

The Trouble with Sand Castles

Sometimes I wake up early and start thinking. Do you? I think about all sorts of things that I really don't want to think about. Things that worry me. Medical things. Financial things. Dental things. If I go too far down that road, my bed doesn't feel safe any more. There's only one thing to do. I need to distract myself.

So I get up and busy myself with some emails or the sports pages, and—hey, presto!—I'm back in my cheerful workaday self. I leave behind all that stuff that worries me and get on with things. And I feel fine.

Right up until the next morning when I wake up again.

The other day I was lying awake, listening to the clock, and I realised that it's not just in those fraught moments of the morning that I seek distraction. I think I must do that all day. More: I think maybe we ALL do it, all day. Maybe most of our lives involve losing ourselves in the particular activities and small challenges of the day in order to avoid thinking too deeply. So I asked myself: what is it I really don't want to think about?

The answer to that question isn't really very hard to find. I won't say it now, because I want to leave you room to think about it. But you know and I know what it is.

That particular morning I was distracting myself thinking about this sermon. It's not easy to say meaningful things to people you don't know well. No, it's not easy to say anything meaningful to anyone. Then I remembered something that had happened to me maybe 15 years ago now. It was a moment that turned me inside out.

I had been reading about something Friedrich Nietzsche once said about sandcastles. You know, those projects that begin and end on a single glorious day at the beach. You make a wonderful little structure with castellated walls and turrets and keeps and add little flags made of candy wrappers. Maybe you put a moat all the way round it and find something that looks like a drawbridge. You get very involved, very excited and maybe sunburned too.

And then what happens? That's right-- the sea comes up the beach with the tide and washes it all away.

Nietzsche said that people could be divided into three categories. There are those who from ignorance and optimism build a sandcastle and then feel devastated when it is washed away. There are others, who, wise enough to know this, never even try to build one. But there's a third type of person. This one knows very well that the sandcastle will not last, but does it anyway. This is the one I like best.

The point is obvious: some of us are reckless or wilfully blind to the truth and go on trying to build something of permanence in a world of change. Maybe we are all like that when we are young, and the sad story of built and vanished civilisations hasn't occurred to us—history is just something we have to study at school. Some of us change as we age, but others of us just seem to keep trying for immortality – practising denial, you might say.

Then there are those whose experience of the encroaching tides overwhelms them. This is perhaps the experience of depression, when all that is left to say is that ancient refrain: “Oh, what's the use?” Why build sand castles, why engage in any sort of activity knowing that it is all ultimately doomed to failure anyway? Take a look at yourself and ask if you have never had this bleak vision afflict you. There are many among us who are poisoned by it. Now it has a new name—clinical depression.

Maybe we all have some of those two types in us—I know I do. But we must all also have something of the third type as well. We know that nothing lasts forever. We know that even our grandchildren's grandchildren will one day become forgotten ancestors to people whose lives we cannot even imagine. Just across the street from my church in London stands one of those optimistic project of the years after the War—one of those concrete skyscrapers that were supposed to issue in a new age of science and progress. If you go there and listen on a weekday, you'll hear the noise of the wrecking ball and the jackhammers as the workmen tear it all down.

Nothing lasts forever. Everything is a sandcastle.

I don't know about you, but speaking for myself, I seem to need to somehow contain the washing away of my castle. I seem to need to find in its hard truth some way to recognise the ephemeral nature of my life without yielding to despair. And I need to find a way not to resent the apparently cruel working of change but to give it my active and even joyous support.

But I was going to tell you about that afternoon that turned me inside out. One day I went to do a house visit with a member. It was a routine visit, but the underlying purpose was that of giving me material for a funeral service. As it turned out, we didn't talk about that at all. We sat around and ate Viennese pastries and drank coffee and laughed and told stories all afternoon. We were distracting ourselves. It began to get dark, and I rose to leave. I was standing by my chair when my friend—God rest her-- said, “I suppose there is one question I should ask you: do you believe in life after death?”

