

Harnessing the Unexpected

Sermon, Sunday, January 2, 2011
Unitarian Universalist Church, Concord, NH
Rev. Michael Leuchtenberger

Reading

The source of the following story is unknown. My adaptation is based on Margaret Silf's retelling in her book "One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World."

Once upon a time, there were two boys. One was called Owen. The other was called Peter.

The two boys each had their own playroom. Owen had a room full of toys for him to play with, but each time he would sit in the middle of the room and start to cry, because he had no drum. He wanted a drum so much, and so he was forever disappointed. The toys lay scattered around him, untouched and unappreciated.

Peter wasn't so lucky. All that he had in his playroom was a pile of manure from the farmyard and a fork.

It happened that the boys' parents came past one day and looked into the playrooms where their sons were playing. As usual, Owen was howling because he couldn't find a drum among the vast pile of toys that surrounded him.

But when they looked into the room where Peter was playing, they found a happy child, eagerly digging through the pile of manure with his fork. His eyes were alive with excitement, and he was singing as he played. 'With all this manure around,' they heard him say, 'there's got to be a pony in here somewhere!'

Story (Linda Williams)

A few years ago, I was vacationing with my family in Rhode Island. One hot summer evening, we decided to go out for ice cream. With our cones in hand, we continued walking down the street, when I discovered a small shop called Small Axe Productions. Run by a man with dreadlocks to his waist, the building throbbed with music.

[play excerpt from Bob Marley's "Exodus"]

I instantly loved what I heard, and immediately bought several tapes. I had fallen in love with reggae. And I really wanted to learn more about it.

I began doing some research. I found that Small Axe comes from a Bob Marley song, with the words, "to cut a big, big tree takes a small axe", meaning that even the little guy can overthrow an oppressive system. I learned that reggae is an expression of the Rastafari way of life and I

discovered that there are many parallels between Unitarian Universalist beliefs and Rastafari beliefs—thinking for yourself, finding your own truth, the absolute equality of all races, a struggle for justice and freedom, looking within oneself for spiritual truths, enjoying life and living in the moment. And there is the belief in a natural foods, vegetarian diet.

In addition, Rastafari have strong liberation theology, as well as some elements most Unitarians might not agree with, like a shamanistic use of marijuana and the belief that Haile Selassie was the Messiah. But I was so taken with the intense spirituality of Reggae music and the Rastafari that I did a summer service about it here at our church.

As I began the service, in walks a genuine Rastafari, with dreadlocks and a knitted crown. That was unexpected. It was Free Joseph, a reggae musician from Dominica, and a friend of another congregant. Omigod, I gulped, I hope I know what I am talking about!

After the service, Free Joseph introduced himself and his wife. He congratulated me on the service and gave me a copy of his CD. Free and I became friends and I learned a lot about Rastafari from him. For instance, followers of this religion prefer the term “Rastafari” to “Rastafarian”. And the frequently used term “I-and-I” means “I am part of everything and everything is part of me.”

Still, I wanted to see Jamaica for myself, and a few years later, we made it happen. We had signed up with a tour operator who had us staying in nice hotels. Yet I had come to Jamaica because I wanted to see Jamaica in all its grittiness. The music is about survival and overcoming hardship, and I wanted a more genuine experience of the island. So, despite disapproving looks from the hotel staff we got a cab to take us to the center of Negril.

Not much of a downtown, but there was a shack with a Jamaican flag painted on it and a middle-aged man making drums. We stopped to talk with him, and soon I was sitting beside him drumming!! Local passersby gave me a few strange looks, but during the afternoon, some of his friends stopped by to chat with us, and children on their way home from school would talk with him, too. I couldn't believe it was happening. And what made it more amazing was that he was a Nyabinghi drummer.

I had heard of Nyabinghi drumming from Free Joseph. It is a very special style of Rastafari drumming with deep African roots. It is intensely spiritual, and at Nyabinghi gatherings, the drumming has a trancelike effect. The song “Rivers of Babylon”, #1042 in our teal hymnal, is probably the most famous Nyabinghi chant.

Our two afternoons with Lloyd, the drum maker, had given me a much deeper appreciation of that music I first heard on that hot summer afternoon in Rhode Island so many years ago. It connected me with the people whose struggles, hopes, and beliefs are so powerfully expressed

through their music, the music of reggae, music I continue to love. You never know what going out for ice cream will do to your life. It certainly changed mine.

[Play selection from “Wingless Angels,” a recording of Nyabingi drummers made by Keith Richardson]

Sermon (Michael Leuchtenberger)

“There’s got to be a pony in here somewhere.” Linda knows how to find a pony – and then ride it – whether that takes her to Jamaica or into the hearts of people she barely knows. She did not mope because she had no drum in her room, yet she ended up drumming regardless.

Today is the day after yesterday, New Year’s Day, and hence the day after the start of the rest of your life. Or perhaps today was the start of the rest of your life. Unless it turns out that tomorrow will have been that start, the start of the life you hope to have if all goes according to plan.

It is the season of New Year’s resolutions and it is good to have a plan because our plans pave the road to that moment, not too far off, when the unexpected will hit; that moment when even the best laid plan will need to be rethought, revised, or simply thrown out the window.

Life is an odd mix of the craving for order and predictability and our dependence on disorder and chaos. The second law of thermodynamics tells us that entropy will always increase in a closed system. One way to think about this law is that the most likely state in nature is a state of maximum disorder and that’s where everything is headed.

Many parents are quite familiar with the impact of this law as they stand in awe of the forces that shape their children’s bedrooms.

