

The Mystery of the Secret Cause.

A Sermon for King Sunday 2014

By E.S. Ruete

A white man shoots a black man, and he dies. The press wants to know why. Everyone wants to know why. YOU want to know why.

You might say the cause of death was the bullet. That is the instrumental cause. You might look at the availability of bullets and guns and reflect that there should not be so many of them around, or that it is bad to have guns in Mega-Lo-Mart where everyone can buy them. You might write a very important tract on gun control, but you will not be writing about the cause of death.

Is the cause of this murder racial conflict in the United states? If that is what you are writing about, that is a proximate cause. You may be writing a very important social tract, but you are not writing about the cause of death.

Many of you may have figured out that I used the example of a white man shooting a man of color because I am actually talking about the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And he tells us himself why he died. The cause of his death is contained in his brave words shortly before his assassination. "I know that in pressing on for this justice and this cause I am challenging death." THAT is the secret cause of this death.

The secret cause of your death is the path you choose. Choose your path wisely and your death will be a fulfillment of your destiny. When we look at a hero and say that we wish we could have lived such a life, what we are really saying is that we wish we could die with such a completion. Death is best understood as a fulfillment of our life's direction and purpose. Choose your path poorly and your death will be just another happenstance.

Some of you may be thinking, Why are we talking about Martin's death? Today should be a day to celebrate his life, not the taking of it. And you would be right. We should not be talking today of the guns and ammo or the racial hatred. But that is the mystery of the secret cause. We cannot celebrate a life freely and abundantly given away out of love, as Martin's was, without celebrating the fulfillment of its destiny.

We CANNOT celebrate Dr. King's life without understanding the secret cause of his death, because they are one in the same. What is completed through the event and what is to be celebrated about the event is the majesty of the life that has been lived and of which the death was a part. Dr. King was a great man – a hero to his people, our nation, and oppressed people everywhere – because he embraced his destiny, even knowing the end that must come of such a life. Martin's destiny was to walk the talk, all the way to that balcony in Memphis.

The story of Dr. King is the story of Gandhi, and of Abraham Lincoln and John and Bobby Kennedy. But it is also the story of millions of people whose names we don't even know. The secret cause was at work in the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. While other people were running down the stairs, police officers and fire fighters were running up them. These public servants became public heroes because they embraced their destiny. They followed their calling to the final fulfillment.

Joseph Campbell has said that the two most important stories in any mythical tradition are the creation story and story of the hero's journey. The first tells us how we got here; the second tells us what we are supposed to do now that we are here. For years I focused on the differences of various

hero's journey stories, thinking that what made the journey story important was that it told people of the culture what kind of hero they were supposed to be; the purpose of life as seen by their culture. But no. The hero's journey myths are important not for their differences but because they are all alike. The message of the story is not what kind of journey you are supposed to take, but that the essence of being alive is to take the journey; to find your destiny and live and die that destiny, not some other safer or more pleasurable or more lucrative life path.

That is the most important message of any mythos. "Be a hero, don't be a schmuck. Figure out the gift that you are destined to bring to your community and then bring it, with all your being, no matter what the cost." This is what Campbell referred to as "finding your bliss." Not the bliss of Madison Avenue, the answer that makes you feel good in the moment – a chocolate high and a beer buzz and a pillow-top mattress – but the tough answer that makes you feel good when it reaches fulfillment. This is the calling Isaiah was talking about when he said, "The Lord summoned me from birth; he commissioned me when my mother brought me into the world." Or again in first Corinthians when Paul says that he "is called to be an Apostle" and is writing to "those who are called to be saints" and says "God is faithful; by him were you called into the fellowship of Jesus."

It's not an easy task to find your destiny. In fact, if you can see your path laid out before you, step by step, one thing you can be fairly sure of is that it's not YOUR path. This is the other reason why the story of the hero's journey is important. It tells us what we must do to find our path. The beginning of the journey is always an awakening, when some event drives you to leave your comfort zone and look for something new. There are always roadblocks set in the way. There are always special tools or knowledge or insights needed to complete the quest. There are always helpers that provide this needed boost, and while essentially human they seem to possess supernatural, animistic, or magical powers. And when the final hurdle is overcome and the beast that seeks to push you back into your comfort zone is defeated, the hero is never the same again. The boon that you bring back is not the blue rose or the gift of fire or the Ten Commandments, but the true You that is ready to live out your destiny, even to the end.