Now you might be surprised to hear that we liberal ministers seldom hear this most important of all life's questions. This is the BIG ONE that is probably too big to think about. We must assume that people think that no one knows, and so why ask? But this one took me by surprise, and before I had time to think, I heard myself saying this: “Yes, I do. And I think we're already living it.”

Then it was as if a lot of little tumblers fell together in some lock of my mind and the door swung open on smoothly oiled hinges. I think we were both rendered speechless for a second, and then I started to explain, as much to myself as to my

friend: I believe that *who we really are has always existed, before our birth, during our life span and after we die*. I think the reason we don't realise it while we live is because we are too busy focussing on being just ourselves to feel being everybody and everything, which is what we truly are.

I think that that is the reason for prayer and meditation and poetry: it puts us just that little bit in touch with our real selves. That's why religious practice is so important; being in touch with our real selves is the only rescue we can truly hope for. I think it represents the goal of any approach to religion, and is the only valid reason for what is called ethics and morality—doing harm to others is doing harm to one's true self. I think people like Jesus and Buddha knew this; they remind us of our true selves, and this is why we deify them. And I think that what we call love is a visible sign of that invisible reality: loving is feeling the underlying oneness of things.

My friend Lori and I were both very surprised when I said this. I don't know where it came from, but it's pretty much the whole of my personal theology, in case you were wondering. I had to sit back down for a minute. And after that, of course, we did talk about that subject. You know the one I mean.

Now Lori was an elderly woman. I was in my fifties. We might have been expected to have different takes on death and all that, but as it turned out, we didn't. She was looking back at her life and I was still looking forward—at least a bit—but we were both wondering whether anything we had done or would someday do had any real meaning. If our sandcastles were washed away, what would remain?

I remembered the words of the great spiritual teacher Meher Baba, who would be able to explain it this way. When the tide carries away your sandcastle, everything you have built or cherished, the grains of sand are redistributed by the waves. They don't disappear. What disappeared, or appeared to disappear, was a fleeting form of organisation or pattern of the grains of sand. You organised it, and some "larger you" redistributed it, just as your life is organised and then re-distributed. Nothing is lost; everything changes. As someone else once put it, "The knot may be untied, but the rope remains."

But the pattern—that which we know as our lives--where did it go?

Baba also observed that all projects—including the project of what we call a human life—are not the point. All these things are simply scaffolding to enable work on an invisible project. After the invisible project is complete, the scaffolding is dismantled. And then re-used somewhere else. That is the real sense underlying the "recycling" theory of life: the base materials, the grains of sand or the molecules of the body must be re-used, but the invisible project remains.

And this invisible project? Put simply, it is what you have taken birth to do. All the wins and losses, the heroism and the villainy, the sweet and the sour, have all served as planks in this scaffold. Behind that is a building that is more than a sandcastle. This building, we have reason to believe is not impermanent. It is the dwelling place of our real selves. It is our true home, against which all other habitations are no more substantial than that make-believe castle on the beach.

A further clue comes from some words from the mystical poet, Kahlil Gibran: “You shall be together, even when the white wings of death scatter your days. You shall be together... in the silent memory of God...” The silent memory is silent because it is invisible to our gross eyes and indecipherable to our little minds. What Gibran means by God, you are free to interpolate or ignore. For myself, I would say something like this for a synonym: “everything in every direction forever, and the consciousness that organises it.”

You never know when something like an afternoon tea is going to lead you on to reflections about life, the universe and everything. What remains for me is the wise question asked that afternoon by my friend, and my feeling that the life before and after death is with us now, if we could only just get in touch with it. And know that we don't really live in time at all, but in eternity. That's what I hope to remember the next time I wake up in the dark early morning. But I'll understand if I don't.

But you never know when that veil of forgetfulness may part for an instant and let you gaze with clear eyes at the sea of deep meaning, not just our small projects on the shore. It has happened for me. And if it doesn't happen so often, well, we can count on being in touch with it when the tide does its magic and takes the grains of sand back into itself. In the meantime, let's encourage each other, keep on praying and singing, and – through it all—enjoy.

So don't get rid of your spades and buckets just yet. There are hundreds of lovely sandcastles still waiting to be built.