

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 8 February, 2015

Seeing in the Dark

With thanks to Dr. Carl A. Hammerschlag¹

Psychiatrist and healer Carl A. Hammerschlag is riding the Amtrak from Philadelphia to New York. The clacking of the wheels is hypnotic. He is imagining the old friends with whom he is about to be reunited. There was a time when they were in each other's lives almost daily; now it has been years.

Not more than 20 minutes out of the station, the train's whistle sounds in several staccato blasts. Then the high screech of iron on iron as the brakes are applied. Several more blasts of the whistle, and the train comes to a halt.

They are delayed for an hour and a half. The time of Dr. Hammerschlag's reunion comes and goes. It's over. He missed it.

In New York at last, he checks into his hotel and decides to comfort himself with a trip to one of his favorite places, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He especially loves the Rockefeller Wing, which houses anthropologist Michael Rockefeller's collection. Dr. Hammerschlag writes,

“On a bench in a huge gallery, I'm gazing, [entranced,] at ornately carved canoes, each filled with detailed human figures representing ancestral spirits being carried to the other world....

“An [elderly] woman approaches me and says, ‘Excuse me, young man.’ To be considered ‘young’ at fifty immediately endears her to me. ‘Can you tell me what time it is?’ ... Looking at my watch, I say, ‘It's exactly two o'clock.’

¹ This sermon was inspired by Carl A. Hammerschlag's book, *The Theft of the Spirit*, and all the quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from Chapter 3, “Old Pearls, New Pearls” (pp. 51-62) and Chapter 7, “Believing is Seeing” (pp. 97-109).

“She continues without hesitation, ‘I have a two o’clock appointment, and my friends were to meet me here, but they have not yet arrived... [Truthfully,] I have no interest in [this] art. Botany is my passion. I still work as a guide at the Bronx Botanical Garden. It’s a voluntary thing. I just love flowers.’

“This is not a conversation,” continues Dr. Hammerschlag; “it’s a monologue. She is speaking without comma or period. But as she goes on, it becomes clear to me that she has an appointment at two o’clock ... and I’m it!

“... She ... is neatly dressed in a blue suit with a matching pillbox hat that’s set just so on her head. In her white-gloved hands, she carries a handbag ... [decorated with] crocheted flowers. She is not more than five feet, two inches tall. While I am in this observational trance, I hear her say, ‘That’s the secret of life.’

“I snap back to the moment. ‘Excuse me, but what did you say?’

“‘I said that’s the secret of life; sneakers are the secret of life.’ I look down and see that she [is], indeed, wearing sneakers with her Easter Sunday ensemble.... ‘Sneakers are the secret of life?’

“‘Yes,’ she says. ‘You can’t wear them without moving. They’re just not comfortable if you’re standing still.’

“At this point, an apologetic couple arrives, to whom she introduces me as the young man who has graciously been talking to her.... She doesn’t know my name; ... I haven’t said two sentences.... I ask her name and she says Pearl. And then she’s gone.

Dr. Hammerschlag concludes that this was, indeed, the reunion – the pearl – for which he was intended. “I got delayed on the train,” he says, “and found the secret of life.... The secret of life is sneakers – you have to keep moving to stay comfortable.”

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It has been scientifically proven that choice strengthens our immune systems. “The mortality rate of [elders living] in convalescent homes can be lowered by fifty percent if they are [invited] to make even simple choices,

[such as what to eat]. We can choose to see – to open all our senses to the presence of the possible, even in the apparent impossible – and our spiritual awakensness will make us happier and healthier. Even in an apparent catastrophe, when we look for the hidden blessings, we will find that we can see in the dark.

Dr. Carl Hammerschlag writes of a friend who, at the age of nineteen, suffered a spinal-cord injury that left him unable to walk. Emerging from the trauma like a phoenix from the ashes, tooling around in a wheelchair, he completed college and graduate school and became a psychologist and specialist in rehabilitation medicine. Dr. Hammerschlag once asked him if, given the current improvements in surgical technology, his friend would choose the opportunity to walk again.

