

“WHY WAIT FOR A DAY THAT NEVER COMES?”

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A mentor of mine was Dr. Charles Copenhaver, senior minister of the Reformed Church of Bronxville, NY. In seminary, I would drive to lunch in Bronxville to learn all about ministry. Sometimes, before a play in Manhattan with his son, Martin, we would visit that elegant parsonage and enjoy dinner as he held forth at table.

Dr Copenhaver was a renaissance man, broad-based in his learning and passion for life. He knew a lot about wine, for example. He was fluent in many varieties and vintages of various vineyards. Upon acquiring a wine, it was carefully stored and catalogued in his well-stocked wine cellar. Occasionally, he even managed to drink some of the stuff. That always unfolded with a formal sense of ceremony.

He brought the wine to the ideal temperature, uncorked it at the right interval, and sampled it with a sniff and a sip. A florid commentary always accompanied these actions, speaking of body and bouquet, about tannins and overtones and finish. We smiled benignly without grasping it all, pretending to care as much as he did.

As friends heard of his passion for wine, he began to receive special gifts of rare and costly wines. His son Martin never remembers him serving those wines. No, they were held in reserve for special occasions. But the special occasions never came. Dr Copenhaver died at a Vermont country inn three weeks after he retired.

Those bottles so full of promise remained unopened. Martin had to sort through them and ascertain what to do with those ever so special neglected dusty bottles, haunted by the painful irony of what might have been. What is it about heralded tomorrows, special occasions, and rainy days that so often they never arrive? And why can't we learn those lessons until we are reminded of the fragility of life?

This might remind us of a certain parable we have heard. Jesus describes a man intent upon building one barn after another on his expanding farm, each larger than the last. The farmer promises himself that after he has enough, some day he will kick back and “eat, drink, and be merry,” as the parable has it. But before that happens, God in his heaven sighs at what he sees, “Alas, this very night your life will be required of you.” So much for the wisdom and promise of that plan.

As a pastor, I imagine what it would be like to call on that farmer's widow to plan the farmer's memorial service. I've done that so many times over decades. After attending to the sorrow, and expressing the heartfelt condolences, I interview the widow to learn who the departed truly was, as I have the last word over his life.

So I ask the widow, “what mattered most to him?” She is pensive and silent at first. “His family is—or was—very important to him. He was proud of his children though they don't really understand that. He loved walks on the beach with me.

We talked about getting back to that if he would ever slow down. And his church mattered to him though you haven't seen us for too long and we aren't up to date in our giving. He never stopped believing in God but somehow life became busy."

I ask, "How did he spend his time?" She smiles weakly at that question. "That's easy. Working on the farm. He was good at it, very successful. He had another bumper crop this year, so much yield he didn't want to sell it. For by himself, if he flooded the markets, the price was sure to fall. So he tore down our old barns to build bigger ones to store all of those crops. It was a huge task that took everything out of him. You know how construction goes. He even had stress dreams about it. It was too much pressure, more than he wanted or deserved right now."

She continues unprompted, staring into space. "Every other part of life got put on hold. I didn't help with that, I'm afraid. I kept asking when it would be over, when we could get on with our lives, with what mattered most. He would always try to reassure me, saying things like 'tomorrow' or 'soon' or 'someday' or 'this won't last forever, I promise.' And he really meant it, I'm sure." She pauses. I sense a need to change the subject. "Let's choose the hymns for his service," I suggest.

Friends, if we only fear death as our enemy, we never embrace it as our teacher. And death can teach us much. Among the lessons are the wide and painful gap between what's most important to us and where we spend the essential currency of our limited days—our time and substance. We all need to learn these lessons. We can learn them the hard way by waiting for deaths of beloveds to reveal what we've missed all along. Or we can learn them by Jesus' parable, by noticing how Jesus invested himself in what mattered before his death and resurrection, how he stewarded the life capital of his time and generosity, and was rich toward God.

Jesus' parable of the Rich Fool has great universality to it. It's not just the farmer who swears he'll live a different, more fruitful life soon. We are all like this. I'm not any better at this than you are. Someday soon I'll call my mother more often and keep in better touch with my close friends. Someday soon I'll pray more regularly and give to the charities I cherish most. As soon as our blasted barns get built, whether they are barns or hedge funds, teaching careers or consulting partnerships. We all build bigger barns and postpone being who we are meant to be, making the difference we hold most dear. We are all oblivious to the risk of leaving our life passion bottled up on dusty shelves in forgotten cellars, never shared.

Listen to those around you as they vow their lives *will* change, as they insist on it. As soon as the semester is over or the economy changes. As soon as they get the promotion or the babies are out of diapers. As soon as this rough patch at work is over or the last child gets out of college or the first one gets into college. It's funny, isn't it? It's not that we're incapable of doing what we want or should. It's more like, for reasons I can't fathom, we act powerless to do those things *now*.

Well, if you want to turn the corner toward living more mindfully in touch with where your passion dwells, today I have some ideas. You know where I'm going.

I say this only half-jesting. I don't mind speaking on stewardship because it's less about money, more about living lives we most want to lead. It's more about faith.

I would describe this year's pledge campaign as the confluence of our needing to give and First Congregational Church's auspicious moment to receive and grow. I am struck by how we have strived and welcomed God's blessing for six years to put ourselves in the position where we are today. Things we have prayed long and hard about are now happening. A congregation that is united and dynamic. A congregation that is confident, energized, expanding, and making a difference.

Our Board of Stewards and all of FCC refused to blindly build bigger barns (or in this case, endowments) and postpone our passion. For instead of piling bigger piles of money, we took a small percentage of our profits from that endowment to mitigate the financial shock of adding new staff, Gary Morello. It seemed like a big risk then. But does anyone now doubt the wisdom of stepping out in faith to bring Gary to minister to our youth and to all of us? At this time, after his ordination on Sunday and baby Ariana born yesterday, doubting that might result on a pox on your skin. But our endowment support of Gary's position ends after 2018.

Last spring, led by our Board of Christian Education, we felt called to do more to plug gaps in ministry for the group between our little ones and high school youth. Among Darien churches, if your ministry to children and youth is strong, you have something. If it's not, you don't. It's that simple. At the same time we were getting excited about a candidate named Christine Geeding, we approached our Council.

We don't believe in spending money we don't have. But we know folks are most open to giving generously when we presented with a compelling reason to give. So last summer Gary and I called dozens of younger family church households and explained that we believed and hoped we were acting in their best interests. Most agreed with us. For 22 of those households increased their pledges 44%. Between their gifts, and one other new pledge, we covered all the cost of adding Christine for '18 even before she arrived here. But we need everyone to step up.

Here's how I would describe this moment in our life and giving as a congregation. Do you know how at a baptism, after the parents pledge their support, after the godparents promise their part, I turn to you, stand you up, and ask for your love, support and care? We did this last Sunday for Juliet Dunn. So far you have never said no. So far you have never looked anything less than joyous in vowing 'yes.'

But here's the thing. That is not just a feel-good, warm, fuzzy, huggy moment. We are making specific and tangible promises to spiritually shape actual children. We need all of us to fall in line with the young family households who increased their pledges 44% percent and own our part with that, "we promise our love, support, and care" moment. We need to translate the passion of that moment into passionately generous giving. For we are now finally equipped to do that job. Good leadership isn't cheap, but the right leadership makes all of the difference.

We hope you believe in the leadership you have assembled. We leaders believe in you. And we look to you to make a difference now. Not someday when barns are finished. But right now as the Lord God Almighty showers us with blessing. Amen.