

All
January 2nd, 2022
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Rev, Kathleen Hepler, a colleague who retired some time ago once said, “Make the world as simple as you can but no simpler.” It is the complexity of life that saves us. There is a simplicity to life but it is on the far side of complexity. No matter how we choose to live, we have to do our own work. We have to carry our own water if we plan to learn and grow.

Words are hotter than flames and wetter than water if we allow them to be, if we remove the veil and open our souls to what is possible. It’s a scary thing to do. No doubt. And I am a great fan of doubt. Yet and still, we do this for ourselves and one another. Together, we overcome the power of that fear. All of us, together. This is the meaning of “all souls.” James Baldwin said, “If you are afraid of something, soften your belly and turn toward it.” Do you have that kind of courage? Do we have it together? What do you think?

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, January 2nd and the title of this morning’s reflection is All. Just the one word. It is a reflection on the spiritual principle of universal inclusion.

Welcome, dreamers and seekers of spirit, bold or ever bashful in the quest. Welcome, wanderers and worshipers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the open ones and to the broken ones among us, to every blissfully imperfect soul who is just like me, blessed and beloved beneath the lucky stars of heaven, given in care and compassion for one another, given...as we all are with and forever for one another in compassion soul-level deep...in good times and in tempest, in conflict and consensus...held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds... To all souls, I say, “Good morning. It is so good to be together again.”

How cool do you think Elvis is? Now, before you answer, you have to know where I’m coming from with my question. You have to know which Elvis I’m talking about. There are many. There is, of course, the obvious Elvis, the famous one—Elvis Presley. Early in his career, he was surprised by his own popularity. He was actually humble about it, saying that he didn’t understand what was happening. He just knew that, through his music, he was breaking free of something he could not name. This, alone, makes him tragically heroic to me somehow.

And there is the man they call El Vez in California, the Elvis impersonator with Latin roots. He’s in his 60s now, hails from Chula Vista. And then, there’s Elvis Costello. He’s a wonderful artist. His poetry was “required reading” in college, still recitable...especily for those of us who loved and lost the girl named Alison. Elvis sang,

Oh it’s so funny to be seeing you after so long, girl
And with the way you look, I understand
that you are not impressed.
But I heard you let that little friend of mine
Take off your party dress.

All—1 I’m not gonna get too sentimental

Like those other sticky valentines,
Because I don't know if you are loving some body
I only know it isn't mine.

Alison, I know this world is killing you.
Oh, Alison, my aim is true.

Life is brutal sometimes. Elvis Costello made things easier, kept the glimmer of dignity alive in the hearts of lovers and losers like me. There are a lot of us. The Alisons of the world attract attention so, there's a club...and cost of entry is high. The price of admission is a broken heart.

We race into this club...all of us who have loved and lost and lived to tell the story. Of course, there is the old saying—right?—that better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all. It was updated some time ago. Now, it reads more realistically, more believably: "It's better to have loved and lost...the first few of times...than to never have loved at all." After a while, apparently, the experience of losing loses its sweetness. Yet, if don't grow...if all we continue to do is blame the Allisons of the world for our problems, we would not be being very wise.

There's something about that song that makes some of us behave foolishly sometimes. In the middle of polite conversations in bars and restaurant, we interrupt. Having heard the song from the beginning. It made us quiet during the first verse. Singing to ourselves in silence, we let the conversation go on without us...until the chorus, of course, when we cannot help but interrupt. It's almost involuntary. It's almost Pavlovian or reflexive. Without even meaning to, we grab ketchup bottles or the hot sauce, a carrot or the celery or even a spoon and we transform these things into microphones at the bar or at dining tables. Interrupting conversations, we break right into song, as if we were on stage and everyone had come to see us perform. We sing,

Alison, I know this world is killing you.
Oh, Alison, my aim is true.

...as if we were still trying to make the point that we could not make when we were being rejected: that inherently within us all, there is worth and dignity.

And after the lead singer spotlight moment, sometimes we play a little air-guitar. Then, we return to normal life, expecting the conversations we've interrupted to continue and when they don't we are surprised and surprisingly defensive when we get blamed. Only the closest of our friends knows that this happens every now and then. And only the most compassionate tenderly ask the question: who was 'Alison'?

There are parts of the human experience that are infinitely predictable...and Elvis Costello knows that. That's why this Elvis is almost the Elvis that I'm talking about this morning.

"How cool do you think Elvis is?" and "Which Elvis am I talking about?"
Behind Door #1 is the famous Elvis, the one who comes from Memphis. Behind Door #2 is El Vez, the Elvis impersonator with Latin roots from Chula Vista, CA. And behind Door #3 is the Elvis who is my second favorite—Elvis Costello, the one who

had trouble getting over a lover named Alison. Which of these three Elvises do I mean? Which Elvis am I talking about this morning?

