

The Possibility of Perfection

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The Reverend Heather Janules
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, Maryland

Meditation “Please Call Me by My True Names”
by Thich Nhat Hanh (Abridged)

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow -
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda...

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Prayer by Karen Holden (Abridged)

The hardest part is people
So...help me face them
Without rancor or disappointment
Help me see the pain behind their actions
Rather than the malice
The suffering rather than the rage.

And, in myself, as I struggle
With the vise of my own desire
-give me strength to quiet my heart,
To quicken my empathy, to act
In gratitude rather than need.

Remind me that the peace I find
In the slow track of seasons
Or an uncurling fern frond,
Is married to the despair I feel
In the face of nuclear war.

Remind me that each small bird shares atoms
With anthrax, with tetanus, with acid rain
That each time I close my heart
To another, I add to the darkness;
Help me always follow kindness.
Let this be my prayer.
Amen.

Sermon “The Possibility of Perfection”

When my father was just a young boy, his parents bought a small lot of land on the shore of Back Lake in northern New Hampshire. Through their own labor, they built a log cabin, with wide windows facing the shimmering water. This cabin, which they called “the Camp,” became a frequent destination, a safe place to bring their family on vacation.

By the time I joined the family, the Camp was an institution, a center of family life in the summertime. My father and his sister both had families of their own. As we grew older and invited our friends to the Camp, the number of people coming in and out of that little house increased.

Some of my fondest memories of the Camp are of conversations around the kitchen table. At first glance, this table is nothing special, just a simple, utilitarian piece of wooden furniture. Yet, it has been the site of so many meals, games of Bid Whist with my grandmother and leisurely reads of the newspaper with a cup of coffee in hand.

The kitchen table also played a role in defining who was truly a member of the Camp community. On the side of the table is a small silverware drawer. You have to look closely to see it as it has no knob or handle.

This strange little drawer was built with a design flaw. There is no catch at the end of the drawer so, as you open it, you have to remember to stop pulling before you pull the drawer completely out of the table. If you forget to stop pulling, you inevitably drop the drawer, thereby spilling a drawer full of silverware on the floor and making a big racket.

The joke in my family was that you truly did not belong at the Camp until you made this mistake. Should you pull and drop the silverware drawer in the middle of the night and wake the whole house, your membership was even more secure.

In retrospect, this membership policy is an ideal model for belonging: you are not fully welcome until you prove that you make mistakes. The more obvious and the more annoying the mistake, the more secure your place in the community.

Based on this criteria, there is no doubt that I belong at the Camp. I have dropped this silverware drawer more times than I can remember.

And I have made bigger mistakes as well. I remember when I first got my driver's license. One morning, my attention to the rear-view mirror distracted me from the car ahead and I rear-ended this car. While no one got hurt and the other car just suffered an angled bumper, the front of my parents' car sustained serious damage. After the accident, their car looked like a crushed soda can.

My parents did not celebrate this mistake with the same light heartedness they viewed my tendency to drop the silverware drawer. When they found out about my very expensive mistake, they were angry. Really angry.

As a result of this accident, I am a much better driver. My parents' anger faded very quickly. The car was repaired and is now long gone as it reached the end of its natural automotive life. No one has talked about this accident for years.

However, I still dwell on this mistake from time to time. The people that I inconvenienced with my mistake have pretty much forgotten the incident but I still remember. They have forgiven me but, in some ways, I have not forgiven myself.

One of the mysteries of church life is the phenomenon where a preacher will set their mind to a subject and, as if silently invoked, the faith community will speak to this subject before the sermon is preached.

About two months ago, I thought about preaching about perfectionism and so many of you—unbeckoned and unprovoked— have spoken of similar tendencies. We may lead our lives without major incident. We may achieve a fantastic success

or excel in a noteworthy way. But sometimes all we remember are those moments where we fall short of our own or someone else's expectations. In these discussions, we have used the name our culture gives this tendency, "perfectionism," the view that anything short of perfect is unacceptable.

The pursuit of perfection raises questions about human possibility which are, by their nature, religious questions. And, so, I turn to our faith tradition for a little guidance.

If you are new to Cedar Lane, you have probably heard me recount this concise illustration of Unitarian Universalist belief: The Unitarians and the Universalists were once different faith traditions. The Unitarians rejected the idea of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, affirming that Jesus was not God but a human being. Unitarianism not only rejected the divinity of Jesus but affirmed the possibility in all people.

