

Possibilities and Priorities

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

Rev Paul Beckel

January 5, 2020

Gathering Songs

#1018 *Come and go with Me*

#1000 *Morning has Come*

Welcome

EB White wrote:

"It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenges.

If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy.

If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem.

But I arise in the morning tor

between the desire to improve the world

and a desire to enjoy the world.

This makes it hard to plan the day."

I'm grateful that you've chosen to spend this part of your day here, creating community together. And I'm grateful for the many many ways that you support this community so that we CAN be here to create this welcoming, evolving, inclusive space where we honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

There is such power, and such possibility in this joyful awakening.

Chalice Lighting/Covenant

Noreen Fujita-Sacco

Children's Focus

Jenna and the Troublemaker by Hiawyn Oram

Summary: Jenna is so distressed about her troubles that The Troublemaker takes pity on her and allows her to turn them in...and allows her to choose from all of the bags of troubles that he has strewn about the world. After looking at some pretty ghastly stuff, she concludes that one particular bag of troubles seems manageable—her own.

Milestones

Wendell Berry writes this about topsoil: It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. Soil keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up ... out of death ... into promise.

Responsive Reading

#568 "Connections are Made Slowly" by Marge Piercy

Silence (5:00)

Message, Part 1

To begin the new year together, this month we'll be exploring the theme of possibility. Those who don't know Unitarian Universalists well, might make the mistake of thinking that since we're not limited by theological boundaries, we believe that anything is possible.

And yet ... we emphasize our calling to live in the here and now—which sets up some parameters ... limits to our possibilities ... also known as reality.

Not necessarily to be perceived as a grim reality—compelling us to understand life as nothing but an obligation to fulfill our grim duties. But, at our best, we face reality by making an honest appraisal of who we are and what we have to work with. At our best, we recognize what's possible with a humble, imaginative, conscientious, and hopeful outlook. *At our best, we recognize what's possible with a humble, imaginative, conscientious, and hopeful outlook.*

The historian Howard Zinn has called our attention to some realities that many of us were not taught at school: a past that we cannot change, or wish away. Zinn insisted that we look at American atrocities, systematic deceit and denial, and collective thievery ... in order to understand who we really are, so far. (In Arkansas, a state legislator introduced a bill to keep Zinn's book, *A People's History of the United States*, out of the public schools because it cast too negative a light on the American character.)

And yes, the book was profoundly critical. And yet, Zinn wrote: *“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents; so to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.*

History was made this past week when the United Methodist Church announced that those committed to LGBTQ inclusion in their congregations and in society ... and those opposed ... have agreed to go their separate ways. Thus the landscape of organized religion, of which we are a part, keeps shifting.

History was made this past week when the American military assassinated a powerful, and beloved, and dangerous military leader from Iran. Going forward, there may be profound global consequences. But this is now part of our reality; there's no going back.

This past week many of us have made promises. All of us have made mistakes. Some of us have

experienced once-in-a-lifetime milestones. In each case, there is no going back. We can fulfill our promises; we can forgive ourselves and each other for mistakes; we can grieve or celebrate milestones. But there is no going back. Now we are *here*. Here we are, *now*.

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There is a branch of theology that I find both intriguing and in a way, comforting. It's called "process theology," and it's all about possibility. Even if you don't generally view the world through a theological lens, or aren't inclined to use God-language, I encourage you to consider this perspective—translating as necessary—to see if some insights from process theology might help you to frame "possibility" in both a realistic and hopeful way.

The gist of process theology is that everything that exists is in process. Reality is best understood not as what *is*, but what is *becoming*. Even God is still becoming. God is not a static entity from before our time, but is changing, growing, gathering experience—along with us. God, or the Universe, or The Ancestors ... or Reality whatever you want to call it, is not made up of pre-existing building blocks, but perpetually dynamic energy: the sum of what is so far ... and the fertility from which we and God, we and Reality, we and the Universe, we and the Ancestors ... the fertility from which all moments to come will evolve.

One could certainly put these ideas in scientific terms rather than mystical terms. Still, I appreciate in process theology a role for God that isn't controlling, or capricious, or cruel. On the contrary, God is neither pulling our strings nor sitting back and watching everything play out that has already been decided. God is the very possibility of novelty ... ensuring that even-though each moment of the present is set, the next moment is not.

We, and God too are shaped by, but not determined by the past. And uncertainty ... possibility ... freedom lies at the very heart of reality.

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So we take the past into ourselves, not just the past that we were born into but the past as it existed last week, and the past as it existed last night. And the past as it existed when I started this sentence. That's the past through which we become, with God, the Universe, the ancestors ... creating anew, becoming, blossoming into possibility.

