My Grandfather’s Blessing, my Life Blessing, was my Grandfather. When I hear Remen’s story about Mae, she reminds me of my grandfather. He was the most optimistic, kind, and welcoming man I’ve ever known. He didn’t say, as Mae did, ‘I’m blessed, sister, I’m blessed.” well, not in those words. He said the same thing in other words. What I remember most was his saying when speaking of his family – his children and their spouses, his grandchildren and their spouses – he would say “not a bad apple in the bunch.” But he meant, “I’m blessed, sister, I’m blessed.” Of that I’m sure. Grandpa Norrie was born in 1904 and actually remembered as a kid when the Titanic sank. He would have been 8 years old. He remembered horse and carriage days and the first cars, and the day we first set foot on the moon. Though he never had a home computer – he got as far as an electric typewriter – he lived through the advent of the internet. He died in 2000.

Grandpa Norrie was almost the definition of blessing. I was shocked one year as a kid when the babysitter next door to my grandparent’s house, who must have been watching me as my parents went out with my grandparents, when she asked me who my real grandfather was. Grandpa Norrie was my real grandfather... as far as I knew. But this babysitter pointed out that his last name was Norrie, and my father’s last name was Bertilson. Grandpa Norrie was my paternal grandfather, as far as I knew, at that point in time.

I’m sure that’s when I learned that my Grandma Norrie, my father’s mother, had actually married this man when my father was 8 years old. My quote “real” grandfather had died before I was born. Grandpa Norrie was the only paternal grandfather I ever knew. And it so never mattered. He loved my father, his son, the way he loved his daughters, my aunts. I never felt from him that I was anything less than family. I felt unconditional love. And that’s how I learned about life blessing, that life is a blessing, and that blessing life is important.

From my Norrie grandparents, I learned that to like each other you don’t have to be alike. One way I learned this was by witnessing their marriage. My grandmother loved the city and my grandfather, the farm. They compromised and lived on the outskirts of Spokane, WA where my grandmother could quickly get to the public library, theater, and department stores, and my grandfather could just as quickly get out to the ranch where he grew apples and raised cattle. My grandparents were different from each other, but enjoyed each other’s company and created a lifestyle that honored the interests of both without squashing either. When family would visit, the top priority would not be to do what my grandparents wanted, but to articulate what we wanted to do, and then go do it. My grandparents were happiest when we were exploring our own interests. Now, to be honest, there were some expectations – that you root for the Cougars (that’s Washington State cougars) and so it is that when my husband married into this family he had to learn the Washington state fight song. But, short of cougar loyalty, there was little else demanded, at least of the generation of grandkids to which I belong. (No doubt my parent’s generation would tell a slightly different tale.)

My grandparents also taught me that if you have a wide variety of interests, life is always interesting. They worked hard, but they also played hard. The playing is important to remember. They played cards – bridge, pinochle, hearts, gin rummy. They taught us all ping pong. Centerpiece of the basement was a large ping pong table and a piano that my aunt Vicki would play and we would gather around singing at holidays. They golfed and Grandpa bowled. They read voraciously – always there were three or four books on the shelf at the top of the stairs ready to be returned to the public library. They didn’t own a lot of books, but borrowed them weekly. Grandpa loved sports of all kinds – playing them, he had been a minor league catcher in his youth, but also watching them on TV. And like I said, they loved the outdoors. Grandpa ran a ranch and raised cattle, Grandma
I often thought that one of the reasons Grandpa Norrie loved life so much, was that his first son died when he was young, riding a bike, he was hit by a car. His first marriage didn’t last after that. But I always thought somehow that this death made him appreciate life all the more.

Crisis in our lives can bring us to a deeper understanding of ourselves and our world – learnings are forced on us when illness or violence enters our lives, when a loved one dies, or a divorce – a division of loyalties, or disillusionment crack opens the world as we previously understood it. There are opportunities at such moments, painful as they are, to explore the depths of our beings and our support systems and the world around us.

