

Sermon: "The Blessing of Life"
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Readings

from "Between the Silences" from *The Mask of Religion* by G. Peter Fleck

Between the silence of the unutterable and the silence of the unspeakable... lies the life of each of us. All of us live between these two extremes. There is beauty in our lives, and love and tenderness; there is the mystery evoked by music, by the sea, and the stars, by the touch of the beloved, the laughter of a child. But then, there is the laughter of the soldier at Songmy who, in the words of Sergeant Michel Bernhardt, "laughed every time he pressed the trigger"... There are the purges and persecutions of Stalinist Russia, the Nazi death camps, the massacres in Indonesia and Biafra and other third world countries, the cattle prods and fire hoses of Sheriff Bull Connor, the deaths in Vietnam's tiger cages and South Africa's prison cells, the endless triumphs of stupidity and vileness and senselessness the world over. We are reminded of the teaching of certain existentialists that all that is demanded of [humankind], all that can be expected of [humankind], is to endure the meaninglessness of life.

Mystery and meaninglessness, the unutterable and the unspeakable.

A little girl asked her father: "Why do we speak of the *good* Lord?" Whereupon the father said: "Some weeks ago you were suffering from measles, and then, the *good* Lord sent you full recovery." However, the little girl, far from being content retorted: "Well; but, please, Daddy, do not forget: in the first place he had sent me the measles"...

Another story comes to mind, the story of a little girl, four years old, and one of those old-fashioned gas water heaters. One day she was standing in the bathroom ready to climb into the tub when the heater exploded. The little girl ran out of the house without taking anything along to cover her nakedness and disappeared into the surrounding woods. When she was found many hours later, she expressed her unwillingness to return home with the words: "I do not want to go back to a house where things like that happen." Of course, in the end she did go home, for it was the only home she had.

We find ourselves in a similar situation. This is our world; it is the only world we have. As the little girl found out, there is no alternative. We have to face the unspeakable. We have to wrestle with the question of why we get the measles; we have, somehow, to accept the fact that water heaters will explode.

from the writings of Alice Walker

How does the heart keep beating? How does the spirit go on? Like my mother, who seemed to switch over to another mode of coping after her body failed her, so that she remained radiant, even though she couldn't move, I felt, after a time of dimness and exhaustion from what seemed like utter meanness of spirit, racism, sexism, homophobia, hypocrisy and craziness, lifted up by an inner spiritual reserve that I hadn't been sure I had; the assurance that life is grand, no matter what. That suffering has a use; it helps push away the old skin, surely not empathically flexible enough, still clinging to our ankles. That I and all that I love are inseparable forever; and that I deeply love courage and creativity and the boldness to try something new, all of which I experienced among the collective who created our film. That even to attempt to respectfully encounter "the other" is a sacred act, and leads to and through the labyrinth. To the river. Possibly to healing. A "special effect" of the soul.

Sermon "The Blessing of Life"

A couple of years ago, I was flying to Boston to attend a meeting. Benjamin, who was only six months old at the time, went with me, and I have countless strangers to thank for helping to entertain him through four flights and the inevitable waiting at the airport. On the return flight, once we reached our cruising altitude, a gentleman sitting across the aisle reached over to invite Benjamin to play. I asked whether or not he had children of his own, since he seemed to have such a knack with babies. He didn't, but he explained that he was an ICU pediatrician, who rarely got to play with a healthy baby. As we talked about his work, I couldn't refrain from observing how heartbreaking it must be to witness such pain and tragedy every day. Death and illness are hard enough to take in later years, when on some level we know to expect it, but experiencing it in our children is all the proof we need of life's cruelty.

He agreed that it was not easy, especially those times when he does all that lies within his power to do, only to discover that it is still not enough. But other moments make it easier to go on. He shared with me the story of one family he had met in the past year. Two brothers, six and eight years old, had sustained severe head injuries after their car was hit by a drunk driver. Both required surgery for the hemorrhaging in their brains, and the older boy was having a particularly difficult time. The mother, watching her sons lying in the recovery room, asked the doctor what she could expect, whether or not they would ever return to the lives they had known before the drunk lost control of his car. Whether his answer came as a hopeful statement of faith or a confident reflection of his years of medical experience, I do not know, but he chose to say these words to her: "Give them two months. Just two months. And you will see them running down these halls." A little while later, the boys were sent home to continue their recovery and he moved on to the next patients needing his care. Two months later, the doors to the wing opened and he glimpsed the mother's face before she stepped aside, so that the boys could surprise him. They ran in and raced toward him, laughing the whole way.

