How Then Shall We Live?

by Jo Page

I'm up there in the pulpit, in the middle of the sermon, when the first car alarm goes off. The woman whose car it is doesn't like to wear her hearing aids so she doesn't notice it. I pretend not to. For some reason, one of the tenors in the choir thinks it's his car and he makes his way out of the choir stall, stepping over the other choristers' feet, then across the uncarpeted part of the floor, up the side aisle, out of the sanctuary and into the parking lot.

Now another car alarm begins to go off. A second choir member decides it must be *his* car.

I keep preaching.

Then both alarms stop. Both men come back into the sanctuary, down the side aisle and noisily back into the choir loft. Mission accomplished. And I've only got a few more pages to go.

But then the car alarm goes off again. It's the same car alarm that had gone off the first time and the tenor now recognizes that it hadn't been *his* alarm that had gone off before. Somehow he's figured out that it's the car belonging to the woman who doesn't like to wear her hearing aids.

So the tenor decides it's a good idea to go tell her about it. But just as he is stepping down from the choir loft again, the second car alarm starts up again. And this time a third car alarm goes off. It's like a parking lot full of wailing toddlers—it only takes one to set them all off.

I see the tenor walking toward the woman who doesn't like her hearing aids. Then a man in a red tie gets up from about halfway back in the pews. He thinks one of those alarms is his. He makes his way out of the sanctuary to the door into the church foyer. Then I see a woman sitting toward the front. She's been holding her baby, but now she hands the baby off to her husband and sprints after the man going to the back of the sanctuary. Suddenly it all seems like a football play, the two of them setting up an offensive formation. I expect the husband to lob the baby into the choir loft. Whatever happens, I hope it's a completed pass.

Meanwhile, the tenor has made it over to the pew where the woman who doesn't like her hearing aids is sitting. She is looking up at the preacher with a rapt smile. So she jumps in surprise when the tenor stands at her shoulder and tries to tell her about the car alarm. It's easy to see she's confused. I find out later she hadn't even realized she *had* a security alarm in her car. So naturally she would have had no idea how to turn it off even if she had heard it.

She gets up slowly, a little stiffly and she and the tenor join the others going into the parking lot. After a bit we hear the car alarms turn off, one by one. Then the man in the red tie, the tenor, the young mother and the woman who hates her hearing aids, each of them holding their car keys, come back to their pews. I keep right on preaching, now just a half-a-page away from the 'Amen.'

"Rabbi, what can we learn from the sound of a car alarm?"
"That what you need to hear is not always what you are listening for."

Seven months after September 11th, 2001, a friend and I went to New York to attend the annual conference at Trinity Institute on Wall Street. The Trinity Institute conferences draw huge crowds because they feature nationally-known speakers, each addressing the theme chosen for that year. This year's theme was *How Then Shall We Live*? It's a quote from Ezekiel, "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then, can we live?"

It was a good question to be asking. The speakers were to address how we might move forward as people of faith in a nation heartbroken by the events of September 11th, hungry for vengeance and frightened at what was to come. It was poignant question, too, made even more so because Trinity Parish on Wall Street was just a few footsteps away from the World Trade Center. It had been both a staging ground for recovery efforts and a memorial site to the thousands who had died.

How Then Shall We Live turned out to be a strange conference, though. Famous theologians and speakers addressed the throngs of conference attendees and wrestled with a question that seemed to give no ready answers. Lots of us could only see them on the video monitors placed throughout the sanctuary and out into meeting rooms. My friend and I sat in the back of the sanctuary, squinting to see the actual speakers, wanting their corporeal presence to somehow provide answers.

We were preachers, after all. And we were liberals. And when a preacher is a liberal, as so many are, you've got to watch what you say from the pulpit. There's an old saw that says a sermon is supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. It's risky business inflicting affliction. And self-righteous besides, not that that necessarily stops anybody.

We were preachers and add to that the fact that we were a little in love. This conference, *How Then Shall We Live?* was sort of a romantic getaway. You wouldn't believe what pastors find romantic. We had arrived late the night before, parked my friend's beat up VW on the street in front of our hotel and tried to check into our rooms. But there had been a flood at the Holiday Inn where conference attendees were staying. We were redirected to the Ritz-Carlton, assured that first thing in the morning our original rooms would be ready. We got back in the car and drove the limping VW the few blocks to the Ritz-Carlton porte-cochere. The valet glanced at the well-rusted car, wordlessly took my friend's car keys and drove into the parking garage.

