

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
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## **Your Wild and Precious Life**

*To the memory of Charles Gandee*

Over the past seventeen years, Gary Smith has told this story three times from his pulpit in Concord.

“When we moved [here] in 1988,” he says, “one of our cars was a 1984 Renault Sportwagon. On the very day we mailed our ... final car payment, some tiny part called the 'cooling fan relay' bit the dust. This meant that ... every time ... we stopped the car, we needed to perform the Dance of the Deranged Driver, popping open the hood, reaching down inside the wires and hoses to disconnect one of the battery terminals, lest the fans run endlessly while we slept or [worked or shopped].

“It was not that we [didn't] intend to replace [the cooling fan relay]. It was, instead, that ... our mechanic could not find its replacement in the terrifying world of Renault Parts and (then) microfiche cards and superseded order numbers. We served as couriers for weeks, scampering around eastern Massachusetts, only to have our hopes dashed on the rocks of four prongs instead of five, black facing instead of blue...”

Gary Smith continues, “At last, the stars were aligned, the part was in, and on a fateful Tuesday morning, I ventured to a Renault garage in Marlborough. Now there are two places in this world that absolutely intimidate me, where I know I have no place, I do not belong. One is a lumberyard. The other is an auto repair shop. So bright and early I enter this garage, this very small garage, the hood yawns open, and the mechanic asks me where the cooling fan relay is.

“I'm a minister, not a mechanic,' I say, in order to firmly establish the relationship. I do place a telephone to the mechanic ... in Concord for him, and they talk only the talk mechanics can talk and then the Marlborough man removes the front grill of my Renault Sportwagon; he removes the front grill and many other parts in order to get at the diseased part. 'Start your engine,' he says to me, this to see the fan run, the car heat

up; we are readying the patient for surgery. I start the car, and then ... walk around to the hood to stare, in fascination and wonder, into the open space.

“Lurking unseen, and only proving [that] the stars were not quite aligned, a loose bolt, once fastening the grill to [g\*d] knows what; the bolt, vibrating in its own unique dance of death; the bolt shakes loose and falls into the humming motor, propelled in an instant with the shriek of metal hitting metal, clear through my radiator, and, to our mutual horror, mechanic and minister, we are left standing in the greenish-blue steaming coolant water.

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“Father,' he says to me, thinking I am a priest, 'Do you have another car?’”<sup>1</sup>

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Why has Gary Smith told this story three times in seventeen years? *I* heard it and had one of those Hokey-Pokey moments, as in, *Maybe the Hokey-Pokey really is what it's all about!*

For the sake of the metaphor, I'm going to say that “Father Gary” does not have another car; *none of us has another car*. For all intents and purposes, this is it; you're driving around or riding around in the one you got. So what are we going to do about it, when the cooling fan relay breaks, a screw comes loose, or, somehow or another, we're left standing in the smoke of the ruins?

This is a practical question, but its answer has everything to do with an open mind, open heart, open hands ... and spiritual resiliency. This is a quiz in the game of Life.

A few of you know the name Joe Morello; more of you know his iconic drum solo on The Dave Brubeck Quartet's jazz classic *Take Five*<sup>2</sup> or the work of one of his most famous students, Max Weinberg, the drummer in Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band. Joe Morello died on March 12<sup>th</sup>, at the age of eighty-two.

Here's the thing about Joe Morello: he wanted to be a violinist. He took up the violin at six, and, despite having been born with significantly impaired eyesight, at nine years old he performed Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E minor* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Six years later, he had the opportunity to hear his idol, Jascha

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Gary E. Smith, *Father, Do You Have Another Car?*, First Parish in Concord, 15 November, 2009

<sup>2</sup> “Take Five” was written by saxophonist Paul Desmond and performed by The Dave Brubeck Quartet on their 1959 album, *Time Out*. Thanks to Mark David Buckles for this clarification!

