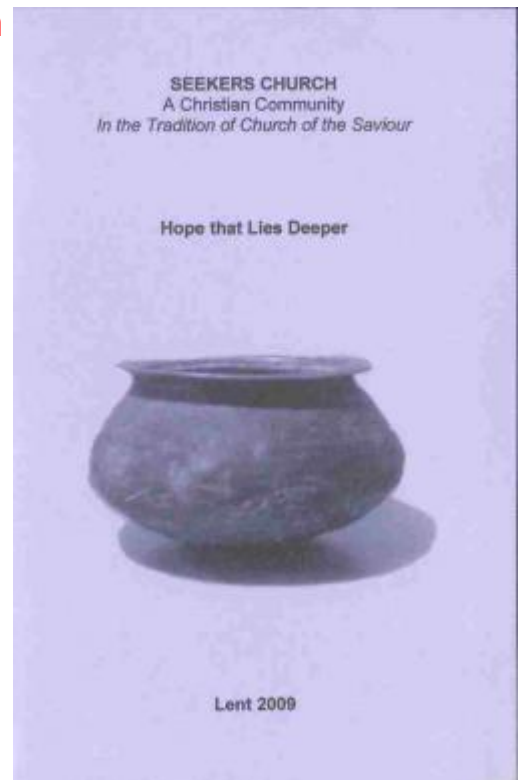


# "Hunting the Hope that Lies Deeper? Practice Dying" by Peter Bankson

# "Hunting the Hope that Lies Deeper? Practice Dying " by Peter Bankson

March 29, 2009, the fifth Sunday in Lent



## SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

## INTRODUCTION

As I approached my 70th birthday earlier this month I found myself taking a fresh look at aging and mortality. These are natural changes, aging and mortality, but they don't get much attention, at least not much visible attention. Every once in a while there's a book like "Tuesdays with Morrie" that raises our cultural awareness for a few minutes, but then it's quickly back to all that attention on being successful ... winning ... making it into the playoffs.

But although the visible attention isn't very bright, there are those times when I wake up in the middle of the night with images of letting go of everything crowding into my awareness. I had one of those sessions on Friday night, after spending the evening with a 92-year old man who's in the middle of that change. Later I woke up to an hour or so of fretting over what I should do with all the stones and beads and fiber I have stored away in my basement at home, all the potential projects I have stored up in my head, all the unfinished work I've put off doing around the house. Morning came early and I greeted it with an upset stomach.

But a blueberry muffin from our favorite local pastry shop and a caring conversation with Marjory helped me put some perspective on my angst so I could focus on the day. Her gift of compassionate listening is a blessing to many, and yesterday morning I had my turn. It reminded me of the value of having someone beside you on the journey. Thank you, Marjory.

This little tale of aging and companionship opens a window on two things I want to share this morning, two insights from our Scripture lessons for this week:

- *The first is the importance of learning loving ways to let go as part of our spiritual journey, ways of falling into the ground like that grain of wheat in this week's Gospel lesson, as a kind of 'practice dying;' and*
- *Second is the power and comfort of companionship on the way, of finding an 'escort' to help us find our way through traffic and stay the course.*

## SCRIPTURE

When I read the lessons for this week, one part of the Gospel stood out, the part that says: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit." At my age, what does it mean to "fall into the ground and die?" And what does that image mean for you?

*[Hold up two large, old, dark brown old seeds]*

Here are two very handsome seeds. My father brought them back with him in 1945, when he returned from four years in combat in the South Pacific in World War II. These seeds were among the treasures he had for me after that long separation. I've kept them safe and dry for almost 65 years. They've become a symbol for me of seeds that remain alone, bearing no fruit. Every grain of wheat is food in its own right, but it's also hope for the future ... if it can let go of its identity as a seed and get into the ground. If not, it may stand as a symbol of something else.

*[Drop the nuts into the offering plate.]*

The other image that came alive is the place in the reading from Jeremiah (31:33-34) where he quotes God as saying "... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts ... no longer shall they teach one another..." That brought images of the difference between being listened to and being taught. And that led me into the work I've been doing with the varieties of spiritual companionship.

#### FALLING INTO THE GROUND IS ONE KIND OF DYING

Falling into the ground is a kind of dying – for the grain but not for the plant. As I softened my focus on this lesson I saw images of times when I had died to my old self, and let something else be born. There's the image of proposing marriage, falling into the fertile soil of a committed relationship. There's another image of the day I was retired from the Army, and the liturgical clowns at Patch Barracks in Stuttgart put Marjory's bouquet of roses in a large bottle that had begun life holding "Fresh Start" detergent. And there's the image of being surrounded by the Stewards of this church 20 years ago next Sunday as I accepted God's call to serve on the staff team here. Each of these is clearly an opportunity; but each of them is also clearly an ending, a kind of 'practice dying.'

