

Treasuring Goodness

Performer Arthur Strimling tells the following story. “There was a man. He was a Holocaust survivor. He was Hungarian. He was 11 years old in Hungary when his family realized that they were going to have to leave suddenly and soon. And the boy was told to pack, but that he could take only a very few things. In fact, he could take only one shoeboxfull.

He said he spent every afternoon for months trying to decide what to take with him—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 his handkerchief, change of underwear, sweater, some hard candies, a pocketknife. In the other he had his poems and drawings, his 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.

Well, they got to their hiding place and they opened the box. Mistakenly, he'd taken the wrong box! He'd taken the box with the poems and the drawings and the photographs and things. 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."¹

My friends, all of us here at Stanford have many more possessions than would fill a shoebox. Whenever we have occasion to leave—whether for college, for new positions, a new community or at graduation, we have the luxury of doing so less hastily and more deliberately than our young friend. And certainly, we live our lives confident that we have some control of our own destiny. Yet, like him, the events of the world—events such as the war in Iraq, the war on terror, Hurricane Katrina, global warming, genocide in Darfur, shootings at Virginia Tech and now, saber rattling in Iran, have insinuated themselves even into our well-manicured community and onto this beautiful, protected campus, and for some of us, those events have or will alter our future.

Many of us at Stanford are spending our time acquiring useful things: for students, tools to serve in making a living; for parents and adults, the homes, cars, even tuition payments that make it possible to live with comfort and security. But as we were reminded last week with alumni descending and reminiscing in every corner of this campus, our lives are also filled with the equivalent of gems and photographs-- snatches of late night conversations, snapshots of a friendship in formation, a stunning moment of

clarity when we realize what it means to be blessed. At moments such as homecoming weekends or family celebrations or, like on this morning, in the quiet and majesty of worship, when we reflect upon our lives, we recognize that we also collect a treasure box of memories that cannot be relinquished. We, like our young friend from a different time, are claimed by a similar question: What to do with it? What to do with the relationships that we have built? What to do with the privilege of a world-class education? What to do with the reflection from our vantage of relative security? What to do with the insight we have gained? What to do with tomorrow's opportunities we 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, from the prophet Micah, who 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, call to mind 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. This steadfast woman lit the spark that resulted in an entire community literally and figuratively walking together every day for over a year, calling out for justice. Rosa Parks, who became the “mother of the civil rights movement,” 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." Courageous, 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." 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, that portrait of Rosa Parks transcending resignation, ceasing to yield and resisting injustice echoed in every newspaper and television in the country. What she took with her on that bus—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, filled her shoebox of treasures.

As we cradle our own symbolic shoeboxes this morning, I hope that this will be one gem sparkling in each of them, a gem that will accompany us throughout our journey— I hope that we, although in a different time, will nonetheless emulate Rosa Parks, in that I hope that we will each live an undivided life. I hope that we will resist complicity with injustice in whatever occasions we find ourselves. I hope that we will defy the inclination to imagine ourselves too small or too unimportant to make change. I hope that we will each carry in our metaphoric shoebox an indelible photograph in which our actions reflect our principles, a snapshot in which, like the sun, our integrity shines forth. To do the goodness that Micah speaks of requires a refusal to conspire in our own diminishment—to recognize the power that we each have, as children of God, as compassionate thinkers and concerned citizens 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 individually and collectively, we will refuse to yield to the world as it is so that nobody need conspire in his/her own diminishment. I hope that we will be steadfast and clear-eyed so that no one is felled by poverty nor hopelessness, by cynicism nor ignorance. This would truly be a gem in our shoebox.

What will our resistance to injustice look like in the time to come? What will our undivided life yield? How will we use our precious and formidable power of One? Will our pursuit of justice be on behalf of stewarding the earth? Rebuilding New Orleans? Reconstructing Iraq? Bringing the troops home? Preventing genocide in Darfur? 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? There is so much to do. 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. Here, at Stanford, students live in a tight-knit residential community. Someone is always close at hand. Many of you share clothes, bathrooms and disappointments. At college, you experience how reassuring it is to have a friend check in on you in those stressed out moments or to have a teacher offer extra guidance in a difficult angst-filled class. For those of us for whom college is a fond memory, it is often our family or our friends to whom we turn in those troubled moments of uncertainty or insecurity, of undesired pain or unexpected despair. But no matter where we are situated, we all know how lustrous a gem a gesture of kindness can be a time of need.

When I was about to graduate from college, I had a conversation that I have cherished for decades. I asked my favorite professor, still a dear friend, what he thought was his best quality. I expected him to acknowledge his many gifts—his copious intellect, his wisdom, his dedication and capability as a teacher; instead, he responded with two words I will never forget—“I’m kind.” What my teacher and friend embodied is an understanding that kindness comes from “kin” or “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, walking with her distraught and destitute mother-in-law, Naomi to the unknown, to Bethlehem. Claiming Naomi as her kin, Ruth protects 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". (Ruth 1:8). The rabbis understand "doing *chesed* with the dead" to mean preparing 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, by the largesse of the gifts of

life. Loyalty, generosity, and hospitality, the Torah teaches, are the ways in which human beings can imitate God. Ruth offers *chesed* as a mourner, as an immigrant, as an impoverished stranger. Clearly, 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, out of love, generosity, vitality, and faith. May we remember this is our own dealings with others. May our symbolic shoeboxes be filed with *chesed*, with basic human gestures that intimate transcendence. May we find abundance, whatever our bank account, and carry with us always, the treasure of kindness.

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Micah's definition of goodness has a third component: to walk modestly with your God. But how, in our contemporary fast-paced world of cell phones, competition, high stress and jet travel, can we walk modestly with the sacred? How can we, students, faculty and staff of this prestigious university, and community members in a region of extraordinary advantage, find the balance between achievement and humility? Most of us in this congregation have privileges that are the envy of many. It is easy to feel entitled to those privileges—and to the doors that will open as a result of the opportunities that have been bequeathed to us. 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 man in our story—he took the wrong box. What gave his life meaning came from not from hard driving achievement, but from a mistake. He thought that what he needed most were material possessions, but he discovered instead that his history, his treasures defined him. Like him, our treasures are not simply useful things. The gems in whose reflection we see our best selves may come as much from serendipity as from planning, as much from failures and disappointments as from successes and achievements. Let us treasure those moments, as well.

Walking modestly with our God is to understand that even amidst our grand achievements and astounding discoveries, there is still much to learn. Let us be open to the surprise of paying attention to the world around us—to the welcome from a restaurateur that causes us to rethink hospitality, to the unexpected gift from a young stranger that breaks open our hard shell, to the revelation of vulnerability from a student that enlarges our love. May we live open to the unplanned, mindful of God’s presence, each precious jewel on display through our modesty and our generosity. May the gems that surround us and those we discover within us enable us to live a life treasuring goodness--rich in justice, suffused with kindness, and walking modestly with the One who gave us and gives us life. Ken yehi ratzon. So may this be God’s will.

ⁱ 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 Sota 14a
^{vi} Micah 6:8