But this morning, I want to explore the possibilities inherent in the every day to do the work of blessing life. I suspect sometimes that we, as a culture, are addicted to the dramatic, to the violent, to the crises, so much so that we think this is the only time, with heart pumping, that we can feel the depths of our emotions, and the depths of values, the depths of our relationships.....

It must not be the only time. I want to explore the possibilities inherent in the every day to do the work of blessing. I’ll explore the wisdom of an historical figure, Henry David Thoreau, for I think he has a lot to say on this matter. I’ll share some of the wisdom of my own grandparents, and finally, the realization of a fictional character, Wally Shawn, from the film, My Dinner with André.

“I want to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life,” wrote Henry David Thoreau, in his book Walden, which has come to be known as one of the masterpieces of American literature. The book is arranged around the four seasons and chronicles his two years living in the woods near Walden pond, on a piece of land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Lest I ever think the world today radically changed from the world of Thoreau’s nineteenth century, I need only read a passage from Walden. Just a moment ago, I decried our addiction to crises.... well, wrote Thoreau:

“If I should only give a few pulls at the parish bell-rope as for a fire, that is, without setting the bell, there is hardly a man on his farm in the outskirts of Concord, notwithstanding that press of engagements which was his excuse so many times this morning, nor a boy nor a woman, I might almost say, but would forsake all and follow that sound, not mainly to save property from the flames, but, if we will confess the truth, much more to see it burn, since burn it must, and we, be it known, did not set it on fire, - or see it put out, and have a hand in it, if that is done as handsomely; yes, even if it were the parish church itself.”

When I learned to drive the freeways of Chicago, those were called “gaper delays”- when the traffic was backed up simply because drivers were slowing down to gape at the accident on the other side of the freeway. The technology may be different, but Thoreau reminds us of our human nature, or cultural values: Our attraction to the extreme, the extraordinary, the dramatic, and the lack of attention paid to the ordinary moments of our lives.
Thoreaus’ book, by contrast, is a love letter to the woods and pond of Walden, a careful chronicling of the details of nature.

“One attraction in coming to the woods to live” writes Thoreau, “was that I should have leisure and opportunity to see the spring come in. The ice in the pond at length begins to be honey-combed, and I can set my heel in it as I walk. Fogs and rains and warmer suns are gradually melting the snow; the days have grown sensibly longer; and I see how I shall get through the winter without adding to my wood-pile, for large fires are no longer necessary. I am on the alert for the first signs of spring, to hear the chance note of some arriving bird, or the striped squirrels chirp, for his stores must be now nearly exhausted, or see the woodchuck venture out of his winter quarters. On the 13th of March, after I had heard the bluebird, song-sparrow, and red-wing, the ice was still a foot thick. As the weather grew warmer, it was not sensibly worn away by the water, nor broken up and floated off as in rivers, but, though it was completely melted for half a rod in width about the shore, the middle was merely honey-combed ad saturated with water, so that you could put your foot through it when six inches thick; but by the next evening, perhaps, after a warm rain followed by fog, it would have wholly disappeared, all gone off with the fog, spirited away.”

I fear, however, that some of you may dismiss the relevance of Thoreau’s wisdom because his circumstances seem somehow different – that he was able to live two years of his life in the woods and shun many of the conventions of modern living. Perhaps, you think, his rather extreme asceticism, simple living in the modern vernacular, is impossible in your life.

Which I why I told you about my grandparents, who I think held some very important keys to blessing life also, and the life they created was far more conventional than Henry Thoreau’s. But they blessed life, and by example, taught those around them to see life as a blessing.

Thoreau’s minute examination of the natural world, and my grandparents wide variety of leisure and life interests may not seem to be of the same magnitude. But I maintain that they are: they are different ways of blessing, different variations on the theme. And now I’d like to offer a third and final example of blessing life.

