

## Fragile Things and Precious

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Psalm 139 – A Meditation

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I used to marvel at the old prayers from the Book of Common Prayer, those we used to pray each evening:

*“O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed; give unto thy servants that peace which the world cannot give; that our hearts may be set to obey thy commandments, and also that by thee, we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in rest and quietness....”*

*“Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy, defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only Son, Our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.”*

There’s more than a little alarm here. There’s the furtive look in the eyes of a people who live in moral danger, in a world (as William Manchester once put it) “lit only by fire.”

But I’ve been rethinking these old prayers lately. Perhaps I misunderstood them. Perhaps my modern naïveté got in the way of understanding the significance of their message for us. Our ancestors had a better grasp on the fragile nature of life than we do. They knew that while we sleep all sorts of things happen in the shadows of the night. They knew this literally, as well as figuratively. And we would do well to recognize the aptness of the metaphor in our own lives.

Life is fragile. Why must we love what we will inevitably lose? poet Louise Gluck asks; because there’s nothing else to love.

I recall a story about the great Carlyle Marney. He was preaching at a nursing home. Standing in the midst of a roomful of widows and widowers, parents who had outlived their children, men and women whose friends were dead and whose lives had passed by them in a flash. Marney looked around that room and he said, “Oh, what a bunch of losers we are.”

As the poet Wendell Berry has written, “An old man’s mind is a graveyard where the dead arise.”

“Why this sudden morbidity, Preacher? Don’t we get enough bad news from our papers and our televisions and our computers? Are you vitamin D deficient, or what?”

We do get a lot of bad news. A lot. But mostly without context, without meaning. And that is worth less than nothing.

You see, there are those who have looked at the impermanence of life and determined it means life is meaningless. “What’s the point of life, if it is so short, so fragile?” they will ask. And their question is a sort of declaration, a manifesto against meaning.

I wish that those who felt that way could be just a little more attentive to the other characteristic of life.

Yes, life is fragile; it is also precious. But this is an awareness we arrive at through experience and not by argument.

I fell in love all over again the first time I held my first granddaughter Grace. I didn't know that was possible and I was unprepared for it. Typical of me, at that point in my life, while Debbie had already been in Texas with our daughter Jessica for several days helping her prepare for delivery, I was in Charlotte, North Carolina, speaking at the annual conference of Presidents of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities. I got the call early that morning, Jessica had her baby shortly after midnight.

My suitcase was next to the lectern as I gave the closing key note address, and a taxi was waiting outside the hotel to rush me to the airport, and I made it to the hospital in Austin late on the same day she was born. And I held her. She was so beautiful and so perfect and she wrapped her tiny hand around my finger, and I fell in love.

A few years later, when our second granddaughter Clara was three, something utterly transcendent happened, I believe, entirely because of her beautiful smile. I had been meditating for an hour or so in our home in Louisville, Kentucky. I went out onto the back deck and sat, meditating again. My eyes closed, I became conscious of an image in my mind, a vast galaxy made up of billions of stars slowly rotating around a Black Hole in empty space. My mind imagined the life of those countless stars in that galaxy, stars with planets some perhaps brimming with life, but also the voracious appetite of that Black Hole, devouring whatever stars and planets and gasses and whole systems were drawn into it. And suddenly, these words came to mind: "Nature has no regard." Again, "Nature has no regard." Birth, life, flourishing, dying, rotting. Nature simply is; it doesn't care.

I sat with that consciousness. I sat still and quiet meditating, just staying with that vision. A hollowness opened up within me, a yawning emptiness, an abyss of sadness. I sat.

And then, just as suddenly, the beautiful smiling loving perfect face of my second granddaughter came to me. I saw her face exactly as I had seen her a hundred times, just looking at me with love. Pure, innocent, perfect love. And I said to myself, any existence, any universe of being that can include that love is not meaningless.

I felt it again about a year ago when I taught our grandson Anderson to fish from the boat he has now declared is his boat, not his grandfather's. I just take care of it for him. That laugh and wiggle of pure joy as we cast a hooked shrimp into the bay where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Altamaha River. That impish delight he had holding the rod as I held him in my arms. Even pulling in that dead shrimp without a fish in sight didn't take one ounce of love away from that moment. Precious.

My dear friends, this is not a just tribute to the joy of grandchildren. It is a reminder of how we go about noticing the preciousness of this fragile life. Each day, every day we are confronted by glimpses of the presence of being itself, which invites our reverence.

As Barbara Brown Taylor has written, "Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars."

What does it take to see this? What does it require to find the deep, joyful meaning in this fragile life full of fragile things?

Lydia Peele, in her magical collection of short stories, titled "Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing," tells the story of a person who is still recovering from a stroke. She writes: "Since my stroke, this is what I have come to know: The path to enlightenment is free of all desire. The doctors say it is something to do with a drop in my testosterone levels, but I feel it is something greater. I look at the world with a new, pure love."

It is so often true that it is in the moments when we experience our own fragility that we see life as most precious. Whatever brings us to those moments of vulnerability isn't really the point, whether it is a drop in testosterone levels or a brush with death or a moment of ecstasy on a mountain top or the face of a newborn child. In those moments, we lust for nothing more than this fragile life full of fragile things.

What was it Leonard Cohen sang? "There's a crack, a crack, in everything. That's how the light gets in." Sometimes it's the cracks that make it all the more precious.

Amen.