

Living Deeply

Rev. David Owen

Readings

From Ralph Waldo Emerson

That which befits us, embosomed in beauty and wonder as we are, is cheerfulness and courage, and the endeavor to realize our aspirations. The life lived is the true romance, which, when it is valiantly conducted, will yield the imagination a higher joy than any fiction. All around us what powers are wrapped up under the coarse matting of custom, and all wonder prevented. It is so wonderful to our neurologists that a person can see without eyes, that it does not occur to them, that it is just as wonderful, that you should see with them; and that is ever the difference between the wise and the unwise: the latter wonders at what is unusual, the wise wonders at the usual.

From Luke 17.20

And Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The Kingdom of God is not coming with extraordinary signs to be observed", nor will they say "Lo, here it is!" or "Over there!", for behold, the Kingdom of God is within the midst of you.

Sermon

Valuable Living

Henry David Thoreau left the security of the city to live in the woods at Walden Pond. From this experience we have his classic work entitled Walden. In it we read the words of a man seeking out a certain authenticity in his existence.

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About this Thoreau writes "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath a shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most people, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about life, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of humankind to 'glorify God and enjoy him forever'".

To live deep - to drive life in a corner - to really embrace everything the human condition has to offer. I am drawn to that passion for a certain purity of existence. I also find myself in that strange uncertainty about life. Do I really want to get the whole and genuine meanness of life, would I be able to handle that? There is something about life that draws us into authentic experience. Yet there also seems to be an urge to hide from life, and to seek security from the experiences of life.

Several years ago I was involved in a reflection group. The aim was to enable participants to get in touch with their feelings. I remember thinking how silly that was. I thought to myself "how could you not be in touch with your feelings, when I have an emotion, I feel it." How else could it work. Well, a few weeks later I began to understand that indeed, I was not totally in touch with my emotional life. But what struck me is that being alienated from a portion of my experience seemed so normal. It took the power of an intense emotional experience to wake me up. To allow me to see that in fact "normal" was not capturing the fullness of human experience.

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Normal, by definition is how we generally feel about ourselves. I find that one of the only ways to evaluate our “normal” experience, is by contrast with experience of a richer quality. There is book written by Camus called *The Fall*. In it a successful Parisian lawyer confesses that his self-confident and humane liberalism had proved to be hollow. He looks back on his life realizing that he never truly committed himself to anything. He dabbled in this and that but he never chose to in Thoreau’s word’s live deep, and suck the marrow of life. The book reads “Thus I progressed on the surface of life, in the realm of words as it were, never in reality. All those books barely read, those friends barely loved, those cities barely visited, those women barely appreciated!”. His existence seemed so “normal”, yet it was without much life.

Much of religion spends its time considering the threat of death. However I think we human beings also find something in life itself threatening. In fact I think much of our efforts in life seem to be about avoiding life itself. We seek security instead of experience. For instance I find a troubling similarity between certain religious fundamentalists, the money oriented morality of our day, and portions of the New Age movement in that they all agree that we need to escape the human condition. To experience struggle is often depicted as a sign of failure. In these ideologies the successful are those not effected by life’s struggles and risks. To be saved is to be liberated either spiritually or technologically from the bonds of our human existence.

This ambiguity towards life seems to be very strong within the American culture and consciousness. We honor the likes of Thoreau, out in the woods, living off the land. We hold a special place in our hearts for the American farmer. Movie critics give praise when a show is “True to Life” and “Realistic”. Yet have you

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ever considered why we would pay good money to go sit in a theater hoping that the movie will be just like real life. Even an unhappy ending can often inspire accolades from a public desiring realism. Why is it that we seem to enjoy watching the difficulties that the on-screen characters go through. Do they remind us of ourselves? Does such fiction give us the thrill of life's struggle without the insecurity of risk.

I once watched a show where a man dies and in the afterlife is given everything he wants. When he gambled he always won. Women always swooned all around him, and he lived in the perfect home safe and secure. But there was never any surprises, he was unable to feel uncertainty for everything was assured. What he originally thought was heaven, turned out to be hell. For all the events in his existence were without value and meaningless. Without struggle, without risk, he found himself without life.

I find that much of our modern lifestyle is driven by a desire for security. This desire can easily place us in a rut, where we give up risk in favor of safety. We give up adventure, in favor of certainty. In short, we give up much of what gives life its character and value. And our technological progress seems only to foster this human tendency. Have you ever considered the effect of living in a culture with so many technological privileges. We no longer have to bother with walking anywhere because now we can drive. We no longer have to worry about the health of our crops because we can just go to the store to buy food. We no longer have to communicate face to face because we have the telephone. In fact we no longer have to even talk to each other because we have e-mail. We no longer have to take care of the young or the old because there are institutions that take that burden from us. We no longer have to attend

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a concert to hear music because everything is recorded now. We don't even have to travel to explore the world because television brings it into our homes. In fact we barely have to do anything, technology does it for us. I imagine if one was successful enough you might be able to make it your whole life, without ever having to live.