Yet, here we are, examples of an evolution of life that seem to contradict the laws of physics. Over billions of years, life has grown more and more complex, emerging as order out of chaos and disorder.

Fritjof Capra, in his book *The Web of Life*, credits the Russian-born Belgian scientist and Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine with resolving “the paradox of the two contradictory views of evolution in physics and biology – one of an engine running down, the other of a living world unfolding towards increasing order and complexity.”

As Capra explains: “In the mechanistic paradigm of [classical physics] there is no difference between the past and the future. Both are implicit in the present state of the world and in the Newtonian equations of motion. All processes are strictly reversible. Both future and past are interchangeable; there is no room for history, novelty, or creativity.”

He goes on to explain that thermodynamics recognized the importance of the irreversibility of energy dissipation in friction, viscosity, and heat loss, but always associated irreversibility with energy loss and waste. Prigogine changed all that “by showing that in living systems, which operate far from equilibrium, irreversible processes play a constructive and indispensable role.”

Capra states that “Chemical reactions, the basic processes of life, are the prototype of irreversible processes. In a Newtonian world there would be no chemistry and no life. Prigogine’s theory shows how a particular type of chemical processes, the catalytic loops that are essential to living organisms, lead to instabilities through repeated self-amplifying feedback, and how new structures of ever-increasing complexity emerge at successive bifurcation points. “Irreversibility,” Prigogine concluded, “is the mechanism that brings order out of chaos.”

If you have tuned out for the last minute or two this is the time to tune back in. “Irreversibility,” Prigogine concluded, “is the mechanism that brings order out of chaos.” How counterintuitive to think that the fact that we can never go back and undo what we have done is essential to the order that allows life to flourish.

As Capra concludes: “In the living world order and disorder are always created simultaneously. [...] In the new science of complexity, which takes its inspiration from the web of life, we learn that nonequilibrium is a source of order.”

Nonequilibrium is a fancy scientific word for being out of whack, being out of balance, being unstable. So what Capra and his colleagues seem to be telling us is that we need instability to find stability and that we need chaos to create order. How is that for a paradox?

Lucky for us, we don’t have to worry about a lack of instability, chaos, or surprises in our lives. Time will gladly deliver them with abundance. The unexpected will happen.

[Jeff & Mike play beginning of Haydn’s surprise symphony]

Mr Haydn did not know of thermodynamics or chaos theory when he composed this piece – his Surprise Symphony - yet he understood the importance of surprises. His sudden sforzandos, the bursts of loud music, make us wake up and pay attention. They force us to stay on our toes and to anticipate the next outburst. We know it is coming even as we remain unsure when exactly the outburst will hit our ears.

And we have a choice. We can welcome this state of uncertainty. We can open ourselves to this sequence of unexpected events and observe what it does to our concert experience. Or we can attempt to close our ears and eyes in the hope that sooner or later the piece will be over and the program will return to more predictable music.

Almost exactly a year ago, I was waiting anxiously to see which congregations might be interested in calling me as their new minister. As many of you may recall, the ministerial search process, in many ways, is akin to online dating and I had clicked on a number of congregations that seemed attractive based on their online profile.

I was late in the game because I could not even begin to flirt, much less date, until I had successfully seen the Ministerial Fellowship Committee in early December. This meant that some of the more proactive and highly organized congregations, such as a certain church in Concord, NH, had already done plenty of flirting with other candidates. And, as I heard through the grapevine, Concord was no longer on the market by the time I entered the dating scene.

Bummer, but no point in even clicking on Concord. That much I knew. As ministers, we only have a limited number of “clicks,” so I wasn’t going to waste one of my “clicks” on a closed door.

The fact that I am standing here today means that I did eventually “waste” one of my clicks on “Concord” and that the Concord Search Committee did the highly unexpected. It extended an unexpected invitation to an unexpected last minute candidate. It decided to spend unplanned resources in a deliberate act to make the most out of these surprising developments. It was willing to embrace additional chaos and instability in the hope that it would lead to an increase in stability and order.

While I am not unbiased in my reflections here, the search committee stands as a model on how to harness the unexpected. Yet what they have done we can all do in our own lives. Harnessing the unexpected does not imply being unprepared. Harnessing the unexpected does not suggest we just sit there and wait until the drum arrives in the mail.

To the contrary, harnessing the unexpected means being alert and ready. It means knowing ourselves and being aware of our role in the web of life that surrounds us. It means digging in the manure, buying tapes of reggae music, going to hear Haydn, and it means reading poetry. Yes, reading poetry, for while the scientists can help us learn about chaos and uncertainty, predictability and order, it is the poets than will make us understand.

Poets like Mary Oliver who challenge us to be ready: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” yet opens our eyes to the unexpected when she writes:

"Just a minute," said a voice in the weeds.
So I stood still
in the day's exquisite early morning light
and so I didn't crush with my great feet
any small or unusual thing that just happening to pass by
where I was passing by
on my way to the blueberry fields,
and maybe it was the toad
and maybe it was the June beetle
and maybe it was the pink and tender worm
who does his work without limbs or eyes
and does it well
or maybe it was the walking stick, still frail
and walking humbly by, looking for a tree,
or maybe, like Blake's wonderous meeting, it was
the elves, carrying one of their own on a rose-petal coffin away, away
into the deep grasses. After awhile
the quaintest voice said, "Thank you." And then there was silence.
For the rest, I would keep you wondering.

And then there was silence. For the rest, I would keep you wondering.

May it be so. Amen.