The Universalists rejected the ideas of Original Sin and damnation for sinners, putting their faith in a loving God who redeemed all His children. Universalists believe that all are saved, no matter what their deeds in life.

In summation, as the joke goes, "the Unitarians believed that they were too good to be damned and the Universalists believed that God was too good to damn them."¹

As these two faiths held benevolent views of both the divine and human nature, after about ninety years of negotiations, the Unitarians and the Universalists consolidated in 1961, forging the Unitarian Universalist faith we celebrate today.

Those who come to Unitarian Universalism from other traditions are often amazed to find such a faith, free of Original Sin,

¹ Attributed to the Rev. Thomas Starr King.

affirming the positive power of human will. In this house of worship, no one is wretched, no one is known first and foremost as a sinner. This is our great gospel. This is nothing short of "good news."

Yet, implied in the Unitarian Universalist affirmation of the human spirit, is the idea that perfection is possible. If we are not bound to fail by being born with sin, aren't we bound to achieve perfection? Are we completely unfettered in our pursuit of the good?

Taking reflection on the Unitarian Universalist tradition a bit deeper, I turn to the work of two men considered the great fathers of Unitarianism and Universalism, the Reverends William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou. Channing is remembered as the one who first and fully articulated the Unitarian Christian perspective through an ordination sermon in 1819. Ballou, Channing's contemporary, wrote the defining text on Universalist theology, titled "A Treatise on Atonement."

One of the great ironies in Unitarian Universalist history is the fact that even though William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou respected each other's leadership, they didn't like each other very much. Ballou and Channing traveled in different social circles and held some conflicting theological views. If they returned from the dead to learn that their traditions had joined to make one faith, the news would probably kill them.

In 1832, William Ellery Channing preached a sermon titled "The Evils of Sin." In this sermon, Channing acknowledges the propensity of humans to sin but argues that we are saved by our conscience, forever prodding us closer to the good. His sermon also includes a unique understanding of the afterlife: When our bodies die, our conscience and our character remain, continually progressing in a positive direction, somewhere in the ethereal realm. However, when we die, God judges our characters and

punishes us accordingly. Hence, it is in our best interest to progress as much as possible in this life.¹

Back in Channing and Ballou's time, ministers argued theological points with one another in the public square, similar to the way politicians debate civic policy today. In a subtle response to Channing, Ballou wrote an essay titled "A Candid Examination of Dr. Channing's Discourse on 'The Evils of Sin.'" In his "Candid Examination," Ballou challenges Channing's idea of successive advances towards goodness, acknowledging that human behavior varies throughout time. And, with my apologies to atheists, he states that Channing's belief that God will punish us in the afterlife is a "gross atheism."²

In short, the only thing that Channing and Ballou agree on is that we are born without sin and have the power to make positive changes in our lives but there is no escape from "missing the mark."

By the nature of being human, we cannot achieve perfection but this does not mean that we are beyond redemption. As the Rev. David Hubner states in his summation of the Universalist tradition "failure and salvation are part of the same story."³

We are not mistakes but we make mistakes. To suggest that perfection is possible is to try to be something beyond human. In

¹ William Ellery Channing, "The Evil of Sin," In Works of William Ellery Channing, (Boston, MA: American Unitarian Association, 1890)

² Hosea Ballou, A Candid Examination of Dr. Channing's Discourse on the Evil of Sin (Boston, MA: BB Mussey, 1833), 29.

³ Hubner, David. "Original Perfection?" *UU World: The Magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations*, Vol 20, No. 3, Fall, 2006, 23.

this way, perfectionism is idolatry—human beings trying to be gods.

And, so, we live in this paradox of being born without sin but falling short of perfection. No matter how we understand the Divine, we cannot evade the humility of being human. This was explained to me by one Unitarian Universalist minister who claimed that "God loves you just the way you are. And She loves you so much She doesn't want you to stay that way."

I am thankful for the ways your stories guided me in considering this morning's sermon. Since I began preparing for this sermon, I also had an experience in my own life that speaks to the pursuit of perfection.

