

## Fifty Years Ago

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### Reading

*The first reading is taken from the speech Robert F. Kennedy gave to an open-air crowd on the evening of April 4, 1968. He was in the midst of the primary campaign for president, but a campaign stop had become a tragically sad occasion instead. Kennedy had begun his talk by informing the crowd that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had earlier that evening been shot and killed. After shouts of grief had quieted, Kennedy continued:*

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this... difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black -- considering the evidence evidently is that there were white people who were responsible -- you can be filled with bitterness, and with hatred, and a desire for revenge.

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization -- black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion, and love...

...we have to make an effort in the United States. We have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond, or go beyond these rather difficult times.

... my favorite poet was Aeschylus. And he once wrote:

*Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
until, in our own despair,  
against our will,  
comes wisdom  
through the awful grace of God.*

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another; and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black...

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times. We've had difficult times in the past, but we -- and we will have difficult times in the future...

(but)... the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings that abide in our land.

And let's dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world. Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

Thank you very much.

## Reading

from Ecclesiastes

*(Note: the Hebrew word usually translated "vanity" more accurately has the sense of evanescent, like a puff of wind, here and gone.)*

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.  
What do people gain from all the toil  
at which they toil under the sun?  
A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.  
The sun rises and the sun goes down,  
and hurries to the place where it rises.  
The wind blows to the south,  
and goes around to the north;  
round and round goes the wind,  
and on its circuits the wind returns.  
All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
to the place where the streams flow,  
there they continue to flow.

\* \* \*

I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the one do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

The wise have eyes in their head,  
but fools walk in darkness.

\* \* \*

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.

## Sermon

You heard a short while ago portions of the speech Bobby Kennedy gave from the back of a flat bed truck in Indianapolis fifty years ago on the night Martin Luther King, Jr., had been shot and killed, April 4, 1968 – an event, needless to say, of tragic consequences for our nation, rippling still.

Kennedy talked from just a few notes on a card. He spoke from the heart. What had been planned as a campaign speech quickly had to become a eulogy and a call for calm and understanding. And though you've just heard most of Kennedy's speech, there was no way to share the quiet emotion of the moment; I recommend that you watch and listen to the speech yourself – it is easily available on the web, and as moving today as it was fifty years ago.

In any case, there are just two lines of Kennedy's talk I'd like to highlight this morning.

First, he realistically named that our nation was in the midst of what he named with obvious understatement "difficult times" and then he named as well that we had had difficult times in the past and would have difficult times in the future. This echoes the realistic assessment and wisdom of the writer of Ecclesiastes who named a very long time ago that there is a time for everything under the sun, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to dance and a time to mourn, and so on. Difficult times and easy times..

It's not that we are meant to *like* the sometimes very much harder parts of this wisdom of the seasons of our lives; but it suggests that we might move through our lives with a little more ease and grace if we accept the reality that this is the nature of life.

But then the question is, well, how shall we move through these seasons, the hard as well as the easy, the devastating as well as the uplifting.

Bobby Kennedy was by no means counseling a bland, sheep-like acceptance. In his somber and deeply heartfelt talk Kennedy named our need as a nation for greater compassion, love, for more justice for all, regardless of the color of our skin. He concluded, in the oft-quoted final line, that we ought to "dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world."

Easier of course in the saying than in the doing, as the death of the man Bobby Kennedy was eulogizing made all too clear. But that man he was remembering lived that "doing" of compassion, love, and justice, in the midst of very difficult times indeed.

And, as you have often heard me say one way or another, how else would we choose to live other than to seek to bring more love, more compassion, more kindness, more justice, more peace into the world... day by day, often just one interaction at a time.

Further, whatever else we do in our lives, whatever our specific "toil under the sun" (job, career, and so forth), this seeking to make the world a little better, a little kinder, is also our work. And as the Teacher of Ecclesiastes wrote, there is nothing better

for us humans but to eat and drink (in other words we need material sustenance and we ought to enjoy the simple pleasures of life) *and* to enjoy and find good in our labor... in the midst of the seasons ebb and flow of our individual and shared lives.

So, I hear all this and more in Bobby Kennedy's speech fifty years ago, a speech grounded in the profound sorrow of that moment in time, a speech grounded as well for Bobby in particular in the sorrow evoked once again of the earlier loss of his brother, to which he alluded in his talk just before he quoted the poem of Aeschylus, the poem which named that wisdom can grow from the roots of despair: As most of us with age and experience come to know quite well, lessons learned from the dark seasons of our lives.

But let me now enlarge our "fifty years ago" lens beyond just that one moment in time, important, even transformative as it was. Let me enlarge our lens of fifty years ago even beyond the world of politics and social change that so marked that time.

