become dependent on us and refuse to take responsibility for themselves, or those who automatically assume we must be one of those evil capitalists?

And how often have we seen the one who is wonderfully attractive and/or successful be largely without close friends or stable families? There are always upsides and downsides of life. This is true, I believe, regardless of our station in life. The salient question in my mind is often, so now what? How am I, you, we, going to deal with this? How do we make meaning out of it?

These are questions that I suspect bring us back to our fundamental beliefs about life and about death. What is our fundamental grounding point, our fundamental orientation to life? Optimists tend to have an orientation to life different from the pessimist. The person who believes, or acts as if they believe, that life is about grabbing as much as you can before you die, will tend to address issues differently than the person who is grounded in a belief in the interconnectedness of life.

I'm committed to the belief that we all should give serious consideration to what our fundamental beliefs are. And then be conscientious in our endeavor to live according to those beliefs. Even when we mess up, and most assuredly, we will, we would be wise to assess whether we deviated from our central beliefs, values or commitments.

Life has a way of throwing us curveballs. Said differently, I believe life can and does teach us about fundamental truths. One of which I'm convinced is: we are best served by accepting the truth of who and what we are,. Then the job is to make the best of it. Another is that life makes no guarantees or commitments. We are not guaranteed happiness or wealth or good health. Nor are we constrained to suffer.

Our story for all ages this morning confirms that. Reeves was attractive, successful and wealthy. Yet, what one could easily call disaster, dramatically altered his life. He was eventually able to use his disaster to the benefit of not only himself but to others.

Death can often manifest as disaster, and can be a hell of a teacher. I'm not talking about our own death, because I wouldn't know about that. But before we die, we all will likely experience the death of someone dear to us. When we experience such a death, our fundamental beliefs can often be shaken, sometimes to our very core. Yet, that experience can lead us on a quest for new meaning.

We can struggle with our religious beliefs or a belief in a just world. Especially when a child dies, we've got to question God and a divine plan, or even fate itself. Death inevitably causes us to examine our own lives and our place in the universe. We often feel adrift as we question our assumptions and try to find ourselves in what has become a changed world.

Often, a fundamental teaching comes from a new sense of what's important. It is a regular occurrence that we place increased value on family and friends. We may change the way we live, our priorities, goals, sometimes, even profession as we discover that neither success or science could save me from this.

We can discover a different sense of reality. We can gain a more intimate relationship with the fragility of life. Over time, we can come to view ourselves as a survivor. The process of grief can give us new insight and let us see strengths we may not have known we had.

As we learn to incorporate pain and sadness into our everyday lives, we develop greater compassion for others. We may learn to live without answers to agonizing questions. We might learn that some things have no inherent redeeming value. Such learnings can strengthen us, make us more stable.

It seems to me, one of the most important things in life is to learn to accept what is. That doesn't mean you have to like it. It doesn't mean it will be that way forever. It doesn't mean there are no alternatives. It simply means, what one of the Nordic Runes says: "do not suffer over your suffering."

We can and we should do, what, according to our fundamental beliefs and values, is "right" for us to do. Then let go and accept that the outcome is in the hands of providence. We can influence outcomes, but we are not in control. No matter how hard we try, we are not in control of outcomes.

Learning to live comfortably with "what is" requires us to let go of "how it should be". Which is different from how we would prefer it to be. And here's an important point. Hanging on to our beliefs and assumptions of "how it should be" can be just as dangerous when we believe it "should be" exactly as it is, as when we believe it "should be" different. Trying to hang on to the "good" is as problematic as trying to push away the "bad."

Living comfortably with what is, also requires us to accept the truth that life will, without doubt, bring us surprises. Because we would prefer to be successful, happy and wise, we tend to fear the surprises of adversity, pain, disappointment and embarrassment.

When they arrive, we need to not fight or wrestle with them. This only makes them stronger and gives them more power over us. Because when we wrestle with something, it captures all of our attention—we become preoccupied and tend to lose sight of the larger picture. We get lost in how it "should be" and miss the present moment of what is, and what's possible.

Attempting to escape the downsides of life hides our bravery, our inherent strength and ability to cope. It masks our ingenuity, skills and desire to survive. These are some of the benefits of living in the downsides of life. We become stronger, more self-assured, more accepting of ourselves and others. We become more compassionate. In a real sense, we become more fully human.

And as we become more fully human our light shines brighter and we are better able to help illuminate this interconnected web of ours. And without trying ,we become helpers of one another.

Amen