The hotel lobby was thickly carpeted, elegantly furnished and glimmering with lights from the enormous chandeliers. At the front desk the concierge welcomed us warmly. He said he hoped we would feel right at home. It only took a heartbeat's time for me to decide I could force myself to feel at home in such a swell place. But the concierge assured us we would be back at the Holiday Inn tomorrow—it was so much more a convenient location for us.

But why would we ever want to leave the Ritz-Carlton? The rooms were little playgrounds of luxe—feather beds and stacks of pillow, Bose radios and boxes of chocolate truffles. And a telescope for looking out at New York Harbor, its night-black surface laced

with lights from boats and bridges. In the bathroom were expensive toiletries, double marble showers and bathtubs big enough for full-immersion baptisms.

How then shall we live?

Apparently with an astonishing sense of duty and punctuality. Because early the next day, before the conference was to begin, we skipped breakfast. We packed up our bags, had the valet fetch the VW and moved back up West Street to the Holiday Inn.

"You're on the 39th floor. You've got some nice views," the man at the check-in desk told us, "Good views of the Harbor."

But not like the ones at the Ritz-Carlton I thought as we stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the 39th floor. It wouldn't be anything like the Ritz-Carlton at all. Why hadn't we just skipped the morning session and had room service? I thought of the deep bathtub and the long soak I was missing, the fancy little bottles of bath products I had not even had the presence of mind to steal.

Then the elevator doors opened and we stepped onto the 39th floor. I did what I guess most people do when they step off the elevator in a tall building. I went to the window right beside it and I took a look outside.

There was a wide path of blue sky in front of me, as if the buildings on either side of it had parted to admit the early morning daylight. It was lovely the way the sun flooded the space with so much unimpeded radiance. I looked to my right and saw a nondescript skyscraper. On my left was a gorgeous older building. It was dignified and weather-worn, with ornate quoins and carved pediments. But like a woman wearing *hajib*, it was veiled behind black nylon netting that blew in the breeze, shrouding the building from its rooftop to as far down as I could see. On tip-toe, I pressed farther into the window-well, my forehead to the glass, trying to see where the netting ended. For a few seconds I stared without seeing and then my throat suddenly tightened and I got so dizzy I braced myself with palms against the window: immediately below me was the maw, the bodiless grave, of ground zero.

I hadn't known. I hadn't realized the Holiday Inn had once been in the towers' vanished shadows. All I had thought, when I first looked out the window, was how pretty it was to see so much sunshine pouring in. But it was only pouring in because the towers had crumbled one by one while and thousands of lives had turned to ashes and dust. Sun and sky were all that was left to fill the gaping cavity. Seven months after September 11th the site had been scraped clean of all debris, as empty and open as a gargantuan drilled tooth."Come here," I said to my friend who had walked on ahead of me down the hall, "Look."

He came back to stand beside me. But what was there to say? We stood looking down 39 floors into the void, into the tragedy. There were no buildings to see. There were no words for us to say. We stared into a stony acre of death, speechless.

How then shall we live?

I wish I could say the conference was powerful and meaningful, but I can't. No one could answer the question the conference had proposed as its theme. One speaker decried the climate of empire that made the United States a target of hate. Another talked about praying the Holy Office, which is to say, praying at regular intervals throughout the day, much as a Muslim is required to do five times a day. Another speaker talked about the need for community. Another one about sin and grace. No one told us what we really wanted to know.

We wanted to know what to say when you come to the end of speech and then you gaze, slack-jawed, at all that lies beyond.

On the last day of the conference we walked over to the plywood platform built to allow visitors a grim glimpse onto the World Trade Center site. We stood there with a crowd of people. There was graffiti on the plywood walls, prayers and blessings, mostly. We saw a set of Venetian blinds still tangled in the branches of a leafless tree like a comb sticking out of a drunken woman's hairdo. We heard a couple arguing about whether or not to take a picture. They spoke English with thick German accents.

"But why do you want to take a picture? There is nothing there." the man asked the woman.

"There is *not* nothing there," she replied, angrily.

We heard a little girl ask her father if many people had died when the buildings had fallen. We could hear his helpless silence. No parent wants to be the one who teaches their children about the senselessness of death or worse, about its endlessness.