It's been said that life is like licking the honey off the thorn of a rose. For life is beautiful, and its taste is so sweet. However, no one can deny that at times we all feel life's sting, and I'm sure all of us have the scars to prove that. And when that happens our natural reaction is to withdraw. No one would lick a thorn while their tongue was bleeding.

This existence we find our selves in often seems to be a joyful tragedy. Many of us right here have had the experience when life deals us a nasty blow. At times it seems like the tragedy overwhelms the joy, and the question can be raised, why bother? Why not just distract ourselves with amusements; physical, intellectual, or emotional distractions. If the Buddhists are right, and life is suffering, then what's wrong with escape or denial? A while back I was a chaplain in a hospice. I worked exclusively with people who were dying. My first day on the job I saw a man named Mike lying motionless in his bed. He had oxygen tubes in his nose, and though he appeared young, he was so emaciated that he looked rather skeletal. I remember the peculiar smell too, later I would identify that as the smell of bedsores that the dying often have. Mike had AIDS, and those of you familiar with AIDS know that it can be an unpleasant way to die. I walked by his room, but I did not enter it that day. I had no supervisor looking over my shoulder, it was just me and my human free will, and I chose to hide. The second day I walked by his room again, and I'm

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ashamed to admit that on that day I once again did not enter his room. I can't say exactly what I was afraid of, perhaps it was the utter reality of the situation.

On the third day I looked in at Mike. On that day I went in slowly with great trepidation. I sat with him and held his hand. He wasn't able to say anything for his voice was too weak, but he grasped my hand solidly, and we talked. I should say I talked, and Mike listened. Then I was silent, and I suppose Mike listened to the silence. An hour later as I prepared to leave I asked him if he would like me to say a prayer with him. He nodded to me yes. Not having anything memorized I fumbled my way through a rambling prayer, not even sure who I should be addressing this prayer to, but asking that Mike find peace. As I got up to leave, Mike leaned up a bit and I heard him straining what was left of his voice to say "God Bless You". And though I've heard that phrase bandied about quite often, in that moment I was sincerely blessed. I can't for sure say that this experience brought me happiness, but I will say it was meaningful. It was not pleasant being in that room, but it was authentic. Mike's blessing was a moment of grace and it stays with me to this day.

It has become my belief that grace only enters our lives when we enter into life fully. That often means entering a world of pain and suffering, a world that our culture tells us to avoid, a world we fear in many ways. But it is only within the fullness of our authentic experience that we find those moments of grace. You all know those moments. We've all had them from time to time. Moments of Grace, when you're walking around outside and all of sudden you look at the trees, you hear the birds, and you just have to stop, and enjoy. Moments of grace, when biting into a freshly picked fruit and truly tasting how good it is. Moments of grace, when a spouse, or a child says "I love you", and you hear

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them. Moments of grace whenever we are able to authentically share the depths of who we are with another. And of course, the honor to have someone share the depths of their humanity with you. They say that most people have a deep fear of being found out. Of being exposed for exactly who they are. The idea of being completely open and vulnerable to other human beings, or to life itself is a very disturbing proposition. However, I think there is another fear, just as strong within our beings. That is the fear of never being found out. The fear of not revealing who we are to another. To never take the opportunity to be vulnerable to life itself. To never take the chance that the human spirit within will rise to great heights of joy, and to risk an encounter with the painful depths of suffering. We have but a brief time on this Earth, and to affirm this life is to choose risk. We won't go far if we only look to guarantees in this life, for none of us has the ability to predict our fate. Our destiny is not written down for us to follow, you might say that we are all condemned to make choices. But it is in the choices that we become most fully human. It is our ability to freely choose our commitments that gives our lives value and meaning. As Emerson wrote "the life valiantly conducted is the true romance". Our Valor is not always found in our greatest victories, but in our enduring and faithful struggle to dream, to risk, and to dream again. To deny risk is to deny life.

For to laugh is to risk appearing the fool. To weep is to risk appearing sentimental. To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self. To place our ideas, our dreams before a crowd is to risk ridicule. To hope is to risk despair. To grow is to risk change. To try is to risk failure. And to live, is to risk dying.

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My thought, my hope, my prayer, is that within this community of faith we will participate in religion that seeks to engage life, not to escape it. To be a community that hopes, struggles, and celebrates the whole of life, with both its joys and sorrows. To be a place where we can seek out and find authenticity. Where we not only praise the divine but affirm the human spirit with all its strengths and weaknesses. And above all may we find the courage and the inspiration to risk, as we strive together to live the life best lived.

Amen.