

STANFORD BACCALAUREATE

June 15, 2002

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From the first moment I was invited to speak to you on this awe-inspiring occasion, I have been wondering, “Why Me?” I’m not a Stanford professor. I’m not an academician. I don’t have a PhD. although I have written two theses for which I think I deserved at least one doctorate. I haven’t won the Nobel Prize and am not in the running. I am a psychoanalyst, but given that the hallmark of the analyst is silence, I doubt it is this fact which prompted the invitation. That leaves the obvious; I was chosen because I am a rabbi, the first woman rabbi to have a son graduate from Stanford. My major distinction therefore turns out to be an accident of birth, and not even my own, but that of my older son. I understand in a new way today the feeling of humble gratitude expressed by Jacob in that first book of the Bible where he uttered the words, “*Katonti mikol ha hasadim umikol haemet asher asita et avdecha* – I am unworthy of the kindness you have shown me” (Genesis 32:11).

We parents are not asking “Why Me?” today; we know why we are here. We parents are here, as I once heard Toni Morrison say, because our eyes light up when you walk into the room. We were your earliest teachers of who “me” was but we knew enough only to get you started. We blessed your coming here to Stanford as another step in your quest to answer this essential spiritual question, this time under the direction of teachers whose lives are dedicated to asking questions and seeking answers. You know by now that real education is not about the intellect alone but about the human spirit. Alfred North Whitehead, in his essay The Aims of Education, wrote that “The essence of education is that it be religious...a religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence. Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events...and the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity.” The question itself “Why me?” compels that insight: education is a religious endeavor. This question distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom because it is a question only human beings can ask. And because it is a human question, the answers must include those qualities that characterize humans as spiritual beings.

The very formulation of the question “Why me?” presupposes the capacity for self-awareness. Dr. Abraham Twerski, in The Spiritual Self, reminds us that this capacity is unique to human beings: “Do giraffes ever think about themselves?” he asks; “Does an alligator ever reflect ‘I wonder whether I am as good an alligator as I can be?’” Alligators might not be capable of narcissism but neither do they seem capable of altruism. The question “Why me?” is necessarily a narcissistic one because that is where we all begin, believing that we are not just the center of the universe but the universe itself. The awareness of the universe inside each of us is a prerequisite to conceiving of a universe outside of us. We begin to learn who we are as we learn to respond and relate to those who love us; that process ultimately allows us to discover who we human beings are in the universe. Young children figure out who they are by observing who they are not: “I am not a boy, I’m a girl!” “I’m black, not white!” Or as I once heard a frustrated Jewish

child respond to the tenth salesperson to wish him Merry Christmas, "I'm not Christmas!" The question grows as we grow, as does our capacity for self-awareness. If we are lucky, we find teachers who aid us on our journey. The ability to ask questions is built into human beings, but the answers can only be explored in relationship with the right teachers. It is they who nurture the increasingly complex questions of spiritual awareness: What are the gifts with which I am blessed? What obligations do these gifts impose upon me? What are my particular challenges in this world? What might be my unique contribution? How do I know which tasks belong to me and which tasks to others?

Simply asking "Why Me?" obligates us to consider which burdens belong to us and which do not. A wise supervisor of mine once suggested a likely answer to this question "Why me?" is that it's not always about me. A friend recently became distressed over her teenage son's newfound interest in a religion other than the one in which he had been raised. Where she saw his explorations as a sign of her failure as a parent, I saw his spiritual forays only as testimony to her success. It's not about her. She has raised a child who has begun taking responsibility for his spiritual life and is continuing to ask the questions she encouraged from his birth. You may know that famous story from Zen tradition:

Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling. Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection. "Come on, girl," said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud. Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. "We monks don't go near females," he told Tanzan, "especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?" "I left the girl back there," said Tanzan. "Are you still carrying her?" (As quoted in Zen Flesh, Zen Bones by Paul Rep)