So we walked on, leaving the World Trade Center site, making our way up Broadway into a bitter wind as far as we could stand it. We had been thinking to visit some galleries, do a little shopping in Soho. But this was the wrong time for shopping. We let the wind turn us around and we walked, hand-in-hand, hunched-over, back to the Holiday Inn, stopping to buy take-out clam chowder to eat in the safe blandness of our rooms. New York was cold. There didn't seem to be any answers forthcoming. We had a view of New York Harbor, it's true. And we didn't look out of the window by the elevator when we got off on our floor.

How then shall we preach?

It doesn't matter if a pastor says that faith doesn't necessarily offer answers, but rather raises more questions, there is still the expectation that in the sermon, some kind of meaning or message will be forthcoming. If you believe St. Paul, writing in Romans, f*aith* is supposed to come from what's heard. So there's an agenda in sermon-writing—to try to find words to make audible the mystical interface between the mortal and the immortal: Moses and the blazing bush, Elijah and the chariot of fire, Mary Magdalene and the empty tomb or the two disciples and the unrecognized walker on the Emmaus Road.

But what do you say when you come to the end of speech and then gaze, slack-jawed, at all that is supposed to be there, but isn't?

The burning bush is no longer on fire. The clouds have forever swallowed Elijah's chariot. And the unrecognized walker on the Emmaus road has long since walked on.

Frederick Buechner, writing in *The Alphabet of Grace,* says, "it is the silence encircling the sound that is itself most holy."

Still, silence was not part of the deal I struck at my ordination. The deal I struck was that I would use words to summon faith in the unseen and unknowable. It's a fool's errand. And I do it every Sunday. I break the silence. I don't have any choice.

Prague Afternoon

by Julie Wittes Schlack

When my late father spoke of his father—a man who immigrated to Canada in 1895 alone at the age of 13—it was always of his sternness, his sense of possibility that mutated overnight in 1929 into a corrosive pessimism, and his almost worshipful adoration of his wife and daughter paired with his inexplicable faith that somehow, by resenting his sons, born in the New World, it would make them stronger. He was a Jew who fled the ghetto in Ukraine, then re-created it in Montreal; became a man of property, then lost it; who escaped domination, then practiced it.

I thought about him this morning as I climbed the stairs up from the Staromestská Metro station and set off on a walking tour of Josefov, the old Jewish ghetto in Prague. This city within a city occupies very little space—an area of about 40 square (and small) blocks—but for hundreds of years, all Jews in Prague were confined to living there. The tour route felt similar to what I imagine the Stations of the Cross to be—a spiritual pilgrimage from one scene of grace and horror to the next.

At the Klausen synagogue I learned about the first known pogrom in Prague. It occurred in 1097, during the Crusades, and became a regular event for the following 800 years. In a glass case at the Maisel Synagogue, I saw the yellow patches and strange hats that the 16th-century Jews were required to wear. In the Spanish Synagogue I read about the Familiant Act of 1726, which mandated that only the firstborn sons in Jewish families were allowed to marry and have children. At the Jewish Town Hall, I learned about the expulsion of all Jews from Bohemia and Moravia in 1541, an order revoked in 1567, then enacted again in 1748. Seeing the intricate garments and manuscripts the ghetto Jews laboriously produced in the late 1500s to pray for the health of the empress who had expelled them in the past (in the hope that she wouldn't do it again) aroused me to the awful obsequiousness of it and to the bitter pride of my grandparents and great-grandparents in the mere feat of survival.

Along the route I looked in store windows, where I saw the same fine, ornate crystal I used to see in my maternal grandmother's apartment, adorned with the same images of lords and monarchs and hunting scenes that always used to strike me as so oddly irrelevant to her life as a Jew, as a Montrealer, as a canasta-playing lady and citizen of the 20th century. But today, steeped finally in some Jewish history other than the Old Testament and the Holocaust, I finally grasped the mix of desperation and arrogance in the Ashkenazis' dogged, paradoxical attempt to be Jewish but not "other," to maintain the tribe but lose the tribal territory—the ghetto—to wrap themselves in and then shed their differentness as easily as one would nestle into or shrug off a cloak.

