

Sermon: "The Chance of a Lifetime"
Rev. Lisa Friedman
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato
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Reading

"Choices" by John Hanly Morgan from Stir Around and Make Some Light

We not only need values by which to live but values by which to die.
The choices we make tell who we are.

I once had an elderly friend who had not been feeling well and had gone to his doctor for tests. Before the examination began he commented humorously to the doctor that only under certain conditions would he consent to live. The tests revealed he had a disease for which there was no cure. It was, however, possible to gain more time if he followed his physician's advice. He had no objections to taking the drugs prescribed but it was a different matter when the doctor carefully outlined for him a pattern of behavior which if faithfully followed could help prolong his life.

Among other changes called for was radical readjustment in a lifestyle heretofore characterized by happy disorganization. Indeed, it could be said that he scarcely had a schedule at all but simply went from one interesting project to another as his mood moved him in a twenty-four hour schedule, eating by intermittent nibbling and napping whenever he felt the need. Now he was asked to reduce greatly his hours spent in such activity and to begin a much reduced and conventional pattern of working, eating and sleeping.

He went home, sat down in his study, and began leafing through a diary he had kept for several decades. He thought of fascinating projects that lay ahead like ripe fruit waiting to be plucked. What, he asked himself, was the best thing to do with his life now? Should he become a miser about his remaining time, carefully parceling out each moment because it was so precious? Precious for what?

Finally, he picked up his pen and wrote a last entry in the diary, rejecting the doctor's proposed changes in his life-style:

"I'm not a person who can approach life so systematically. It would make me miserable. Instead, I have operated on the basis of interest, going from one thing to another depending on what seemed to be most attractive and fruitful. I have never budgeted time; my diary has been my only concession to regularity because I did need a record of what I've been up to. And so, I much prefer now to go on living much as I have in the past. I will make only one concession: this is my final diary entry. I need the time formerly spent in reviewing what I've done for more of the doing itself. My time is short. So be it. This is how I will spend it."

And he did.

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Sermon "The Chance of a Lifetime"

When you were a child, did you ever decide that, no matter what, you would never grow up? Or at least that you would do it differently than all of those stodgy grown-ups around you. At some point in our young lives, we shared the perspective of young Verdi, the yellow snake: the world was fresh and new - an amazing, wonder-filled jungle. A place to play, to dare, to explore. The world was open to us, filled with endless possibilities for adventure, for glory and fame. And in that moment, in that youthful exuberance, it is impossible to imagine not seizing each and every one. It is impossible to imagine losing sight of that wonder. Impossible to imagine growing up. Impossible to imagine ever, ever turning green.

Now, remember back to that time and hold it; then, in your mind's eye, trace a life-line from there to today. No matter how many years that line encompasses, it is safe to say that you have come a long way. You have made choices that have guided you through the jungle. You have tasted some of its glory, and perhaps a little of its bitterness. And somewhere in that process, deliberately or completely unawares, you grew up. You turned green and became the person who you are today.

The famous actor and heartthrob, Cary Grant, once reflected on his success: "I pretended to be somebody I wanted to be until I finally became that person. Or he became me." Grant's success is everyone's dream - we can choose the kind of person we will be. There is a part of me that firmly believes this; the choices that I make are the cornerstones of my life. I know it in my bones and feel it in my veins. I once thought I would be a book editor by profession, but I chose the ministry almost a decade ago because I believe that Unitarian Universalism has a needed message in our world and that our congregations have the power to transform lives. I once thought that I would raise my children in the same house to which they first came home, as I was raised, but I chose to move to Minnesota nearer their grandparents because I believe that family involves a team effort and that the bonds built across the generations are precious. I once thought that this move would mean my leaving the ministry for a time, but I gladly chose to accept your Board's invitation to serve as your minister because I am excited about who you are and who you are becoming in our Unitarian Universalist faith.

This is the essence of the American dream, the gift of our hard-won freedom. You can choose where you will live and the life you will embrace. You can choose what you will do, and even who you will become. This is the essence of our Unitarian Universalist faith, part of the heretical religious tradition - after all, the root of the word heretical means simply "to choose." Within this faith, we not only have the freedom, but also the responsibility, to choose the values and discover the beliefs that will guide us toward

what is good and true. The promise of it all speaks to us from every aspect of our culture - is your life, collectively or individually, not all that you want it to be? All you have to do is find the strength, the discipline and the daring to choose another path. Just choose, and you can make it happen. From adolescence into adulthood, this is the message we receive loud and clear. The chance of a lifetime is there for the taking. It is within your reach. "Just do it," as the Nike ad says.

