

Reaching the Other Side
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Happy New Year to you all! I trust your holiday was even a bit restful. Ours was full and, well, sick. All fourteen of our clan took turns being sick with stomach flu. My turn came on Christmas Eve. Well, of course it did! My deepest thanks to Lois and many others who did so well helping me through our services that Sunday. It took me another three days to really right my boat. With a week out of the saddle here, I had to find my groove again. Preaching is a bit like riding a horse; if you don't keep at it, you're bound to end up a bit sore, or thrown. Well, thrown off was apt for me. I started calling this sermon "Starting Anew" but then went with "Further on Up the Road." But since I couldn't remember what I was going to do with that, I changed it again to "Reaching the Other Side." Yes, this seems to be more fitting. Even though Jan. 1st is just another day on the calendar, it is something new in our imagination. A time when we leave behind what doesn't work and hope for resolutions for changes that will work. We look with longing to a new year, to the other side, hoping it will offer more satisfaction than the last. Just about mid-February, when the resolutions have slipped out of our consciousness, we start sighting another side to the stream of life in the distance, and it beckons us.

What is it with always longing for the new, that which we don't have? We yearn, we might strive, perhaps even achieve, and then, well, and then we have it and yearn again. Human nature I suppose. Or karma. Or even the sin of separation from what we have, to what we want.

I believe that in order to reach the other side and be happy, we have to retain a consciousness of why we yearned for the change in the first place. Looking back over 2006, I can't see why I was in such a hurry for 2007. Until I thought about where I had been. This is one of the reasons resolution making is important. If you can find them, you can measure how far ashore you have come. I promised myself that I would join the YMCA and I did. But the best resolutions are the ones that require a fairly steady conscious reminder. My favorite for this New Year is to visit each of my loved ones on their birthday. That way I can remember them and honor them. I learned this from my Dad.

There is so much more to reaching the other side of life than resolution making, of course. It might be a start, but to truly grow spiritually and emotionally in life, we must show the courage to be conscious of our faults and our potential. In Scott Peck's sequel to his bestseller *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, Dr. Peck makes a rather compelling case that reaching the other side, the better side to what we want to be and do, requires our consciousness and our will. This little formula is a lot harder than

it sounds. For, as any who have endured psychotherapy can tell you, just being conscious of your faults doesn't make them go away. We have to summon the will to change. And that, my people, is full of back steps and slides.

Jesse Gelsingner was a troubled youth, the oldest of four. His mother was hospitalized for manic depression when he was a boy, and his father, Roger, was a handyman doing the best he could to raise his kids. Jesse was born with a rare genetic disease which, if untreated, would lead to death by the time he was thirty. In most cases, the disease kills infants before they are one year old. Jesse was one of the few who survived into adulthood.

In and out of trouble with the law, he had managed to find a steady job by the time he was 18. It was just about then that his father heard about an experimental gene therapy program at the University of Pennsylvania. Jesse was eager to try it out. There were risks. The "vector" or vehicle for the replacement gene was a flu virus that could lead to complications. But given Jesse's otherwise excellent health he seemed a prime candidate.

In the spring of 1998 the experiment began. At first the therapy looked promising but then something went wrong. The virus they used to transmit the new gene into Jesse turned out to be more virulent than the doctors had imagined. Perhaps Jesse's wild past had led to an immune deficiency. But whatever it was, Jesse soon began to suffer from multi-organ shutdown. As he lay dying,

his father held his son. “Dad” Jesse said, “I haven’t always been the best kid. It was like we were on different sides of the river. But you have to know I love you and that I did this not just for me but for the babies who will get my disease, hopefully the docs will figure it out better next time and it will save the babies.” Jesse died soon thereafter.

At his memorial service, his father, his brother and sisters and, remarkably, even his Doctor, stood at the edge of his favorite river near his home in Wyoming and spread his ashes into the air. Strangely, Jesse’s father reports a deeper spirituality than he had known before, as if Jesse’s dying gave him a great consciousness about wanting to live, and the will to live it. He reported, “Jesse reached that other side, he is over there and I know it was for the good. I miss him terribly, but he did the right thing entering into the experiment.” Since that time, the doctors have been working hard finding out what went wrong, making good on their promise to Jesse to “figure this thing out.” Small breakthroughs have happened consistently over this last decade. Soon they will be ready to try again. (Adapted from *The Biomed Death of Jesse Gelsinger* by Sheryl Joy, NYT, 1999)

Most ancient religions use crossing a river as a metaphor for meaning, whether it is between years, between lives or between stages of life. The ancient Greeks spoke of crossing the rivers Styx and Posida, the rivers of mortality and forgetfulness, into Hades.

