

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church -Unitarian Universalist
“The Blessings of an Imperfect Life”
The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
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Introduction

A few weeks ago I led a vesper service titled, “In Praise of Winter.” I wanted to celebrate winter; look for the positive things that winter gives us. I asked those in attendance to share what they liked about winter. Each one did. They also expressed their reason why they moved to Charlottesville—to get away from the cold and snow of the north. They struggled with my message. They were looking for spring while I was in the midst of winter.

Now, several weeks later, I am with them. I want spring to come. My sermon on Cold Mountain seems a distant and faint memory. I want flowers, warm days, and walks in the woods, not evenings by the fire, layers of blankets, bare trees, and white stuff.

Wallace Stevens reminds me to keep winter on my mind in a poem titled, “The Snow Man.” He writes:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,

The spruces rough in the distant glitter
Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind

This poem was the opening for an article in the UU World several years ago by Philip Simmons. The article was titled “Winter Mind.” Simmons also wrote a book titled, Learning to Fall; The Blessings Of An Imperfect Life. This book was especially important to me because Simmons writes about his struggle with Lou Gehrig’s disease—a disease that also took the life of my sister, Janet, over a decade ago.

Simmons and my sister had a similar philosophy of life. Central to that philosophy is the belief that we all suffer. We must accept our limitations and life even with its imperfection, live in the moment, learn to let go and see the divine in everything, and finally, give back more than we receive.

Trekking Through the Mud

The metaphor that Simmons uses is that of trekking through the mud. He lived part of his life in New Hampshire. Between winter and spring, during the months of March and April in New Hampshire, the unpaved roads and driveways turn to mud. He writes:

Mud coats the flanks of our cars, splatters our clothes, cakes our shoes. Children here, of course, are mud connoisseurs. In their school art classes my kids are handed sponges and brown paint and told to do paintings of mud. After school, I meet them where the bus drops them off on the paved state road, and we walk home through the real thing. We stomp and squish, we poke and stir, we sample textures and colors. Sometimes it takes us nearly an hour to walk the quarter mile. Children, so much closer to the source of life, seem in touch with their muddy origins. From dust you came, the priests used to tell me, thumbing my forehead with ashes. Dust, yes, but for there to be life you have to add water, and we know what that makes. . . . Mud season brings portents. Buds swell: already a blush appears in the red maples above the swamp. Daffodils poke up from the earth, only to be buried by a late snowfall. A coyote limps across our field in full day. Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem, knowing that men wait there

to kill him. Our minds cannot grasp the coming change: in three months I'll plunge my body into the same lake I walked across only weeks ago. (P. 79)

Simmons concludes that we try to avoid the mud seasons of our lives. We want to avoid the dirt and the grime. We pave the streets so we don't have to go through the mud. The word pavement comes from the Latin pavire, which means to stamp or beat. Yes, we attempt "to suppress all things untoward and unseemly, to make our way smooth."

This week, I attended a meeting of the University Community Racial Reconciliation Project, chaired by Frank Dukes of our congregation. In the meeting they talked about the difficulty of working through this effort. The word that was used over and over again was "mush." Mush is another word for mud. We all avoid the mud.

What is the other alternative? To enjoy the mud as young children do. Each summer Marti and I attend the Southeast UU Summer Institute in Virginia (SUUSI). The adults there used to sponsor what they called "Dirty Day" for the children. They would go to a hill and put water on the dirt, so the children could slide down it. Slide down it they did, over and over again. The kids loved it. They would return to camp looking like they had been playing in the mud. I am sure their parents didn't enjoy it nearly as much as the kids did.

For Simmons, the enjoyment is a psychological pleasure born in self-pity. He wallows in the mud of his illness. But after five years he found he could no longer continue down that road. He concludes:

Even the glamour of tragedy wears thin, and I must fall back on the ordinary, everyday returns to mud we all so much depend on: my computer crashes, the dog chews the windowsill, my children cut each other's hair with poultry shears, my wife fails to appreciate my talent for staring out the window at the bird feeder. Mud, mud, mud. (p. 81)

The answer to learning to fall begins with the act of trekking through the mud. We must first see that all people suffer and that we are going to die. That is the beginning of an appreciation for the blessings of an imperfect life.

