

**THIS BEAUTIFUL TRAGEDY**

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Sunday, February 23, 2020

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

of Vero Beach

**THE MORNING'S MEDITATION:**

This morning's meditation is by the American artist and writer Peter Marin.

He is describing the soul-satisfaction he felt one summer day, while enjoying an afternoon picnic outdoors with dear friends. Close your eyes, listen to his words, and imagine yourself there with them...I will end our period of silent meditation (that will follow his words) with the ringing of the bell:

*Sometimes, somehow, almost as if by accident, we get things right. Now at noon, we sit on the grass beneath this tall tree, having within reach the fruits of countless harvests: wine, bread, cheeses, fruit, chocolate. I look at the grass, the sky, the passerby, my companions, and my heart fills with a joy equal to any more obviously mystical or religious sentiment I have ever had. There is nothing beyond the absolute beauty of the transience of this day – this wind, this ease, this flesh. It arises from the heart in answer to a human presence, and one understands – if only for a moment – what it would mean to be free. It is a passion beyond all possessiveness, a fierce love of the world, and a fierce joy in the transience of things made beautiful by their impermanence. I would not trade this day for heaven (no matter what name we call it by). Or rather, I think that if there IS a heaven, it is something like THIS...a pleasure taken in life, this gift of one's comrades at ease momentarily under the trees, and the taste of satisfaction and the promise of grace, alive in one's hands and mouth.*

**THE SERMON**

This morning...

**[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

**"THIS LIFE IS A BEAUTIFUL TRAGEDY"**

I want to focus on the idea of this life of ours as being **"A Beautiful Tragedy"** -- a memorable phrase which has been rattling around in **my MIISTERIAL BRAIN** for decades. Now I can't remember the time, place, or context when I first heard our earthly human existence described in this simple-yet-poignant way...so as I began thinking about this sermon, I went on-line and googled the phrase...sure that its well-known source would immediately pop up. But (much to my surprise!) **NOWHERE** on the entire world-wide-web did it pop up as a famous/old quote by some notable person! Indeed, the **ONLY** reference I could find for this phrase was from (of all places) the lyrics of a popular **HEAVY METAL ROCK SONG** by a Los Angeles- based band called **"In This Moment"** :

**[PICTURE AND LYRICS OF ROCK BAND GOES UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**



### ***In This Moment***

#### ***A Los Angeles heavy metal Rock band***

A band which, of course – given my age and musical preferences (which decidedly do **NOT** include “heavy metal” music) -- I had never heard of (not to mentioned ever listened to!). I will spare you the raucous music video of this heavy-metal song of theirs, but here are the lyrics of the chorus refrain:

**[THE LYRICS OF “THIS BEAUTIFUL TRAGEDY” ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

#### ***“This Beautiful “Tragedy”***

***This beautiful tragedy***

***Is crashing into me...***

***This dying destiny***

***Take me away...***

***This beautiful tragedy***

***Come crashing into me...***

***This dying destiny***

***This beautiful tragedy...***

So...lacking any other credible literary or philosophical origin for this phrase, I began to wonder if indeed **IT WASN'T SOMEHOW ME!** (in all of my obvious literary and philosophical brilliance 😊!) who first coined this wonderful phrase! But (IN VERY SHORT ORDER) I concluded, **PROBABLY NOT!** I am pretty sure that some decades ago, someone (perhaps it was one of my wise, older UU ministerial colleagues?) described life’s mysterious journey to me in this way...**AND I HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO GET THIS PHRASE OUT OF MY HEAD!**

**[THE FOLLOWING PHRASE GOES BACK UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

#### ***“This Beautiful Tragedy”***

In any case...regardless how or where or from whom I got it, I have long thought that **“This Beautiful Tragedy”** is a powerful and apt descriptor of **“these mortal years on earth”** in which we so remarkably find ourselves

living. Life on this earth is (for us) **[SCOTT GESTURES WITH BOTH HIS HANDS]** both incredibly BEAUTIFUL and yet unavoidably existentially **TRAGIC**...it is a gift of stunning and unimaginable worth...but (as you all know) it is also a gift we must ultimately surrender. What a **profoundly vexing spiritual situation** we earthly creatures find ourselves in!