Possessing self-awareness in a given situation enables us to know what to carry and what to leave behind. It also presumes we have a choice in the matter, the other quality that differentiates the human being from the rest of the animal kingdom. This idea of human choice is implicit in the very notion of creation. If we are created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God, that very fact bestows upon us the moral dignity that allows us control over our own impulses. A lioness doesn't choose to defend her cubs; she merely acts on her instincts. While we human beings may be intellectually aware that we possess the freedom to make choices, do we not often behave as if we have no choice and resort instead to moral laziness or despair? We, too, are subject to the forces of biology and environment, but we have the additional capacity to reflect and consider consequences even in the most difficult of circumstances. Natan Sharansky was a refusenik in the former Soviet Union. He spent 13 years in the famous Gulag in solitary confinement and in freezing punishment cells, his only human contact the famed KGB of yore. In his book Fear No Evil, he tells of his ultimate release and arrival in Israel:

In freedom, I am lost in a myriad of choices. When I walk on the street, dozens of cheeses, fruits and juices stare at me from store windows. There

are vegetables here I'd never seen or heard of, and an endless series of decisions that must be made: what to drink in the morning, coffee or tea? What newspaper to read? What to do in the evening? Where to go for the Sabbath? Which friends to visit? In the punishment cell, life was much simpler. Every day brought only one choice: good or evil, white or black, saying yes or no to the KGB. Moreover, I had all the time I needed to think about these choices, to concentrate on the most fundamental problems of existence, to test myself in fear, in hope, in belief, in love. And now, lost in thousands of mundane choices, I suddenly realize that there's no time to reflect on the bigger questions. How to enjoy the vivid colors of freedom without losing the existential depth I felt in prison? How to absorb the many sounds of freedom without allowing them to jam the stirring call of the shofar that I heard so clearly in the punishment cell? And, most important, how in all these thousands of meetings, handshakes, interviews and speeches, to retain that unique feeling of the interconnection of human souls which I discovered in the Gulag? These are the questions I must answer in my new life, which is only beginning.

Living as a human being is more than a matter of having and making choices; it is first being aware of having freedom of choice and then being able to utilize it. That, too, is a spiritual choice that is distinctly human. An anonymous concert-goer once witnessed and wrote about one particular performance of the great violinist Itzhak Perlman:

You may know that Itzhak Perlman suffered from polio as a child and has braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. To see him cross the stage is both painful and slow, but somehow heroic and majestic at the same time. He came out center-stage, he took his seat and reaching down he unhinged the clasps that were on his leg and, tucking one leg back and extending the other, he took his violin in hand, laying the crutches on the floor. He began to play. No sooner had he started playing than one of those marvelous strings broke on his instrument. We heard it. It went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what it meant. There was equally no mistaking what he had to do. We started applauding softly, finally louder and louder, waiting for him to leave the stage. He did not leave the stage, but rather he signaled the maestro and they started out the symphony...He played with such power, with such intensity, with three strings. Now I know that is impossible to do. He was modulating, he was changing, he was recomposing the piece in his head, and on one or two occasions, it even looked as if he detuned the strings to get different sounds or tuned them upward to get other sounds. I do not know. All I know is that when he finished, there was awesome, awe-inspiring applause and accolades from the audience. We were on our feet screaming and yelling and doing everything we could to say how much we appreciated what he had done. He quieted us down and gave us these words...He said, "It is my genius as well as my heart to make music with what remains."

Perlman's ability not to be constrained by what was expected, not to leave the stage to change his strings, but to use his freedom of choice in that moment was testimony to the power of the human spirit. His awareness of his own freedom allowed him to enter the unknown.

Perlman and Sharansky both remind us that freedom is a choice made in the human mind and in the human heart. What is it, then, that would prevent us from exercising our freedom of choice? We allow so many kinds of fear to limit us. Sometimes failure frightens us. When Mother Teresa helped those starving in Ethiopia's famine during the 1980's, people were dying all around her. "How can you tend to the sick and the dying," an interviewer asked her, "Knowing you will not be successful with everyone?" "We are not here to be successful," she answered, "We are here to be faithful." Fear of failing did not limit her choice. Sometimes risk frightens us. Fear of risk can limit our freedom to choose. Abraham Maslow, in The Farther Reaches of Human Nature, calls this "the Jonah Complex," when we hear the call but run from it, preferring to pretend that we have heard nothing at all. What we discover is that the call doesn't go away, that the storm continues to rage and the waves wash over the ship's deck until at last, like Jonah, we find ourselves in the belly of the whale, unable to deny the truth any longer. Jonah represents the danger that threatens when we permit our fear of risk to deafen us to our calling.

