

*I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.
Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”
Though I lack the art
To decipher it,
No doubt the next chapter
In my book of transformations
is already written,
I am not done with my changes.*

- The Layers, by Stanley Kunitz

We are here, gathered in the chill of another autumn season. As the heat and light of summer have faded into changing leaves and cooler days, I think often of fall and all the traditions that come with this time.

In the course of my life, 20 of my 35 years have been shaped by the school calendar, the return to school another sign of the ending of summer. And, so, even though I am no longer a student, I am inspired to take part in an annual tradition from elementary school. Standing before you this morning, I wish to tell you “what I did over my summer vacation.”

My summer vacation was a road trip, driving up the East Coast to New England, where I grew up, attended college and lived as a young adult. My leisurely drive through all the places that are “home” for me then continued into unfamiliar territory, the province of Québec, Canada, and its capital, Québec City.

The first leg of my drive was the longest stretch, eight hours between suburban Maryland and the Pioneer Valley in western Massachusetts. I had planned to install a compact disc player in my car before the trip, to help the time go by faster. It’s hard to keep myself entertained by looking for good radio stations or drawing from my dwindling tape collection. But this is one project that I didn’t complete so I had to find different ways to keep myself engaged and alert on the road.

These eight hours of driving gave me the opportunity to listen to an audio presentation a colleague had lent me a few months before. When I tell you what it was about, you may get insight into my desperation for something to keep my mind occupied. The presentation was on death and dying – not the usual summertime beach novel.

The audio recording was a lecture by the Rev. Dr. Kathleen Rusnak, a Lutheran minister who has served as both a parish pastor and a chaplain for a hospice center. And while the content of her lecture was sobering, I was intrigued by the title of the presentation. It spoke a simple and profound truth, illustrating why I should listen to her words. It was called “Because You’ve Never Died Before: The World of the Dying.”

Dr. Rusnak begins her lecture with a few basic observations. There is the world of the living – those of us who can imagine a future for ourselves – and the world of the dying – those who have good reason to believe that they will not be alive six months from now, three months, one week. There is no way to fully understand the world of the dying until we are sent there ourselves. Few people choose to enter this world voluntarily. How can we imagine a world going on without us? As no one ever survives life on earth, on some level we all know that we are mortal and just a small piece of the earth’s creation. But it is another thing to know this truth on an emotional level, in a spiritual way. And, so, those of us who are called to companion the dying are encouraged to understand their perspective as best we can, knowing that we are only visiting their world until it is our turn.

What happens when one enters the world of the dying? Suddenly, our open-ended way of living comes to an abrupt halt, the date on the right-hand side of the dash on our headstone comes into focus. Dr. Rusnak says it is like “hitting a brick wall,” a metaphor that countless terminally ill patients have used to describe their experience.

With no way to move forward, with the wall of mortality blocking their path, the dying can only look behind. “Life review” is an important element of the dying process; some patients will not die until they have made sense of their time on earth.

Before we die, we are moved to answer some essential questions for ourselves: What was that all about? What was my purpose for living? Why do we exist? What are my regrets? Accomplishments? What is left undone? Whom do I love?

Dr. Rusnak shared a case study to illustrate “life review.” One patient was told that he had three months to live although, when she first spoke with him, he had been in hospice care for nine months. He was a miserable man,

but not necessarily because he was dying – angry after a lifetime of belligerence, as cold and uncommunicative as ever. Tough. No feelings. Throughout his nine months in hospice, he refused to talk to anyone – the chaplain, the social worker – except for his nurse.

Ten days before he died, he asks to meet with the chaplain. When she arrives at his house, the man’s wife greets her at the door. She welcomes Dr. Rusnak in and directs her to his room. But before they part, the wife leans over and whispers, “I don’t know why he called you but, whatever you do, don’t tell him he’s dying. He doesn’t know.”

The visit with this man lasts for five minutes. He doesn’t say hello. Doesn’t look at the chaplain. She sees a wooden chair by his bed and so she sits down.

With his hands folded across his chest, he says:

I’ve been thinking about my life...When I was a child, my mother died and my sister raised me. She did a good job. I never told her that, never thanked her. In fact, I’ve been pretty mean to her my whole life...At work, the guys reached out to me: “Let’s do things with our wives together.” Didn’t do a thing. “Let’s have lunch together”. Didn’t do it. I was only interested in my own world, my own money, doing what I wanted. I ignored everybody...Had a fifty-year marriage. Crummy marriage. Bad marriage. Never told my wife I loved her. Weekends came, she had to go out with her girlfriends. Why? I wanted to stay home, read my book. It was “my time.”

Then he turns, looks at the chaplain and says, “Can you help me?”

When I arrived in Massachusetts, I was greeted at the door by my friend Zachary. Zach and I met when we were both teenagers. He lived one street away from the campground I worked every summer. While I spent most of my days selling ice cream cones to suburban tourists, Zach and I spent our spare time reading philosophical books together, listening to strange music and bemoaning the isolation of rural living.

But then there was college; he attended a school only a couple hours’ drive from mine. A number of years later, after losing touch with one another, we discovered that we both lived in Boston and eventually became roommates. But then I moved to Chicago and Zach relocated to Amherst, ironically living in my college town. With Zach’s smile of welcome as he opened the door, I felt a wave of memories wash over me – the campground in northern New Hampshire, my days in college, the apartment we shared in Boston.

