One Wild and Precious Human Birth

Given 10/26/14 by Robin Mitchell

As we come to the end of yet another election season, I am once again struck by how carefully politicians choose their language. Changes to immigration laws are either "reform" or "amnesty" depending on which party they belong to. And these days almost no one hates gays; they all love traditional families instead. They do this for a reason, of course - they know that how we respond to something depends on how it's presented to us. Different ways of saying the same thing can make us feel attracted or repelled, noble or debased, and they choose their words carefully to draw out the responses they want.

And this isn't just true in political campaigns; it's something that affects us in everything we think about. For example, the words we heard in our meditation reading: "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon" - that is perhaps the central tragedy of human existence, but how we respond to it varies wildly with how it's presented to us.

One way it's presented is YOLO, which stands for "You Only Live Once." From what I've seen on YouTube, putting it that way mostly makes people respond by jumping off fourth-floor balconies into swimming pools with a can of beer in one hand and a GoPro camera in the other.

But Mary Oliver presented it in a very different way: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Put that way, the responses are different and much more profound. If you thought that meditation reading sounded familiar, it might be because Candace Sage has used it as the theme for her generational services where she has people of all ages reflect on what they're doing with their wild and precious lives. And if you've been to one of those services, you know that the answers she gets are worlds away from the YOLO follies on YouTube.

This, I think, is why we have artists, because they hold the stuff of life up to us in a way that makes us respond deeply, meaningfully. And as I've said in other sermons, I think religion is the most profound form of art we have because it does this with our most pressing concerns; it engages us with stories, myths and rituals that make us want to take action in our lives to move towards healthy and noble answers.

And this question we have here today – what does it mean that we have these improbable, precious lives, and what should we be doing with them – is one that pretty much all religions have leapt in to answer.

The theistic faiths tend to see life as a precious gift from our Creator, and that our response should be gratitude and a sense of obligation to use it well. And there's nothing wrong with that – you can do far worse than starting each day with a profound sense of gratitude. That inoculates you against all kinds of self-centeredness and entitlement, it inspires material and spiritual generosity, and it's just a great place to begin a spiritual journey.

But there are problems with a theology of gratitude. It's difficult to imagine a gift without a giver, and for those of us who are committed to non-theism that can be awkward. My own journey into Christianity began with a simple gratitude practice,

of saying "thank you" every morning for my life and everything in it. That was a lovely practice; it lifted me out of complacency into the genuine spiritual quest that I've been on ever since. But there's a "you" in "thank you", and my search for that "you" ultimately led me to worshipping God in a Methodist church. That has worked out well for me, but not everyone here may want to risk an outcome like that!

And there are limits to gratitude, especially for a gift that we never asked for in the first place. There have been times, in my darkest moods, when I have really wished that I could re-gift my life; that I could give it away to some wandering spirit who would get more joy from it than I have.

But there are other ways of expressing the promise and urgency of our lives without talking about gifts and givers. The story that has come to mean the most to me is the Buddhist notion of a "Precious Human Birth"; that our birth as a human being is both incredibly rare and very fortunate, and that while there is no Creator to thank for it, there is a tremendous urgency to use it well while we have it.

Different Buddhist schools and teachers tell the story differently; some are very literal and others treat it more metaphorically. But in the literal, traditional telling there are four parts to the story:

The first is the idea of reincarnation and karma, that when we die the emotional energy, or karma we have accumulated during our life drives us to take rebirth again in one of various realms. Some realms are higher, and some are lower; some, like the human and animal realms, share our physical universe, while others, like the hell or god realms, exist on other spiritual planes.

Any of us could have been born into any of these realms; we have been in the past and we may again in future lives. (Or at least something resembling us will be; the question of exactly what gets reincarnated is kind of subtle.) What brought us to the human realm this time is our accumulated karma, the residue of all our thoughts and actions in previous lives, and that is what will determine our rebirth after this life as well.

The second part of the story is what's called the defects of samsara, which is the Sanskrit word for this endless cycle of rebirth - that the one thing all of these realms have in common is that they are ultimately unsatisfactory places to live; they are all tainted by suffering. In some of the realms, suffering is everywhere and overwhelming; in higher realms it may just be the suffering of knowing that the good times are going to end. The human realm, being in the middle, is a combination: many of us are able to escape great suffering in our daily lives, but even for those of us living charmed lives, we all know that ageing, sickness and death are coming for us in the end.

As the computer said in the movie *War Games*, "a strange game. The only winning move is not to play." The only way to end the cycle of suffering is to see its true nature and step off the wheel of cyclic rebirth. This is what Buddhists mean by attaining Enlightenment: seeing the true nature of things so that we are no longer caught up in illusory realms of suffering. Once you are free from compulsive rebirth, you can enter the blissful oneness of Nirvana or choose to consciously take rebirth to help other suffering beings, but either way you are free from the blind sufferings of samsara.

Which leads to the third part of the story, the heart of the Precious Human Birth. Of all the realms of samsara, the human realm is the only one where it's possible to make real progress towards Enlightenment. It's like the Goldilocks realm - in the lower realms there is too much suffering, or too little mental development to be able to make spiritual progress, and in the higher realms there is so little daily suffering that there is no motivation to make a disciplined effort to become free. Only in the human realm is there this workable combination of ability and motivation.

