



Reflections for My Student-Aged Self

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Psalm 25 Luke 8: 22–25

It is an honour to be here tonight, in this beautiful chapel that for centuries had been a place of prayer, song, worship, faith, doubt, and community. Anne thank you for your hospitality, and John, for your continual and enduring friendship. Not only have you introduced my American boys to the odd and beautiful sport of cricket, you have introduced me to the likes of R.S. Thomas and for that I am eternally grateful. There are times in our conversations over the years where, where in wavering faith 'I thought I detected the movement of a curtain' (*Folk Tale*, 1986). Thank you. The choir aptly and most beautifully sang William Byrd's Anthem, *Quomodo cantabimus* – and I am indeed a stranger in a strange land. Yet I am grateful for your hospitality that is making me feel at home again. Tonight I am tasked tonight to offer reflections of my student aged self.

I have constructed my thoughts this evening as notes or a letter to my younger myself with the intention of letting you eavesdrop on this conversation so to speak. I am aware of both the limitations of my own expression, insight and how far removed I am from being a student at Cambridge. So I invite you to take what works for you and leave the rest.

With that, I offer this.

Learn the way of Trust. It will move you from the totalizing stories and experience of a smaller self towards a more expansive interior freedom and community. Learning to trust yourself and the risk of trusting others is really the only way to this freedom. Strengthening these bonds both internally and externally are crucial in growing up and in waking up. The way of trust will be the pathway to overcome the anxiety of living and the umbrageous shame that humanity shadowboxes against. You will have had to free yourself of a thousand voices, each of these vying for prominence, air time and centre stage. Some holding out the promise of either (lasting) security or emanate catastrophe. Neither of these are true (although you will experience both). In this process you will become more attuned to your own voice and the voice of God's love amid the cacophony of outside influences and internal turmoil and anxiety. Cultivate this inner voice of love. It will re-form and transform you where forces of pressure, intensity, desolation and shame have created maladaptive ways of living.

You are here to become yourself as fully as you can. Always weigh the cost and consequences of your choices as they affect others, but you are here to live your journey not someone else's, not your heroes, mentors, and not your parents (which parenthetically they are not very healthy and God knows are freighted with their own struggles, projections, shadows and smaller ego projects that you will, in love, need to find distance from one day).

You have a powerful internal source, call it your instinct, your intuition, your gut wisdom, in this Hallowed hall I will name it as Spirit (Hollis, 2018). This will grow in you as you nurture it, but you must spend time listening for it, leaning into it, making space for it. Cultivating practices that bring attunement. Service and respect this – behind all other agendas honour and account for this – this path will lead you to an internal freedom that titles, degrees and accomplishments cannot. It is here that you will learn that the divine heart of God’s love is immeasurably larger than your imagination can conjure. All of this requires a type of gritty faith – which is just another word for risk. And so you must take risks forward in places where there are no guarantees, no secured outcomes. It is that energy that summons your life forward into avenues, relationships, hardship, joys and decisions that will always require, if not a Kierkegaardian leap, at least a step without a net. It is here that you will learn to trust the unfolding of your life, these ‘widening circles’ that Rilke talks of, giving yourself to the process not the outcome. Your Grandfather was right: way is made by walking. Life is really rather simple: if you do what is right for you, it is right for you and others, if you do what is wrong for you it will be wrong for you and for others. Trust and cultivate the inner voice of love.

There will be hard times ahead that you cannot circumvent, outflank or go around – you must face them – truly, ‘the best way out is always through’ (Frost). The gospel reading tonight bears witness to this – that the storms will come. They will come in the form St John of the Cross’ dark night of the soul, or Jung’s hour of the wolf, or what those in 12-step recovery programs call ‘the bottom’ where anguish, and grief and loss are brought to your door through what you have done, what you have not done and through what has been done unto you. You will know a darkness of determined ignorance and hatred, impenetrable and smothering. And listen carefully, *because the darkness has as much to teach you as the light does*. I know this sounds crazy but it is true. No matter how fractured things seem to be, no matter how the crisis splinters your delusions, there is a solid foundation within and beneath us, beside and between us. You will not learn this in the light but in the darkness. You will not experience this in times of Orientation but in days of Disorientation. You will come to depend on this hidden wholeness yet it will take time so you must be patient and compassionate with yourself . This will serve you and your community when there is a collectively eclipse that blocks the light.

It is here that you will be brought to the edge of yourself and you will **learn that the antidote to the terror living is connection** (human connection), accompaniment and friendship. These will carry and sustain you. **So begin now to cultivate deep and soulful friendships**. They will create an inner aliveness that honours the rhythms of knowing and being known, loving and being loved. This is the key that unlocks everything and you will find a wholeness, a radical experience of belonging and a love that validates, transforms and will change you at the deepest levels of consciousness. Always have someone in your life to whom you *can and will* speak the truth about what is going on with you. Keeping secrets will destroy you. These friendships will carry you to a light that you cannot always see – and will be a presence of light that the darkness cannot, shall not, will not put it out.

And You will do well in the early 2000s to befriend the mess of recovering alcoholics that are showing up at your church. Particularly guys like Steve Ahern, who spent 30 years in prison, tatted from his neck to his feet, but has found an internal freedom that has eluded you to this point. He and his friends will have pasts that will intrigue you, captivate you, and scare you. But they will **teach you the spirituality of imperfection** and will lead you to a community of vulnerability, care, accountability, grace and a laughter that just might save you. These men and women will introduce you to a vision of beloved community that can only

be found by going to the margins. A reality Martin Luther King Jr pointed to, that Bishop Oscar Romero gave his life for, that Delores Huerta was captivated by that Cleve Tinsley will compel you towards. This life of service that emerges from a vision of beloved community, of Kinship and belonging is worth giving your entire life to. **It will take you to the margins**, not as a tourist but as a pilgrim – and you go there not to make a difference but you go there and will find that the margins will make you different. So that you can say with the Buddhists ‘Oh nobly born, remember who you really are’. So go and in your own particular way find a way to stand with the vulnerable, the poor with those whose dignity has been denied and those whose burdens are too big for them to bear, this is the only way that the margins will be erased. And every once in a while you will have the exquisite and extraordinary privilege of recognizing that you have been enfolded into a community who is attempting to be who God is in the world, spacious, expansive, magnanimous and tender.

And lastly, having just experienced Ash Wednesday in this sacred Chapel, Remember you are going to die. Let these ashes remind you that amid of taking life in hand, squarely facing all you can, you will need to learn to surrender it all to let it go, to yield. So, every now and then check in with yourself to see if this is how you want to spend what little time you have here in this form, in this body, in this consciousness.