

## “Considering Ravens and Lilies”

August 19, 2007

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“Life,” some clever person has said, “is a sexually transmitted, terminal condition.” As cynical as that phrase might be, it does capture a certain existential truth. We know that this ride won’t last forever. And, as the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr noted, our conscious awareness of our own mortality, and *knowing* that we know, are sources of a very primal anxiety that is unique to the human life form. We know we will someday die. We are aware that we are aware.

I recently caught a snippet of a radio program on the therapeutic treatment of children who have tremendous anxiety about human mortality. As one eleven year-old boy put it as he talked with his therapist: “It’s kind of hard to enjoy all this when you know that it is all going to end some day, and you won’t be around anymore.” As mortal beings aware that we are, indeed, consciously aware; as humans who face the ultimate anxiety related to the fact of our own mortality; as people who become anxious about so many things in life, we look for all kinds of ways to ease our anxiety. Some methods work out rather well, and others...well...not so much! Behaviors aimed at the management of anxiety range widely, from prayer, meditation, and exercise, on the constructive end, to overeating, drug and alcohol abuse, manipulating other people, and a million other destructive possibilities, on the other end. It is a soothing, then, to find that Jesus himself touched on the topic of anxiety among his followers. Seeking to soothe them about all they had left to be with him, Jesus had this to say:

“Which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life?” Offering deep assurance of God’s care, his remedy for anxiety about food, clothing, and life was disarmingly simple: “Consider the ravens. They neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them....Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

So, let’s consider those lilies and those ravens! Lilies and ravens have no choice but to be perfectly what they are. When nature is in balance as God intended, they flourish, going about their raven-ness and lily-ness perfectly. God’s plan has provided for them; they eat, they grow, they thrive. In being perfectly themselves, they are as God intended them to be: the raven well-fed, the lily growing and beautifully arrayed. In issuing an invitation to consider lilies and ravens, perhaps Jesus has invited us to be perfectly *who we are*.

But wait, we protest, it’s easy for lilies and ravens! Ravens don’t have to deal with difficult co-workers, juggle a household, kids and a job, and lie in bed at night worrying about the state of the world. And lilies don’t have to cope with a drinking problem, deal with a family member who is seriously ill, or worry about the bottom line of a budget. They just get to *be*. And as far as we know, they don’t have conscious awareness....they don’t know about war and poverty and disease....they don’t know they are going to die....they don’t feel as if they carry the whole world on their shoulders like we do. We, on the other hand, burdened and blessed with conscious awareness, not only know--- we know that we know! We do not have the unconscious luxuries of lily-ness or raven-ness.

My big lovely dog, a rather goofy cross between a bloodhound and a Great Pyrenees, languished in a shady spot on the sidewalk on Friday morning during a pause in our walk as I talked with my neighbor Dianne. Dianne is an energetic woman in her late fifties with a twinkle in her lovely blue eyes; the presence of the twinkle is itself a miracle, because it

wasn't long ago that her eyes were filled with the sadness of losing Alan, her dear husband, to cancer. Dianne told me about a friend of hers in her early 40's who is now dying of cancer, a wonderful woman who has young children and a spouse-- all of them, of course, struggling with the tragedy of their situation. Her friends have looked to her for words of wisdom about how to get through this awful passage. As Diane and I talked, Dusty the dog was lying at our feet, unconcerned. In fact, day lilies, their blossoms gone by, waved nearby in the slight breeze. Birds flew about, even crows, so very raven-like! Dusty, the lilies, and the birds carried on, no thoughts of young mothers dying even being a possibility for them. Diane spoke further of her friends and their struggle, saying: "They are most anxious about the actual death, I think, and I have said to them, look, the death itself is not the worst part of all this. You already know it's going to happen. You have already heard the worst news you can hear. Your caregivers will help you manage the actual dying process. What you have to do now is just *be* and not let your time be destroyed by anxiety about dying." Diane and Alan were able to do this; it was their special gift. Somehow, they managed, lily-and-raven-like, to just BE, even knowing what was coming. Though Diane thought her advice was inadequate and overly simple, it really is, in a way, a profound paraphrase of Jesus' words.

As troubled as our souls can be by all we are aware of, surely the bestowing of the ability for conscious awareness upon human beings was meant by God for good, like all of God's good creation. Maybe the fact that we have this ability is a clue to our true purpose. It is indeed true that we know all about mortality, poverty, disease, sadness, war and every other difficult and tragic reality. But we also know about whales, stardust, the blue of the summer ocean, polar bears, the way a baby's soft fuzzy head smells so sweet resting on our shoulder, the taste of a fresh autumn apple, and the way the woods look when they are blanketed by snow. Lilies and ravens don't know about all this. Somebody had to be appointed to help God take care of all this, and those somebodies had to have a high level of knowledge and awareness in order to do it well. We are those somebodies! The special genius, the unique possibility, of our humanity is to know that we know, and yet to not be anxious about it. We are supposed to know, to understand how high the stakes are, to take very good care of one another and of God's good creation. The very thing that makes us anxious is meant to make us responsible seekers of God's kingdom.

To the dear little eleven-year-old boy so troubled by the fact of mortality, his wise and gentle therapist said, "You know, for many people, this is where God comes in. Many people believe that God manages all of this in a way that works out very well. We just have to trust that so we can go on with our lives and be happy." Living fully into God's promises is, ultimately, going to have to be an act of trust. And mortality can be viewed as a gift that brings this into sharp focus: any hospice worker knows the mysterious paradox that very often those who are in the midst of the worst are able to be at their best. Facing down the terrible possibilities, all that is most precious becomes perfectly clear.

Consider the lilies, meant to be strong and beautiful in their lovely coats of color. Consider the ravens, robust and noisy, meant to be gliding on the air. Consider the humans, gifted with knowledge both beautiful and terrible, meant to know what is most precious, and to be God's partners in caring for this magnificent creation. Let us be who we are meant to be.

Amen.