

“Live in the Layers”
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This month of April, the first full month of spring, the month of Easter - I've been thinking about transformations...changes. Resurrection – life coming after death - is a kind of transformation, after all. And every life is full of change – constant change. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus one said, “Change alone is unchanging.”

Each one of us can look back at the lives we've lived – and forward at the lives we have yet to live – and reflect on the changes that have occurred and how they have helped to make us who we are. As much as we might have struggled with the changes, the fact of the matter is that if one thing hadn't happened in sequence, we would be different people sitting here today. Maybe not dramatically, but different nonetheless. We are changing and we are changed. And yet there is, as Stanley Kunitz has written, something that remains constant, some “principle of being that abides.”

It is probably fair to say that few have looked back on their lives and described what they've seen as eloquently as Kunitz. He was born in Worcester in 1905 and died in 2006 at the age of 101. Probably no one wrote and published poetry for as long as he did – his first book was published in 1930 and his last in 2005. He was twice appointed US Poet Laureate, first in 1974 and then at age 95 in 2000.

“The Layers” is an old poem, written in the 1970's, but new to me...a wonderful set of images that I've begun to use to reflect on my own life, my own journey, my own changes...on who I have been, who I am now, and who I am becoming. This morning I'd like to invite you to look at it more closely with me and join me in my reflection. I'm thinking of this as sort of an extended meditation, if you will...and I invite you to spend this time this morning meditating on your own life's journey to this point.

Kunitz begins with the image of life as a journey...

*I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.*

It is a description of the kind of territory through which we all walk – many lives, others and our own. We walk through the lives of those who have known us – friends, families, acquaintances. We touch and shape those many lives, and they, in turn, touch and shape ours. There is no

denying the impact that others have had on us...the elementary school music teacher, the camp counselor, the youth advisor...not to mention our parents and our closest friends.

But there is also a sense in which we walk through many layers of our own identity, some of which are more genuinely us – more real – than others. Throughout our lives, we are always changing and being changed. Our identities, as much as we may at times wish to pin them down, are more fluid than fixed.

In my own life, I have been the youngest child in a household of 6 people and I have been an only child with a single mother. I have been a guitar student, although I no longer really play. I have been a choir member, a horseback rider, a soccer player, and an ice hockey goalie.

I have been a student – many times – and an occasional poet. I have been an employee of the UUA and a minister. I have been a daughter and a mother, a sister and a wife. Some of these have felt more truly me – more consistent with that abiding principle of being – than others. Yet all of them have contributed in some way to making me who I am today.

Whose are those lives that have most deeply touched and shaped your own? How did they change you? And who are you today? Who have you become? Which pieces of your identity have felt most consistently true to you? What is that abiding principle that has guided and shaped you? Has it always been easy to follow or have you sometimes strayed – walking through a life that did not really feel like your own?

And how far have you come? Kunitz continues...

*When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.*

Have you stopped recently to look back and take stock? Kunitz writes here of the need to stop and look to gather strength, but there is also a sense of his needing to see if he is still on the right path and going in the right direction. He was in his 70's when he wrote this poem, it was a pivotal time in his life, and he was, in fact, feeling like he was ready for a change.

When you look back, what are the milestones you see? What are the significant events that stand out against the horizon? Which ones seem smaller and less significant now and which ones still loom large?

And what about those campsites, those rest stops, those places where you arrived and stayed for some time? Those periods in your life during which you settled in and got comfortable? Who was with you, sharing the warmth and the light of the campfire?

As Kunitz looks back, he sees the fires merely smoldering and the scavenger angels circling overhead like so many vultures. The implication of his image, of course, is that there is no life left there, just dead or dying organic matter. The past is dead. These smoldering campfires are part of the litter he has left behind.

Sometimes it is a relief to be able to look back and see the remains of what once was – especially when “what was” was challenging or uncomfortable. Not all change is discomfiting. But all too often, we mourn the passing of things gone by – the passing of the people who were dear to us and of the times that meant the most. As Kunitz has written,

*Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.*

The imagery here is, of course, of death. Scattered...dust...ashes...feast of losses. This is pure grief. Kunitz wrote this poem after the deaths of his mother, his two older sisters, and several dear friends. He described being depressed during that time in his life. As any of us might be upon suffering so much loss in so brief a time. The longer we live, the more we lose: friends, family, dreams. It is unavoidable. How do we reconcile ourselves to so much loss?

What is it that you have lost? How has your tribe scattered? Who are those dear people who have fallen along the way?