One of my former colleagues, Peter Fleck, writes of a similar philosophy in a book titled, The Blessings of Imperfection; Reflections on the Mystery of Everyday Life. In this book he tells a Scandinavian story that fascinated him as a child. He would ask his mother to tell it over and over again. It was the story of a gnome who lived in the forest under the root of a tree. The gnome had one big wish: more than anything else in the world he wanted to own a green hunter's bag. He used to think about his green hunter's bag by day and to dream about it at night. He had visualized it a thousand times. Then, one day, it may have been his birthday, he received a beautiful green hunter's bag as a gift. His dream had come true; his ardent wish had been fulfilled. He owned his green hunter's bag. Now you would have expected him to be happy. But he said, "it is a nice hunter's bag, only it is not quite as green as I had imagined it."

The point of this story for Fleck is that all of us have experienced what the gnome felt that day. We have all experienced the sadness of disappointment after the fulfillment of an ardent wish. I quote from Fleck:

The stream was not quite as clear as we had imagined it; the sea not quite as blue; the mountains not quite as overpowering; the woods not quite as dark; our marriage not quite as happy; our children not quite as accomplished. Reality did not measure up to our idea of reality. And when we say that, we have stated one of the principal tenets of the philosophy of Plato. For Plato taught that only the idea of something is perfect and its realization, its expression in material, worldly terms, a mere shadow of that perfection.

Fleck reminds us that God created the world and called it “good” not “perfect.” One commentary says “adequate to its purpose.” We can rationalize theologically that God created the world less than perfect because he/she wanted to give humans something to do—create a less than perfect world more perfect. There is a hymn that says just this:

Creation’s Lord we give thee thanks
That this thy world is incomplete. . .
That we are in the making still . . .

All of us are a work in progress. We can apply this principle to creation, but also to the institutions created by humans. How often have we heard people criticize organized religion? Some people say they would rather worship in nature instead of in church. Some people use the annual Stewardship Campaign to give all of their complaints, pointing out our shortcomings. Peter Fleck has an answer for them. He writes:

Well, let’s be frank and admit that the church has its aggravations. The eternal and oh-so-necessary concern about finances, the annually recurring problems of balancing a budget, of finding money for fixing the parking lot, repairing the plumbing, fixing the piano, the ongoing criticism of the minister’s sermons, which are too liberal for some and too orthodox for others, too pedantic for some and too colloquial for others, the endless committee meetings about the Religious Education curriculum and about how to fund social action, the persistent shortage of volunteers. Who wants it? Who needs it?

The answer to this question is that we, all of us, the congregation and the minister, want it, because we need it. The answer is that the church, and I am now speaking of the liberal church, in spite of its shortcomings, the imperfection that characterizes everything made by humans, is better, infinitely better, than no church. Maybe I should not have said “in spite of its shortcomings” but “because of its shortcomings.” For isn’t it true that in our church, in these communities of the spirit, we have more resources than outside of our churches to accept each other’s imperfections, to reconcile our differences, to forgive and be forgiven, to comfort and to be comforted, to love and to be loved? (adptd, p. 78)

Yes, Peter Fleck and Philip Simmons, you are right. It is important to affirm that God’s creation and human creations are imperfect. This is the first step in learning to fall.

Accepting our Limitations

The second step in learning to fall is accepting one’s limitations. For Phillip Simmons that was the realization that he was not going to survive this illness. He was going to die. As he says, it is a degenerative illness “bent on emptying me out one teaspoon at a time” (p. 75). At some point Simmons realized that he was not alone in his suffering. He then concluded that,

My illness is just a particular form of the universal human malady. We all suffer the limitations of our humanness: not just our aches and pain but our fear, our anger, our pettiness, our grief. Fact is, we do practice being human in every waking moment. (p. 75)

Live in the Moment and Then Let Go

The third step in learning to fall is living in the moment and seeing the little things that are good and true and beautiful. Simmons is a true Stoic. It is today that we live for, not looking for a reward in another life. He calls it “falling to life.” He doesn’t talk about death. He talks about life.