**[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF REV. DR. FORREST CHURCH GOES UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**



The Rev. Dr. Forrest Church (1948-2009)

***“Religion is about the twin mysteries of finding yourself alive, and realizing you have to die. To be at home with life, we must make our peace with death.”***

The Rev. Forrest Church -- who served the **All Soul’s Unitarian Church** in Manhattan for decades, and was a leading Unitarian Universalist author and theologian until his untimely death from cancer at the age of 51 -- famously proclaimed (again and again, in his more-than-20 books, and in sermons from his New York City pulpit) that all of religion (which is also to say that all the work of our individual spiritual lives) arises from -- and now I quote him -- ***“The twin mysteries of finding yourself alive, and realizing you have to die. To be at home with life, we must make our peace with death.”***

This to me is one of the most insightful things anyone has ever said about religion and life. And the “starting place” of Rev. Church’s affirmation ***“the mystery of finding yourself alive”***...is the **utter amazement and spiritual delight** he took from the fact we human beings suddenly find ourselves in the **UNLIKELY MIRACLE OF BEING ALIVE IN THIS CREATION IN THE FIRST PLACE**. I want to quote him now at some length from a famous sermon of his on this subject, because I think it’s spiritually right on...listen to his words about the holy mystery of just finding yourself alive!

***The odds against each one of us being here this morning are so mind-staggering that they cannot be computed...We’re talking miracles here...not an unlikely miracle like God parting the Red Sea for Moses to escape...but [having] the miracle of water itself, in which living organisms can incubate, and [the miracle of having] just enough warmth and light from the sun to establish ideal conditions for life to be nurtured and develop here on earth.*** [Beyond the amazing miracle of there being life on this planet at all] ***Consider the odds*** [of you being here this morning]. ***Your parents had to couple at precisely the right moment for the one possible sperm to fertilize the one possible egg that would result in your conception. Right then, the odds were still a-million-to-one against you being the answer to the question your biological parents were consciously or unconsciously posing. And that’s just the beginning of the miracle. The same unlikely***

*happenstance must repeat itself throughout the generations. Going back ten generations, the miracle must repeat itself one thousand times – and [going back twenty generations, must repeat itself] one-and-a-quarter-million times. That’s right, mathematically speaking [going back just 20 generations, we each have] approximately two-and-a-half-million direct ancestors. This remarkable pyramid turns in upon itself, of course, with individual ancestors participating in multiple lines of generations, until we trace ourselves back to when our [ancient] ancestors, the founding people, whom each one of us carries in our bones, began the inexorable process that finally gave birth to us all, kith and kin, blood brothers and sisters of the same mighty miracle. And that’s only the egg and sperm part of the miracle.*

In other words, dear friends THERE ARE BILLIONS UPON BILLIONS OF REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT BE HERE!

And then Rev. Church expounds further on this gift (this wholly unlikely miracle) of each of us finding ourselves alive in the first place...

*Mathematically, OUR DEATH is a simple inevitability; whereas OUR LIFE hinges on an almost infinite sequence of perfect accidents. [and then Forrest tells the true story of how one of his paternal ancestors, a Pilgrim by the name of John Howland, fell off the Mayflower in the middle of the Atlantic and, against all odds, was saved by the other shipmates throwing him a lifeline...leading to his unlikely birth some 10 generations later!]*

*Think about it...[Church concludes] The [ancient] Universe was pregnant with us when it was born.*

Even as Rev. Church faced his own tragic death at the age of 51 from cancer, he was able to fully affirm **the unlikely blessing of his just being alive**. The last time I saw him (just weeks before he died) he body was down to little more than skin and bones from the disease... yet he still carried that warm and radiant smile of his, was fully engaged with his family and friends and his congregation -- and seemed genuinely grateful (he) just to have the chance to hang around creation a bit longer. In his final book *“Love and Death”* he wrote, *“Every day we live is a miracle, rich with possibility -- even when, right off camera, the boom is about to fall -- To this miracle, we must each do everything in our human power to awaken [in gratitude]. Awakening is like returning after a long journey and seeing the world [for the first time – seeing] our loved ones, cherished possessions, and the tasks that are ours to perform – with new [and grateful] eyes.”*

And then Church went on in quiet appreciation: *“Think of little things. Reaching out for the touch of a loved one’s hand. Shared laughter. A letter to a lost friend. An undistracted hour of silence, alone...with our thoughts...until there are no thoughts, only the pulse of life...for this fleeting moment...our life becomes a sacrament of praise.”* So for Rev. Church, life itself was *“a beautiful tragedy”*...a holy, unlikely blessing, even though we all must someday surrender it.