The next day, I drove to southern New Hampshire to spend the day with my friend Tom and his family. Tom and I were best friends in high school and, after he married, he and his wife settled in our home town. For the past year, Tom and Mary’s lives have been entirely focused on caring for their son David, diagnosed with a rare form of brain cancer before his second birthday.

This visit was the first time I saw David after his diagnosis. He is in many ways a normal two-year-old, learning new words, growing and changing. But he is also fighting to stay “in the world of the living,” although he, as a toddler, doesn’t know it. Tom, my long-time friend, was now a father, his child teetering on the edge of life.

I then drove to northern New Hampshire, stopping first to visit The Basin, part of Franconia Notch State Park. In my childhood photo album, there is a picture of me and my father, wading through the rushing water of a river. I am about six years old, my father holds my hand so I don’t get pulled away by the current.

As an adult, I once toured The Flume, thinking it was the site of this photograph taken long ago. But The Flume was a gorge with high, rock walls and a thin trickle of water, not the place I was looking for. I missed the dramatic rush of the Pemigewasset River, eroding the solid rock into elegant curves. With my visit to The

Basin, in the midst of this place still natural and wild, I realized I had found the river immortalized in this fading photograph.

That night, I joined my father at my family's camp, built on the shore of Back Lake in Pittsburgh, New Hampshire. If any place is home to me, it is this small log cabin, the site of so many summers with my grandparents and my cousins.

During my visit, I slept in what was once my grandparents' room. Lying in that bed, I couldn't help but think of my grandfather, the storyteller. There is a three-quarter wall that divides this room and the room where my cousins and I slept. This would allow my grandfather to tell us fantastic stories over the wall at night. One summer, the last night we were all together for the season, I fell asleep before the story ended. I woke the next day and asked both my cousins what happened. But they had fallen asleep too. My grandfather told a dramatic conclusion to an audience all fast asleep. None of us were happy about this.

The cabin is not what it used to be; the front yard is overgrown with berry bushes, the boat dock unmoored from the shore and anchored to a rock. We don't gather there like we used to. With so many of us moved away, passed away, the cabin is, for the most part, silent, the only noise the occasional call of a loon across the water.

After my stay in Pittsburgh and my tour of Québec City, it was time to return home. After I spent the night in a motel in Rhode Island, I drove south, arriving in Maryland by late afternoon. On the way, I had the time to finish listening to Dr. Rusnak's presentation on "the world of the dying:"

In her five-minute conversation with the dying man, he looks at her and says, "Can you help me? But before you respond, I want to tell you something. My wife doesn't know I'm dying. So, when you leave this room, please don't tell her."

As he was rude and blunt, Dr. Rusnak felt free to be direct in return. "Yes, I can help you. You're not dead yet. Is your sister still living? Are some of these friends that you worked with and ignored still around?...and your wife is right here. What are you telling me these things for? Tell them...And before I leave here, I want to ask you why you haven't told your wife that you are dying. Because I think she knows. You did sign those hospice papers."

She notes that this is where "the soft underbelly comes up...He said to me – and it must have been very hard for him to say it – 'Because I am afraid that if I tell her I am dying, I will start to cry and I will never stop.'"

Dr. Rusnak returns to the man's home about a week later. Again, she is greeted at the door by his wife. The wife says, "I don't know what you did with him last week but there has been a stream of people going into his room and they have all been coming out crying...And even my sister, whom he hates, he called into the room and she came out crying. He told me he was dying and he told me what a rotten marriage we had, took responsibility for his part. You know, it doesn't make anything better between us, but it helps that he said it...Here's what we did this week. He told me, we sat on the sofa, went through all of our pictures from our wedding, birth of our children, buying the house, vacations. He called his lawyer, made out his will, called the kids in, gave them things. Called the priest, called the funeral home, made his arrangements"

When Dr. Rusnak entered the man's room, she sat down in the wooden chair. He said to her, "I did what you said. But I have one last regret -- that I didn't live my whole life like this." She replied, "Look what you discovered about yourself that you never thought existed."

Dr. Rusnak concludes in her lecture, "That's why everyone was coming out of his room crying. They were never going to see him again. They walked out of that room having experienced a man they never met before, that he didn't know existed within him. They were grieving. He was grieving."

This is “what I did over my summer vacation.” I remembered a simple but profound truth. We’re not dead yet. Whether we can imagine a future for ourselves or whether we live in the world of the dying, there are things we must do, gratitude we must give, pieces of ourselves that have yet to find their voice. We do not know exactly when we will die but we can learn from a man who knew love, knew honesty, knew kindness and connection for only ten days in his life.

Because “I’ve never died before,” I can neither confirm nor deny an afterlife but I can affirm that the future is shaped by what we do in this life, even if we are no longer here to bear witness. The future – our legacy – depends on the choices we make, what is said and unsaid, decisions often influenced by the past. Why do we exist? What from our memories will carry us forward? What are our regrets? Accomplishments? Whom do we love?

Or, in the words of Stanley Kunitz:

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as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
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