We remember them with sadness, perhaps...with thanksgiving, if we are lucky. For without their presence in our lives, we would not now be the people we have become.

*Yet[Kunitz goes on to say] I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.*

Yet! Yet! He turns...not grudgingly, but “somewhat” exulting. Exult: a word that suggests a profound liveliness, a sense of joy, even triumph. He is alive! He is *still* alive even after so much

loss. He still has a future ahead of him and a path to follow. And perhaps because of the recognition of so much loss in the past, every stone in the future is precious to him. He is, perhaps, living now with greater appreciation for each moment.

We are fortunate if we can get to that place of exulting. I spoke a few weeks ago of adversity and how we sometimes survive a shipwreck only to then carry on our backs the wreckage of the ship. That is suffering. The shipwreck itself is only loss. Life is full of loss, but it need not be filled up with suffering. Oh! If we could only turn and walk away from those shipwrecks with some measure of joy...“exulting somewhat” that we have even survived, our will intact to carry on.

Perhaps what we need is a vision to inspire us. Kunitz had many such visions, which he attributed to being in touch with his intuitive, unconscious self. One, he describes in this poem:

*In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”*

Here he is, wandering aimlessly and forlornly about amongst the litter, the wreckage, from his past. And then, this vision. Kunitz said that these lines actually did come to him in a dream in which a voice spoke to him from out of a cloud. In classical mythology, a nimbus is a shining cloud that sometimes surrounds a god when he or she appears on earth. In meteorology, a nimbus cloud is a rain cloud, and precipitation is on its way...needed for growth and new life.

But what does it mean to “live in the layers, not on the litter?”

“Litter” is, most obviously, rubbish strewn about, scattered like the detritus of his past lives. “Live in the layers, not on the litter,” could mean simply, “Don’t try to live among the dead!”

Interestingly, a “litter” is also a stretcher for carrying a sick or wounded person. And so the command could also mean, “You’ve suffered losses, yes, but don’t allow yourself to be carried along your life’s path like a dead or wounded person!” You are alive! Get up and walk!

And, probably less *apropos*, a “litter,” of course, describes multiple young brought forth at a single birth. And so there is perhaps – though less likely – the implication that one shouldn’t expect a brand new start – or a complete rebirth.

That may seem like a stretch, at first, but it may not be so much of one. Let’s talk for a minute about the “layers.”

Here it is important to remember that Kunitz was an avid gardener – “gardener” was as much a part of his identity as “poet.” In horticulture, layering is a method of propagation – that is, of

bringing forth new life. A “layer” is a shoot or a twig that is induced to root while still attached to the living stock, as by bending and covering with soil.

Interestingly, I understand that layering is actually enhanced by wounding the stem where the roots are to form. Picture a vine that you’d like to layer. You bend the vine, you break or wound it along the way, you bury those wounded places (as if they were dead), and then over time the life in that vine grows new roots in those spots and life goes on.

To “live in the layers” then, is to stay alive not in spite of, but because of our woundedness, our brokenness. I know that there have been times in my life – changes that I’ve faced – when I’ve wished there were a handy reset button I could push to make it go away and start again. But of course, there are no reset buttons. New life will come. But it will not come miraculously from nothing – *ex nihilo*. It will come instead precisely from the wounded places. And that is no less miraculous! Every place of brokenness, a potential source of renewal!

When Kunitz was once asked how he’d remained so successful as a poet for so long, he said, “Because I haven’t dared to forget.” And then he went on to say, “I think it’s important for one’s survival to keep the richness of the life always there to be tapped. One doesn’t live in the moment, one lives in the whole history of your being, from the moment you become conscious.”

Like a single vine that has lived in its many layers.

Finally, Kunitz writes,

*Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.*

Every one of our lives is a book of transformations. We are always changing. We are always changed. We can reread the chapters we’ve already been through at any time; but we can’t read ahead. We cannot decipher the future.

Kunitz – as a gardener and a poet – found so much meaning in the ways of the earth, the ways of nature. As he once said, “It’s the way things are: death and life inextricably bound to each other. One of my feelings about working the land is that I am celebrating a ritual of death and resurrection. Every spring I feel that. I am never closer to the miraculous than when I am grubbing in the soil.”¹

This spring, as we pause for a moment in our journeying, may we, too, celebrate the newness of life, the miracles of renewal, of transformation, the miracle of resurrection – in us and all around us. Let us turn and go forward to face our changes, lively and exulting.

¹ Bernstein, Adam, “Pulitzer-Winning Poet Stanley Kunitz Dies,” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2006, Page BO6.