#### **[PHOTO AND CAPTION OF REV. CHURCH COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]**

And thus we spiritually arrive at the second half Rev. Church’s theological observation...after acknowledging how amazing and precious the gift of life is...we arrive at the all-important (and unavoidable) realization of its stunningly tragic dimension...the physical truth that – in this mortal universe -- despite the rich tapestry of life that is set so mysteriously before us...we all must someday die.

**And this (my dear friends) is indeed the towering reality of earthly existence that every religion must somehow spiritually address. Every religion must somehow “answer” the reality of death, if it is to properly come to terms with (and find meaning and purpose in) life.**

Now...as I'm sure you all understand:

**[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

**Most religions “answer” the “tragedy” of physical death with a belief in some sort of continued existence after our bodies die.**

As one author puts it:

***Whether it is in some peaceful paradise, a hellish land of punishment, or simply a continuation of the soul or essence in a new live, this continued existence [most religions promise] is known as “the afterlife.” [Most religions] have detailed descriptions of what we can expect after death, as well as how our time on earth affects this afterlife.***

In other words, most religions answer death by promising that death is not really final, complete, and total...and that life (in fact) continues past death in some form, pattern, reality or configuration. Many religions promise their believers that death is not totally real, because they get to remain as a presence in creation as some sort of discreet, conscious, spiritual entity.

For example...most Christians and Muslims “**answer death**” by believing that they will have an afterlife lived out in either heaven or hell (based on how well or poorly they lived on earth).

And most Buddhists and Hindus similarly “**answer death**” by believing that their human souls will be reincarnated into another life (also based on how well or poorly they lived on

But most Jews and Unitarian Universalists (and now I shift this theological discussion closer to home!) tend to “**answer death**” **NOT** by imagining themselves as being able to consciously continue on past death as distinct, spiritual entities...but rather **by focusing on how WELL and LOVINGLY they are able to live their lives while here on earth, and putting their hopes for “continued life” based on whatever spiritual legacies are carried forward as the creation moves on without them.**

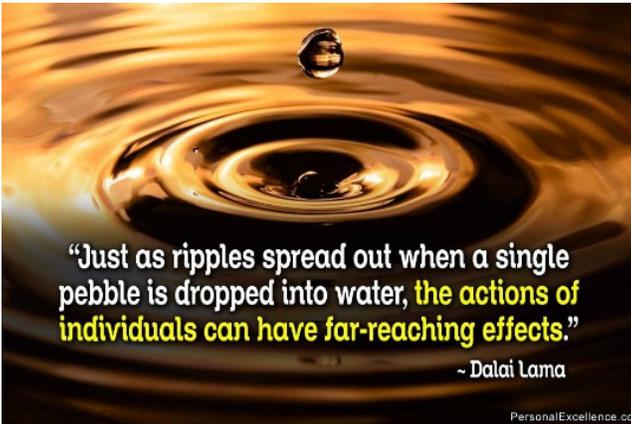
This is what theologians call:

**[THE FOLLOWING PHRASE IS PROJECTED UPON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

***This is what theologians call “The lasting immortality of influence”***

***“The lasting immortality of influence,”*** the idea that we mortal human beings “live on” in this creation -- **NOT** in some concrete, embodied, conscious or eternal way as distinct and “definable” souls -- but rather by the NOBLE LEGACIES OF LOVE SPIRIT we leave behind in the lives and communities we have touched. So...in our faith tradition – which is very much focused on the duties and joys we human beings have “right here...and right now” in this worldly life -- death is ultimately answered (and life is made whole and meaningful) by how fully, joyfully, and well you live your life here on earth...and by how actively you lend yourself to its beauty, promise, purpose and goodness.

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF DALAI LAMA IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



The Dalai Lama has written, “Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped not water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects.” Let me speak personally for just a moment. As one Unitarian Universalist, I take real and great comfort in my long-held spiritual belief that the way I chose to purposefully live now on this earth will (God help me...like the waves from a pebble dropped in still water) “*ripple out*” past my mortal years, and continue to effect the sum total of creation in a life-giving and positive way. The way that Forrest Church affirms this...is by saying that it is THE LOVE WE LIVE OUT IN THIS LIFE (and our love alone) that survives death. I quote him again from his final book “*Love and Death*”:

*About life after death, no one knows. But about this, we surely know. There is love after death. Not only do our finest actions invest life with meaning and purpose, but they also live on after us. Two centuries from now, the last tracings of our being will yet express themselves in the little works of love that follow (bead by bead in a luminous catena) extending from our dear ones out into their world and then into the next, strung by our own loving hands. When we ourselves die, the love we have given to others is the one thing death cannot kill. Only our unspent love dies when we die, love unspent because of fear. It is fear that locks love in the prisons of our hearts, there to be buried with us.*

