

## Early Spring Reflections

### Reflection Five

#### The Web of Blessings

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With our fifth reflection, we draw to a close our time with Dr. Rachel Remen and her beautiful book, My Grandfather's Blessings. These blessings continue to echo through Rachel's life even though her grandfather died when she was very young. In one section of her book, she speaks of the web of blessings. She says that "many people do not know that they can strengthen or diminish the life around them. There is a web of relationships that connect us. We all have the power to affect others. We may affect those that we hardly know and those we do not know at all."

I enjoy being out on a walk and noticing the complexity of spiders' webs. Sometimes they glisten in the sunlight. I often wonder how in the world they know how to do this amazing feat.

When we have hiked in Costa Rica and on St. John in the USVI we have seen the webs of the golden orb spider. Their silk is five times stronger than steel and more elastic than nylon. It is waterproof and can be stretched. Ancient people wove cloth out of this silk and recently some new cloth was woven. Apparently, it feels like you are wearing an invisibility cloak, it is weightless.

So, what about the web of relationships in our life? How are we connected and how do we influence the web? A few years ago, when we were visiting Ireland, we drove out the Dingle Peninsula. We stopped in at a very small museum and on the wall, I noticed this quote: "Every one of us...has been warmed by fires we did not build. Every one of us has drunk from wells we did not dig. We can do no less for those who come after us, and together we can do much more." Mark Sheilds

Just consider for a moment, the fires that have warmed you that you did not build, the water that has quenched your thirst from wells that you did not dig.

This is all part of the web of life, how do we choose to add blessings and goodness for those who come after us? The American writer and theologian Frederick Buechner describes it this way.

“Humanity is like an enormous spider web, so that if you touch it anywhere, you set the whole thing trembling... As we move around this world and as we act with kindness, perhaps, or with indifference, or with hostility, toward the people we meet, we too are setting the great spider web a-tremble. The life that I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. Our lives are linked together. No one is an island.”

Rachel tells a compelling story in her book about her early life. She did not speak until she was 3 years old, not a word. She had been born very premature, and long before there were good medical treatments for premature babies. The doctors told her parents not to expect much from her, and that perhaps she was handicapped. Her grandfather would say to the rest of the family “look into her eyes, she is there.” To everyone’s relief and surprise she spoke at Thanksgiving dinner when halfway through the dinner she asked for the salt.

But these were not her first words, her grandfather had been teaching her Hebrew. He had taught her the Shema Israel. This is a holy prayer, when translated into English it is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord God is One. This is a prayer that is said many times a day. It is also said at times of great danger and at the moment of death. These Hebrew lessons were one of the secrets she shared with her grandfather. When she was five or six, she asked him what the Shema really meant. He said “Neshume – le, to me these words have always meant that despite suffering, loss, and disappointment, life can be trusted.”

This sweet story made me think of one that Dr. Viktor Frankl shares. When he arrived at the concentration camp with his young wife and his parents,

he was still carrying his manuscript for his book. This was like a precious child to him. He had it hidden inside his coat. Of course, everything was taken from him. His pregnant wife, his parents, his life's work, his own clothes. He was given a coat from a man who had been sent to the gas chambers. I cannot imagine the despair and heart break he must have experienced in that moment. Eventually he reached deeply into the pocket of this ratty coat he had been given and there on a tiny scrap of paper he found this prayer, the Shema Israel. "Hear O Israel, the Lord God is One." This challenged him to live with meaning in spite of everything, and he found sustenance in this holy prayer.

Truly, there is a web of blessings. Rachel says that "real teachers are everywhere. The life in us will be blessed by others over and over again until finally we have remembered how to bless it in ourselves."

Phil and I had a unique experience a few years ago that reminded me of the blessing of the ancestors and their wishes for us. My cousin Bill Ivory who lives in Maryland organized a gathering of the Ivorys (his father's people) and the Dorans (his mother's people.) Bill invited us to lead the music. This gathering took place at Holy Trinity Church in Corktown in Detroit. This is an historic church that was founded in another location in 1834. Soon after it was organized a cholera epidemic broke out and it was turned into a hospital, the only hospital in the Northwest Territory. The Doran side of Bill's family lived in Corktown, his ancestors were baptized and married there. The priest who said the mass was a delightful Irishman from County Cork; he had been a missionary in many places in Africa. He shared some thoughts that really touched my heart. He spoke of the famine in Ireland in the 1840's and 50's. In 6 years one million Irish people died of starvation or disease. 2 million emigrated. Many came to America. So, on a Thursday morning, we gathered where our ancestors gathered when they first came to Detroit. We could feel their presence. When our ancestors arrived, they were afraid, lonely, and uncertain about their future and the future of their descendants. Perhaps you have gone to a church and sat with your hopes, fears and dreams and prayed; I know that I have. Think about the families today fleeing so many distressing places in the world. What do you think their prayers are like? I am sure they are praying for

themselves and their descendants. They pray that they will be safe, that they will have hope and happiness. During our visit, Father Noel O'Connor said, look around this room; your ancestors' prayers have been answered. You are the answer to your ancestors' prayers.

They could not have known how their prayers might be answered, but I am sure they prayed them, just like we pray for those who come after us.

We are designed to be instruments of peace, compassion, encouragement and light. We may not see the outcome, but we all have more capacity to affect life than we know. It is up to us to recognize our real value and power. We can strengthen or diminish life wherever we are. It is a choice and Viktor Frankl would say it is a responsibility. When we serve the goodness in life, we recognize it as holy.

In conclusion let me share one more beautiful quote from Dr. Remen. "A single act of kindness may have a long trajectory and touch those we will never meet or see. Something that we casually offer may move through a web of connection far beyond ourselves to have effects that we may have never imagined. And so, each of us may have left far more behind us than we may ever know."

Thank you for sharing this blessing journey with those you meet along life's path. Your intentional kindness and compassion echoes across the web of life.

In closing, I will share some lyrics from "This is What I Know," a song by Jan Garrett.

"This is what I know: That we are all connected,  
The universe reflected in each shining part.  
And everywhere I go I recognize the faces,  
All of my relations in this one heart."

May you find strength, delight, and courage on your blessing journey.

Shalom, Shanti, Peace, Salaam.