

Chapel Talk
January 12, 2005
Will Speers

Last Friday after lunch, I went down to the chapel service that Adam Mantha and Mr. Hutchinson had organized about the tsunami relief efforts. The discussion ranged from “How can we give?” to “Why are people forgetting this disaster so quickly?” The 25 people sitting in the chancel talked about different ways we could raise money, and about the complexities of human nature – how quickly we forget; how little we knew of the poverty existing in these battered countries before the tsunami hit; how invisible the problems of the world are when they occur to people who are different from us. By the end of 20 minutes, we had come up with some workable ideas on how to help.

But what has stayed in my mind since last Friday is the admission that we do forget catastrophes quickly. We move on. We get back to our own lives. We deny. W.H. Auden’s poem, “Musée des Beaux Arts,” piercingly captures that feeble quality of humanity:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window
or just walking dully along...

There are many reasons for our failings here: our lives are busy and filled with lots to do; we ultimately have to prioritize our energies, whom we help, how we keep ourselves alive. We can handle only so much suffering and pain, especially when the magnitude goes beyond our comprehension, as it did with this tsunami, or the horrific killings in Rwanda, or the devastating cyclone in Bangladesh in 1991 that killed 130,000 people, or the earthquake in Mexico City in the 1980’s which killed 20,000 people, or even the attack on the World Trade Towers. There is simply too much for us to take in at once. It is unimaginable.

To protect ourselves from this monstrosity, we block it out. The body does the same action when it is injured or bruised – muscles atrophy to shield themselves from more hurt. We do that emotionally to protect ourselves from going crazy in the face of such destruction and pain. How can we comprehend 150,000 deaths? We can't – but as one person at the Chapel said, we can think globally, then act locally.

Humans forget quickly. That's why we are doomed to repeat the past. It's also why big moments end so quickly. Take Christmas, for example. I imagine just mentioning the word "Christmas" caused some of you a moment of unease, perhaps even trepidation. "Is it about to happen again? Please, no, please, no!" We've already forgotten Christmas, and it was a mere 18 days ago. We've been back to School barely a week, yet vacation and presents and family chaos feel like months ago. I know I can now turn on the car radio without being assaulted by those soppily played Christmas songs – I even bet a few of you are scared I might mention the titles of these dreaded songs. Christmas was then; this is now.

But isn't something wretchedly wrong here? Is Christmas just the absurd shopping and then the fleeting presents? Have we forgotten what we were supposed to be anticipating, the excitement of this birth, the chance to experience it again, the hope to be reborn?

The Sunday before Christmas my brother, who is a minister in Philadelphia, asked me to lead an adult class at his church on Auden's long poem, "For the Time Being," which is a verse adaptation of the Christmas Story. The final passage, spoken by the Narrator, captures this post-Christmas depression:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes...
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week –
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully –

To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are...
... the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.
It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten
The office was as depressing as this...
...In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance.

Ironically, we should read this Christmas poem in January and February, especially bleak and cold February, to witness how far behind we've left Christmas, discarded it in the garbage can like torn wrapping paper. Maybe that's why churches name major community service initiatives, "Christmas in April," because they need to keep that spirit alive long after Christmas. Maybe that's why singing a Christmas hymn in the summer is actually fun, because we are freshly reminded of the meaning of those words. Maybe the only meaningful Christmas happens afterwards. What can we do this winter and spring and summer and fall which will let us actually, truly, simply, celebrate Christmas; that will mean Christmas, the Christmas of attempting "To love all relatives," even though we can't and won't; the Christmas of not sending the child in the manger "away," even though we keep doing that; the Christmas of trying "to redeem from insignificance" "The

Time Being,” even though “There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, irregular verbs to learn?” How can we keep the meaning of Christmas and the needs of the victims of the tsunami disaster present in our daily lives? Here are four suggestions.

One, let’s take action. Proposals from last Friday’s chapel discussion included raising money from a series of sacrifice lunches, maybe once a month until graduation; having individual dorms adopt a child from one of these devastated countries through CARE and UNICEF; visiting a Hindu temple to find out if there are direct ways we can help here in Delaware; working through the Episcopal Church to partner with a church or school in Indonesia or Sri Lanka, much the same as we have with St. Mark’s in South Africa. Yesterday, the boys both ate pizza and raised money, giving legitimate meaning to “Tsunami Tuesday.” Early this morning, Adam Mantha, Ashley Panichelli and Sallie Wright Milam went over to Middletown High School to discuss with their student leaders how we could partner with them in raising relief funds. Action generates results and hope. Action engages hands and the soul. Money does have a positive and right now, immediate impact.

