

Per Aspira Ad Astra
A Sermon Preached by Brian Sutton
at the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Scituate
August 11, 2019

I read that an easy way to deliver a successful speech is to be sure to at least convey one practical bit of information in just a few words. So let's get that out of the way, right away.

Sharks. If you happen to find yourself attacked by a shark, here is what you do.

1. Hit the shark! If a shark is coming towards you - use your fist, or anything you have with you, to hit the shark's eyes or gills, their most sensitive areas.
2. Hit with quick, sharp repeated jabs at the eyes or gills, not at the nose. If the attack is happening too fast for you to concentrate on aiming for the eyes or gills, or for some reason you are not in your calmest state of mind, just do your best at hitting the shark anywhere, the goal being to let it know you are not defenseless.

Unless you happen to be a pearl diver whose only choice for make a living is to gather pearls in a sharks' neighborhood, the, ah, opportunity you have to punch a shark should be incredibly rare, if you follow a few rules to avoid a shark attack:

- A. Stay in groups.
- B. Don't swim far from shore.
- C. Don't swim at twilight or at night.
- D. Don't swim where seabirds are congregating.
- E. Don't wear shiny jewelry.
- F. Use your smart phone for its true purpose, tracking shark warnings for your local beaches. There's an app for that.*

Now to our main topic, *Per Aspira Ad Astra, Through Hardship (Sweat) to the Stars*. *Per Aspera Ad Astra* is a Latin phrase attributed to Seneca the Younger, the Roman Stoic playwright and philosopher. *Per Aspera Ad Astra* is translated as "through hardship to the stars," or "through difficulties to the stars." Appropriately, it is the motto of NASA. Every launch of every space exploration ship, with people aboard or not, is a difficult endeavor, with the work of hundreds of scientists on the ground, and years of testing, failing, fixing, and then well deserved cheering and news coverage when the project succeeds.

What does *Per Aspera Ad Astra*, through hardship to the stars, mean to me? I'd like to think that I have, from time to time, pushed myself hard over the years to work on a project at work or home, but I hadn't thought about the phrase for years until *To the Stars* was announced as the general theme for the summer sermons.

"Through hardship to the stars" is connected to me from back in high school Latin. We translated some of Seneca's less complicated writings, and when we went to the annual Latin Day, hosted by the University of Vermont, our venerable teacher, Ethelda Graves, wanted us to create advertising-style posters for the event, and after to hang up in the high school. I couldn't decide on one phrase, so I made two posters. One was my favorite Cicero quotes, "O praeclarum custodem, ovium lupum," which is "An excellent protector of sheep, the wolf." Throughout my life I have seen that expression play out as I have seen people in power, particularly in Washington, look to me like wolves saying they are protecting the sheep when really they are looking out for themselves and other wolves. For those of you who may be thinking I am going to somehow connect my "punch the shark or avoid the shark" practical advice with what to do about the metaphorical wolves, no. I am not suggesting we can avoid or punch the wolves in our lives and in our society. But when we see a wolf saying it is an excellent protector of sheep, perhaps as a public service we can point it out just as we would yell "shark" for everyone to get out of the water.

The other poster I made was *Per Aspera Ad Astra*, through hardship to the stars. For a while it was a slogan shared among us teenage, cross country and track & field runners, at least the ones who were also in Latin classes. In other words, for a few of us, my advertising poster worked. As we poured off sweat during practice you would say "Per Aspira," perspiration - get it? And the other runner would answer "Ad Astra." *Per Aspira Ad Astra* became a mantra for me, with the sense that only through sweat would I get to the stars, that is I would do my best in the races, and it got me to push harder in practice. It worked for me better than Nike's, "Just Do It."

It took a lot of sweat to be a runner at sixteen, and it still takes a lot of sweat at forty-eight. And now aches, and schedule planning, and keeping a better diet. I am dedicated to running. I call myself a distance runner, and I love that part of my day, and the nervousness before a road race, and running shoe shopping. And I won't go on.

The point I want to make is that throughout this church year I am dedicating myself to the spirit of "Through sweat to the stars" as a member of First Parish, to "Our Vision," and I invite all of us to do the same. This is not a call to sign up for bottle duty, committees, coffee hour, coffee house, or weeding, and so on. I have confidence that all those and more will happen, because you continue to be angels. Some of you may remember when I stood here a few months ago and named all of you in First Parish as the angels I see in the world and in my life.

Instead of a call for sign ups, think of "Ad Astra" as an invitation for us to continue exploring "Our Vision," how we have already been turning Our Vision into Our

Action, and in the future how we want to turn Our Vision into "Our Action." We will continue, strengthen and - I hope – celebrate the activities we are already doing.

And we can explore actions we want to try as we reach to the stars, knowing that our vision is an aspiration and aspirations are as hard to reach as the stars. This vision is a life-long journey, I would say, transforming our society and ourselves along the way is a journey I love to be sharing with you as First Parish Scituate. My angels! We have lots of questions to ask together, lots of things that are wrong in our society to speak up about and act on changing, lots of generosity to share, to take care of each other, our neighbors, and to keep our welcoming doors open to individuals and families who are searching for a place like First Parish, where people are on a genuine and open exploration of life's biggest and deepest questions.

I will end this morning with the words of "Our Vision," a sentence I have fallen in love with this summer. This is Our Vision, the words that this community created together:

WE ASPIRE TO BE a beacon of liberal faith, strong community, and transformative service, rooted in love.

* Advice comes from the chapter "How to Fend Off a Shark" in *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. The expert sources are George H. Burgess, director of the International Shark File at the Florida Museum of Natural History, at the University of Florida; and Craig Ferriera, board member, Cape Town's South African White Shark Research Institute.