Simmons also says that learning to fall is letting go of life. He admits that it is a paradox. He writes:

That we deal most fruitfully with loss by accepting the fact that we will one day lose everything. When we learn to fall, we learn that only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious—our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return to them. This is my book’s central them. (p. xi.)

My wife, Marti, was a hospice nurse for many years. When people heard this they would often say, “That must be depressing to work with the dying.” Marti’s response was always, “I worked with the living. They always had an interesting perspective on life. It wasn’t depressing at all.” Hospice care depends on individuals who live in the moment and then let go.

See the Divine in Everything

The fourth step in learning to fall is seeing the good in all things. Simmons takes his philosophy from the Stoic Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius who wrote:

All things are little, changeable, perishable. All things come from god, from that universal ruling power. . . .and accordingly the lion gaping jaws, and that which is poisonous, and every harmful thing, as a thorn, as mud, are after-products of the grand and beautiful. Do not then imagine that they are of another kind from that which thou venerate, but form a just opinion of them all.

Simmons then puts it in his own words:

Accepting ourselves means accepting the whole package, the whole sour and sweet, lovely and larcenous mess that we are. So, too, with accepting the world, with its madness and mayhem but also its music. Right now with my weakened arms I can barely lift a tissue to blow my nose. But I can sit with my son as he identifies the Broad-winged Hawk circling over our field. This is a world I choose to remain in. We must understand what we can, and learn to dwell richly in the mystery of what we cannot. Certainly much in the world needs fixing, and there’s much about the behavior of others we would like to change. But before we go fixing others, we must first accept and find compassion for ourselves When we stop seeing the world as a “problem” to be solved, when instead we open our hearts to the mystery of our common suffering, we may find ourselves where we least expected to be: in a world transformed by love. (p. xiii).

How does one move beyond self-pity as Simmons did to seeing the divine in ourselves? Here is where Simmons was transformed. I find this the most difficult challenge of all. He writes:

We have all heard poems, songs, and prayers that exhort us to see God in a blade of grass, a drop of dew, a child’s eyes, or the petals of a flower. Now when I hear such things I say that’s too easy. Our

greater challenge is to see God not only in the eyes of the suffering child but in the suffering itself. To thank God for the sunset pink clouds over Red Hill—but also for the mosquitoes I must fan from my face while watching the clouds. To thank God for broken bones and broken hearts, for everything that opens us to the mystery of our humanness. The challenge is to stand at the sink with your hands in the dishwasher, fuming over a quarrel with your spouse, children at your back clamoring for attention, the radio blating the bad news from Bosnia, and to say “God is here, now, in this room, here in the dishwater, in this dirty spoon.” Don’t talk to me about flowers and sunshine and waterfalls: this is the ground here, now, in all that is ordinary and imperfect, this is the ground in which life sows the seeds of our fulfillment.

Give more than we receive

Another characteristic I saw in my sister, the one that I would like to end this sermon with this morning, is that she gave to life more than she received. This is the message I would like to give on this Sunday in which we start our canvass.

Many of my colleagues, and I in the past have given sermons titled, “Sermon on the Amount.” Earlier in the year I looked to the Sermon on the Mount for the best advice about how we should live. The wisdom of Jesus is wisdom for us all. The bottom line for me is that we are all blessed to live in this world. As a church I believe we are called to comfort those who mourn, stand up for those who are persecuted, offer joy to those who seek to do right, share happiness with those who love their neighbors as themselves. This is my sermon “On the Amount.” In order for us to do this we need to support our church, give as much as we can afford to give, so that we can thrive in this community.

We should also remember that we have a message to give to the world. For me that message is that we live in an imperfect world. Each of us is imperfect. May we accept that suffering comes with life, that we have our limitations, all of us must ultimately accept our own fall, live in the moment and let go, see the divine in everything, and give back more than we receive. May it be so. Amen. Blessed Be.