After all, in the periods of respite and relative peace, such as the middle of the 13th century, when religious and civil self-administration of the Jewish community was respected and protected, it was easy for my ancestors to either believe they had joined the social rank of their persecutors enough to see an end to persecution or to recognize that the power of avarice and co-optation surpassed even ethnic and racial hatred. And so, in

the High Synagogue museum gift shop, browsing the mezuzahs and Kafka paraphernalia, I found myself thinking about how that same debate has played itself out over and over across the Jewish generations, between those who stayed in Europe and those who fled when Hitler came to power, between the Zionists and the assimilationists, the orthodox and the secular, between the garment boss fathers and their Communist children, between those who thought you could join them and those who thought you had to beat them.

But then I went to the Pinkas Synagogue, where the pale plaster walls are delicately painted with the names of the 77,297 Czech citizens killed in the Terezin concentration camp outside of Prague. Many of my Aunt Anne's relatives had lived in Prague, and, indeed, there are many Klaubers, some of them undoubtedly her grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins. (Her parents were among the Klaubers killed in Auschwitz.) In the rooms upstairs from these haunted, spidery names is an exhibit of artwork created by the children of Terezin. The pastels and watercolors are faded now, and the pictures depict many ordinary scenes of classrooms, teachers, families, soccer games, and dinners. Row after row, picture after picture—the sensation isn't so different from casually looking at the kids' artwork stuck up on a friend's refrigerator door—until you notice that *very* occasionally, the word "Survived" appears next to the name and age of the artist.

For these are the bald facts—180,000 Jews in Czechoslovakia pre-War; 1,300 exist today.

Another fact: Aunty Anne, a tortured and glorious woman, had a deep, shuddering abhorrence for all things religious, for any professed faith in or defense of an impossible God.

After the Pinkas Synagogue I went to the old cemetery. One of the consequences of being confined to a ghetto was that the Jewish residents quickly ran out of burial space. So, in the one graveyard that was permitted them, the tombstones cluster and tumble, and an estimated 100,000 people are buried in layers, 50 centimeters apart, 12 layers deep. But the serenity of the place is uncanny, and, like an ethnobotanist who imagines entire societies from ancient seeds and pods, my family—aunts, uncles, grandparents, and parents—made a new kind of sense to me. Standing in the old cemetery ten months after my father's death, some odd dissonance about him finally clicked into place. He *knew* that he straddled the old and new worlds, knew that he carried and had to find a way to honor both the suffering of his ancestors and his right to self-invention.

His father died before I was born, but I always imagined him as stern and stolid. In pictures he is a balding, rotund man with a glum face. He was fastidious, I am told, carefully peeling his grapes before eating them, demanding that their series of small apartments be immaculate, and dictating the life course of the many family members he supported. He was not orthodox, but he was observant, and when his sister Rachel married outside the tribe, his sense of betrayal was so intense that he treated her as dead.

My father and his brother learned of their shamed aunt by accident and asked their father about her. They honored his order not to contact her until he died. Then, being modern men who had inherited some of their mother's sweetness and none of their father's rage, they reached out to her and their now-Catholic, French-Canadian cousins. Once a year for a few years, they'd get together with their formerly dead relatives and play piano and fiddle and sing songs.

That was my father—a man who kept the ritual but shed the sternness, turned la-

ment into lilt, saw sunshine cracking through the soot-and-age-darkened towers and alleys that were *his* father's soul.

I saw all of this today while standing in the Jewish cemetery and desperately wanted my father to know that I was there, that I saw it, that I finally felt the connection to a heritage that was so integral to him and so secondary for me. Two months before his gravestone is unveiled, I finally realized that this is what death meant—me wanting him to know and knowing that he can't.

So, instead, now sitting at an outdoor café awaiting coffee and a piece of apple strudel, I write. Across the street from me is a black woman—I assume African—in a red head scarf, bright gold earrings, white slippers that glow against her dark, dark skin, tight spandex bicycle shorts—and a dark-red serape with black Peruvian patterns and fringe. As I watch her hustle up business for the Steakhouse El Gaucho, I instantly and silently intone the punch line to one of my father's favorite jokes: "Funny, you don't *look* Jewish."

I don't remember the joke it goes with, but I do, thank God, remember his laugh.

Jene Beardsley

Loneliness Is the Longest Distance Between Two Points

Midnight begins the roll call, a list of faces the mind repeats
till sleep drifts into the corners of the eyes.
A silent son in a distant town, a love long fled, a friend from the grave—
All answer to the name "Not here," "Not here."
He is up late studying the geometry of headlights on the wall
that one by one slide away into the disappointing darkness.
Nothing arrives.
The scattered world is full of glances
While old age shrinks into deep attendance.