I had the honor of officiating a wedding for a couple who we will call Linda and Kevin. From the first moment I met them, I was inspired by the warmth and enthusiasm they brought to planning their wedding. I also sensed that they were anxious about things going well. They both worked in technical fields and brought their engineer minds to the many details of this big event. As I do with most of the couples I work with, I reminded them of the Great Truth of Weddings, "Something will go wrong." I then added, "but I will do all I can to ensure that this has nothing to do with the minister."

After months of planning, the wedding weekend arrived. Linda had always imagined a wedding by the water so they made arrangements with a historic inn on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

I arrived at the inn with time to spare for the rehearsal and introduced myself to the wedding planner. From there, she and I helped Kevin and Linda coordinate their large wedding party and the numerous transitions in the ceremony. Kevin seemed concerned about the many children who played roles in the service

and the capabilities of my wireless microphone. Linda, on the other hand, fretted about the weather. She had her hopes set on an outdoor wedding and the forecast foretold of rain.

After two or three tries, everyone played their part perfectly. We then left the inn for a festive crab feast, celebrating the wedding and the marriage that would soon come.

After a leisurely day of touring Chestertown, we all returned to the inn for the wedding. The day was perfect—there is no other word to describe it. The morning was rainy but, as if on command, the clouds opened and the sun shone through. Thinking of her mother, three years deceased, Linda looked to the sky and said, “Thanks, Mom.”

The back lawn was set for the ceremony, with the Chesapeake Bay as our horizon and light dancing on the shimmering water. Enormous bouquets of purple and orange flowers created a sacred space before the rows of chairs, the whole gathering enveloped by tall, stately trees.

Once Kevin and Linda’s loved ones were sitting in their seats, the procession began. The three-year-old flower girl orchestrated her steps beautifully, with everyone else taking their places, a quiet hush falling over the crowd.

Then I spoke, drawing from Ecclesiastes:

“Let your presence be welcome, your hearts be glad.
For everything there is a season
And a time and purpose for every matter under the heavens...”

After I finished the opening words, the community pledged to support Linda and Kevin in their union and the bride and groom voiced their intentions to commit to one another. Kevin’s niece

read from First Corinthians 13 and then I invited the community into a time of silence, in memory of all those who could not be present in this ceremony. After I named those absent loved ones, including Linda’s mother, we stood and sat together in this quiet. Out of the quiet swelled beautiful music by the string trio, “The Swan,” a somber and elegant tune.

Looking out at the crowd, I saw that many were crying. For me, it was a powerful and poignant moment.

The music faded back into silence. I then asked Kevin to take Linda’s hand and repeat his vows after me.

Kevin took her hand and began to repeat my words, but he looked confused. I wasn’t sure what his body language meant until Linda whispered to me, “the Owl and the Pussycat.” This was shorthand for, “the second reading, ‘The Owl and the Pussycat,’ comes before the vows.”

Oh.

I stopped reciting the vows and said, “We’re going to stop the vows for a moment. Instead, I invite Rachel to come forward with another reading.”

Because the Universe has a sense of humor, this is what she read:

“Pussy[cat] said to the Owl, ‘You elegant fowl!
How charmingly sweet you sing!
O let us be married! Too long we have tarried:
But what shall we do for a ring?’
They sailed away, for a year and a day,
To the land where the Bong-tree grows
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood
With a ring at the end of his nose...”

'Dear pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling
Your ring?' Said the Piggy, 'I will.'
So they took it away, and were married next day
By [a] Turkey...who lives on the hill."

My experience with this wedding taught me two things. First, with weddings, something will go wrong and sometimes it will have to do with the minister. For everything there is a season.

But, the more important lesson is about the possibility of perfection. It doesn't exist. Even if we could go back in time, with everything unfolding as it did, I would make the same mistake. Beauty and error can be part of the same ceremony.

Like my auto accident, this mistake will make me a better minister. But I know it is more important to remember that through my mistake, I belong to this thing called humanity. The more obvious and the more annoying my mistake, the more secure my place in this community.

And, should I forget, I only have to remember Kevin and Linda's instantaneous forgiveness. Their willingness to live on this side of perfection with me recalled the gift I received long ago from my family at the Camp, at the shore of another body of water.

We are all loveable, just the way we are, with room to grow. This is our great gospel. This is our "good news."

Blessed be. Amen.