Mystery and meaninglessness. Joy and tragedy. Hope and despair. G. Peter Fleck is right to remind us that we live somewhere in between the silences of the incomprehensible and the unexplainable. The world as we know it is filled with senseless deaths and miraculous recoveries, immense calamity and heroic courage, unfathomable horror and unforgettable ecstasy. We try to bring words into the silence, words to explain all of the good and the bad we find, and our human part in them, but our words often seem incomplete, poorly expressed, inadequately understood. How do we explain a world where water heaters can explode? Where waves can claim the lives of whole villages in a matter of seconds? Where famine and bounty exist side by side? Where we can travel through our atmosphere to stand upon the moon? The words that we speak into the void attempt to define the nature of the Creator of such an imperfect, yet awesome world, or the consequences of there possibly being no Creator at all. They seek to determine whether life is more blessing or curse; whether our futures are determined by fate or choice; whether it is better to hold on fiercely to our hard won answers, or to learn to live with the persistent questions themselves. Out of our struggle with the silence comes our spoken theology, our personal response to the experience of being both human and alive, of being a part of the great unknown.

Unitarian Universalism has traditionally spoken an optimistic word into the silence of our lives. We abolished the idea of an eternal hell, not because we don't recognize our capacity to create a hell for ourselves in this world, but because we believe that human beings can learn to act for goodness for its own sake. We preach the gospel of freedom, knowing that freedom will exact its price, because we believe that it is only in the presence of freedom before the Ultimate that truth and justice can be found. We affirm that this world matters, regardless of what may or may not come after this life, because we believe that all that is sacred and true abides with us even now, in the very midst of our struggle.

Yet in the direct presence of the very real mystery and meaninglessness in the world, I fear that our optimism is often misunderstood, and in being misunderstood, that our faith can be trivialized. How can we experience life is a gift, when we know that hundreds of thousands of people have lost all that they had in the tsunami, including their loved ones, and still stand to lose so many more? There are too many days when the world feels more like a burden that we must bear. There are too many days when we are afraid to turn on the television or to answer the telephone, because we cannot bear one more herald of bad news. There are days which come to each of our lives, when we wonder if it is even worth getting out of bed. At first glance, to speak of the gift and blessing of life seems to fly in the face of such experiences, dismissing them, as though if we could only look at them in a different light, they would not seem so bad.

In preaching this sermon, I do not want in any way to dismiss the reality of the despair and suffering of our world. To deny their reality only makes the suffering worse. They are a part of the truth of our lives that demands to be heard, whose pain must be

acknowledged, if we are to make any sense out of our brief time on this earth. Rather than doubt the truth of our despair, I would ask us to consider whether it is the only truth that we have ever known, or whether we have also experienced at times those moments of assurance which Alice Walker speaks of, “when we know that life is grand, no matter what... That even to attempt to respectfully encounter ‘the other’ is a sacred act, and leads to and through the labyrinth. To the river. Possibly to healing. A ‘special effect’ of the soul.” For the good and the bad in our lives and our world will never be present in equal measure at any given time – what matters is the relationship that we take to them through the years.

What does it mean to be open to life as a blessing, while still taking its evils seriously? A blessing is something which reveals the holiness of the world, those aspects of our lives that are worthy of honor and reverence. Do you doubt that such aspects exist? Look out the sanctuary windows at the stark winter beauty. Consider the love and dedication of people like Sahti, who are returning to their homelands to lend their support, along with countless strangers. Remember the courage of the ICU doctor trying to save the lives of two young boys. Recall the privilege that it is to be trusted by another human being. Are not such moments worthy enough to speak words of praise into the silence of the world? To speak words of inspiration? And yet, claiming them in the face of all the world’s uncertainty does not come easily. Like Jacob wrestling a blessing from the angel in the middle of the night, we know that the world comes with no guarantees. But we have a choice about how we will respond to that world and whether or not we will continue to affirm the potential that lies within it, no matter how rare, even when it lies beyond our sight.

