The Journey to Hallelujah

Knowing and Owning Your Divinity

“Vitam impendere vero”

“I consecrate my life to truth.”

- Rosseau (16th Century Philosopher)

Texts:

 Isaiah 50:4-9
 Mark 14: 3-9
 Mark 14:13-46
 Mark 13:9-11

Early on as I was getting to know Bruce I asked him what his favorite quote was. He shared this one with me and told me that he had adopted it as his ethos, a personal motto, when he was thirteen years old, hitchhiking and reading the philosopher Rousseau. His naming of this shared ethos was the moment I knew we had a road to walk together. It was so fundamental to his, and our shared legacy, that it is the quote that will be inscribed on his headstone at Arlington National Cemetery.

The quote originates from a letter Rousseau wrote to a colleague and friend d’Alembert (Letter to d’Alembert, 1758) in which he is explaining a philosophical break with his friend, fellow philosopher, Diderot.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this letter he declares that he has taken these words as his motto: *Vitam impendere vero*. In this announcement he shared that this invocation to truth serves, not just himself, but the “public good.” Our relationship with our truth can take many forms. Sometimes it comes easily. Sometimes more of a curiosity or aspiration. For Rousseau, it was in essence, a sacrifice of self. He realized it wasn’t about him; it was about a greater calling to being more deeply aligned with his inner knowing and, what I like to think, the divine. In the closing of his letter, he writes “Here is the only portrait of man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth [...] I want to show my peers a man in the full truth of nature; and that man shall be myself.”

Before we start I feel called to dedicate this teaching to, and share a little about my daughter, Salomé Heartly Hanessian, who would be two years old this year. A week before Salomé died, she was shown to me in a vision. The divine gift of this was immeasurable. It was her way of using my gift of vision to say both hello, and in retrospect, goodbye. The blessing of this vision saved me over and over again in those early months. She literally took me jumping in time through her life up until about the age of eight. The vividness in which I saw her full cherubic face, head full of dark strawberry blond curls, like Ava’s were, her bright blue eyes, her joyful, knowing, yet playfully mischievous, smile was one the greatest gifts I have ever received.

Salomé’s name means “peace.” I could go into much more detail about the different Salomé’s in history who inspired that, but suffice it to say, she is named for all the women who, time and time again, have suffered. For the women who suffered from half-truths and whose stories were never told. For the women who have borne and birthed children that they didn’t want to conceive. For women who transcended their oppression and pain with solidarity and divine femininity. Her name was in dedication to the women who named their daughter Salomé either despite of, or because of the most well-known Salomé’s role in the beheading of John the Baptist.[[2]](#footnote-2) To women who beat the drum of truth. To women who care for one another’s wounds and pains, call each other towards their power and truest selves, and name each other’s divinity with authenticity, wisdom and grace. To Salomé, who even in her earliest stages of life was a visionary and knew to how to show me what her true life was in a different realm, to the little girl who saved me with her vision and divine grace.

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I find myself wondering how your lent journey been, because I can certainly attest that mine has been pretty wild. It has included the burial of my husband, visions, a forty-days-in-the-desert-like experience, repentance, and new beginnings, all to the backdrop of some severe cognitive symptoms during a bad bout of COVID! God has really packed it in for me this Lent.

In harmony with scripture today, as we explore Jesus’ last days before His death, I approached today’s sermon by exploring the overlapping themes of both my Lenten journey and Jesus’ Lenten journey. The themes that emerged were: Inner Knowing, Divinity, and Honoring Call. How do we recognize the divine in us? How do we unleash our knowing and allow that knowing to guide us along our path? How do we prepare ourselves to receive calls from the Holy Spirit? And finally, how do we respond to them? As I distilled these questions within the word, I realized that I’ve been wrestling with these questions all my life in a very intimate way.

