

## NOT TOO LATE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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I'm so sorry I missed the pre-Halloween snowstorm last weekend. Record-early snow, trees down, power out, roads closed: how could I think of missing this early-season spectacle? Sadly, I was out of town. Actually, I was out of the country. Truth be told, I was in the Caribbean. You know, sunshine every day, cool breezes, soft sand: that Caribbean.

Make no mistake: I had no choice. Last November, my wife Holly and I had planned a trip to the Caribbean to celebrate our 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. As many of you know, Holly broke her leg last October, and we had to postpone our anniversary trip. The airline tickets were good for a year. If we hadn't rescheduled our trip and traveled by last weekend, they would have expired. So, our trip delayed by a year and shortened by half, we spent last weekend in the Caribbean. We missed the snowstorm.

I'm pleased to report, however, that we had a great time. A long weekend may seem too brief an interlude to mark the end of a decade in a marriage that's now just a dozen days shy of 11 years. Even so, it was a time to look back and remember and to look forward and anticipate: to reflect on where we've been as a couple and where we wish to go. It was a time to admit the shortcomings in our relationship and our lives and to refocus and recommit.

A long weekend away is also a good time to catch up on some reading. On our migration south last Friday, I happened to read an article in the Financial Times by Lionel Shriver about her new movie "We Need to Talk About Kevin." The article, titled "Perfectly Flawed," explores why many great characters in literature and film are appealing despite being personally or morally unattractive. Why do novelists and screenwriters create flawed characters? Because, Shriver says, goodness in fiction is not only boring, it can be annoying.

She continues, "I try to duplicate in fiction the complex, contradictory, and infuriating people I meet on the other side of my study door... I'm less concerned that you love my characters than that you recognize them. Human beings have rough edges. Authors who write exclusively about ethical, admirable, likeable characters are not writing about real people. Good stories require mistakes. If you want to read about unimpeachable characters, order the annual report from Oxfam. If you want to read about difficult, complicated, maddening characters who remind you of people you know—who remind you, if you're honest, of yourself—read Shakespeare." And Tolstoy, and Updike, and Wolfe. And, presumably Shriver would add, watch "We Need to Talk About Kevin."

Whether in film or fiction, characters can be flawed by nature or by nurture; they can be flawed by choice or by circumstance. When I started digging out the books I had taken along for the weekend, I began to see a pattern. One book was about a pianist who couldn't see. Another was about a safecracker who couldn't speak. A third was about an attorney who couldn't imagine he was mistaken.

The book about the attorney is titled “The Woman in Black” by Susan Hill. A perilously self-assured young solicitor named Arthur, in his quest to read only the hard evidence in a particular case, fails to read the room—to heed the counsel and follow the instincts of the people whose lives have been devastated by a series of implausible events. By the time Arthur starts paying attention to the rest of the story, his life too has been destroyed. The question is whether he can somehow exorcise the ghost of his own arrogance and, as he puts it, “finally be free of it for whatever life remains for me to enjoy.”

The book about the blind pianist, written by Michele Halberstadt and titled “The Pianist in the Dark,” wonders whether, as Maria the pianist puts it, “sight is an illusion that leads the other senses astray.” At one point in the book, a man offers to help her regain her vision. She asks him, “What is the advantage of seeing?”

He replies, “It is a way of discovering the reality of things and of people. You will develop your knowledge, learn to appreciate nature and to understand the human condition. Seeing can make you lucid.”

But, she asks in return, will seeing make me happy? He cannot answer. Should Maria try to regain her sight? And if she does, will she be happy?

In all good stories, a moment comes when the characters must choose either to overcome the flaws in their characters or their lives or to be doomed by them. In the book about a safecracker who can’t speak, titled “The Lock Artist” by Steve Hamilton, a young boy named Mike suffers a horrific trauma that leaves him mute. He begins playing with locks and, over a period of years, becomes a skilled lock artist—a safecracker. Not surprisingly, Mike finds himself surrounded by people intent on using his skills for nefarious purposes. The question is whether he can unlock the safe that contains his own private demons in time to free himself from the shackles of his criminal companions.

Early in the story, when strong-armed into serving as the box man (as safecrackers evidently are known) for a job in Detroit, Mike reflects, “I’ve had more than one moment like this in my life. These moments when I could have taken myself right out of the game. Cut my losses... I can’t help wondering how differently my story might have turned out if I had played it that way. Even once. [But] that’s not how I played it.”