Like most of you, I cannot fully comprehend the magnitude of the devastation and danger which are unfolding in the wake of the tsunamis. It is a tragedy on so many levels – the personal tragedy of survivors unable to save their children, family and friends; the wider tragedy of whole communities lost and the onset of both a real and spiritual homelessness; the human tragedy of not being able to get the aid which has been raised to the people who need it fast enough; and the more existential tragedy of living at Mother Nature’s mercy, reminding us of the uncertainty of each day. To say that life is a blessing in the face of such horror does not mean that there is any blessing to be found in this tragedy itself. There isn’t one that I can see. I am not someone who believes that suffering is sent to us to help us learn, or that there is a reason, foretold before we were born, for everything that happens to us. I can only name the tragedy for what it honestly is – a great loss to humankind and a ruthless reminder of the fragility of life itself.

But does the meaninglessness of so many innocent deaths take away from the meaning of the lives of the people lost? I cannot name them all by name. But I know that they were mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, lovers and doctors, leaders and priests, teachers and students, fishermen and boat-builders, elders and artists, and all the many faces of our human callings. I do not know the details of their lives, but I can guess that, while they walked this earth, that their actions and loves,

their joys and hopes made a difference to those who walked with them. No matter how young or old they were, I will not say that they lived or died in vain. Each of them leaves a legacy to their survivors - in the goodness they shared; in the dreams they dreamed; in the hopes they carried; in the loves they dared; in the moments of meaning they shared. So it is with all of our lives. We leave a legacy in the lives of the people we touch, both with our imperfections and achievements. We place our own unique imprint upon the mystery of life, and so become a part of its answer to the void. To see life as a blessing means to affirm the power of our lives to be heard, even in the face of tragedy and death.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel once observed: “Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy.” If we agree that life has meaning, simply by its existence in the face of the possibility of nothingness, simply by its power to lift up each person’s story as worthy of being heard and remembered, then we must still address the meaning of the suffering which comes to every one of our lives. I have heard people try to explain suffering as a necessary prelude to the blessings of our lives. This is the logic which seeks to explain that we lost our one arm, in order to appreciate the existence of our other limbs. The problem with this line of thinking is that we can always suggest plenty of less severe ways to have gotten the point across. It both minimizes the pain of the suffering, by suggesting that we should somehow learn to appreciate it, and cheapens the blessing, by implying that we’ve paid for it without a choice.

I am reminded of the real life of the American author, Pearl S. Buck, who, in her book *The Child Who Never Grew*, recounts her odyssey caring for her retarded daughter. Reflecting on that time in her life, she writes: “The first step was acceptance of what was. Perhaps there was a single moment in which I actually said to myself ‘this thing is unchangeable, it will not leave me. No one can help me, I must accept it.’ But practically the step had to be taken many times.” She took the step, again and again, until she found the courage to love and care for her daughter. The experience led her to reach out to others. She adopted nine other children and founded an adoption agency that found homes for children of mixed Asian-American heritage. She entered into counseling relationships, face to face and by mail, to many parents, whose children were also retarded, orphaned, or of mixed ethnicity and race. And through it all, she began to find a slow path toward the expansion and healing of her heart.

As I see it, the blessings of community and friendship, of healing and hope that she found did not arise directly from her suffering. Had her life taken a different turn, she might have found them in another way. But the fact that she chose to face her pain directly, with such courage, meant that she was open to wrestling the blessings from the opportunities about her. She was willing to accept them, not as an antidote to her sorrow, but as another truth in her life. To see life as a blessing means to affirm the power of human courage and love, even in the face of the unchangeable.

In a sense, we are not unlike the ICU pediatrician, who did not know whether he spoke his hope for those two boys out of faith, or merely the evidence at hand. As

Unitarian Universalists, we may be taken for optimists, but I would argue that we are in fact realists. To say that life is a blessing is to know that suffering and death exist, but also that they have not yet succeeded, in all the generations of our kind, in having the final word on life's meaning. To say that life is a blessing is to discover inner spiritual reserves that we never knew we had. It is to listen as our experience tells us that even in the midst of our despair that this is not all that there is or all that will ever be.

And so our religious task is to tell the other side of the world's truth, to offer, as the doctor did, a sense of balance in the long course of time. There may be days when tragedy and illness hang in the air, but wait a while longer, and some hope and healing may come. There may be days when the mystery has no answers for us, beyond the answers that we bring to it in our witness to the love and kindness, the compassion and forgiveness that we have known, and that is ok, for the truth of our lives may offer meaning and hope enough for the journey. There may be days when the wonder of being alive eclipses the meaningless of the void, where we remember that love outlasts time and death and all the stars. Capture those days, when they come. Hold up those glimpses of what is holy and good about this earth. Remember that you are a part of the creative power, which can wrestle a blessing even from the darkest of nights, and claim that power for the light of hope and courage that it is.