He hesitated for only a moment. “I’d have to think,” he said, “about how much I’d be willing to give up.”

He sees in the dark.

Seeing in the dark: the spiritual practice of grit; stubborn hope; the insistence on possibility over probability; and an attitude of gratitude, no matter what.

I’m thinking of Hugh Herr. You remember his story; at seventeen years old, he was already considered one of the best competitive rock climbers in the country. Caught in a blizzard on Mt. Washington, he spent three nights in negative-twenty degrees; by the time he was rescued, he had lost both his legs below the knees to frostbite.

“At the time,” he says in his 2014 TED talk, “I didn’t view my body as broken. I reasoned that a human being can never be broken. I thought, Technology is broken. Technology is inadequate. This simple but powerful idea was a call to arms to advance technology to the elimination of my own disability, and, ultimately, the disabilities of others.”²

² Please see *A First Dance, on a next-generation bionic limb: Hugh Herr and Adrienne Haslet-Davis at TED2014* at blog.ted.com/2014/03/19/a-first-dance-on-a-next-generation-bionic-limb-hugh-herr-and-adrienne-haslet-davis-at-ted2014/

“Five weeks after [his] amputations, Hugh Herr climbed a steep trail near his home. Within a year, he’d learned to design and make himself new feet.” Different feet for walking, for climbing, for rock climbing, for ice climbing – all different feet.

Dr. Hugh Herr is now the director of the Center for Extreme Bionics at the MIT Media Lab. If they choose to, he says, “Every person should have the right to live without a disability.”

After the Boston Marathon Bombing, he focused his work on ballroom dance instructor Adrienne Haslet-Davis. “In 3.5 seconds, the criminals and cowards took Adrienne off the dance floor,” he says. “In two hundred days, we put her back.” Cue Enrique Iglesias, and Adrienne Haslet-Davis, wearing a short, white, sparkling dress, and a high-tech prosthetic left leg, twirling back to life.³

And when asked by a reporter what it’s like to climb now, as compared to the old days, Dr. Herr replies, “Now my calves don’t cramp.”

Hugh Herr sees in the dark.

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And then there is Dr. Stephen Hawking, the stunningly brilliant British theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author, who lives with a degenerative, paralyzing neurologic disease. Seemingly undaunted, Dr. Hawking lectures worldwide, communicating using a single cheek muscle that activates computer-enhanced voice.

In a talk-show interview, he is asked about the impact of his disease on his life. “You know,” he says, “what I do is, I think. I spend my life thinking and theorizing; it’s what I like most. Look how fortunate I am – I have my mind and nothing to distract me from doing what I do best.”

Stephen Hawking sees in the dark.

One last story. A young man named John – somewhere in his mid-twenties – was diagnosed with a particularly virulent strain of leukemia. Nine months after his brother donated bone marrow for a transplant, John is

³ Adrienne Haslet-Davis’ dance partner is Christian Lightner; their first post-bombing dance was Enrique Iglesias’ *Ring My Bells*.

in remission. He says, “When I was at my lowest, I said, ... ‘I don’t see a light at the end of the tunnel.’ I saw no light until I decided that no one was going to deny me my last hope....

“The light at the end of the tunnel is not an illusion. The tunnel is [the illusion].”

John sees in the dark. He realizes that “the tunnel of fear is no more real than the light of hope.” It’s all in how we choose to see; the choice is ours, and choice has life-giving power.

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Who knows what our 2:00 appointment really is?

Maybe we’ll learn the secret of life – a pearl:
Wear sneakers! Keep moving!

When we look for the hidden blessings,
we will find that we can see in the dark.

Are we willing to believe
that a human being can never be broken?

Are we willing to believe
that the tunnel is the illusion?

Only the light is real.

We can choose.

We can choose the spiritual practice of
grit;
stubborn hope;
the insistence on possibility over probability;
and an attitude of gratitude, no matter what.

May we choose to see in the dark.