

Sermon: “Our Sister’s Keeper”

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Linda Yates

Without evolution nothing living on this earth would exist. Without evolution, cancer would not exist. Without evolution, you and I would not exist. The mechanics and wonder of cell division and proliferation make our very daily existence sustained and possible. At every moment of every day, within our bodies, the forces of evolution are active. We have all been known, millions of years before we were born, in this chemical soup of DNA. This bothers me. I resent that the mould on my blue cheese shares most of the DNA found in my own body. Tangled up in our double stranded DNA complexity, affected by our interaction with the earth, sea and sky of our physical world, mixed up with our choices and our experiences, engaged with the power of the Holy, dosed with a really large complement of chance and randomness, are what we might call our human “lives.” Perhaps we are the only living giant sacs of DNA programmed protein that can ask, “What is our purpose?”

Jeremiah says that God “knew” him since before he was born, the Hebrew word “knew” describing a relationship of intimacy, of intense “knowing” and of “being known.” Jeremiah is naming that ever since he can remember being conscious, he has felt called to prophecy by God. God has always had this job in mind for him. When he was still a boy, God told him it was time to get on with this task. This is a revelation of some concern for Jeremiah. He very much wanted to say, “Thanks, but no thanks, God.” He names three reasons to refuse the task. First, he is just a boy. Surely this must disqualify him. Secondly, he does not know what words God wants him to say and when to say them. Thirdly, and this one is unnamed but is revealed later in the passage, he knows that prophetic words can make

people very upset and he worries about that. Shining light on misbegotten important things tend to make important people angry.

This too is Anna's problem.

Show Clip – “My Sister’s Keeper” Movie Trailer¹

Anna is a girl who has some important, prophetic words for some people who are important in her life. However, she is very young. She has no voice, but she *is* a lawyer's kid. This means that she knows there is law in her land; law, which holds up, in principle, the right of people to make decisions about what happens to their bodies. Does she have this right still apply to her even though she is just a child? Like Jeremiah, she has known ever since she can remember that she has a job. She was brought to earth, or “created” to save her sister. She was designed by her parents and the medical system to be a baby of a certain HLA tissue antigen structure – a tissue type, a certain DNA or genetic configuration that will provide a perfect match for her sister. She has been intimately “known” by her parents and the doctors that created her. She has been seen in her genetic nakedness as an embryo. Her mother, Sara, tells her she was a piece of blue sky brought down to earth at a time when the sky could only be dark, grey and stormy. We see that Anna is loved, but is it a conditional love? We wonder with her, would she even exist if she were not the perfect genetic match?

Anna approaches a lawyer, Campbell Alexander, seeking medical emancipation. She does not want to be forced to donate her kidney to her sister. She feels it is no longer her “call” or her job. Campbell balks at her age but he is a man who suffers from epilepsy and is therefore no stranger to loss of bodily control. He agrees to take on her case. Anna's words, spoken through her lawyer Campbell will have the power to take down worlds, to pluck up and to destroy. Sara, Anna's mother, is shocked when presented with legal papers requesting

medical emancipation for her daughter. She asks for dismissal of the case based on Anna's youth. Judge Amelia, still reeling from the grief of having lost her own adolescent daughter listens to Anna in a one-on-one conversation. Anna's words move her and the case goes forward.

When Jeremiah judges himself too young for the role of prophet, God simply instructs him not to speak of it again. God has judged him able. God also tells him not to worry about what to say or how and when to say it, because God will give him the words. God reassures Jeremiah regarding his unspoken anxiety about the power of the words that he will speak and the opposition they will create. God is with Jeremiah in and beyond his words – words that will pluck up and words that will plant.

Anna worries about the words of revelation that she is called to speak. She has a secret. Her words are not her words. They are Kate's words. Kate no longer wants to fight death. She is the one who wants control over her own body. She feels the irresistible call of death and no longer wants to fight that call. She has judged herself to have lived enough. She has loved and been loved. She has even been to prom. Most importantly, she has seen the effect that her parent's struggle to keep her living is having on her siblings and her mother and father.