The Buddhists talk of crossing the river of attachment in life towards the farther shore of enlightenment. In each case, there is a ferryman to take us across. For Jesse Gelsinger the ferry was his disease and his courage to try something new to change the course not only of his own life but of those children who would follow him. In his case, the crossing led not to his living but to his death. But, as his own father acknowledged, his journey might very well lead to life after all.

But in order to take that journey we must each have the will to try the crossing. It is never enough to ride on the back of someone else as they cross. Each must enter the forest at the darkest place of their own choosing commanded Arthur to his knights in search of the Holy Grail. Each of us must make our own crossing in order to fully understand what we want to change. It's not like we can't have help finding where to cross, that is what a church community is for; we help you with finding the place on the shore where you might want to cross and change. But ultimately you must do this on your own.

The spiritual quest is aided by your fellow travelers, but you must find the spirit in your own. There is an old proverb: "God has no grandchildren." The religion of our choosing must be our own.

Along the way to the other side there will be circumstances and people who will thwart you. There is an old Persian story of a

Scorpion who said to the frog “Carry me across the river”. The frog responded that he wouldn’t because the Scorpion would sting him. “If I sting you,” said the Scorpion, “then we both drown.” About two thirds of the way across the river, the Scorpion stings the frog anyway. As the frog is sinking he asks the Scorpion “Why?” The Scorpion replies, “It is in my nature.” Well, it may be a Scorpion’s nature to sting, but we hope human nature is no such thing. Still there are those stings of misfortune that slow us down if not stop us. Whenever we change, we risk the critic’s voice, often from ourselves first and loudest. I can only say this: consider turning the old maxim on its head, instead of waiting to see in order to believe, consider instead believing it before you see it. This is the place of faith in life’s journey, in crossing the river. I will have much more to say about faith in the coming months but let me say this: Faith, the deepest held belief that life has meaning, is, ultimately, the river we cross. We are born on it, over it and then on it we cross to the other shore.

As we begin this New Year together I would like all of us to ponder the other side we see before us in the months that lie ahead. Remember Jesse. Traveling takes courage and will but we must begin with the simple belief that we can actually get there. Perhaps this is the year you resolve to heal old wounds. We can help you start. Perhaps this is the year to defeat some old demon of fear or addiction. We can help you start. Perhaps this is the

year you will give something back to your community or this church. We can help you start. It really doesn't matter if you have tried and failed before. This is a new day, a new time to try again, to reach the other shore. As Oscar Wilder put it, "Every Saint has a past, every sinner has a future."

Richard Feynman, a Nobel laureate in physics, once described a conversation he had with an artist, "I have a friend who is an artist...He'll hold up a flower and say 'See how beautiful this is?' and I will agree. And he will say, 'I am an artist, I can see how this is beautiful, but you as a scientist want to take this apart and it becomes a dull thing.' And I think he is kind of nutty. I can still love the flower. At the same time I can see more about the flower than he does. (adapted from Rev. Lee Barker's *It Only Adds* in QUEST, March 2002).

To reach the farther shore you need to look at the crossing in both a small and a big way; not only what the other shore is, but where you will leave from, how you will cross, how fast the water is moving. When Jesse signed up for the experiment it was at the small level, he wanted to be free of the disease, but it wasn't until he pushed off from the shore that he saw the other shore wasn't even about him. So it might be with us.

In changing our lives it may ultimately not be about us at all. When I am asked to gaze into the future and imagine what could possibly be gained from someone's struggle, I sometimes remind

them that their struggle may not be about them. “What?! Not about me!” they exclaim. “It might be about changing others around you.” When one couple I knew lost their newborn to heart failure they wondered why she had even been born. I had no ready answer but in time the other side appeared. The family and friends of that lost baby, raised over \$100, 000 to help the local hospital buy some needed neo-natal cardiac equipment.

Being here this year starts with you but it may not end with you. We are here to build an open and welcoming community to teach the lesson of life to those in need. With consciousness, will and determination we will do just that. And in each of our struggles we will hopefully reach another shore. But remember, my people, that sometimes just being together in loving transformation might actually help someone else cross their river as well. And at the end of the day, at the end of the year, that may be all there is.

Blessings and Peace to you all in this New Year!