

For Jeremiah Adams, June 1st 2018

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1. The Six Days' World

In 1997, the Adams family started attending my parish. Jeremiah was three or maybe four years old - what I remember most from those days was his smile, which lit up whatever room he entered with the sheer joy of living. And that blond hair, and those ears. All the Adams kids had stuffed animals that represented a sort of totem for each of them, some essential quality of their existence I suppose, and Jeremiah's was the Puppy, growing as he grew into the loyal and powerful Wolf. I fondly remember playing board games with Jeremiah and Rebekah; one of the games featured the cartoon character Scooby Doo, and you would collect Scooby Snacks while playing. The rules would mutate and change as the game went on in amusing and puzzling ways.

A year or two later, Jeremiah and Rebekah presented me with birthday cards, with smiling stick figures of me and them on them, and the words "I love you" in a childish hand. I cherished those cards for years. I also came to realize that the importance of the board games we played back then wasn't so much about winning, but rather about doing something together with people you care about. Something important. Because for a child, games are icons of who they will be in the real world - and they haven't yet been told that magic doesn't work and that impossible and wonderful things can't really happen. They live in a timeless moment, unaware of the immensity of time that often burdens the adults in their lives.

Play is in short important work. This is how I have come to think at least some children I've known experience liturgy: as sacred play, the enactment of something timeless and important that connects somehow to what is truly Real. Which is of course how we should also be understanding liturgy as adults. Kids get it by instinct, we have to work at it.

Jeremiah took flying lessons in high school; I think his brother might have been in the Navy by then. Jeremiah wanted to be a pilot; his dad would go with him for his lessons. He sang beautifully - I remember

his voice ringing out when he was a child - and acted in plays, and started building (as all children begin to do at that age) his own life. I'm told he wrote poetry, and my sense was that he was looking inward for that inner gate, that would lead him to his own true self. It's a period when a young person connects with others, and starts building the plans and hopes that will ground him in his life. The job of the infant and toddler is to connect with his family, his caretakers; the job of the young man and woman is to learn autonomy. And the adults in their lives remember it all, and cherish it in their hearts.

2. A Life

I saw less of Jeremiah as the years went by, running into him occasionally at gatherings. He seemed to have a sense of where he was going, a grounding in those plans and hopes of his - a sort of serenity surrounded him. But this is only the story I have built in my head about who he was — as all of us create stories about the people in their lives which are partly mirrors reflecting our own aspirations and fears. He was a singer and an actor, who had many friends. One of them said "He just kind of accepted everybody and he cared about everybody ... he was just the best person, there's no other way to describe him."

So he graduated, and like his brother Matthew went into the Navy. He built his own life, but stayed connected with family and friends back home. Although I never told him, I felt blessed to have known him and all the Adams children, and privileged to see them all grow into young adults.

He graduated from boot camp in April 2015, and was assigned to the U.S.S. Nimitz. He progressed to assistant work center supervisor, and led a crew of 24 sailors. During the course of his work on the Nimitz, he was honored as Reactor Junior Sailor of the Year for 2017, and advanced to Petty Officer Second Class. He was awarded the National Defense Service Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Service and Expeditionary Medals, the Navy Good Conduct Medal, the Sea Service Deployment Ribbon, and the Navy/Marine Corps Achievement Medal.

As a shipmate, his fellow sailors describe him as hard working, competent, humble, and possessed of a wealth of experience, a

boundless curiosity and knowledge. He gave credit to others rather than taking it for himself and was described as selfless - going out of his way to help others and challenging them to be better persons. Humbly, he would help others but not let them know about it. People trusted him. A friend of Jeremiah's was a friend for life - something that his friends from back home would concur with. He had a big heart and loved singing; he would sing while he worked. He was a compassionate and helpful friend whose presence was comforting to those he loved.

He came to love hiking and would take advantage of every opportunity to get out to the wilderness, even when he didn't feel well. The wilderness became a restorative for him, a counterbalance to the hustle and noise on the Nimitz. There are a number of pictures of him from his adventures, looking out over a wilderness scene. Perhaps for him going to the wilderness was a spiritual connection, as it is for many of us who have grown to love creation.

His plans after the Navy were to go to college or get a job abroad; he spoke of working at Elon Musk's SpaceX aerospace company. One friend says he lived in the moment, but also looked forward to the future. Jeremiah was a planner and a list maker, something I identify with, he had detailed plans for things to do with friends: diving, hot air ballooning, various outdoor activities and hikes, sports events, movies.

In short, he loved and embraced life, as he loved his friends - and achieved an enviable balance between his care of the soul and his reaching out to embrace everyone who came into his life. He didn't sip at the well of life, he gulped it down gratefully, and eagerly awaited the pouring of the next glass.

3. The Mercy of Light

The photographs Jeremiah left for us that last morning on earth included a clearing along the path, a river in a valley, a rocky hill and lichen draped trees, and the serenity of a dew spotted spider's web. He went out of this life into whatever comes after doing one of the things he loved most.

One of the things I've come to believe over the years is that our memories are immortal diamond, that love means nothing is lost and Somehow at the end of things, it will all be redeemed. Our lives are a kind of palimpsest of all the people we have ever been, all our experiences, layer upon layer. God holds all of this and all of us in His memory - which is how I understand the prayer, Memory Eternal. This is of course a deep mystery.

Jeremiah went into those woods on the other side of the six days' field of life, laying down whatever were his burdens, crossing (we might imagine) something like a creek into the unknown, entering perhaps on the narrow path that starts on the other side, heading toward the green meadows of an eternal Sabbath, and the mercy of that distant uncreated light just breaking through the trees. And after all is said and done, there is love, and love, and only love on the other side.

A reading from one of Wendell Berry's Sabbath poems:

How long does it take to make the woods?

As long as it takes to make the world.

The woods is present as the world is, the presence of all its past and of all its time to come.

It is always finished, it is always being made, the act of its making forever greater than the act of its destruction.

It is a part of eternity for its end and beginning belong to the end and beginning of all things, the beginning lost in the end, the end in the beginning.

What is the way to the woods, how do you go there?

By climbing up through the six days' field, kept in all the body's years, the body's sorrow, weariness, and joy. By passing through the narrow gate on the far side of that field where the pasture grass of the body's life gives way to the high, original standing of the trees.

By coming into the shadow, the shadow of the grace of the strait way's ending, the shadow of the mercy of light.

Why must the gate be narrow?

Because you cannot pass beyond it burdened.

To come into the woods you must leave behind
the six days' world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.
You must come without weapon or tool, alone,
expecting nothing, remembering nothing,
into the ease of sight, the brotherhood of eye and leaf.

<https://lawandpoetryblog.wordpress.com/2017/07/08/wendell-berry-how-long-does-it-take-to-make-the-woods/>