Or is it fear of the unknown that keeps us from choosing freely? Deepak Chopra wisely comments that it is the opposite that is usually true, that the unknown is wide-open to possibility while it is the known that is much scarier because it is habitual and hard to break. I once heard a story about a woman who always cut off one end from her holiday roast before putting it into the oven. She explained that she did it that way because her mother had always done it that way. Her mother, in turn, said it was what her mother did. When they approached the family matriarch, the old woman told them that, as a young bride she had had a very small oven and had been forced to cook her meat in two parts. Her ritual of cutting off the end from the roast had been passed down for generations, long after the need for it had disappeared. It is important for us to keep our rituals in context so that they retain their connection to spiritual transformation and transcendence. Rituals are there to help us know and understand and bring us closer to abiding human value. Comforting as they are shallow, old habits can imprison us if we allow it. We may find ourselves repeating the same behaviors not because they are productive and meaningful but because they offer us an easy sense of having done something right. That is what Alcoholics Anonymous calls the definition of insanity and Freud calls the repetition compulsion. Whether our own habits rule us is up to us. We are free to learn from the past or not, to choose our behaviors or not.

Once we know we can choose, we discover another human capacity: the ability to put aside our own needs in deference to others and to know this is not an erasure of self but an affirmation, that in fact, it is the definition of love. We humans are capable of delaying gratification. We can consider the consequences of our behavior in advance and choose whether to act. We can have our feelings but we don't have to let them get in the way of the task. We are creatures of impulse yet we are not slaves to impulse. We human

beings are capable of putting aside our own feelings and acting for the higher good. We are capable of doing so not out of instinct, as an animal might, but out of love and self-conscious choice. Victor Frankl describes how even prisoners in concentration camps had moral choices to make and were able to act out of altruism rather than impulse: “We who lived in concentration camps remember that there were men and women who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they are living testaments that everything may be taken from a person except for one thing: the capacity, no matter what the circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” We are inherently relational creatures; we learn the question why me with others, we develop our answers to the question with others, and we live out our answers with others. The human spirit encourages us to transcend ourselves for the common good; it does not remove us from the world but rather brings us closer.

Because we are spiritual creatures, because we have the capacity for self-awareness, because we possess free will, because we can subsume our own impulses for the good of others, because we can learn from the past, we have a greater obligation to use our gifts to influence a world sorely in need of help. Someone once asked the Dalai Lama, “When you look at the depressing conditions found all over the world, and the injustices that can happen to people everywhere, how can you be so optimistic?” The Dalai Lama is reputed to have let out a loud deep belly laugh and replied, “What else would you suggest?” The Vilna Gaon, a saintly rabbinic sage who lived in the second half of the 18th century in Lithuania, asked his teacher for words that might humble his soul. His teacher the Dubner Maggid replied, “What can I say to you, you who are the pride and light of our people, who study and pray night and day. You are learned and pious; but you study and pray here in the house of study, among your holy texts. Would you remain unblemished in the marketplace, where men and women compete ruthlessly to sell their products, where corruption is rampant, and price-fixing common? Would you be holy then? In a world of mud and muck where people are fallen into pits, it is easy to keep one’s cloak clean by refusing to enter the pit.” The Vilna Gaon’s challenge will go with you as you enter the world of mud and muck. How you choose will dictate how dirty your cloak will become. That you are able to choose will elevate your choice to a spiritual level whether in the village or in the marketplace. There are teachers awaiting you as you continue your search. Those of your teachers who have been with you thus far and have understood the religious nature of their teaching will also continue to be with you. Those of us who were with you at the beginning will always be with you. We, your parents, do not ask “Why Me?” We know why we are here. Our eyes will always light up when you enter the room.