We started this week’s reading in Bethany. In this place a woman pours a whole bottle of perfume over Jesus, which appears to his disciples to be a waste of money. They suggest that selling the perfume would have given them more money to give to the disinherited among them. This makes a lot of sense as many of Jesus’ teachings leading up to this point were about giving to, and caring for, the disinherited and spreading whatever wealth they had. Jesus surprises us here by rebuking the disciples who criticized the woman. In doing this Jesus highlights the importance of personal sacrifice and honoring his presence. Jesus was feeling the weight of his fate. He was wrestling with his imminent death; a fate that, no matter how much life we have lived or how prepared we feel in spirit, most are not immediately at peace with. Maybe we get to peace, but it’s heavy and requires time and discernment. If we are given the foreknowledge of our death, as Jesus was, the ability to “come to terms with our mortality” as Bruce often put it, we are forced to face ourselves: excavate, take stock. I can tell you from experience this sort of excavation, through both Bruce and myself, things come in to sharp focus. We are forced to answer if we have fully discerned our purpose and if we have accomplished it with the time we were given here. In other words, did we listen carefully along the way, discern the ‘Call’ … and do what God sent us sent us here to do?

It’s a big question.

Jesus was very much in this moment. Excavating and thinking deeply. One could make the argument that because of the gravity of the moment, Jesus’ actions and word hold particular weight and meaning compared to the other stories told during earlier, less weighty days. In this somewhat startling rebuke of his followers — who were just applying what he had been teaching them! — Jesus teaches us about the often-surprising process of discernment. He identifies an order of values. He identifies the importance of this sacrifice made to honor his path. This woman’s act acknowledges his spiritual alignment with God and emphasizes the specialness of his upcoming sacrifice for all humanity, such a profound sacrifice in fact, that we are here today to reflect and speak about it 2,000 years later! This woman, she got it right. In this example Jesus teaches us that we must look closer. He needed everyone to see and honor his incredible sacrifice, and maybe he even needed the comfort of this sweet perfume, as he walked towards the terrifying glory of his crucifixion.

The more overarching take-away from this passage is that not every commandment and teaching of Jesus’s is created equal. Context matters. He shares with us the vital lesson one must learn to actualize themselves and their purpose: that they actually need to pause, think, tap into their inner knowing, just as this woman in Bethany did. She clearly saw and empathized with his fate and acted upon her empathy. She offered what she could: a simple but valuable sacrifice of perfume. Cashing in the bottle and giving the money to the disinherited would not have been in-tune with the bigger picture of the moment.

We are also instructed through this passage that charity and empathy start with those who are right in front of you. Your family, friends, community. We should love and empathize with them first. If we aren’t caring for those we know first, we will not be fortified with the love we receive in return and we will not be able to help the world. The love we cultivate and receive in our intimate interpersonal relationships is the love that fills us up and amplifies us. If our cup is overflowing with love in our day-to-day relationships, the more love we have to spread to the world. This was a scary moment for Jesus. He needed that extra love. He needed to be perfumed with adoration and respect so that he could courageously walk towards his fate. The lessons within this story instruct us that empathetic discernment should be at the heart of every action we take; that we should not just blindly follow commandments but distill the greater call that may be present.

In diving deeper to Jesus’ time in Bethany, and his Last Supper and time in the Garden of Gethsemane, what strikes me as the most profound theme is the evolution of Jesus’s clarity and knowing. It was clearly a process. When we step back and look at his three-year chronicle of ministry, we see the path towards salvation was not linear. There were a lot of ups and downs. Tests of Faith. Moments he was asked to rise to the occasion as a healer, a friend, a teacher, an advocate, an activist. It took Jesus’ entire life to get to this point in which we meet him this week, where he is somewhere around thirty years old.[[3]](#footnote-3) That means it took Jesus approximately thirty years to find himself, to accumulate enough courage and self-worth to show the gifts he had to the people. Thirty years. Jesus had to face and surmount an enormous number of challenges, build his bonafides, hone his craft, sharpen his reputation. Without those years and trials and pains, Jesus would not have been strong enough to answer God’s radical call to ministry of healing and love. It was a radical call in terms of the historical context in which it occurred. Much like today, there were many disinherited people and much social rupture and dissension. Deep divides that seemed hopeless. Asking someone to devote their life to love and heal people’s personal and social wounds was akin to putting a large target on their back. It was definitely a dangerous and outside-the-box call. It strikes me that there must have been a tipping point of some sort for Jesus, a point in which the aggregate of life lessons that Jesus needed to learn were learned. He proved his holiness, proved his inner knowing and divinity was alive enough, strong enough, to receive God’s call, and answer it.