[and then he ends]

*Will my love live on forever? I believe so. And your love too. It will certainly live on after your death, continuing to touch from heart to heart long after you have gone. We know from experience that our indifference, cynicism, and hurt feelings leave [ONLY] a little mark. But [live] love, and someone, somewhere will remember.*

**[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF REV. DR. FORREST CHURCH GOES BACK UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS**



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The Rev. Dr. Forrest Church (1948-2009)

***“Religion is about the twin mysteries of finding yourself alive, and realizing you have to die. To be at home with life, we must make our peace with death.”***

Let me end this morning by bringing all this just a little closer to home if I can. I am no longer a young man...and I know it! As I approach my 71<sup>st</sup> birthday this Spring...my own personal mortality is a little more vivid and real to me than it once was. As I shared with you this autumn, a few months ago, I faced the first, real, serious health situation of my life...and while I am still blessed with overall good health, and am not (as far as I know) staring death in the face...this recent physical scare has powerfully reminded me that I most certainly will not live forever. As my friend Rob Stone (who is my age) starkly reminded me over dinner the last time we were together, **“Scott...we’re both now in the 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter!”** These days, I am keenly aware that my wonderful, amazing life on this planet – this **grand mystery** of being I have hold of for the moment -- will someday come to an end.

Now I know that some of you (who are well into your 80’s and 90’s) are saying (under your breath to yourself) **“71?...what’s that?...you want to really feel your mortality...just wait, Reverend...just wait!”** **And I hope I will!**

But all this aside, I want to tell you that my life – at this stage -- has taken on an keen (and not unhappy) spiritual awareness of what Forrest Church powerfully affirmed when he said that life **“...is all about the twin mysteries of finding yourself alive...and realizing you have to die.”** There is in my life these days **A QUIET RICHNESS** that I’m not sure I fully noticed when I was younger (and was not so existentially cognizant about the eventual end of my life). At 70, I am now more organically aware of life’s profligate beauty and grace...and the twin reality of its fragility. And so – without any conscious effort or intent:

- I now **savor more fully** my time with family and friends...
- I **take more simple satisfaction** from work, exercise, service, reading and sleep...
- I **delight** in the eager and radiant faces of children, and the infinite charm and diversity of everyone I meet...
- nature seems more **vibrant, holy and welcoming** to me...
- and I am **so grateful** – despite the increasing limitations that come with aging -- for what my body and mind can still do...so well.

To me in the 71<sup>st</sup> year of life, my existence here on earth is a beautiful, tragic, amazing, and holy gift...and I do not resent or begrudge a single dimension of it. For I am alive...a satisfied creature of this earth...who miraculously finds himself free to LOVE and LIVE and BE and as best I can...and (dare I hope it) leave this world better than I found it. And I take great comfort in believing that after I am gone from these familiar earthly haunts, the "ripples" of my human being – the vibrations of my love, decency and care -- will reverberate out, even to the farthest stars. That – for me -- is eternal life enough.

Amen.

The Cost by Dorothy N. Monroe

*Death is not too high a price to pay  
for having lived.*

*Mountains never die,  
nor do the seas or rocks or endless sky.*

*Through countless centuries of time, they stay  
eternal, deathless.*

*Yet they never live!  
If choice were there, I would not hesitate  
to choose mortality.*

*Whatever Fate  
demanded in return for life I'd give...*

*for never to have seen the fertile plains  
nor heard the winds nor felt the warm sun on sands  
beneath a salty sea, not touched the hands  
of those I love – without these, all the gains  
of timelessness would not be worth a day  
of living and of loving; come what may.*

*And though I die,  
I for an hour have been alive,  
Aware of what it is to be.  
The high, majestic hills,  
The shining sea,  
I have looked upon,  
And meadows golden-green.*

*The stars in all their glory I have seen.  
Love I have felt.*

*This poor dust that is me  
Has stirred with pulse of inward liberty  
And known extremes of hope, and all between.  
Can the small pain of deathbeds,  
Can the sting of parting from accustomed haunts of earth*

*Make me forget the bounty of my birth  
or cancel out the grateful wondering  
That I have known exultance,  
And the worth of being myself,  
A song the dark powers sing.*

Arthur Davison Ficke