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Arlington Street Church
13 September, 2009

Gratitude, After All

Dedicated to the memory of Katie Tyson

Every parent of an adult child lives in unspeakable dread of a middle-of-the-night phone call. It comes with the parenting package: great love, and boundless terror. In July, when Karen and Herb Tyson told me about getting that phone call about their Katie – Liz Weber's Katie, the Young Adult's Katie, our Katie – that phone call that divided their lives into “before” and “after,” I had only one comforting thought to share: Driving east with her sister road warrior, Heather Concannon, she was headed back here to her heart's home with Liz and her beloved friends, Arlington Street and Boston University; the whole world was open to her. Katie went out like a shooting star. She was brilliant, exultant, exuberant.

Just one week earlier, Kem and I had sat with her and Heather at an “Emma's Revolution” concert, singing our hearts out. Katie's voice! So beautiful, and so filled with joy! We sang,

We are living 'neath the great Big Dipper
We are washed by the very same rain
We are swimming in the stream together
Some in power and some in pain.
We can worship this ground we walk on
Cherishing the beings that we live beside
Loving spirits will live forever
We're all swimming to the other side.

Katie made it. And her spirit will live forever ... in us.

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When I was 27 years old, I was misdiagnosed with an aggressive form of ovarian cancer. For exactly 24 hours, between the time an ultrasound was misread and the time it was read correctly, I thought I had an outside chance of living six more weeks.

To my surprise, in those liminal hours, it was not death, but life, that came into absolutely sharp focus. Rachel Carson wrote, "One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, 'What if I had never seen this before? What if I never see it again?'" Suddenly, everything was so precious. Suddenly, I knew exactly what was important, and what was not. Suddenly, I was so awake; as e.e. cummings wrote, "now the ears of my ears awake and // now the eyes of my eyes are opened." Do you know that poem?

i thank You God for most this amazing
 day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
 and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
 which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
 and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
 day of life and love and wings:and of the gay
 great happening illimitable earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
 breathing any-lifted from the no
 of all nothing-human merely being
 doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
 now the eyes of my eyes are opened)¹

A few years later, my Provincetown parishioner, Jim, was tested for HIV; actually, he was negative, but his test was also misread. This was well before the days of The Cocktail; for Jim, too, for 24 hours, the end was suddenly close at hand. After it was behind us, life was before us again – as much as it's ever before any of us; which is, after all, not really more than moment by moment –

1 e.e. cummings, *XAIPE*, #65

and we moved on, and, mostly, put it out of our minds. Except that after that rude but transformative awakening, one of the running conversations he and I shared was whether we would take back those 24 hours, if we could. We never went as far as saying we would wish for the experience, or wish it on anyone, but we did decide we'd keep it, and run with it. It was stunning, but so glorious. As any of you who has cheated death knows, the relief is unspeakable. And then ... there's life ... and this incredible, unrepeatable sense of gratitude *to life!*

I want to live like that; I want it for each and every one of us. I want that kind of awake-ness and passion and joy and thanksgiving. When I think of Katie Tyson, I want to live large; to honor her in death by honoring the gift of life. When I think of all those who have gone before us, I want to seize the day and give thanks.

Tibetan Buddhism has a slogan that translates as, *Be grateful to everyone*. “Be grateful to everyone” is actually one of Tibetan Buddhism's many spiritual zingers. Here's Pema Chödrön, abbess of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in North America. She writes, “‘Be grateful to everyone’ is getting at a complete change of attitude.... [It] means that all situations teach [us], and often it's the tough ones that teach [us] best.... [They] really teach us because ... [we're] continually meeting [our] match. [We're] always coming into a challenge, coming up against [our] edge.... ['Be grateful to everyone'] encourages [us] to realize that when [we've] met our match, [we've] found a teacher.”²

² Pema Chödrön, *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*, p. 56ff

During the Vietnam War, spiritual luminary Ram Dass kept two photos on his altar: one of his teacher, Maharaji Neem Karoli Baba; and one of the secretary of defense and prime architect of the war, Robert McNamara. Both were his teachers. I can't imagine it; I can't even look at McNamara's picture. So it doesn't look like "all gratitude all the time" is going to happen for me in my lifetime, though I'm willing to keep trying, and acting as if it's possible, and I'll commend it to you!

In the hours after Katie's death, while the Tysons were certainly feeling grief, despair, and rage, I also heard them say, *We are so grateful to have had her. It was so brief, yes, but the love was so great.* There it was: gratitude, sharing the same space with devastation. *The love was so great:* Gratitude, after all.

One of my very favorite stories of the power of gratitude is from Dr. Richard Moss, yet another person who thought he was dying; he describes the experience as "an earthquake," changing him forever.³ The details are long; two brief reflections on them are enough, for now: at first, he writes, "I tried to breathe deeply in order to center myself. I found nothing I had learned gave me any authority over this experience.... I was standing at the edge of an abyss, afraid and unable to let go, yet too anguished to remain where I was."⁴

And later, one of my all-time favorite passages in spiritual literature: "I had

3 Richard Moss, M.D., *The Black Butterfly: An Invitation to Radical Aliveness*, p. 15

4 *ibid*, pp. 18, 19

done everything I could think to do. All that was left was acceptance. I vowed to myself that I would live one moment at a time and, even if I knew nothing but this misery, I would learn to be grateful.”⁵

With devotion and practice, gratitude can be learned. It's a spiritual practice; it doesn't come cheap! But we, too, can learn to be grateful. Here's author Kathleen Norris, holding the light: “... An acquaintance of mine, a brilliant young scholar, was stricken with cancer, and ... came close to dying three times. But after extensive treatment, both radiation and chemotherapy, came a welcome remission. Her prognosis was uncertain, at best, but she was ... able to teach [again], and to write. 'I'd never want to go back,' she told her department head..., 'because now I know what each morning means, and I am so grateful just to be alive.' When the other woman said to her, 'We've been through so much together in the last few years,' ... [my colleague] nodded, and smiled. 'Yes! And hasn't it been a blessing!’”⁶

Did she say that her cancer had been a blessing? No, not the cancer! And no again, not the treatments. So where's the blessing? I hear two things: first, having emerged in gratitude, the blessing is in every morning, really opening up the great gift of the present. And second, there's the companionship in her darkest hours: “We've been through so much together in the last few years.” It was horrible, she's saying, and you were with me. There's the blessing.

5 *ibid*, p. 24

6 Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, pp. 12-13

My spiritual companions, despite great loss, despite everything we cannot change, we arrive, after all, in thanksgiving; *grateful*, even when gratitude is the only thing left to us. Let us open our hearts and minds and hands, and look well to the gifts of *this* time, giving thanks for *this* day – the only day we can know, for sure. May we seek to live in gratitude, after all.