This one fictional. In the character of Wally Shawn, an actor and playwright who dreads having to share a meal with an old friend, philosopher and theater director, André Gregory, because he has heard rumors that André been seen crying in public, traipsing off to strange lands, and basically gone off the deep end, so to speak. He doesn’t know what he will encounter with this old friend. Perhaps you have seen the movie, My Dinner with André, which is as its title suggests, the filming of a fictional conversation over dinner. (I have to tell you that the conversation is so good that I had remembered vivid scenes that, when I rented it again to work on this sermon, I discovered weren’t there – at least visually – the entire content of the conversation takes place with words.) The evening begins as Wally says to André, “you look good. How are you?” and André makes an atypical response, o just terrible. As they are seated, André begins to tell him about his adventures all around the world searching for something, some meaning, some way out of his prison-like existence – he tells of a man who says that New York is a prison built by it’s prisoners who have no capacity to see it or to leave, and how he was advised by this man to leave before it’s too late.

“Do you want to know my response?” Wally finally replies, after the full meal has been served and consumed and before the coffee and amaretto is served. “Do you want to know my actual response to all of this? I’m just trying to survive. I’m just trying to earn a living, to pay my rent and my bills, to live my life. I enjoy living my life.”
I am paraphrasing here, you understand. But these words by Wally were so powerful that I remember this particular monologue from 30 years ago when I first saw this film. Says Wally, “How could anyone enjoy their life more than getting up in the morning and having a cup of cold coffee that’s been waiting for me all night still there for me to drink in the morning and no cockroach or fly has died in it overnight. I’m just so thrilled when I get to see that my coffee is there just the way I wanted it. Of course, if a cockroach is in it, I’m disappointed, I’m sad, but isn’t it pleasant to just get up in the morning – I don’t feel a need for anything more. You talk as if it is inconceivable for anyone to have a meaningful life, that everyone is destroyed, and I wonder don’t you just enjoy getting up in the morning. Can’t you learn to lean back and enjoy the details. Why is it necessary to have more than this? I know what you’re talking about but I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The image of a cold cup of coffee next to Wally’s bed was so strong that years after I saw this movie I could describe to you his bedroom, though in viewing the film recently, I know it was only in my imagination.

But perhaps this appreciation for a cold cup of coffee took hold for me because it was 5 years after this movie came out that I was in Mexico City waiting for a cup of coffee at a café. It had taken a good long time for anyone to wait on us, and I was desperate for my first cup of morning coffee. In much of Latin America, the coffee is brewed with the sugar in it, so to get a cup of coffee without sugar – café amargo or bitter coffee as it is called – you have to ask real nice and people have to work extra hard to make it. so, I am waiting patiently for my cup of café amargo, and it is taking a very, very long time, and there are a couple of delays – I was brought a cup of coffee with sugar in it first, and I had to send it back and finally, I get a cup of coffee that looks to be instant, but I didn’t care. I took a sip, and it was hot, and lumpy, which I thought was probably instant creamer or something, but it was chewy enough that I reached in my mouth to take the lump out only to discover a cockroach. I knew then that I had reached Wally’s delight in the world, when I placed the cockroach on the napkin and finished off my long-awaited, and much appreciated cup of coffee.

So, what, you might ask, does this cup of coffee that a cockroach fell into have to do with blessing? Life itself is good and everything else is extra; the coffee, the cockroach, the Washington State Cougars, books, the muskrats, the bluebird, song-sparrow, and the red-wing. Perhaps we have to see life as a blessing in order to bless life, and perhaps by paying attention and appreciating life, we bless our lives along with it.

I am hoping today for a spring thaw such as Thoreau describes in Walden, that after a warm rain followed by fog, the ice in our hearts will wholly disappear, all gone off with the fog, spirited away, and summer will be let in, a little hope, and life will freely flow through our veins once again. And we will appreciate it. And we will all say together, Amen.

_Benediction_

May this week bring blessings to your awareness - may we feel blessed ourselves, so that we may bless others. May the spirit of summer be let in, with a little hope, and life freely flowing through our veins. May we pay attention just a little more and appreciate the blessings which surround us.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.*