

Join the Human Race
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Meditation

Knowing that some among us are ill...
Knowing that some among us are grieving...
Knowing that some among us have lost a job...
Knowing that some among us are struggling with addiction...
And knowing that we do not always speak our sorrow or struggle...

May we silently, with full hearts, hold one another in our thoughts and prayers...

...this hour... this day... this season... always...

Readings – from the Gospel of John 1:1-5, 14:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

from the essay "What Does it Mean to Be Human?" by Frederick Franck (in the collection by the same name)

It became clear that what through the years had fascinated me in Shakespeare, touched me so deeply from Rilke's *Book of Hours*, had moved me to tears in the *Agnus Dei* of Bach's B Minor Mass... in Gregorian and Tibetan chant, was the celebration of life's fullness and its transiency, its timelessness in time. It must be the ingredient that elevates art to the status of High Art as it is manifest in Egyptian, Assyrian and Medieval sculptures, in the sayings of Zen and Sufi masters... in Vermeer and in the smallest of Rembrandt's landscape drawings... But it is far from confined to High Art, for it strikes the awakened eye wherever it turns – in the glance exchanged by an old couple, in the nurse's face bent over me as I woke up from anesthesia, in the handshake of two men on a street corner, a child stroking its kitten – the Human.

Sermon

Several times over the years I have fallen while running through the woods – tripped on a root or rock, once I was actually flung backwards and onto my you know what by a branch I had thought I could run through.

Fortunately, beyond a few scratches or a mild ankle sprain, only my pride has suffered much from these falls. But each fall comes with a reminder: In the blink of an eye your life could change. Nothing is certain, most certainly including our health and physical well-being – and these days financial matters too – a job lost, a house lost. Unpleasant things, sad things, even tragic things don't just happen to other people. They can happen to any of us.

Join the human race.

My father quoted this line to himself in a journal he kept following his cancer diagnosis: Dad was a surgeon, and he reflected on the way in which he was now experiencing what so many of his patients had experienced first hand. So,.. “Join the human race.”

The hymn we've just sung, with words by poet William Blake, reminds us in broad strokes what that means: “Joy and woe are woven fine” in every life. For though the first line seems to suggest that some are born only to joy, and some only to misery, the rest of the poem – and the realities of our lives – testify otherwise. Though some most assuredly seem to have much more than their share of woe, most of us have some blend of joy and woe woven fine.

Join the human race.

You're running along, smooth and easy, and the unseen root trips you up. And everything changes. It *can* happen to anyone... even you who may have thought you were somehow immune.

Which is my first point. When things are going well, it is all too easy to think that the slings and arrows, ills and suffering of life only afflict those other people. Of course it just ain't so.

Now, it is not my purpose to encourage worry about the terrible unnamed, invisible, unimaginable thing that just might be about to happen to us. That is no way to live.

It *is* my purpose to remind us that whether things are going well for us or whether we are in the midst of an awful trial, we are *all* part of the human race – and this is a good and helpful and enriching thing to remember.

Some of you may recall my recently quoting Helen Keller, when she wrote that grief – perhaps the signature reminder of our human frailty and vulnerability to suffering – welcomes us into the largest family of all, the family of the heavy-hearted, as she put it. Sounds woeful indeed. Yet in the next breath she affirms that we feel around us the arms and the love of that family.

So we begin to realize that “join the human race” has a blessedly two-fold meaning. A fall, an illness, a setback, a loss... may be a sudden and forceful and quite unwelcome reminder that we are part of the human race, not invulnerable to the slings and arrows. Step one.

But step two: We're not alone. Others have had similar experiences. They can hold us, help us, heal us. And whether or not others in our circles of family and friends have had a similar experience to the one that has just knocked us down, still, they can hold us, help us, heal us.

And part of being fully part of our human family is to *accept* the holding, helping, healing. We are in it together. (This is, after all, one of the reasons we gather here each Sunday!)

Now there is yet one more perspective on this reminder, this mantra, “join the human race.” Which comes clear if we turn the phrase into a question rather than a statement: “Will you join the human race?”

Stories perhaps best make the point. And as we’ll see, the question sometimes comes to us over time, and sometimes as quickly as that hidden root or rock on the trail. Will you join the human race?

So... two quite dramatic stories to make the point about our usually more mundane lives.

First story:

Have you heard of Dr. Halima Bashir? She is a Sudanese woman. She had been given the gift of a good education by her forward looking family. She worked in a clinic, the first doctor in her home village – and her work included treating dozens of young girls who had been raped and beaten by the Janjaweed militias. For this she was herself kidnapped by soldiers and tortured and raped. She managed to escape and she returned to her village, welcomed back by her family – and continued her work.

Then, months later her own village was attacked and destroyed. She and her husband managed to escape, but her father was killed and she still doesn’t know of the whereabouts of her siblings and mother. Granted asylum in the U.K., she could retreat and rest. But instead “she travels the world, speaking about Darfur and the horrors perpetrated there against women and children.” To the question life posed to her – will you join the human race? – she answered a resounding “yes.”