But, it was that popular and wistful muppet, Kermit the Frog, who became famous for his song, "It's not easy being green." The responsibilities and choices of adulthood are not always what they are celebrated to be. I heard that honest struggle in the voice of a childhood friend, who called me up recently. "I've decided to move back home," she said. It was not what I had expected to hear. Four years ago, she had moved to New York City to establish her career, carve out an independent life for herself, and meet a broad spectrum of new and interesting people. She had done quite well, achieving each of her goals and making a life for herself that others might well envy. I confessed to her my surprise, and she grasped at words to help me understand her decision. "Yes, I've done what I set out to do," she said, "but somehow I'm still not happy. There are some things I want in my life that I thought I'd have by now - a husband, maybe even children. I want to be near my family, to spend time helping to raise my cousins. I want some things that I can't have here, and if I don't act now, what if I discover that its too late? What if they never become a part of my life?"

The chance of a lifetime is within your reach. While this can seem an incredible opportunity, it can also feel like an intolerable burden of pressure and uncertainty. The problem is that it is not the whole truth. Is my future really all in my hands? What if I don't realize the importance of a choice, until it is too late? If my life is not all that it could be, is it simply because I have not had the strength to choose otherwise? The flip-side of the American dream of reaching for the top, is that when the dream fails, we begin to doubt ourselves deep within our souls.

"Just do it." Although we live in a culture that holds personal choice as the ultimate power, there are some things in life that we simply do not choose. Examples are not hard to come by. I have known couples surprised by an unplanned pregnancy sitting side by side with couples who are struggling through the invasive fertility treatments with no guarantees. I have known people, who, despite every bad habit in the world, still possess their strength and health, while others come down with terrible diseases out of the blue. I have known people who have tried for years to suppress the truth of their sexuality at great price to themselves. I have known people who lacked a talent or opportunity needed to fulfill a dream, and others who took such talents and opportunities for granted. We could just boil it all down to the age old maxim, "life just isn't fair," but this does not adequate address its challenge to the power and place of choice in our lives.

Instead, I have found that the reality of our power and powerlessness lies somewhere in-between our innate American optimism and a despair worthy of Job. I am

reminded of the touching words with which the philosopher Hannah Arendt reflected upon the life of the poet, W. H. Auden. She writes: "What made him a poet was his extraordinary facility with, and love for, words, but what made him a great poet was the unprotesting willingness with which he yielded to the 'curse.'.... It seems..... very unlikely that young Auden, when he decided that he was going to be a great poet, knew the price he would have to pay. I think it entirely possible that in the end.... he might have considered the price too high.... We... his audience, readers and listeners, can only be grateful that he paid his price up to the last penny." Sometimes the very nature of who we are calls us into being, whether as a poet or a lover, a parent or a physician, an activist or a friend, a congregant or a congregation. Sometimes it does not even seem like a choice, it is simply what we must do to come, as May Sarton puts it, "into our true selves." But even within this truth lies a choice. To be a poet or a great poet, a parent or a great parent, a physician or a great healer, a participant in a nice place to gather on Sunday mornings or a builder of a community which matters fundamentally in people's lives. Whether we face opportunities or obstacles, we always have a choice about how we embrace the unchangeable truths of our lives.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, was told when his son Aaron was three that the boy had a rare, incurable disease. It was a disease that produced rapid aging and stunted in growth, so that his son would look like a little old man and most likely die in his teens. Reflecting on the question of loss and growth, Kushner writes: "I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron's life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose."

When tragedy or other immovable events occur, there is no choice but to face them. The question becomes *how* we will face them, how we will make peace with both our power and powerlessness in the world. I am reminded of a story that one mother often shares with her son. She calls it their adoption story. From time to time she reminds him that four days after he was born, she and her husband went to their first adoption meeting. Because they were hoping to adopt an older child, they did not anticipate a long wait. But as it turned out, they waited three and a half years - and there he was in their lives. "Some people might call it God or an angel or fate," she said, "but I like to think it was meant to happen like that." Her son was quiet for a moment, and then asked "But, Mom, did you ever think it might be Satan?" In truth, as the young man impishly points out, we can never be totally certain of the source of the events of our lives, of all of the whys and wherefores, no matter how hard we try. But we know the unique opportunities that those events offer us - opportunities for love, growth, and deepening, if we will only give ourselves over to them. And it is the giving of ourselves over into the experiences of our lives, the joy and the sorrow, that determines whether or not we will see the true

chances that are offered us.