Speaking of radical, I am going to be a little radical, even borderline heretic, and say that I think the Bible makes what Jesus and the disciples did during their ministry seem a little too magical. I think we are kind of dulled to the story of Jesus and all that he did. We don’t truly identify with it because we could never do that, right? Jesus is the Son of God – we stop right there, our aspirations are shot. There is no way *we* could compare to Jesus in our acts of love or empathy or wisdom?! Jesus was a human, divinely manifested with a purpose to teach and change the world, one person at a time. And we think that is great! A wonderful example! But, not “me.”

Let’s take a serious and thoughtful, and again possibly fully heretic, pause here. What if we are *wrong* about our divinity in comparison to Jesus? What if you, yes you, are as divinely gifted as Jesus? What if in those first thirty, forty, fifty, even sixty years you, too, stumbled and got up, you, too, sinned and repented, you, too, lost faith and found it, you, too, were entirely flattened over and over again by life and kept getting up. What if all those reparations of faith and moments where you aimed towards goodness, what if because of those you, too, were gifted the same divine qualities to heal, show empathy, lead with wisdom, love unconditionally and be a mouthpiece for justice, just as Jesus was? What if the holy trinity instilled all these gifts in you, but you just weren’t aware?

As creative exercise I would like to ask you to imagine, actually *visualize*, that you have all of Jesus’ gifts of healing, empathy, wisdom, love and advocacy and that you are actively and fearlessly using them, just as Jesus did. I want you to imagine that your chapters may not have been written yet, but they are coming. Take a moment to feel and claim your divinity and alignment with God and The Spirit, and Jesus’ tenets and know that you, too, are miraculously divine. Feel the power and possibility of your divinity and interconnectedness with everything. Imagine that you too have the ability to heal as Jesus did, that you, too, have the ability to have visions, that you, too, have the gravitas required for discerning what is right, that you, too, love like Jesus did and you, too, *know* like Jesus *knew*.

Jesus, he just knows. Over and over again. He knows and names exactly what his disciples will see and encounter, down to the layout of the architecture. He knows who will betray him. He knows he will die. He just knows. But what if the knowing Jesus had was just what we call today, really good “intuition”? Just being in-tune with God’s call to goodness and the other beings around you? What if the healing Jesus performed was simply done through teaching people about their own personal power? What if he just taught them that the power of their negative thoughts held them back? Or simply taught them about the power of self-confidence; not to give up when times get hard or things look hopeless? To always believe in yourself and find a way? What if we were able to hack through creativity and inference all the “magic” that is demonstrated in Jesus’ miracles and the paradigm for “miracles” we created worked?

I want you to imagine that you possess all the qualities that bring people salvation and hope. Imagine you are the Ah-Ha! moment. The solver of mysteries, inspirer of the masses with your light and love, totally tuned-in to the will of God and the Spirit, responding to its every command, even the ones that have you like,

“Whaaaaaaat? Whhhaaaaaaat’s that? Come again ’cause I don’t think I heard you quite right…”

What if you had that conversation and listened and eventually did that crazy thing that no one understood? Acted on that thing no one cared about? What if you walked in the example of Jesus over and over again to become today’s salvation? What if you are the divine gift? What if you are the blessing we’ve all been waiting for to inspire, lead and change the world?