Much later in the book, however, faced with a similar fork in the road, Mike makes a different choice. He’s on his motorcycle, riding from a job in Michigan to another in Los Angeles. “Halfway there,” he says, “the decision came to me. As crazy as it sounded...as desperate and hopeless...I knew it might be my last chance to be free. I’m going to do this, I told myself. No matter what, I’m going to try.”

Good stories portray difficult, complicated, and maddening characters who remind us of people we know—who remind us, if we’re honest, of ourselves. The crux of the story, whether in fiction or in life, isn’t the sequence of events without, but rather the struggle of character within: the struggle to break free of whatever holds us back, to find our voice, to regain our vision.

The catalyst for this sermon was a posting by Tony Woodlief on his blog “Sand in the Gears.” Two weeks ago, he published an entry about the death of his daughter. He writes:

This morning I drove past the house where she died... I saw the awning over the window I would look out for hours each day, holding her

in my lap, feeding her a sip at a time through her tumor-clenched teeth, because we couldn't let her starve the way they said we should...

I drove past that house and I imagined it was twelve years ago, and... I wondered what would happen if I knocked on the door and a younger me answered. Would I listen to these words, that it will be worse than you imagine, that it will be nothing like you imagine, that you can burn down your marriage and your friendships and set your very soul aflame in fury, and none of it will heal you, because while the rest of your life is tinder, that hole shot straight through the center of you can never be burned away?

This is what I've learned: suffering doesn't make you noble. Suffering is a burden and a wound and a gift, even, but what you do with it, well, that's on you, no matter how you rage at the sky. This is what I've learned, and maybe I haven't learned it too late. Maybe it's not too late...

I can't go back there and make that man listen, can't yank him back from the precipice. So I'll whisper it to this man... —and to you, those of you who need to hear it—that it's not too late.

Whether your life has been flawed by nature or by nurture, whether by choice or by circumstance, the truth is that it's your life now, and what you do with it, well, that's on you. The good news is that it's not too late.

True, it may be too late to do certain things that you could have done in the past. But it's not too late to be the person you ought to be. It's not too late. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke puts it, "You have not grown old, and it is not too late to dive into your increasing depths where life calmly gives out its own secret."

Kelly Clarkson is a popular singer-songwriter who came to fame as the first winner of the television competition "American Idol." Since then, she's also won two Grammys, and her four studio albums have sold more than 20 million copies. Her music is built on a country music frame, with occasional elements of pop and rock, but she has a vocal style that rises from rhythm and blues.

The blues come naturally: she grew up hardscrabble in a small Texas town and has struggled throughout her life with eating disorders. Shunning both the form and substance of pop-music stardom, she has become a genuine hero to many women for her honesty and lack of pretense. In a recent New York Times article about Clarkson's latest album, released a week ago and titled "Stronger," one of her fans is quoted as saying, "Kelly's songs are not just about failed relationships with others, but failed relationships with ourselves."

My favorite song on the album is a poignant yet triumphant tune titled "The Sun Will Rise." She sings:

I can see the weight there in your eyes  
I can feel the thorn in your side  
Your knuckles are bruised from a losing flight  
One way down a dead end street  
Broken glass underneath your feet  
You think the day won't break this endless night

Then comes the chorus:

The sun will rise  
The sun will rise  
When you've lost your light  
The sun will rise  
It'll be alright  
It'll be alright

The second verse recalls the words of Tony Woodlief's blog:

I've been in stuck in a storm before  
Felt the wind raging at my door  
Couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't find a way out  
Somehow my clouds disappeared  
Somehow I made it here  
Maybe just so you could hear me say  
The sun will rise  
The sun will rise

The song concludes with these words:

It'll be alright  
It'll be alright  
The sun will rise

Holly and I returned from the Caribbean a little more rested and a lot more grateful for the gift of our relationship. We also returned with a clearer sense of the challenges before us as individuals and as a couple—as well as a deeper awareness that often our biggest obstacles lie within. Character must be forged within before it can be revealed without.

I don't know what flaws you grapple with today, whether your life has been flawed by nature or by nurture, whether the flaws have come by choice or by circumstance. Whatever the case, the honest truth is that your life is yours, and what you do with it is up to you.

The good news is that it's not too late. It's not too late to break free, to open your eyes, to find your voice. It's not too late to become the person you ought to become. It's not too late. Even for you and me, and perhaps today especially for us, the sun will rise. It'll be alright.