1968 was, to be sure, a year of political and social turmoil and change unlike any other in our American history. Those of us who were old enough have vivid memories of the war in Vietnam unfolding on our TV screens, the withdrawal from the presidential campaign of President Johnson, the assassination of Dr. King and the ensuing unrest and violence in our cities, then a mere two months later the murder of Bobby Kennedy, then the divided Democratic Convention that summer and the police violence outside the walls of the convention center in Chicago, then the election of Richard Nixon. And more.

So, with all this political and social turmoil perhaps coloring our perspective, we might not as immediately bring to mind that 1968 was also the year that Apollo astronauts circled the moon, that Arthur Ashe became the first African American man to win the U.S. Open tennis tournament, that the first international Special Olympics was held, that a Wesleyan University senior named Amby Burfoot won the Boston Marathon, that Mister Rogers began national syndication, that the movie "2001 a Space Odyssey" was released, that "Laugh In" and "60 Minutes" began their television runs, that the Beatles released their "White Album" and the Rolling Stones "Beggars Banquet"... and on and on.

My point is that our lives are more than political lives. Our political lives matter a great deal – it is how we, the people, the "polis", shape our shared lives. But our political lives are nested in and held by our social and cultural lives – the arts, music, science, technology, all of which is in turn nested in our lives as part of nature, and nested in our spiritual lives.

We are shaped and held by all of it. And the world is changed and our lives are changed not only by who is in office but by the music we hear and sing, the books we read, the movies and television shows we watch, as well as of course advances in science and technology.

In short, I have found that bringing back to mind all that was going on in 1968, not just the politics but everything else as well, is a salutary reminder that our lives here and now, 2018, are also larger than what's going on in politics, are also held by and often

nourished by the larger culture – music, all the arts, ever deeper scientific knowledge, not to mention our spiritual lives however we understand and experience our spiritual lives, and always by the world of nature in which we live and move and have our being.

Now, there is no question in my mind that much of my own worldview today was shaped by the politics of the 1960s. I have vivid memories of the signature events not only of 1968, but of the years before and after.

But my life was shaped and often enhanced too by the music of that era – from Pete Seeger to the Beach Boys and the Beatles (I had all their albums).

And though it's hard for me to imagine this was the same year, it was indeed the case that just a few weeks after King's assassination I was inspired by an article in "Sports Illustrated" about the Boston Marathon to begin running – an activity that has been grounding and nourishing for all these years since.

And either that year or the next during this time of national turmoil somehow a copy of the Hindu "Upanishads" fell into my hands, planting a seed for a lifelong nourishment from the wellsprings of the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, indeed all the world's religions. And it is nourishment and wisdom and solace that has helped to carry me through whatever season of turmoil, whether personal or political.

Yes, our lives are more, much more, than political; and we would do well to remember this.

This all comes around again, then, to Bobby Kennedy's invitation to follow the example of Dr. King by striving to live lives of compassion and understanding in the midst of whatever, echoing Aeschylus, drops of pain fall upon our hearts, an invitation we can, it seems to me, better heed if we keep in mind that our lives are lived in a larger world than the purely political, to remember to keep the wellsprings of spiritual nourishment open, however we each best do that – through music, through passionately following the Red Sox or Bruins, through opening our minds as we learn of the latest scientific discoveries, through opening our hearts by reading the Sermon on the Mount, the Bhagavad Gita, or a favorite poem of Shakespeare or Mary Oliver.

Sometimes a little of this spiritual nourishing is as simple for me as turning the radio dial from the news on WBUR to the music on WCRB or WUMB. Or just enjoying the birdsong outside our kitchen window or the clink of dishes as we clean up around the sink.

All the better, then, to also engage in the issues of the day as a citizen, whether at Town Meeting or in the voting booth this November or however else we make our voices heard, however else we strive in our own lives to compensate for the terrible losses of the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy.

Finally, then, one more personal example.

It was just a little less than fifty years ago one summer, maybe 1969 or 70, when I was introduced to Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass". A fellow counselor at Forest Lake

Camp in Warrensburg, New York, was giving me a ride to camp that summer; he was a couple of years older than I, and he had already discovered Walt Whitman, and when he learned that I didn't know much about Whitman he said I must (must!) get and read a copy of the first edition of "Leaves of Grass." Mike was authoritative enough that I knew I must do as he said. Which I did.

To conclude, then, here are a few lines from this poet of our American democracy, this poet who celebrated in his lines each and all whatever their occupation or gender or origins. Here are a few lines that nourished me then and nourish me still, whatever season of the soul I/we find ourselves in.

Here, a sample of Whitman's leaves that woke me up almost fifty years ago that I leave for you today... perhaps nourishment on the path of life for you too as they were and are for me:

I celebrate myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

\*

This minute that comes to me over the past decillions,  
There is no better than it and now.

\*

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars.

\*

Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last,  
In things best known to you finding the best or as good as the best.  
In folks nearest to you finding also the sweetest and strongest  
and lovingest.  
Happiness not in another place, but this place... not for another hour,  
but this hour.....

So may it be.