In the Christian mythos, the hero's journey is the story of Christ on the Cross, of Jesus who came voluntarily down knowing that the cross was going to be his death. His story starts out like the typical hero's journey. We know little about his awakening, but can surmise it was a combination of the political realities of his time and his own sense of how things could be. Jesus left his carpentry shop to become a teacher and healer. John the Baptist provided knowledge of the path to unity with The One and the gift of baptism – a gift of the spirit that was so palpable that John chapter 1 tells us it couldn't have been more visible had it been a dove. Jesus' spirit was tempered by 40 days in the wilderness; and in the end Jesus overcame the three temptations. After that he had the message of The Way that was the boon he brought to all of us.

But here is where our hero departs from the mold. Unlike many hero's journeys, Christ's story goes on to the fulfillment of his destiny, to the mystery of HIS secret cause. And it is this mystery, the meaning of this secret cause, that Christians have struggled with throughout the ages. Here are some answers I have found.

In the words of Bishop Spong, Christ exhorts us to live fully, love wastefully, and be completely. Live fully. Love wastefully. And be completely whatever it is we're supposed to be. And I would add, then wholly give it away. Life freely and abundantly given away out of love is life made sacred. John Dominic Crossin tells us that the meaning of the story of the Walk to Emmaus in Luke 24 is that study of the scripture may fuel the awakening and even serve as the start of the journey, but Jesus doesn't appear until we welcome in the stranger and share God's food with them. That doesn't mean everyone here has to go fight over the guy who stands at the entrance to Stop and Shop with his sign and take him home for lunch. It DOES mean that each of us has to find our way of welcoming in the stranger. In the

words of Psalm 40, "Then I said, 'Here I am, I offer myself to You; In the scroll it is written of me that I delight to do what pleases You, o my God.'"

How do you know when you've found the right path? There's a simple test that Ron Johnson showed me years ago in Micah 6:8. "You know what is required: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." If your path is not about justice and mercy, try again. And that last is key. Many good people do justice and love mercy. But without paying some attention to the God-shaped hole in their middle, they will never bring a complete person to the task. To paraphrase Anne Lamott, you need to follow a brighter light than the glimmer of your own candle.

In a discussion of prayer at the morning Bible study, Ocean said that God always answers prayers, it's just that sometimes we don't like the answers. Pastor John said, "In the Garden Jesus didn't like the answer. He didn't like it so much that he was weeping tears as thick as blood. But the answer was from God and what he would bend his life to."

This is what Christ meant when he said in Matthew 16, Mark 8, and Luke 9, that to follow him we must deny ourselves and take up our cross. Our cross is not his cross. But whatever our destiny, whatever our secret cause, whatever our cross, to be true to his lead, to follow Jesus, we have to carry that cross to the end.

You must walk this lonesome valley. You must walk it by yourself. Or, in the words of poet Antonio Machado, "Traveler, it is your footsteps, the road, nothing more; traveler, there is no road, the road is made by walking...All things die and all things live forever; but our task is to die, to die making roads."

That is why we must talk about Martin's death to celebrate his life, and why we must talk about Easter during Christmas. When we think that talk about the end of life spoils the joy of the celebration, that is a fear of death. But Hebrews 2 tells us Jesus came to free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. The mystery of the secret cause is that we don't have to fear a death that is the fulfillment of our destiny.

It has been said that there are three different Christs; the Christ of the ministry, the Christ of the Passion, and the resurrected Christ. Some writers even talk about different kinds of Christians based on whether they focus on what Jesus said when he was preaching, what the sacrifice of God's Son means for our relationship to God and to sin, or the presence of the living Christ in the world today.

These three different Christs are unified in the mystery of the secret cause. The words that Jesus spoke during his ministry carry weight because of holy week. There would be no Church if Jesus had gone before Caiaphus, Herod, and Pilot and said, "Let's not get carried away here. I was just talking" any more than we would be celebrating Martin today if he had not stood in solidarity with those garbage workers. And Christ is resurrected every time we embrace the secret cause and live into our destiny.

Let me say that again. I won't use Pastor John's patented line, but some of you are hearing it – yes, this is the time to pay attention. Every time we walk the talk; every time someone runs towards danger instead of away from it; every time parents put their lives on the line for their children; every time a student stands with a classmate who is being bullied or a church embraces the least, the last, and the left out; every time we lean in instead of leaning back, the Living Christ walks with us.

When we do Jesus work, Jesus appears. Every time.

Not all secret causes have to be that dramatic. Your destiny may be to do important work in the shadows, in support of the more visible heroes, or to do work that supports your family when your soul is crying out to be released to find its inner artist or musician – or to forego family and stability in pursuit of a true calling to the arts that enriches the lives of others. Your destiny may be to be a teacher or a preacher or a parent, living your life underpaid and under appreciated, but dying knowing that you spent your life helping others find their destiny.