Kate no longer has the will to continue to fight nature. Cancer cells grow on the principle of survival of the fittest. They have chromosomally adapted to all of the many, many of the body's defences. After each treatment, a new environmental "bottleneck" is created. Millions of cells might die with each cancer treatment, but there will be one or two cellular clones that will survive to continue dividing becoming stronger, faster, and tougher. Kate's dad, Brian, and her doctor see that, after so many treatments, Kate is losing the struggle. Life is not about winning the struggle against death. They conspire together to answer her wish for

a day on the beach as a family. Sara, Kate's mother freaks out when she finds out, but it is in the seeds of this day, that the almond branch of family life, beyond Kate's death, takes root.

Clip – Beach Scene - 1:05:58 to 1:11

Anna has her day in court. But she is struggling. When Anna calls Kate by phone and tells her she does not think she can continue with the court struggle anymore, Kate reassures her, telling her the words will come, the truth will be revealed. She will be with her. In the end it is brother Jesse, who blurts out the truth - it has been Kate all along who has called Anna to this *final* sacrifice – that of revealing ugly questions whose answers are really only more questions. Questions like: Who has control over a child's body? When does that control move into the child's realm of influence? How much and when? Does the legal system have the right to interfere with the "family" unit and when? Where are the limits of control that humans can wield over "life" and "death"? When does a mother's love move into the realm of obsession with winning over death? Kate's prophetic words presented through Anna's mouth deliver serious challenges to the paternalism of the medical system, the family unit and even the legal system itself.

At the end of the day, literally at the end of Kate's day, none of them have any power over nature, over evolution's great gift and evolution's great demand - Death. How few of us can face the pain of this truth. In the following scene observe Kate's aunts and uncle's refusal to face it and Kate's care of them in their weakness.

Clip – Kate's Death – 1:29:18

It is the words of Kate, both verbal and in the print of her scrap book, that plant in her mother the courage to accept Kate's death. It seems like a neat and tidy ending, but the film refuses to answer all its own questions. It leaves us with images laden with the almond

branches of hope; the family camping and fishing by a lake. However, there are also images hinting of the simmering pots of perhaps permanent tension. Anna and her mother, sit next to each other but are not touching. Anna's prophetic voice concludes as narrator, saying whatever happens to them, they know Kate is with them, a piece of blue sky, looking down on them. They are lonely but they are not alone. They are healing but they have sustained wounds. They are in the pristine setting of nature, but at the end of their days, it is that same nature, replete with the forces of evolution, which will demand their death and our deaths.

So, there they are and here we are creatures of evolution, creatures of nature and still very much bound by its rules - yet also children of God. It is this odd God, who promises to be with us in this strangely tangled DNA dance, both in this life and beyond. Is there purpose in life? Is there meaning? Is there planting in the plucking up? Words always fail us in these questions. Like Jeremiah, perhaps we can only just trust in the promise of the giving of the words by One who knew us even before we were born.

ⁱ <http://www.mysisterskeepermovie.com/#home>

Conceived by means of in vitro fertilization, Anna Fitzgerald (Abigail Breslin) was brought into the world to be a genetic match for her older sister, Kate (Sofia Vassilieva), who suffers from acute promyelocytic leukemia. Because of her sister's dependency on her, Anna is unable to live the life she wants; in and out of the hospital constantly, she cannot take part in extracurricular activities such as cheerleading or soccer. When Kate turns 13 she goes into renal failure. Knowing that she will have to donate one of her kidneys to her sister, Anna sues her parents for medical emancipation and the rights to her own body. Attorney Campbell Alexander (Alec Baldwin) agrees to work for Anna pro bono. The film is interlaced with flashbacks that detail the strong relationship between Kate and Anna, as well as how Kate's illness has affected her siblings' lives. Before the result of the case is known, it is revealed that Kate had asked Anna to file for medical emancipation. Believing that she would not survive the surgery, Kate wants to die. Anna wins the case, and due to her sister's wishes does not donate her kidney. Kate later dies at the hospital. The family moves on with their lives, being changed by Kate's death, but every year on Kate's birthday they go to Montana, which was her favorite place in the world.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1078588/synopsis>