Singing Together

#396 *I know this Rose will Open*

Message, Part 2

A few months ago, Carrie Koehline gave an inspiring sermon here about the transformative power of clearing clutter from our lives. Physical clutter, emotional clutter, spiritual clutter. Even partially clearing clutter in even one area of our lives opens doors to new possibilities.

Many of you, I'm guessing, nodded vigorously, then went right home and started clearing clutter from your lives. Many, I'm guessing, nodded vigorously, and then found other things to do. I

was in the latter group—though on and off I’ve taken opportunities to suggest to Jane that she clear away some things that I consider extraneous.

But this week, when I thought about this sermon, I remembered the book, *Jenna and the Troublemaker*. I looked and looked for the book, couldn’t find it, assumed I never had it to begin with, checked the public library, and, still not finding it, as you know, I did not include it in today’s printed order of service. But digging around, I did notice a book that I had to acknowledge I was never going to read. And I started pulling more books off my shelves. I eventually had three or four feet of books on the floor, and then in the trunk of my car. And then I found *Jenna*, right where I had been looking the whole time.

So then I thought of an article that pertained to what I wanted to share today about possibilities and priorities. I thought it might be in one of my stacks of paper that I’d been hauling around for decades. So I started digging through a two foot stack. I only found the resolution to throw half of it away, but that’s not a bad start. And I found the article, which is called “The Problem with Problems.” It was dated 1992. Does this mean that I should congratulate myself for keeping that piece of paper for 28 years? And therefore I should keep it another 28 years? No it only means that *now* I have the opportunity, freedom, possibility, and necessity of deciding to keep it, throw it away, or decide not to decide. Actually those options no longer exist because I read it, and threw it away. Now I have only four more feet of paper to go. And heightened motivation to do so.

The gist of “The Problem with Problems” is that the problems we choose (and if you don’t like that way of putting it, if you don’t resonate with the notion that we choose our problems, substitute for “the problems we choose,” the phrase, “the way we choose to approach today’s problems....”) So the problems we choose (or the way we choose to approach today’s problems) unfailingly reflect our current level of personal development.

In choosing this book for the kids today, my assumption was that at their level of development, they would do well to recognize and try to deal with the problems they have, rather than someone else’s problems. My assumption for adults, having matured to some extent, is that we may be able to trade up ... not to take on the problems that are none of our business, but to choose from among the problems we have, trade up, perhaps, for the ones that are most worthy.

So I ask: which of your many problems (or your many possible pursuits) are most relevant, now, to your spiritual health and growth? Which are *most worthy* of your limited time and attention?

Many Unitarian Universalists are put off by the word “Worship.” because we’re stuck on the assumption that this can only be used in reference to worshiping some-*thing*. It’s roots, however, connect to the word “worth.” and with this in mind, please understand that when we gather as a congregation our intention is not to worship as in to kneel in obeisance before some static idol, but to attend to what is most worthy of so many possibilities. It’s for us to decide, or to decide not to decide. This is true for each of us as individuals, and it is true when we enter in good faith into our covenant, considering as a congregation what is most worthy of our limited time and

attention and resources as a congregation. From among all the possibilities. Not including the possibility that reality, up to this point, was different.

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William James wrote that wisdom is knowing what to overlook. Steven Covey taught those who would listen not to waste energy on problems over which we have no control. I would add that there's no value in wasting energy on the problems over which *we could* have some control, but recognize as not the *most* worthy of our attention. We have the capacity to solve countless problems. But when we choose those that are most worthy of us, it is dishonorable of us to keep stressing over the weight we could have lost, because really, we could have done so, or the books we could have read, because really, you could have done so, or the trees we could have planted. Yes we could have, but it's OK, in fact it's inevitable that we will attend to what we consciously or unconsciously select from among all the possibilities.

So we're going to be much more effective dealing with our priorities if we have the nerve, the courage, the maturity, the wisdom, to let those other things go, maybe just for now, maybe forever. Because every one of us is going to die without having solved all of the problems within our reach.

We can do our darnedest to save the world *and* to savor it as well.

Both of these can be healthy and ethical ... lived into with both serenity and hope. In the next seven seconds, seven hours, seven days, we can be very deliberate about our choices to save the world and/or to savor it. We can be deliberate and/or we can go with the flow. *Any* of these possibilities can be healthy and ethical ... and lived into with both serenity, and hope.

Musical Meditation

Sharing our Gifts

Sending Song *Life Calls Us On*

Benediction

May I have the Courage to change the things I can,
The Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
And the Wisdom to know the difference.

May I have patience with things that take time,
Appreciation for all that I have,
Tolerance for those with different struggles,
And the Strength to get up and try again,
one day at a time.

Circle 'Round