Heifetz. Imagine his anticipation. Instead, the world as he'd known it ended.

Upon hearing the virtuosic performance, Joe Morello realized his own violin playing would never match Jascha Heifetz's tonal perfection.

So ... he took up the drums. Joe Morello took up the drums, and distinguished himself with a light, fluid touch; exotic time signatures (5/4, 7/4, 9/8!); a huge career; and fans and students all over the world.

He will be remembered as a drummer, but let's remember him, too, as a phoenix. Relatively few of us have lives that are so deeply and indelibly marked by “before” and “after,” and far fewer than that rise like the phoenix to recreate our lives out of the ashes. Joe Morello has something to teach us about *what happens next* when we are left, literally or figuratively, standing in the steaming remains of our engine, and the answer to *Father, do you have another car?* is *No*.

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My friend Rosemary's parents are in their nineties; her father is ninety-seven. They live, independently, very comfortably, in a condo in Florida. Recently, when Rosemary was visiting, she began to load the dishwasher after dinner. “No, no, don't do that;” her father said, “I'll just wash them.” “Dad,” she said, “that's crazy! It's so much faster to load the dishwasher, and it's better for the environment. It'll just take a minute, and then we can go for a walk.” “No, no, I want to wash them.”

Eventually, it came out that the dishwasher was broken. It was broken and, in fact, it's been broken for almost two years. Rosemary was horrified. “Dad, that's crazy! I'm calling a plumber.” “No, no, don't do that....”

There was more back and forth, and then it came out that he didn't want to pay a plumber to come. “Dad, that's crazy!” Yet more back and forth, and then, finally, it really came out: Rosemary's father, with money to burn, doesn't want to pay a plumber to fix the dishwasher. Why? *Because he's concerned he won't live long enough to make the investment pay for itself.*

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Maybe washing his dishes and balancing his checkbook is what keeps him young – I'm in no position to judge! – but here's what I want to say this morning: *Please fix the dishwasher.* What is it about thinking it's too late? What is it about thinking that anything that makes us happier isn't worth it? You can go through the world doing the Dance of the Deranged Driver ... but I hope you won't. Let's fix the dishwasher, so that we might enjoy this abundant life *abundantly*. This isn't about being materially rich or poor; this is

about feeding the soul.

Persian poet Saadi wrote,

If of thy mortal goods thou art bereft,  
 And from thy slender store two loaves alone to thee are left,  
 Sell one, and with the dole,  
 Buy hyacinths to feed thy soul.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, flowers die. It doesn't mean we shouldn't buy them! Across nine centuries, Saadi reminds us that while they're alive – while we're alive – they feed our souls.

As Henry David Thoreau lay dying of tuberculosis at age forty-four, he was visited by his friend Parker Pillsbury, who asked him what he saw of “the opposite shore,” across the river Styx. Thoreau gave this apocryphal response, “One world at a time.” He didn't need to spend the last of his energy fancying anything more more than *this* world. As a young man, he wrote, “[The] wild river valley and the woods ... [are] bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked the dead.... There needs no stronger proof of ... immortality. All things must live in such a light.”<sup>4</sup> This world was enough, and more than enough. *It is enough.*

Beloved spiritual companions, we get one life – or one life at a time, anyway – and it is up to us to make it more than enough. When our cooling fan relay gives out, and a loose screw leaves us standing in the smoke of our dreams, can we, too, take up the drum, and beat out new rhythms for new dreams? Let's fix the dishwasher, so that we might enjoy this abundant life abundantly; let's buy hyacinths for the soul. One world at a time; one world is enough.

Again, the final lines of poet Mary Oliver's *The Summer Day*,

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
 which is what I have been doing all day.  
 Tell me, what else should I have done?  
 Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

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3 Moslih Eddin (Muslih-un-din) Saadi (1184-1291), *Gulistan (Garden of Roses)*

4 from Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?<sup>5</sup>

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5 from Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," in *New and Selected Poems*