Two, buy and wear the bands that Antonia and Sallie Wright will be selling. Yes, that will also raise money, but wearing them will be a way for us daily to remember this calamity. Wearing these blue bands will be like prayer, a momentary thought connection, a spiritual, intangible cable that bonds us to these victims. Does our prayer or thinking help them? Not really; it doesn’t bring them anything tangible or needed, except through our financial donation – but it does unite us with them across oceans and continents. Feeling that band constantly around our wrist lets us touch the outskirts of this horror. Wearing “LIVESTRONG” bracelets doesn’t cure cancer, but they remind us that it is something we desperately want to do; they symbolize our solidarity with the cause and with the victims. The bracelets simply say, “You are not alone.”

Three, rituals help us remember and stay connected. Rites of chapel, hymns, family-style meals, grace, school meetings, Andrew’s Place, even wearing a blue or yellow or pink bracelet reminds us what we care about and what is larger than our own particular needs. Structure grounds us in memory and habit; it brings order to our wild and busy world; it makes us focus on the world outside of us. Sustained moments of silence – right before grace is said at a meal, or here in chapel

– bestow upon us a connection away from our petty concerns of grades and sports and applications and those endless “to do” lists which falsely give us the impression we exist.

My final suggestion is about how we can “redeem/from insignificance” this “Time Being” we have been allotted in life, this brief being of existence we have on earth. Because as sad as this world is, sad in its natural devastation, sad in its man-made destruction, there has been a response. One commentator said that two waves struck South Asia: one was the tsunami; the other was the humanitarian wave of relief and care. Many people generated that second wave, fueled with the power of countless individual donations. Whether to the victims of the tsunami or the mudslides in California or to our neighbors in Middletown or within this School community, there is heroism in the very simplicity of giving, of helping. There is heroism in staying up all night with a sick classmate. There is heroism in babysitting on a moment’s notice to let a faculty member get to a meeting. There is heroism in how siblings care for each other. There is heroism in helping someone else because you yourself have been helped by others. There is heroism in a five-minute hallway talk that merely connects. All these touches “redeem/from insignificance” “The Time Being”: they make the moment permanent; they consecrate. They are what William Wordsworth called

...That best portion of a good man’s life,
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love.

We don't have to win the Nobel Prize for Helping to animate Christmas, to give meaning and relief to an empty or starving life. We can serve the cause of humanity not just by aiding the victims thousands of miles away, but also by how we interact with those around us at meals, at home, in airports and train stations, in stores and at street intersections.

This recognition that life is nevertheless lived most meaningfully in little moments ironically came to me three summers ago at a funeral. A great friend of mine died of Lou Gehrig’s disease. His service was in New Hampshire, and it was packed. Phil Simmons was an English professor, and he loved language, great writers, and like most teachers, he relished interpretation.

Phil took this passion to new heights by writing his own eulogy, which he had read by one of his college friends. Of course he had to analyze a literary work, but initially his choice perplexed me. It was “Out, Out--,” Robert Frost's poem echoing Macbeth's famous last soliloquy which describes the emptiness and nothingness of life. In Frost's poem, a young boy dies from a freak accident, and his family stands around him at the bedside:

He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then – the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little – less – nothing! – and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

I had always read the end of this poem as an example of how insensitive people can be – how quickly people can overlook the suffering and pain of others. But in this seemingly bleak and cold portrait, Phil found hope for all of us sitting there listening to his voice, a voice that truly was speaking to us from another world. Phil knew that we would leave his service in a few minutes, and amid hugs and tears we'd go to our cars and then realize we needed to buy milk and get the kids to music lessons and finish the laundry and work through that Sisyphean “To do” list. And then we would feel guilty about getting the milk, because we wouldn't be honoring him or his memory; that somehow buying milk would defame his memory or our feelings about him. We'd be just like those people who have already forgotten Christmas or the tsunami victims. Since it is not us who are hurt or dead, we can return to our lives and jobs.

But Phil's startling reinterpretation of Frost's poem was that those minor tasks celebrate life, just as those simple offerings of help were heroic. Those basic acts and errands “redeem” the insignificance. Those chores are a testimony that we indeed live. It is good to be alive and to have to get milk, Phil asserted. Life rarely occurs on the grand stage with floodlights and a 50-piece orchestra. Instead, life happens in hallways, at bedtimes, in cars, at grocery stores, over the kitchen sink. How we connect through these necessary, unglorious deeds sustains us in the routine and

drudgery of our existence. Progress happens mostly through small steps: we only lose that extra weight from Christmas gradually, despite those sporadic, intense workouts; we only get to know people slowly, building trust and understanding through many moments, not one big talk which we naively believe will change our lives; we only become better athletes or artists through practice, not through getting it right on the first try and then coasting. We are incrementalists. But those fragments paradoxically forge together if not to make a whole unit, then at least to make us wholesome.

It's OK that we, since we are not the ones dead, turn back to our affairs. But in doing so, we must act, and we must connect. By acting, we remember and honor; we allow Christmas to happen in April and February and October and July. By acting, we connect ourselves to others, even if we never actually touch them. Those "little, nameless, unremembered, acts of kindness and of love" send ripples through our families and communities and world, endowing our lives and the lives of those around us with significance and hope and redemption.