I don't often think of Spring as a time when Winter is dying, but that IS one way to think about it. Look out the window. The trees are changing. This is the weekend of celebration for the cherry trees. The ground is littered with the sepals that have protected the blossoms, sepals that the trees have set aside. The buds must die to let the blossoms live. In the altar table installation for this season the tulips have already lost their petals, and since there are no bees living in our sanctuary I think these flowers will not lead to new seeds. But the leaves are healthy and the plants are now busy storing up energy for another try ... next year. It's another tale of 'dropping into the earth,' of dying to what has been so you have the energy to focus on what is emerging,.

Yet another kind of "dropping into the earth" is the big challenge is the letting go of 'stuff.' As I was writing this, Marjory was in the basement, letting go of some of the stuff that so easily accumulates in places we visit only occasionally. I have a particular weakness for hanging onto stuff that still has some use left in it, you know, those "perfectly good" 2x4s that were left over when we expanded the deck 20 years ago...

While I'm what might be called "stuff-challenged," there is hope. Over the past 20 years this community has shown me some creative ways of ending our attachments to stuff.

There was the moment at the Y2K bonfire, as Seekers Church was celebrating the new millennium, when Alan Dragoo cast his doctoral dissertation into the fire. He told us he'd saved it because he thought he ought to consider publishing it, but that time had passed and he was taking advantage of this community celebration to let go of his thesis and face into what was ahead for him.

Here's another. Glen takes things apart to honor the end of his relationship with them. The latest one is an old reel-to-reel tape recorder that was taking up space in his studio. It was "perfectly good!" But as Glen said, he couldn't find a home for a big, bulky, perfectly good reel-to-reel tape recorder. And he couldn't just pitch it in the trash, either. So he took it apart, to see how it was made. Then he had bags of parts to recycle or discard and he'd learned a thing or two.

Then there are the memories of dying to my place in a community when I move. If I count only the moves where we settled in with our own furniture, I've moved 20 times. (And I've been in Alexandria for 33 years, so lots of these were one after another.) It was really hard at first. I used to say "See you later," and try to keep up the kind of connection with the few close friends I was leaving, but I had only so

much relational energy and it never worked. Along the way, Marjory helped me learn how to say goodbye, with formal rituals of thanksgiving. We learned to say that we needed to say "goodbye" to current places and relationships so we'd be free to say "Hello" to new ones, even new ones with the same people in other settings.

I've had to let career expectations die. Some were ill-suited, but still seemed real. That bouquet of roses in the "Fresh Start" bottle has been a good reminder for me that "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone..."

That leaving, and the picture we have of Marjory and me standing by the "Fresh Start" flowers in front of the chapel at Patch Barracks leads me to the other idea I wanted to raise up, the image that came as I read the lesson from Jeremiah that there's an important difference between being listened to and being taught.

#### THE POWER AND COMFORT OF COMPANIONSHIP

One particular approach to listening is spiritual companionship, which comes by a variety of names: spiritual direction, discipleship, shepherding, mentoring, spiritual friendship...

Spiritual companionship is a bit like gardening. Like healthy seeds and bulbs, most spiritual pilgrims will grow if you just let them fall into the ground. But over the past 30 or 40 thousand years we've learned from agriculture that if we offer seeds and bulbs a bit of extra care they're likely to bear more fruit. It works that way with people, too. Most of us can survive and grow if we're left alone in the presence of decent opportunities. But there are times when a little help from our friends is a Godsend.

When it comes to my own journey, I'm learning that letting go is a lot easier if I have someone to share the journey,

someone to help me remember that we're on the Way with Christ.

This year for Lent I decided that instead of giving something up I'd add something to my spiritual practice. On the paper that went into the fire on Ash Wednesday I wrote something about being more conscious of exercising my body, to see if that might help me get past some of the chronic aches and pains that seem to have settled down in my joints.

I kept this commitment quiet, telling myself that I didn't want to burden anyone else with my needs when there's so much trouble all around me. So far, we're at the fifth Sunday of Lent, and I haven't done much. I'd thought of going swimming, which works for me, but I've been "too busy." (Hah!)

No companionship ... no accountability ... no good!

My challenges to change aren't unique. I recently received an observation that "life requires both deepening in God and living fully in the world. In seeking to do both, I feel I've avoided doing either."

