

OPENING WORDS – 27 Nov 2016  
 Seamus Heaney: “St. Kevin and the Blackbird” – The Spirit Level, 1996

And then there was St. Kevin and the blackbird.  
 The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside  
 His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff  
 As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands  
 And Lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked  
 Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked  
 Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand  
 Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks  
 Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

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And since the whole thing’s imagined anyhow,  
 Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?  
 Self-forgetful or in agony all the time  
 From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?  
 Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?  
 Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth  
 Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?  
 Alone and mirrored clear in Love’s deep river,  
 ‘To labor and not to seek reward,’ he prays,  
 A prayer his body makes entirely  
 For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird  
 And on the riverbank forgotten the river’s name.

## **Kingdom of the Sick**

First Parish UU Medfield – 27 Nov 2016

Rev. David W. Chandler

Sally keeps NPR on the radio in her car, so I know that is where we were one winter night in 2010, listening to a man speaking who did not have a body. It was ten minutes or so before I realized he did not actually have a voice either. He was breathing through a machine and speaking through a synthesizer.

We were not having a visit from the other side, although we might as well have been. The man's name was Tony Judt. He had ALS – Lou Gehrig's disease. He was utterly paralyzed – no muscle control at all. A few involuntary functions were still going, like his heartbeat, but that was it. Judt described his absolute physical helplessness bluntly but not without a wry humor. He told of being put to bed at night, his attendant turning off the light and leaving the room, and of then lying awake for hours unable to move a muscle – and what happens when you have an itch.

There was nothing wrong with Judt's brain. He described passing the long hours of night running pictures through his head, and – much of the time – composing his thoughts as a leading historian, cultural critic, teacher and public intellectual. By morning, he had ready for dictation the continuation of his decades of work.

Judt was a brilliant interview subject – lively, interesting, wide-ranging, pointed and present. He died in the summer of 2010, but not before publishing a final major work, and completing the manuscript of an equally well-reviewed memoir of his illness.

In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king – we have heard the proverb, and perhaps we think it is the same with sickness: Anyone who is well must be king. But perhaps that reflexive judgment is too easy, too gratuitous and even shallow. Perhaps it is part and parcel of our American cult of wellness, of clinging to youth and almost compulsive activity up to and beyond the point of foolish pain and dangerous overreach. Perhaps it is instead a symptom of denial and timidity, a guarded unwillingness to follow the thread of life wherever it may lead us.

To encounter someone who is sick – especially someone gravely ill – is often to find a startlingly different reality than we expect or assume. Those in the immediate grip of mortality often shock us by not just craving peace. They may indeed seize it with both hands – displaying a vigor of life's energy that can be all out of proportion to the

infirmity of body or even mind. How many times have you heard of, or felt, a gift of compassion and composure, not as the well person gave it to a “patient” – as was presumably planned – but as it was *received* from that patient? There is an ageless reason why we lean close to hear – the blessing is so often actually for us.

You may have heard of the “Jefferson Bible.” Our third president, polymath that he was, compiled a chronological life of Jesus of Nazareth. In cutting and pasting, he dropped the miracles the gospels attributed to Jesus. We may still agree with this Enlightenment view as far as Jefferson took it – that miracles were neither necessary nor proper to prove divinity – but we can also understand those miracles primarily as evidence of healing. The sick can give us a profound appreciation of “healing.”

Healing is not curing. The wonders of modern Western medicine are many – including cures for medical conditions that would have seemed miraculous only a few years ago. Look closely at miracles of *healing* and see something else at work: Not the disappearance of illness or injury but its integration, the restoration of wholeness even in diminution, the reconciliation of the self and the social bond. The sick often uncover this gift in the uttermost depths of their illness and despair, and then they offer it up to us. Even those at the end of life – knowing they are at the end of life – find so frequently not an overwhelming sense of loss but a surpassing sense of completion – of passing, however understood, from one phase of existence, to some other phase. We can know in their company life is indeed a biomechanical process, but also something beyond that.

To this lesson of healing, add that of enduring. In the kingdom of the sick, patience is not a passive virtue; it is an active necessity. How many of us go through the day longing to be more “grounded,” or “centered,” more “appreciative” or “mindful,” more “in the present moment” – and less processing regret or stifling apprehension?

Certainly illness can be processed as a project with its own deadlines, goals and action plans – realistic or absolutely deluded. But how much more often does the learning come that patience is essential. We soon learn the human body’s mechanisms take time for healing. And the mechanisms of chemotherapy, surgery and rehabilitation are deployed as well over extended periods. A cold will take ten days no matter what you do. Something more serious may take months or even years. Might as well leave this rushing and frenetic world and live out the virtues of hunkering down. Time is elastic not linear. This is a gift we can gain and receive in the midst of illness.

Finally, this lesson practical, social and spiritual: The gift of repairing. To understand the central goal of healing, to appreciate the fundamental mechanism of patience and perseverance – these are dimensions sustained and progressing toward the culmination of putting right what is not, or has not been. What is not right is often the focus. The injury or illness naturally draws the attention – it is why you are off work; it is why we are calling or sending a card or coming to hold your hand.

It will take its course. A goal just as crucial is the repair of what has not been right, sometimes long before this particular episode of mortal life. We know this. Our shared narratives are common – of forgiveness between children and parents, between partners and spouses, between friends or even mere acquaintances. These are truisms because – surprise – they actually happen. Stripped of what we create – the accumulated artifice of constructed roles and mediated reality – we touch what is real between us. Forgiveness postponed bursts to the surface. Absolution denied emerges unstoppably. Strained tolerance – or even total alienation – melts from our hearts. We find our hands touching, our words softening, our relationships knitted up not in raveling of cares but sinuous in resilience and entwined, inescapable connection.

We suddenly find we are together in only this place in absolutely this moment – the most profound truth available to human beings. Our deepest longing – to escape the pervasive sense of being sundered from others – is suddenly gratified. Perhaps only a few minutes or days, but possibly a long and treasured memory, this great gift secures our hearts and our spirits without hardening them. It is an altogether *bona fide* miracle – to become stronger and more resilient through the mechanism of greater weakness and vulnerability. Who among us can fail to see revelation here, if we have the courage to name it? Who will refuse to recognize a reality so transcendent, if we will accept it?

From the kingdom of the sick then, like the gifts delivered by the Kings of Orient, come these three treasures – healing, enduring, repairing. They are delivered to us if we care to receive them. They come despite our gnarled lives, ignoring our transgressions and evasions, regardless of our worldly accomplishment or lack of it. They come to us because we too are divine. Somewhere within us is that inherent dignity and worth, that all encompassing grace. They come because we are always sick, but never undeserving.

May the moment always arrive when they come to you and yours.

Amen. Blessed Be. Shalom. Salaam.

## CLOSING WORDS – 27 Nov 2016

William Stafford: “Once in the 40s” – The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems, 1998

We were alone one night on a long  
road in Montana. This was in winter, a big  
night, far to the stars. We had hitched,  
my wife and I, and left our ride at  
a crossing to go on. Tired and cold – but  
brave – we trudged along. This, we said,  
was our life, watched over, allowed to go  
where we wanted. We said we’d come back some time  
when we got rich. We’d leave the others and find  
a night like this, whatever we had to give,  
and no matter how far, to be so happy again.