

About to Leave...

Genesis 3:1-24; Micah 6:8; Ruth 1:8-10

The advertisements for student storage lockers have made their way into the Stanford Daily. Seniors planning the next stage of their lives walk longingly around the campus, pinching themselves to realize that four years have gone by, that it is almost time to leave. Change is in the air. The French writer Andre Gide, once said—“Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.”

Sometimes courage comes at an early age. I think of the story a young Iraqi refugee who was forced to leave the only home he knew. Watching events unfold around them, his mother told him to pack, but that he could take only a very few things. In fact, he could take only one shoebox full.

He spent hours trying to decide what to take—emptying his pockets, going through his books, his treasures. Well, finally, he did get it down. But he didn't have one shoebox. He had two. In one, he had a handkerchief, a change of underwear, a sweater, some hard candies, a pocketknife. In the other he had his poems and drawings, pencil and paper, photographs and post cards, a ring, some pieces of his gem collection, all of his treasures. Each one of these had a history.

Which box to take?

One afternoon he came home from school and the whole block next door was gone; it was just a smoking ruin. And his parents were waiting. “Now. Run.” He ran inside and he grabbed the box with the useful things. He was crying and he knew all along, in that moment, he left his childhood behind.

They got to their hiding place and they opened the box. Instead of underwear, he saw poetry; in place of handkerchief, there were photographs. Mistakenly, he'd taken the wrong box! What a shock? What to do with it?

He said he spent the rest of his life trying to figure out what to do with that box.”ⁱ

Our students who are about to leave will undoubtedly do so with many more possessions than would fill a shoebox. Our students will leave less hastily and more deliberately than our young friend, though I imagine with those storage advertisements in mind, they are realizing how much is left to pack. And our students are likely to be more in control of their own destiny. Yet, the events of the world throughout their Stanford experience—events such as the economic crisis, the Arab Spring, global warming, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the upcoming elections—have insinuated themselves even onto this beautiful campus and for some, altered the future.

Our students surely use their time here to acquire useful things, tools that will serve in making a living, a degree that will open doors to a successful livelihood—at least those paying tuition hope so! But our students also acquire here the equivalent of gems and photographs—snatches of late night conversations, snapshots of a friendship in formation, the moment of clarity when you realize where you want to put your talents. About to leave, our students will surely take a treasure box of memories that cannot be relinquished. And like our young refugee friend, they are claimed by a similar question: What to do with it? What to do with the relationships built here? What to do with the privilege of a liberal arts education? What to do with the insight engendered here? What to do with the life our graduates are poised to seize?

In many idioms and many traditions, answers to these questions abound. The one I offer today emerges from the biblical prophetic tradition. The prophet Micah teaches,

God has told you what is good
And what the Holy One requires of you
Only to do justice
And to love kindness
And to walk modestly with your God.ⁱⁱ

The two words “walk” and “modestly” side-by-side describe a time in American history when justice was made by walking—during the Montgomery bus boycott. They call to mind the most modest justice maker in the 20th century, Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks unleashed a quiet, steely resistance to injustice. In segregated Montgomery in 1955, when a menacing bus driver loomed over her, threatening to have her arrested if she didn’t give up her seat, Rosa Parks responded softly but resolutely. She said only, “You may do that.”

Fearless, bold, serene, those four quiet words relayed dignity to an entire people.

Many misunderstand Rosa Parks, painting her as a tired, old woman who made an impulsive, if fateful, decision. She was not old--she was forty-two. And she was no more tired than most of us are at the end of a long day.

“No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in,” she later said. Rosa Parks was tired of her own complicity in ignoring injustice; tired of all the times she had acquiesced. Her decision to yield no longer enabled her to overcome fear and inertia. In the words of educator Parker Palmer, “When you realize that you can no longer collaborate in something that violates your own integrity, your understanding of punishment is suddenly transformed... The courage to live divided no more comes from this simple insight: no punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Determined, unafraid, even understated, the portrait of Rosa Parks transcending resignation, ceasing to yield, and resisting injustice echoed in every newspaper and television in the country. What she bequeathed to all of us as the mother of the civil rights movement—her strong faith, her involvement in community, her refusal to bow to the world as it was rather than the world as it might be—is a shoebox rich in treasure.

I hope that her gem will sparkle in our own shoeboxes, that like Rosa Parks, we too will live an undivided life. I hope being at Stanford will enable us to defy the inclination to imagine ourselves as too small or too unimportant to make change. I hope that in this time when so many are about to leave, we will carry in our metaphoric shoebox an indelible photograph where our actions reflect our principles, where, like the sun, our integrity shines forth. To do the goodness that the prophet Micah speaks of requires a refusal to conspire in one’s own diminishment—to recognize our power to pursue justice. To do the goodness that Micah speaks of is to keep ever before us a vision of justice and to pursue it tenaciously, not only for ourselves, but also for others in need of encouragement. I hope that we will refuse to yield to the world as it is so that nobody need conspire in his or her own diminishment. Not because of poverty nor hopelessness, not because of cynicism nor ignorance. Will our pursuit of justice be on behalf of stewarding the earth? Repairing our broken political system? Promoting human rights abroad? Protecting democracy at home? Advocating for immigrants and laborers in our own back yard? Providing health care around the globe? Fighting poverty? Educating those

who are surrounded by despair? The Rev. Frederick Buechner says, “The place that God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” There is a need for justice-making in every corner of our world. May there always be in our shoeboxes, the treasure of justice.