Another person shared that a reading had been an unexpected reminder:

If you really believe that God has given you all you need to do what God has given you to do, then you celebrate and give thanks, no matter what it turns out to be. This is very difficult because if it is less than we hoped for, it means we have to give up something and that is painful. But, that is why it is faith-based. If you really trust God, you will accept what God has given you and use that to the best of your ability.

*(Linda Grenz, Faith-Based Stewardship.  
[www.episcopalatlanta.org/stewardship/faithbase.html](http://www.episcopalatlanta.org/stewardship/faithbase.html))*

There are lots of other examples around us of the importance of companionship. We have a tradition of blessing those of

us who claim some new calling. We send them off with prayer and a ribbon to remind them of our continuing, prayerful support and companionship even at a distance.

The AA group that meets here is growing. They've had to move into a larger room, and I heard not long ago that there may be another new group meeting here soon.

One of us is working on more regular journaling, and reporting to a small group daily to be accountable for this step.

I felt blessed by this community on my birthday – the notes, the song, even the embarrassing web site item – it felt like real companionship.

Part of the authenticity of these examples of companionship is the way they tell us that we are deeply known and loved by God.

In my experience, the mission group is the deepest place of belonging in this community. A core element of that belonging is spiritual companionship within the group, with regular spiritual practices in each group and some form of accountability. The practices vary from one group to another, and emerge into new forms over time, but they help reinforce the sense of "being with" that feels so important as we follow God's call.

Jesus knew about the importance of spiritual companionship when he sent his disciples out 2-by-2. We've been inspired by that model in mission groups, blessing our missionaries (currently Ron Kraybill in Israel and Palestine), and walking with those who are being supported through the Growing Edge Fund, where an important element of the support we offer is the companionship by someone from the community that goes along with the financial support.

Last year Brenda, Kate and I were students in "The Art of Spiritual Companionship," a nine-month course taught at the



National Cathedral by a team that included Marjory. This year I've joined Marjory on the teaching team. That course has raised up the image of Jesus sending folks out two-by-two so they had the support they needed to stay the course.

Spiritual companionship is a way to find someone to share the challenge of your journey, someone to help you listen for – and to – the Holy Spirit; someone to help you keep your hand on the plow when you're called to stay, and to leave your nets when you're called away.

Over the past two years I've come to a much deeper appreciation of the varieties of spiritual companionship. I hope to offer a sampling of these approaches to the class that begins in the School of Christian Living on Tuesday.

As I've worked and worried over how to compress a year-long course into six weeks, I've begun to look at "spiritual companionship" as a labor of love for the companion as the relationship grows with each pilgrim.

Here's the "LABOR" part:

- *"L" is for Listening with compassion: its about accepting and loving rather than judging;*
- *"A" is for Accountability at the point of acknowledged needs rather than imposed requirements;*
- *"B" is for Blessing, helping each pilgrim find ways to receive God's blessing at life's thresholds;*
- *"O" is for Observation after invitation, that is, making sure the pilgrim is ready for feedback or problem-solving before trying to fix them up; and*
- *"R" is for Rituals, helping find ways for each pilgrim to release what has died and accept what is being born.*

I'm still working on the "OF LOVE" parts, but its only Sunday and the class doesn't start until day after tomorrow.

## CONCLUSION

Enough! In all this wandering I hope you've been able to hang onto two basic points:

- *First, any life change is a kind of dying, an opportunity to practice letting go with hope, and*
- *Second, the spiritual path is often uneven, and it helps to have a companion, someone who can help you keep track of the presence of Christ and the angels.*

Here's a bit from a little meditation book that the Time & Space Mission Group has been using lately, "To Pause at the Threshold" by Esther de Waal. Esther says:

*Insecurity makes certitude attractive, and it is in times like these that I want to harness God to my preferred scheme of things, for it is risky to be so vulnerable. Yet it is this vulnerability that asks for trust and hope in God's plans, not mine. So I try each time that I am called upon to move forward to hand over the past freely, putting it behind me, and moving on with hands open and ready for the new. [de Waal. Pg. 56]*

Finally, if the only poem Mary Oliver had ever written was "In Blackwater Woods" she'd still be a spiritual companion for me. Let me leave you with the end of that elegant treasure:

*Every year*

*everything*

*I have ever learned  
in my lifetime  
leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side  
is salvation,  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it  
against your bones knowing  
that your own life depends on it;  
and when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.*

Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, pp 177-78

Hunting for the hope that lies deeper? Practice dying!

Amen!

