

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 87 – Bob Henderson – Teaching Elder

Theology is All Around Us

And now a personal word,

A few days ago, I attended a memorial service at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. Over a thousand people attended with me honoring the person who had died. Bob Henderson led the service. Bob spoke about kindness and generosity and living an incarnational life. The person who had died had died young from cancer, at the age of forty-seven. My wife, Laura, was to right of me in the pews. My friend, Karen, was to the left of me. The entire hall was filled with people. I turned to Karen and asked her if she would rather die young and have hundreds of mourners attend her service or die old with one or two people at her funeral who remembered her. Karen turned the question back to me. I've been considering it.

I would rather die old even if I die nearly alone. I would rather die old even if no one remembered me. The time will come when no one will remember me anyway. I want to experience this world as long as I can. I want to create. I want to experience events. I want to see the people I love grow old with me. I want to witness this earth. I know all of what I sense may end today. That is the tragedy and grace of this life. We exist in mystery.

I've been drawn to the mystery of life and what we make of it since my teenage years, maybe even earlier than that, when my grandmother read me children's stories in Portuguese. (I have a distant memory of a story about a bird with bloodied feathers, suggesting the passion of Christ.) I've been surrounded by my mother's love and prayer since I was an infant. I've sensed since I could name it the protection of forces I cannot explain. Later, whatever was supposed to happen in my first communion happened. God was on my side. But something else happened too as I matured in my teenage years. I began to deal with God as a construct, as something less to know and something more to know about. Religion was something to understand. I remember writing a letter to my sister—I think I was fourteen years old—explaining Pentecostal eschatology and refuting the end of days. I could see the working of things.

I attended Chaminade High School, an all-boys Catholic school, during my junior and senior years. I took a religion class every semester, recited the catechism, and attended Mass. The Marianist order of brothers and priests taught me, men who took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, who devoted themselves to the broad education and

moral development of the students in their charge. I remember Brother Charles Roggeman. Brother Chuck taught English with wit and a twinkle in his eye. He would give out demerits on a slip of paper with a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini on it. I still have those demerit slips. I earned my share. He taught us *Beowulf* and Chaucer and Browning and Thoreau. Brother Chuck was mischievous and fun and loving and an angel of a man.

In college I read history and philosophy of religion, which together is theology. I took classes from three great professors of religion: Arnold Wettstein, dean of Knowles Memorial Chapel, who had studied under Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary, and who introduced me to the religions of India, China, and Japan; Karl Peters, who was at the forefront of religion and science, who taught me several classes on the development of Christian thought and who guided my senior thesis on American civil religion; and Theodore Darrah, who was emeritus dean of the chapel. Dean Darrah was semiretired by then, teaching the Old and New Testament. He smoked a pipe in class and tinkered with clocks.

There is an earnestness to religious studies. Theologians consider the deepest questions of existence: birth, death, redemption, and salvation. I have that earnestness too. I do think we have to risk being earnest in this world. But every kind and decent theologian I know is also a lover of life, finding joy in laughter and friendship. There is something perfectly sublime about the playfulness of people who think deeply about the absurd and divine.

I did not continue my formal study of religion. I did not want to minister or pronounce. And I did not yet want to profess. I wanted to be in and of the world, in law and business and civic life. But I find as much satisfaction today reading Anselm and Aquinas, Barth and Bonhoeffer, as I did as an undergraduate at Rollins College. And I enjoy reading Christopher Hitchens too.

Theology is all around us. We worship. We love. We create. All in response to evolution and consciousness and perhaps to a relationship with something ineffable to which we give many names.

I want to return to my studies. I want to honor the protective force of parental love that shields me. I want to exercise a critical mind. I hope to live long enough to give this life a good try. What I want most is for my wife and daughter and a few friends to smile in memory of the life I led. If a kind and decent theologian is there to say a few words, to give grace to mystery, then all the better.

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