According to Micah, not only does God desire justice, but also *chesed*, kindness. One of the best parts of college is living in community. Someone is always close at hand. In college, we share clothes, bathrooms and disappointments. We experience how reassuring it is to have a friend check on us when we are stressed or to have a mentor offer extra encouragement. We know how lustrous a gem is a gesture of kindness in a time of need.

When I was an undergraduate, I had the pleasure to develop a strong and enduring bond with a faculty mentor. In fact, in a few weeks, I will join fellow alumni to study with him in a summer seminar. When I was about to graduate, he and I had a conversation that I have cherished for decades. I asked my mentor what he thought was his best quality. I expected him to acknowledge his many gifts—his intellect, his wisdom, his dedication and capability as a teacher; instead, he responded with two words I’ll never forget—“I’m kind.” What my teacher and friend embodied is an understanding that kindness comes from “kin” and “kindred”. To be treated kindly is to be treated as if one were a relative, a part of a family. It is to be recognized as one-with; to be welcomed-in, to be claimed as one’s own.^{iv}

The Biblical figure most closely associated with kindness, with *chesed*, is Ruth. Following her husband’s death, Ruth leaves her home in Moab, accompanying her distraught and destitute mother-in-law Naomi into the unknown, to Bethlehem. Claiming Naomi as her kin, Ruth protects and encourages her as Naomi journeys from desolation and hopelessness to community and hope.

The first time the word *chesed* is mentioned in the Book of Ruth, Naomi is speaking. “May God deal kindly with you as you have done with the dead and with me”. For the rabbinic sages, doing *chesed* with the dead was practical—it meant to prepare their burial shrouds—to engage in an act for which there can be no direct reciprocity. *Chesed* is done neither to repay a debt nor for the sake of gain, but freely and purely out of love. When human beings do acts of *chesed*, of kindness, we are imitating Divine *chesed*.

“Rabbi Simlai taught: The beginning of the Torah is an act of *chesed* and the end of Torah is an act of *chesed*. In Genesis, “And the Eternal God made

for Adam and Eve garments of skin and clothed them. (Gen. 3:21) and in Deuteronomy, “And God buried Moses in the valley. (Deut. 34:6)”^v

Simple acts--clothing, feeding, sheltering and burying, are reflections of God’s kindness. *Chesed* is prompted by a sense of abundance, the spreading out of life, the desire for life to be more. Loyalty, generosity, and hospitality, the Torah teaches, are the ways in which human beings can imitate God. Ruth is not privileged—she offers *chesed* as a mourner, as an immigrant, as an impoverished stranger. And so she affirms that the prerequisites for these simple acts are not fashionable clothes, large homes or dinners at fancy restaurants. Rather, acts of *chesed* grow out of kinship, love, generosity, vitality, and faith. May our shoeboxes overflow with *chesed*, with basic human gestures that intimate transcendence. May we find abundance, whatever our bank account, and carry with us always, the treasures of kindness.

Micah’s definition of goodness has one final component: to walk modestly with your God. How, in our contemporary fast-paced world of iPads, smart phones, competition, high stress and jet travel can we walk modestly with the sacred? How can we, associated with this prestigious college, find the balance between achievement and humility? The experience of being affiliated with Stanford grants privileges sought by many. It is easy to feel entitled to those privileges—and to the doors that will open as a result of the advantages here. It is easy to stride self-importantly into a future made possible by the marriage of our gifts and our prospects.

But remember the young refugee in our story—he took the wrong box. What gave his life meaning came from a mistake. He thought that what he needed most were material possessions, but he discovered instead that his history, his treasures defined his life. For us, as well, our treasures are not simply useful things. A Stanford education is not the sum total of credits and classes or the job prospects it made possible, but of community and connection, of friendships, of serendipity, of successes and perhaps even, of failures.

Remember also Andre Gide, “Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.” As summer approaches, as so many are about to leave, bidding farewell from this familiar shore to brave the waves on the vast ocean of the future, I wish for courage as the journey unfolds, humility to face and embrace the unknown. I hope for openness to serendipity and surprise, secure in the circle of community that transcends time and space. May the gems that we carry forth from this place enable us to live a

life treasuring goodness—a life rich in justice, suffused with kindness, and walking modestly with the Creator. And once in awhile, may we each take the wrong box.

ⁱ Adapted from A Traveling Jewish Theatre, “Stories Make the World”, Audio Tape, San Francisco, 1991

ⁱⁱ Micah 6:8

ⁱⁱⁱ Parker Palmer, “Divided No More: Teaching from a Heart of Hope”, The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life, p. 171

^{iv} Kevin O’Neill, “Graduation contract Precis for Bill McDonald”, offered in May, 2005 at Bill McDonald’s Retirement Party

^v *Talmud Sotah* 14a