

For Edgewood Summit -- from Rachel Naomi Remen's My Grandfather's Blessings -- 10 January 2012

Genesis 32:22-32

22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

This is a story by Rachel Naomi Remen from a book she wrote entitled, "My Grandfather's Blessings."

Rachel Naomi Remen is a medical doctor, who devotes much of her practice to the care of people with serious illnesses. She, herself, has been a living survivor of Chron's Disease that afflicted her as a child.

Rachel's grandfather as a Kabbalist Rabbi. The Kabbalah contains the mystical teachings of Judaism.

Although he died before Rachel reached her teens, his visits with her, and most importantly his stories, shaped how she sees life and what she has done with her life. She learned from her grandfather that "The Kabbalah teaches that the Holy may speak to you from its many hidden places at any time." She wrote

that" "The world may whisper in your ear, or the spark of God in you may whisper in your heart. My grandfather showed me how to listen."

The following story is one Rachel heard from her orthodox rabbi grandfather. It helped her to see life in a special way. Perhaps its retelling here can do something for how we see life, as well.

In the story, the grandfather calls Rachel "Neshume-le" which is Hebrew for "Little Blessed Soul."

Sometimes a wound is the place where we encounter life for the first time, where we come to know its power and its ways. Wounded, we may find a wisdom that will enable us to live better than any knowledge and glimpse of a view of ourselves and of life that is both true and unexpected.

Almost the last story that my grandfather told me was about a man called Jacob who had been attacked in the night as he slept alone by the bank of a river. He had been traveling, and when he had stopped to make his meal and settle down to sleep, the place had seemed safe enough. But it was not so. He awakened to find himself gripped by muscular arms and pinned to the ground. It was so dark that he could not see his enemy, but he could feel his power. Gathering all his strength, he began to struggle to be free.

"Was it a nightmare, Grandpa?" I said hopefully. I often suffered from nightmares back then and had to sleep with a nightlight on. I moved closer to my grandfather and took his hand.

"No, Neshume-le," he answered, "it was quite real and it happened a long time ago. Jacob could hear his attacker's breath, he could feel the cloth of his garments, he could even smell him. Jacob was a very strong man, but even using

all of his strength he could not free himself and he could not pin his enemy down, either. They were evenly matched and they rolled on the ground and struggled fiercely."

"How long did they struggle, Grandpa?" I asked with some anxiety.

"A long, long time, Neshume-le," he replied, "but the darkness does not last forever. Eventually it was dawn and as the light came, Jacob saw that he had been wrestling with an angel."

I was astonished. "A real angel, Grandpa?" I said. "With wings?"

"I don't know if he had wings, Neshume-le, but he was definitely an angel.," he told me. "with the coming of the light, the angel let go of Jacob and tried to leave, but Jacob held him fast. 'Let me go,' the angel told Jacob. 'The Light has come.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go until you bless me.' The angel struggled hard, for he wanted badly to escape, but Jacob held him close. And so the angel gave him a blessing."

I was very relieved. "Did he leave then, Grandpa? Is that the end?" I asked him.

"Yes," my grandfather said, "but Jacob's leg was hurt in the struggle. Before the angel left, he touched him on the place where it was hurt."

This was something I understood; often my mother did this, too. "To help it get better, Grandpa?" I asked.

But my grandfather shook his head. "I do not think so, Neshume-le. He touched it to remind Jacob of it. Jacob carried it all the rest of his life. It was his place of remembering."

I was very puzzled by this story. How could it be that one might confuse an angel with an enemy? But Grandfather said that this was the sort of thing that happened all the time. "Even so," he told me, "it is not the most important part of the story. **The most important part of the story is that EVERYTHING HAS ITS BLESSING.**"

In the year before he died, my grandfather told me this story several times. Eight or nine years afterward, in the middle of the night, the disease I have lived with for more than forty-five years declared itself in the most dramatic way imaginable. I had a massive internal hemorrhage. There was no warning at all. I was in a coma and hospitalized for months. The darkness and the struggle lasted for many years afterward.

Looking back on it, I have wondered if my grandfather, old and close to the time of his death, had not left me with ***this story as a compass.***

It is a puzzling story, a story about the nature of blessings and the nature of enemies.

How tempting to let the enemy go and flee. To put the struggle behind you as quickly as possible and get on with your life.

Life might be easier then, but far less genuine.

Perhaps the wisdom lies in engaging the life you have been given as fully and courageously as possible and not letting go until you find the unknown blessing that is in everything.