And it's not enough to be born in the human realm; to make progress we also need to have the conditions that allow us to make use of our human birth. We need to be born with our mental faculties intact, in a place where healthy religion is being taught, and in circumstances that allow us to find and follow it. This is true for all of us here this morning, as shown by the fact that we're here, but we need to realize it for the rare gift it is

And that's the fourth part of the story, the incredible rareness of a precious human birth. Buddhists tell the story of a blind sea turtle who comes up to breathe once every hundred years in an ocean that has a single life preserver floating somewhere in it, and say that he will randomly come up and put his head through the ring before a being in the lower realms can attain a human birth. This is partially because there are so many beings in all the realms that humans are a tiny, tiny fraction, so just by chance it would be very rare to be reborn as a human. And it's partially because it's very hard in the lower realms to do the good actions that create the karma that leads to a fortunate rebirth - a cat can go a thousand lifetimes without ever feeling compassion for a mouse. This doesn't make us "better" than beings in the other realms; if anything, it means we need to be even more tender and compassionate towards them. But it does mean that we have a unique responsibility to make use of the rare and precious chance that we have been given.

This way of imagining our lives can provoke a fierce urgency in Buddhists – we tend to see people like the Dalai Lama as genial, good-humored people, kind of like an Eastern Saint Nicholas, but when they consider our human lives they can start sounding like Old Testament prophets. The eighth-century monk Shantideva, in one of his gentler passages, wrote

> Take advantage of this human boat;
> Free yourself from sorrow's mighty stream!
> This vessel will be later hard to find.
> The time that you have now, you fool, is not for sleep!

Imagine that your goal in life was to win an Olympic medal. From before you were a teenager, you got up at dawn every morning and ran five miles. You spent hours every afternoon training and practicing. For ten years or more you lived a fiercely disciplined life, always watching your diet, always going to bed early, always doing your training.

And after all those years, it has paid off. You have made the Olympic team, and as you walk around the Olympic village and look at the other athletes you realize that you are as good as any of them, that the gold medal is really within your reach.

And then the night before your event, a fellow athlete - probably a snowboarder - knocks on your door and asks if you want to smoke some weed and go nightclubbing with him. As you're deciding what to do, the memory of just how hard you have

worked to be there, how much of your life you have dedicated to pursuing a medal, would be a strong motivation to say no, you're going to stay the course for one more day.

And in the Buddhist story, we're all spiritual Olympians; more then Olympians. We have gone through much more than any athlete to be here, over countless lifetimes, and we're part of a much more select group. To show up for our event hung-over and sleepy would be an even greater tragedy for us than it would be for our athlete. The time that we have now, whether we're foolish or otherwise, is not for sleep!

So this is a very compelling story for traditional Buddhists; if you believe it you're going to be very motivated to live well and to work hard at your spiritual practice. But most of us here aren't Buddhists, and many people who are Buddhists don't take it literally. So how can it have any meaning for us?

Well to start with, it's a story based on real life, as they say. However you feel about karma and reincarnation, we can certainly see how it happens within a single lifetime. For all of us, the person we woke up as this morning is the sum of all the decisions we have made through our life up till now. Every act of bravery, of generosity, of compassion, has left its mark in our character, as has every act of cowardice, of selfishness, of cruelty or anger. If we were confronted with a difficult situation this afternoon, we would probably react to it in the way that we have spent our life conditioning ourselves to react, for better or for worse. So even if our karma doesn't affect our next life, it has a lot to do with what the rest of this one will be like!

Which leads us to the realms of existence. There are very traditional Buddhist teachers who say they can be seen as psychological states that we get caught in during the course of our life. The news is full of people who are caught in hellish states of anger or impermeable bubbles of pride and create tragedy for themselves and the people around them. As with the literal ones, these psychological realms are easy to fall into and very difficult to get out of, so we should treasure whatever mental and emotional clarity we have and be aware that today's actions and attitudes are creating tomorrow's mental states.

And going back to the literal realms, the sheer improbability of our consciousness taking birth in a human form really is mind-boggling. I went on a boat tour of Mono Lake once, and when we looked in the water we saw what looked like living galaxies down there, these vast clouds of brine shrimp that extended as widely and as far down as we could see. Our naturalist said there were between four and six trillion of them in the lake, which means that if your birth was nothing more than a random quirk of fate you would be almost a thousand times more likely to be a brine shrimp in Mono Lake today than a human being anywhere on earth! And that’s not counting all the brine shrimp in all the other salt lakes on earth, or all the termites, or the ants, or all the krill in the oceans. It really is a miracle that any of us are here today!

So the Buddhist story, like all great myths, is telling us something profoundly true about our situation in a way that deeply focuses our attention. Whether or not it's "better" to be a human than a brine shrimp, it gives us unique abilities and opportunities, and however it happened, we are the one-in-a-trillion creatures who have them. And of all the humans on earth, those of us here in this amphitheater have been blessed with resources, opportunities, and power to change ourselves and

our world that are given to only a lucky few. What the Buddhist story tells us, powerfully, is how much it matters that we live lives worthy of our circumstances.

So tell me, what is it you plan to make of your wild and precious human birth? The time that you have now, you wise and precious people, is not for sleeping! May we all, regardless of what stories we tell, fashion lives worthy of the miracle of our precious human birth.

May that be so.