Strangely enough, the truth is that I am not talking about any of these Elvises. The Elvis that I'm talking about is Czechoslovakian. He is a high-level philosopher, an intellectual named Slavoj Zizek. His friends and colleagues refer to him as the Elvis of philosophy and I don't really know what that means but I really like it.

Slavoj Zizek is a disheveled guy—bearded, boisterous, intellectually brutal. The Elvis of philosophy... He must play air-guitar and wear metaphysical, leather pants. This Elvis is the Elvis that I'm talking about this morning. This Elvis is the Elvis that I mean.

Zizek is smart. He's courageous. I wish I had a fraction of his brilliance. I wish I were as smart but I'm just getting started...young among the journeymen to cast a look around...or, at least, it feels that way to me...because life seems to have that quality these days. It seems to have that shine, that glint...even though things are challenging and I deeply appreciate that.

I may be a beginner in the realm of philosophy but Slavoj Zizek certainly is not. He's been at it for a while. In 2008, he wrote a book called *In Defense of Lost Causes*. The book has always fascinated me. This is out of context, but in his book, he writes,

In contrast to the simplistic opposition of good guys and bad guys, spy thrillers...display...the “psychological complexity” of characters from our side.

These spy thrillers are too simple. They don't even try to present a balanced view of things. They tell stories of we and they, us and them. It's binary. We are interesting, vulnerable and complex. They are one-dimensional. It's good guys and bad guys, straight up and down. The bad guys are one-dimensional...just like Alison. The song is called Alison but never does she speak. The song is called Alison but the song is about Elvis Costello. It oversimplifies the world in a way that feels comfortable to us, more comfortable than the way that the world actually is. It takes courage to do otherwise. It takes real courage to see through the eyes of others, through the eyes of enemies. It takes courage to argue like Zizek does, the Elvis of philosophy... It takes courage to argue in defense of lost causes.

On the final page of his famous book entitled *The Courage To Be* (1952), theologian Paul Tillich wrote those beautiful and strangely mysterious words:

The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in anxiety and doubt.

Tillich had German roots. He saw the rise of Hitler in real time. When Paul Tillich talks about courage, he does so against the backdrop of the Second World War.

Tillich's theology was not esoteric or intellectual. It was not an abstraction. It was real, historically situated. Like all of us (or almost all), Tillich was imprisoned by his time. He was limited and could not more escape the trappings of the 20th century than can any of us escape the trappings of the times in which we live. What Tillich could escape (and did escape), however, were the downward forces of despair. He spoke of courage. Against the odds and against the grain, he fought on in life and he fought on in the life of spirit to make real and meaningful the tenets of his

faith. He was not Unitarian, not Universalist but that didn't matter. He fought on to achieve a quality of faith that is deeper than denominations. He never surrendered the ability to see the good in other people, never surrendered the ability to see the good within himself. Zizek, the Elvis of philosophy... He was able to do the same...and not because their names are Elvis. None of us need to surrender this ability, this practice of seeing the inherent worth and beauty of everyone. The whole world changes when we see this way, when we feel this way... and it looks and feels absolutely the same...but we are different. Somehow, we are deeper than we were.

Peter Gomes once wrote about Tillich. He wrote about courage and faith. He wrote,

Absolute faith, for Tillich...is the ultimate courage, for it takes the radical doubt, the doubt about God, into itself and transcends the theistic idea of God. Modernity has been able to unhorse the god [small g] of theism.

Theology, for people like Gomes and Tillich, was like a contact sport. They really wrestled. They really struggled. They put themselves hard to task, trying to make real meaning in a messy world. There is so much spiritual doubt in the world these days. It's been that way for a while. It may be that Gomes had named it when he said that the god [small g] of theism had been unhorsed.

He wasn't alone. In the ivory tower, a philosopher named Friedrich Nietzsche famously proclaimed, "God is dead." Nietzsche was no Elvis but he did well enough for himself. And on the popular stage, John Lennon once said that The Beatles were more popular than Jesus. He got into a lot of trouble for saying that but he did so, nevertheless. A lot of people didn't like the things that Nietzsche and Lennon were saying but their words were just reflections of the spiritual doubt that was there all around them. They got into trouble for naming it but it was there. We made them villains for a while because we didn't want to take in what they were saying. We scared. We avoided it. We made enemies of them instead...and very often, an enemy is an illusion that we create in order to avoid the things that really scare us. It is easier to be angry than it is to be afraid. But, as James Baldwin said, "If you are afraid of something, soften your belly and turn toward it."