

Chapel Talk
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Will Speers

Inspiration

This past summer, my wife and I left our home in New Hampshire at 6:00 a.m. to climb the Baldface Mountains near the Maine border. It was a gorgeous morning – sparkling blue skies, mild temperatures without humidity, a soft wind bouncing through the leaves. The day begged you to be outside. With water bottles filled, sandwiches and fruit packed, we started driving toward Maine on quiet back roads. As we pulled out of the dirt driveway, I took a bite of toast, and was cognizant how heavy, still asleep and unready my body was for this 9-mile hike. I casually turned on the radio to our local NPR station. Without realizing it, we were both mesmerized by the following report:

[NPR story on Jim and Don Sargent](#)

[Audio broadcast of StoryCorps interview between Jim and Don Sargent](#)

Listening to this three minute broadcast, it quickly became difficult to drive, as tears ran freely down my face. I couldn't look over at Heidi, because it was embarrassing how immediately moved I was by this story at 6:15 in the morning; yet when it ended, I saw Heidi wipe her own eyes. Neither one of us could initially speak as we continued to drive on solitary roads. My toast, cold and hardened, sat forgotten in my lap.

Why were we so affected by these voices? While I can easily tear up, the love and devotion each brother held for the other was stunning. Even 40 years later, they powerfully articulated their love in simple, unadorned language. Their resilience humbled me. Their testimonial affirmed the bonds of family. The exchange that really choked me up was when Jim, the Vietnam War hero, asserted to Don, his diabetic brother, "I'm proud to be your brother and you're my guy," and Don replies, "And you're my guy, and I love you."

Each brother believed the other was the true hero. Neither one possessed an ounce of self-importance; each accepted what Life gave him. Neither thought much of the challenges

of his own life; instead, he drew hope and strength from the other's perseverance. Jim, the soldier, felt Don's life-long struggle with diabetes sustained and protected him from war's horror. For Don, his brother's military courage and sacrifice fortified him through years of physical and emotional turmoil.

The paradox of inspiration is that while it initially is about us, our epiphany or recognition, it actually extricates us from our selfish world into the lives of others. Indeed, we are inspired to do something. I can certainly be moved by the example of people around me; I can be awed by words, impressed by conduct – but if I am truly inspired, something more has to happen. As I wrote this talk last weekend, I realized the collaborative nature of inspiration: inspiration is not passive, static or solitary; it is purpose, action, change. When inspired, I must stand up, produce, engage. Its root meaning has deeply religious and spiritual implications: “inspiration” means “a breathing in, an inhaling.” That is what God did to Adam and Eve in Genesis, turning mud into human life by breathing in the Holy Spirit to their bodies, allowing them to live and move. Literally, the Spirit goes in, and clay becomes alive, enabling us to live lives of generosity and charity, lives that hold meaning only in service to others. As Mr. Roach noted on Sunday at Old St. Anne's Church, salvation is not about saving yourself but about redeeming your community. Likewise, inspiration is not about me but about my inspired actions for others. In many ways, inspiration happens when another breaks into us, breathes life into us, propelling us to fix, help, move, build, heal.

The more I've thought about that radio broadcast, the more I've understood that inspiration is a relationship. What we discover, what we are inspired by, exists only when given to, planted in, shared with, another: it is not a loss, but rather a gift, birth, continuation; a sharing, a betterment. Sadly, it is human nature to compare ourselves to others – how much more athletic she is than I am, how much smarter he is, how much more money they have. Our envy and jealousy isolate us. Shakespeare describes this pathetic self-absorption in one of his sonnets:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,

And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least...(#29)

The speaker in this poem wallows in self-pity. Getting out of ourselves, emotionally and physically; getting into another person's world; acting for and connecting with someone offers us the only chance for a happy, useful and constructive life.

In the month since hearing that radio broadcast, I have been inspired to express my love and gratitude to family and friends, to affirm their impact on my life, and to exist more in their lives than in mine. As I start my 31st year at St. Andrew's, my dear colleague Mr. Roach, with increasingly less hair, nevertheless passionately exemplifies for me how to commit more energy, vision and hope to this School and its students, in order to bring justice and equality to all humanity. I am empowered by the vigor and tenacity of the students at this School, who genuinely want to transform the world. They inspire me with their service and fundraising and causes; by their commitment to stewardship and learning; by their devotion to friendship and hospitality. They inspire me to be like them. Daily I am encouraged by the zeal and creativity of my colleagues, to teach with passion and commitment. Those whose bodies appear to hinder them, through illness or disability, inspire me to forget my creaks and worries, and focus, as they do, on what is eternal and vital. I am inspired by the immediacy and openness of Mrs. Duprey, who so naturally and inclusively says "I love you," a phrase that doesn't come as smoothly to my lips; her mentorship gives me courage to embrace those I cherish. I am guided by the full lives of my parents, who even as they age and physically slow down, invite and welcome more people into their family. I am inspired by my vibrant and expressive wife, who makes it safe to talk and feel and laugh. I am inspired by the honesty of my children, who have dared to speak their questions, emotions and hopes, more than I could or did as a child. They challenge me likewise to voice my soul – although sometimes their honesty surprises me, as when I asked my little son Carter, age four, how old I was, and he immediately replied: "You're stupid, Dad. That's how old you are."

We can be touched by words in chapel; by the valor and resilience of those around us; by the plight of victims in Delaware, New Orleans, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Central America; by the service of saintly individuals: but until we transform that empathy into action, until we respond to something bigger than ourselves, until we let that spirit burst in and fill us with resolve and tenacity, we are still selfish creatures consumed in our own tangible, materialistic lives. Nothing changes: no growth, no liberation, no transformation, no justice.

To be inspired means to risk the comfort for the battle; it means to fight, to get messy in the trenches of life in order to bring opportunity to those without it. To be inspired requires us to leave the shelter of the shore and plunge into the torrents of hatred and small-mindedness and exclusivity. To be inspired demands we forget our own petty worries for the needs and aspirations of those around us. Senator Robert Kennedy, speaking in South Africa in 1966, asserts what happens when inspired people act for the cause of humanity:

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

A tiny ripple, a first step, one person, one deed can galvanize the forces of righteousness. Therefore, we must fulfill our inspirations to make them real; to do so breathes life into the barren corners of this tired world, transforming isolation and solipsism into salvation and generosity. Our very essence depends on such sustaining engagement. May we incarnate that spirit. May we possess the courage to risk our convictions. May we live inspired lives to make our families, this community, our country and our world more gracious, just and virtuous.