

"The End Is Where We Start From"

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They say that if you are not sure of the meaning of life, you should go to more funerals. Listening to people try to make sense of a single life; being with friends and family as they remember what matters about another person, will give you some clues, at least some things to think about as you think of your own.

The New Year is another time we step back and look at our whole lives, where we have come from, what we have been, what we have done, where we are now, where we are going, what does the present moment offer to us: gifts, opportunities and challenges.

I offer two readings today to help us think about these most weighty of questions, and in each case, I have chosen to go to the end and look back to make meaning of the present. The Revelation of John, the last book of the Bible, not only at the end of the volume, but written most recently. More importantly, it describes the end of human history as we know it. And I have offered this prose fragment by Czeslaw Milosz, a transcendent, transporting visions of the end of life: A moment of happiness on this side that foretells of a greater happiness to come.

"The End is Where We Start From"

I write eulogies. It's part of this work, I stand at the end of a life and read it backwards. The End is where I start From. And I want that the words I say to honor the memory of a person: "honor the memory"; it's a cliché, I know, but what I mean is that I want to respect the way that person is remembered by the people who knew him or her. I do not want to pretend that a scoundrel was a saint, nor expose a saint's shameful secrets, to deconstruct them in death. I want to be accurate to how they were known. It is not my job to revise the history.

And I want to comfort those who mourn.

And I want to make a meaning of the person's life, to tell the story of his or her life in such a way that all those gathered will take away some truth. To tell the gospel according to the one who died – to show how almost all human lives move in ways unique and mysterious toward redemption, the redemption of humanity and of the earth.

And I want to suggest that everyone present at that funeral or memorial service should allow themselves to Start From the End, and consider their lives as from the end, as from inevitability of each of our death's.

*In advanced age, my health worsening, I woke up in the middle of the night, and experienced a feeling of happiness so intense and perfect that in all my life I had only felt its premonition. And there was no reason for it. It didn't obliterate consciousness; the past which I carried was there, together with my grief. And it was suddenly included, was a necessary part of the whole. As if a voice were repeating: "You can stop worrying now; everything happened just as it had to. You did what was assigned to you, and you are not required anymore to think of what happened long ago."*

I have to tell you that the first time I read these words – sitting in my reading chair at night – sitting like a frog in a pool of light – I cried out and wept. I wept in relief because it gave me hope.

You have to understand that I know nothing that you don't already know. I know nothing certain about what lies beyond the horizon of death. It is not as though when you graduate from seminary, the dean calls you into his office (like Harry Potter and Dumbledore) and says: OK, you passed all your course and are ready to be a minister; it is time that we let you in on the secret. This is what happens to people when they die. This is where their souls go and this is the system, the rules, the policies and procedures that govern the afterlife. After all, you need to know this to be a minister. It would be great if that were so, but the catch would be that nobody will ever believe that you or anyone else knows. So good luck with that.

No, I know nothing that you don't know.

But I take the testimony of Czeslaw Milosz to heart. Here is a man who is in his nineties, who watched the Warsaw Ghetto burn as a young man, who fought with the Polish Underground and who became the Ambassador to the United States from the Democratic Republic of Poland, and who defected to the United States and became a Professor at Berkeley and won the Nobel Prize for Literature and here is the reason why I think he is wise, he learned how to find exactly the right word, with the right sound and the right meaning in two different languages and who grew very, very old.

And so, I am comforted by his testimony that for those who have the time, we die in happiness because we have become reconciled to our lives. Is that not the process that he is describing: *the past which I carried was there, together with my grief. And it was suddenly included, was a necessary part of the whole. As if a voice were repeating: "You can stop worrying now; everything happened just as it had to. You did what was assigned to you, and you are not required anymore to think of what happened long ago."*

We know this process of reconciliation to our own lives. I was thinking of a small incident from my high school days the other day – a moment when I was hurtful to another, a moment that fills me with some shame: enough shame that I will not share the details with you even now. But everyone in that moment I remember has moved on in life – it is a half century ago. The other people there may not even remember the event the same way. The moment exists only in my memory, and always will, but it no longer matters. "You can stop worrying now."

When you start from the end, what becomes clear is that the past is unchangeable and untouchable – if it is painful or shameful, the only really possible response to it is grief – or maybe what I am trying to say is that you emotionally graduate to acceptance, which allows grief to be present as itself, and allows for happiness.

The past seems inevitable, doesn't it? Looking back, starting from the end, your choices and decisions seem fated, as though an invisible author were writing your life as a novel. "You did what you were assigned to do," says Milosz. There is a great comfort in that, but that comfort comes from the perspective.

Looking forward, life seems to an infinite number of choices. Looking backward, and from a sufficient distance, it seems as though we have merely done what we were quote assigned close-quote to do.

I am not sure that knowing that this is how it turns out helps us make the moral decisions that we have to make everyday, but it does tell us that our ultimate happiness is not at stake. No matter what we choose, eventually life will lead us to a point in which we see what we did as being assigned to us, inevitable, and unchangeable, present, not obliterated, but nothing we have to worry about anymore.

Kind of like all that turmoil one goes through in hoping to get accepted to this college or that college. It seems all important at the time, but no one I have ever met says that where they went to college was the turning point of their life, that made all the difference between their happiness and woe.

I suppose you could take what Milosz offers us as meaning that nothing really matters. If all choices in life turn out to feel like that they were fated, or simply assigned, and that eventually all the regret, shame and pain that comes with life fades into a stoic acceptance, then what does it matter?

But Milosz testifies that at the end we are not delivered into a place of bland neutrality and dispassionate and detached calm. No, he says that we awake in the middle of night, seized by a *a feeling of happiness so intense and perfect that in all my life I had only felt its premonition.*

To me, this promise of intense and perfect happiness is a sign of our ultimate reconciliation with the Universe, with the processes of life, with our own selves and our own living. It is the most practical, materialist and this-world understanding of universal salvation as I can imagine. And whether it is an announcement of what is coming on the other side is not important to me right now. What matters to me is the testimony that such final happiness is possible. And it is not only this testimony by a poet I have never met, it is also what I have witnessed among some of those I know who have died – some at great age, like Milosz, and some after very difficult illnesses.

To take this as the possibility of the end as the place where we ought to begin, or begin again today, is live as though we are on a journey to happiness, that we are bound for glory, in some way. It is a profound invitation into life.

Can we hear that message? We who believe that our happiness depends on what we do, our virtue, our goodness, can we imagine that the world is such that our final happiness will be a gift, given by grace, and that nothing we do has made us deserve it.

I have been moved by the final chapter of the final book of the Bible. The end of the Bible, that point where we ought to begin. For thousands of pages, and hundreds of stories, the mysterious stories, the funny stories, the horrifying stories, after all the teachings and songs of praise and proverbs and Paul's increasingly cranky letters, we arrive at the end and Jesus is saying – "Come, and let everyone who hears say Come. And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

Can this be true? That the waters of life are a gift to be taken? Could it be possible that human history is a giant complex knot that is loosening, unraveling and untying. and that human lives, if given enough time, finally resolve themselves into simplicity and happiness? If that is at least one possible end, ought not we start there, find our beginning there?

The end is where we begin again. To live with a premonition of happiness at the end; to live with the knowledge that the alpha and omega of life is an invitation to drink freely from the springs of the living waters, that we need not worry anymore; we are doing what we are somehow assigned to do, what better thoughts to begin a new year.