I am deeply aware that this morning begins a new chapter in all of our lives – in my life as a minister and in yours as a congregation. We cannot know all of the whys and wherefores that have brought us together at this particular moment in time, but that is not so important as what we do now with the rich opportunity that has been given us. The choices that we make tell us who we are. This is true not just of the obvious choices which lie ahead – whether or not to seek a new Fellowship home, or more ministry, or to grow not just in members, but in depth of community and spirit. It is true of the choices that we make in how we will greet these decisions, how we will live together in this time of change, excitement and uncertainty, how we will get to know one another better as we work together to care for one another and to make Unitarian Universalism's promise heard. Whatever the future may bring, this morning I wish to assure you that I chose to bring my best self to our journey together and to walk with you in the respect and honesty that are the cornerstones of our faith.

The chance of a lifetime is within your reach, within our reach. A woman once went to see a great rabbi, and she said to him, "I don't know what to do. At first I thought that to be happy I had to be beautiful. I read beauty magazines, spent an hour every day on my makeup, and became beautiful, or so my friends told me. But I wasn't happy. Then I decided that to be happy I had to be rich. I went into business and made a great deal of money. But I worked so hard that my health began to fail. So I decided that happiness lay in health. I joined a health club, gave up smoking, began running three miles a day, and now I am healthy. But I'm still not happy." "Look, my child," the rabbi said, "in the window there is glass and in the mirror there is glass. The back of the glass in the mirror is covered with a little silver. You cannot look through it. You can see only yourself in it. When you seek beauty and wealth and health only for yourself they act like the silver on the glass of the mirror: they prevent you from seeing others and enable you to see only yourself. The happiness you seek is not in the mirror. It is passing by your window."

There is a Passover prayer in the Jewish tradition which asks that we each find the inspiration "to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder, to bless and not to curse." It is a relational prayer, a communal vision and hope. It invites us to consider the choices we make, not while we are sitting at the mirror thinking about our own successes and failures, but while we are looking out the window at the world passing by. It invites us to consider what we have to offer out of our own life experiences, even the ones we did not choose. I know of a woman, who was unable to bear children, who instead became a trusted supervisor in her field. Her students still send her Mother's Day cards. I know of a man, who is widowed, who volunteers at a nursing home, befriending people who have no family left to visit them. I know of a child, whose parents are troubled, who still tries to care for her little brothers and sisters as if they were her own. I know of a congregation, whose financial resources are limited, who still opens their doors to their neighborhood to provide meeting and gathering space to struggling organizations who likewise are trying to build a vision of hope. I know everyday, ordinary people who show

the power of blessing, despite the days when the temptation to curse seems so great.

"The choices we make tell us who we are," writes Rev. Morgan. The choices that he speaks of are not the choices of career or home or family; they are the choices of the values by which we live and die. The values that we choose to be faithful to, reveal the very essence of our souls. His story of his elderly friend is a touching one, as he makes the decisions about how he will live the last days of his life. After serious reflection, he decides not to make the changes that his physician prescribes, for fear that his life will become unlivable, drawing him away from the world he loves to just care for himself. He is reluctant to sit at the mirror, when he is used to reaching through the window and exploring the world beyond it. In choosing a potentially earlier death, he is paradoxically upholding his life-long belief in choosing life - in living, heart and soul, to the fullest. It is not an easy decision, and not one all of us would make, but it is nonetheless revealing. The choices we make, the values we choose, tell us who we are.

Choose life. Claim the values by which you will live out your days. Proclaim the power to bless, in a world filled with so much hurt. The chance to make these choices, choices of comfort and blessing, of helping and healing, is the chance of a lifetime that lies, always, within our reach. Such chances come to us everyday that we are willing to look out the window and be touched by what we find. These are the chances of a lifetime by which we transform, not ourselves, but rather our world with each act of kindness and care, courage and love.