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I know… It’s a struggle. It’s a struggle to imagine this could actually be. We are so fragile. We break so easily, over and over again. We carry the heavy weight of our shadows. We mourn, sin, feel shame, and for whatever reason, these broken pieces of ourselves block us from going there. However, today I am going to challenge you to integrate all those mucky, not so shiny, even downright impossible pieces of yourself. I want you to see those pieces as not just part of you but essential to your alignment with your higher self, and ultimately, your alignment with the divine. *For it is through these pieces we are shown not just the parts of ourselves that need healing, but the parts of the world that need healing so you can serve can fulfill your purpose. In our humble steadfast struggles through our pain and shadows, we are shown what needs fixing within us all, as a whole.*

When I started coming here a little over a year ago in the midst of some very messy, public, painful life changes that culminated with the death of my husband, Bruce, I was naïve to the number of deaths there would actually be. In his death were exponential deaths. The death of a life and future together. The death of dreams. Hope. In this new denuded landscape I mourned. A lot. I was forced to reorganize. Slowly I began to create a coherent new narrative, pave a path towards a renewed sense of purpose. This painful work has not only been done within the framework of this uniquely authentic and spirit-filled community, this work has been done because of it.

The work has paid off. This extremely eventful Lent has not just culminated in what I offer here today. It has also offered the beginnings of what we name ‘Call.’ That amorphous idea of a new purpose that has been echoing in me since starting to come here last year, that thing I have been humbly hoping and praying for, that next thing that excites me, gives me joy, reminds me of who I am, that thing that states with unequivocal clarity and voice: this is why you are here. Yes, *that thing* has - kind of - arrived! For the first time in a very, very long time, I am seeing glimmers of joy in the distance and feel the excitement of renewed purpose and possibility.

This community has been a huge part of cultivating the ground in which this seed of hope I planted when I came here a year ago could start to grow. Thank you. Each of you. For being the divine beings you are; offering me week after week the love, empathy, challenge; it’s all propelled me forward toward doing whatever it is I am supposed to be doing. You are indeed the clay for this beautiful new vessel. Through belief in my inner knowing, my inner divinity — something 8th Day has been clutch in helping me know and own since birth — eyes closed and in the dark I have shaped a vessel with my weary hands, and it all of the sudden holds water. It’s both new and old, still deciding on its exact shape, and what exactly it wants to be. In keeping with the well-established themes of my life so far, it is an innovative synthesis of big ideas that will take a lot of finesse and creativity. But - it’s something, and I am so incredibly grateful for that! Truly, I am in awe of the process and the Spirit’s movement through you, into me.

To wrap things up but staying with the theme of this naming of your, our, divinity and thanks and giving, I want to conclude by singing a modified version of *Hallelujah* by Leonard Cohen. This haunting, deeply moving song is considered a modern-day epic that is a testament to the complexities and intricacies of the most powerful tool that God has gifted us: love. It is not what I would call a ‘happy song’ about love. Through an Old Testament lens it wrestles with the shadowy side of love, exploring themes of passion, power, brokenness, empathy, redemption and salvation.

As an act of artistic interplay I have written a few new Hallelujahs, for if there is one thing I have learned over this year, it is that *we write our own Hallelujahs*. I offer these verses as an ode to *Hallelujah*: To the timelessness of our human experience; all the challenges and joys we face: To the gift of epic and song, which has provided us a way to express our humanity and pass it down to others time and time again: A bow to knowing and owning the God in us well enough to write some new verse. May we keep writing our stories over and over again until we get them right.

*Hallelujah*

I’ve heard there was a secret cord
that David played and it pleased the Lord
but you don’t really care for music, do you?
it goes like this:
the 4th, the 5th
the minor fall
the major lift
the baffled king
composing, Hallelujah!

darkness walks within the halls
shadows they hide your call
Tell me, “what’s your truth?”
Does it move you?
For God is great
Jesus right
I speak the truth
you see the light
That holy piece
The “u” in hallelujah

Sons and daughters, take the lead
Shape our work, our unity
Help us plant the seed of your dreams
You’re our hope, our forever light
Return us to that place, that sight
Where everything’s abloom
And hallelujah

So here we stand you and me
closer to our divinity
How do we part the sea
so we may lead?
But This we know, we all are one
And Lord, the song has just begun,
Let’s make some noise!!
That joyful hallelujah!

1. The Cambridge Companion toRousseau, pp. 365 - 396. Cambridge University Press, 2001 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Salomé III, Jewish Princess c. AD 30](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salome) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [c. AD 30](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Jesus) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)