(this story may be found at www.Beliefnet.com/inspiration)

Second story:

Perhaps some of you have read of the train station announcer at Mumbai’s largest railway station. His name is Vishnu Datta Ram Zende. Ordinarily his job is routine, directing travelers to their trains. Yet two Wednesdays ago, his job became anything but routine. Here’s how the New York Times described it:

...last Wednesday just before 10 p.m., when he heard a loud explosion and saw people running across the platform, he gripped his microphone and calmly directed a panicked crowd toward the safest exit. The station, Victoria Terminus... was suddenly under attack, the beginning of a three-day siege by a handful of young, heavily armed gunmen. “Walk to the back and leave the station through Gate No. 1,” he chanted alternately in Hindi and Marathi, barely stopping to take a breath until the platform was cleared. No sooner, gunmen located his announcement booth and fired, puncturing one of the windows. Mr. Zende was not hurt.

Vishnu Zende had had a split second decision as to how he would answer the question – will you join the human race? Terror was unfolding before him. His own life was in danger. He could have ducked and hid or run away. But he, too, *chose* to answer the question resoundingly “Yes.”

Now, these *are* dramatic stories to say the least... so they may provoke the response: “But I couldn’t do that.”

Yet the reality is that we don’t know how we will respond to a crisis until we’re in it.

And another other reality is that we have choices just about every day as to whether to become fuller members of the human race, choices that are more modest, choices to turn towards someone who is suffering rather than away, choices to give back in response to some good turn we have received.

This said, we may not always make the best choices every time – after all, being human also means being imperfect. Yes, sometimes we don't get it just right; sometimes we turn away from full membership, so to speak.

Yet we can learn from such missteps too. I know I have. The hometown boyfriend of a girl I knew in college was killed in a car accident. When she returned to campus I didn't know what to say. I avoided talking with her. In other words I fell short in the most basic of ways to be part of the human family simply by being present, which is often all it takes. At least I learned a lifelong lesson – began to learn it anyway.

So yes, our personal stories, whether of success or just muddling through, are generally not as dramatic as the stories of Halima Bashir or Vishnu Zende. But we all do have the same kinds of choices to be more fully part of the human race by reaching out to others, often using our own experience to hold and help and heal others. Each of us *does* have something to offer. Each of us can heed the lessons we learn from our own missteps and say to ourselves something like: “Yes, we *are* all in this together. I think I'll be part of the human race.”

And here's where I find the story of Jesus to be illuminating.

For to begin with, God in effect says, “I think I'll join the human race!”

(In the reading from John which we heard earlier, not that “the Word” is a translation from the Greek “logos” which has to do with what we might call the ordering principle of the cosmos – how things are at the most fundamental level...)

What a powerful image, rich with spiritual, mythological, and psychological meaning. God choosing to experience all the joy and woe woven fine of an ordinary human being by becoming the son of a carpenter in a small town. Yet at the same time somehow still being God, still divine – at least that's what the orthodox creeds say.

But we don't have to be orthodox or literal believers to see in the Jesus story a reminder that we human beings are not only made of joy and woe woven fine – we are also made of divine and human woven fine. So that when we make that *choice* to really be part of the human race by caring for each other – speaking out against the violence to women and children in Darfur, guiding travelers to safety on a Mumbai train platform, turning to help others suffering with the same illness or affliction you yourself have gone through, or just being present for another person living through a hard time... whatever our particular choice is on a particular day in a particular situation – we are bringing both the divine and the human parts of ourselves to our friend, our neighbor, our loved one. We are bringing the *infinite* love and compassion of our hearts... and we are bringing our own broken and very *finite* human heart... when we choose to be fully part of the human race.

Just as, the story of his life and death attests, Jesus did.

One more story of joining the human race. Dutch Rabbi Avraham Soetendorf, writing in the same collection of essays from which we heard earlier, attests to the extraordinary courage of those Germans who chose to be fully part of the human family by sheltering Jews at huge risk to their own lives.

He, just a baby, was one of those Jews, taken in by a 47-year-old German woman:

Because she opened her door and gave me support and love during the next two terrible war years, I live, and work, and long for the redemption of the world. My personal story is a universal tale.

Yes. Universal... and, blessed be, not so rare. Perhaps even ordinary. As Franck wrote in his essay, a few of the words we heard earlier:

...the celebration of life's fullness and its transiency, its timelessness in time... strikes the awakened eye wherever it turns – in the glance exchanged by an old couple, in the nurse's face bent over me as I woke up from anesthesia, in the handshake of two men on a street corner, a child stroking its kitten – the Human.

Join the human race! Joy and woe woven fine. Human and divine woven fine. Yes, sometimes we trip and fall... or worse. But others are there to lift us up.

Just as we are among those who often do the lifting.

Sadly there are plenty of examples of human beings making another kind of choice. All the more reason that we say that resounding "Yes" whenever we can.

And if this season is about anything, isn't it about reminding us that we *are* all in this together, for better and worse? And isn't this reminder all the more important this year which has also brought a season of foreclosures, job losses, shrinking retirement accounts?

We *are* all in this together.

So, yes, may we be fully part of the human race as we heal and hold and help one another.

So may it be.