

LOVE IS STRONGER THAN DEATH

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
An Interfaith Service of Remembrance
Reunion Homecoming Weekend
October 20, 2013

Welcome to all of you who are here for Reunion Homecoming Weekend and have come to this special Interfaith Service of Remembrance. It's particularly poignant late in your reunion to be able to think, in this beautiful and contemplative space, about classmates who have died – to remember them individually, feel how they remain as inspiration in your lives, and to go on in days to come honoring their dreams and aspirations along with your own. How indeed, can any of us live on well after having lost those who went through important times with us and especially those who've meant the world to us – who've actually defined the world for us and helped set the contours of our personal universe. That can mean not just Stanford classmates, but also colleagues, other friends, family members, and exemplars beyond our own daily circles.

Sometimes their death can be utterly devastating for us, as William Carlos Williams wrote in his *Widow's Lament in Springtime*:

...Today my son told me that in the meadows
At the edge of the heavy woods in the distance,
He saw trees of white flowers.
I feel that I would like to go there and fall into those flowers
And sink into the marsh near them.ⁱ

But Italian philosopher Giuseppe Mazzini wrote that “I would not for all the world that you should fall in the depths of inert despair if I died. If love is not an empty word... but rather a state of progression for the soul, you would feel yourself bound to worship with a renewed enthusiasm all that I loved ... the Beautiful, the Good, the True.”ⁱⁱ And Turgenev reminds us that “Love...is stronger than death... Only by it, by love, life holds together and advances.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But what is it exactly to speak of love on a reunion weekend? There's a shadow side of Stanford when it raises very high the expectations of what we should do with our lives. Reunions can be points of uneasy comparison within us of what we've accomplished, or not; of what level of success we've achieved, or not; of what kinds of ideal families we've created, or not. Many don't even come to reunions, because they're afraid they won't measure up, in others' estimation or in their own. But by about the 25th reunion, if not before, this kind of melancholy on the one hand, and

brittle posturing on the other, can give way, in my experience, to genuine affection for our classmates regardless of our achievements or lack thereof. It's not what we've done that matters as much as who we are. An appreciation begins to build of what's uniquely beautiful in all of us. And that's where the word love starts gaining relevance as we think about each other.

As reunion years advance, it becomes clearer that living an internal life of integrity, justice, and concern for other people is more important than external material accomplishments. We seek and appreciate in others a congruence of what's inside them and us, and what's manifested for good in the world outside us. A graced life is one of personal integrity and meaningful relationships with others. In the words of the Baha'i reading you heard earlier, "Man's merit lies in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches...You were created to show love to one another." In the words of the Muslim reading, although "the journey of love is a very long journey, search and search again without losing hope."

May it be that this reunion weekend has brought many of you here together in that kind of graced love. May you leave here searching for it in your daily lives and in your continuing relationship with Stanford friends, other colleagues, your families, and so many others whom you touch in your lives. Others of us here today, not involved in a reunion, continue to experience the ebb and flow of reuniting with others from important prior times in our lives. A significant part of that's done in memory, when those who have meant so much to us are deceased and no longer here in person.

The late university chaplain at Harvard, Peter Gomes, not long ago a Baccalaureate speaker here at Stanford, was known to say at university alumni memorial services like this, "You will always be remembered here." He explained that one's college class, and the university in general, was and is a precious human community, where no student and no graduate is ever forgotten. No matter what happens to you in life -- where you live, how many jobs you have, what your marital and family situation may be -- you can always come back to this place, your university, as a home -- of memory, but also of continuing vitality. And whether or not you stay in touch with the university during your lifetime, you will always be remembered here after your death as well: listed formally in writing in this service on this day, but also remembered by your classmates and others associated with the university.

Building from this, I would say that for all of you who were students at Stanford, this is not just an educational institution that you once attended, but also a continuing community of people with whom you are timelessly connected, before and after death. It's a sacred community, in fact, not in a sectarian sense, but still in a deeply spiritual sense -- as a binding together across traditions and cultures and disciplines and experiences as the Stanford family.

The Founding Grant of the University required that a church be built here at the center of campus to support the spiritual and moral development of Stanford

students, but it was insisted that it must be maintained on a strictly nonsectarian basis, never becoming an instrument of any religious organization, and "entirely free from all denominational alliances, however slight the bond may be." The Founding Grant further stated that "Attendance at religious services shall be entirely optional, and no profession of religious faith or belief shall be exacted of any one for any purpose." This chapel has been truly an interfaith and even non-faith experiment from the start, as a rabbi who was asked to participate in the 1903 dedication of Memorial Church later explained : "Mrs. Stanford has sat at the feet of preachers of every possible denomination and of no denomination... Unitarians, trinitarians, infidels, Brahmins, Buddhists, Mohammedans, materialists, atheists, all have been heard, all were welcomed, the main condition of their welcome being that they must have something to say."^{iv}

It's important that we all have a place to gather at times like this, despite all the Christian iconography on these walls and windows that Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger politely looked beyond in 1903 -- a beautiful place at the center of campus which allows us to remember and celebrate not only our timeless connection to each other, and to all who have come before and will come after us at Stanford, but also our timeless connection to the very ground of our being and to our ultimate concern.^v

As our opening words, from the Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, explain, our timeless connection to each other and to the universe at large is right here in this very present moment: "Our true home is in the present moment... The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment." And, I would add, on the green Earth "Where the rolling foothills rise/ Up towards mountains higher" ... on the green Earth where "Tender vistas ever new/ Thru the arches meet the eyes" ... on the green Earth where "the light wind half afraid/ Whispers in the palms." Thich Nhat Hanh asks us to see that "Peace is all around us in the world and in nature, and within us, in our bodies and our spirits." We are in timeless connection at every present moment, if only we can feel it and be conscious of it.

The Hindu reading from the Bhagavad Gita asks that we see that the ultimate timeless connection is through Brahman or God. The same God dwells in all of our hearts. God is the source of all that shall be born as well as the death that snatches all away. God is the beginning, the middle and the end in creation. The Jewish reading from the biblical book of the prophet Joel reminds us that the same God who pours down abundant rain on the earth, so that we may be fed with grain and wine, also pours out his spirit on all human beings, giving them the ability to see visions and dream dreams. The rest of our service today will stress that everything belongs to a harmony and an order which envelops all, that everyone is ultimately on the same journey of love, and that there is a silent center in the midst of all the tumult of life and death.

I agree with what that Peter Gomes said many times at his university: You will always be remembered here at your alma mater. You will be remembered here in

human love by a community of other human beings, as long as memories last, and you will be remembered here in ultimate love by the ultimate force and lover of the universe, for ever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

ⁱ William Carlos Williams, as quoted in Carl Seaburg (ed.), *Great Occasions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 174.

ⁱⁱ Giuseppe Mazzini, as quoted in Seaburg, *Great Occasions*, p. 331.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ivan Turgenev, *The Sparrow*, as quoted in Seaburg, *Great Occasions*, p. 324.

^{iv} As quoted in Gail Stockton, *Stanford Memorial Church: An Appreciative Guide for the Non-so-casual Visitor* (Stanford, CA: Memorial Church and Office of Public Affairs, 1980), p. 8.

^v Citing terms used by theologian Paul Tillich. See, for example, his *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), Vol. 2, p. 10, and his *Dynamics of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 5.