

“Sidestepping Perfection”

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For the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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The latest bumper sticker to identify Unitarian Universalism is that we are: “An Uncommon Denomination.” This morning’s sermon is a case in point when I say: “To aspire to be perfect is akin to shooting ourselves in the foot.” Such a statement is indeed bucking all major religious precepts, including common perceptions of how to become better persons. But this radical, uncommon statement is exactly what I would like us to explore this morning. We’ll look at our pervasive standards of and need for perfection, the downside to believing in perfection, and the spiritual strength to be found in imperfection.

Not long ago my husband and I were on a panel of ministers addressing the local community college students who were writing papers on differences of opinion. And because it was a non-elective English class the students were your typical community members without zealously guarded religious agendas. Yet it quickly became evident that the differences of opinion that they sought were merely interpretations of God’s revealed word through the scriptures. My husband, Chip, and I were definitely in the minority. To one of Chip’s urges to consider the vast array of religious texts found throughout the world, a student challengingly retorted, “And I bet you even believe that we evolved from monkeys!” Being the historical, scientific literalist that he is, Chip answered with a twinkle in his eye, “No, I don’t believe that we evolved from monkeys; I believe that we came more from chimpanzees.”

The conversation then quickly shifted back to the Jewish-Christian perspectives with one woman student genuinely making the comment: “I don’t know why anyone wouldn’t want to live for perfection, for heaven.” She was not alone. The pursuit of perfection is a goal that pervades traditional eastern and western religious beliefs. The nods throughout the room confirmed this widespread view-point. My Unitarian Universalist perspective on concentrating on the here and now and making this a better place to be in the wider community went basically unheard. I left the session desperate to return the next day to sign up to teach a class on critical thinking. But I conceded that it was a lost cause; but her statement was not lost on me. I have found myself on more than one occasion thinking about

how to handle the seeking for such an ideal and have realized how pervasive perfection is.

I'm sure each of you can think of those times when you have been taught to reach for the stars, to strive to get that perfect score on a test, to aspire toward that perfect Buddha/Jesus state. If you have forgotten, all you have to do is watch TV commercials to remind you that the perfect life is possible. Or remember that you have to clean the house before friends come over. After all, we're been told that cleanliness is next to godliness! We are taught from the time we are young that if you are going to do something, then do it right. And right is akin to that flawless, faultless, without human-shortcoming state of being.

That reminds me of when I was a Girl Scout. We learned how to be an upright, outstanding community member. To receive our homemakers badge we were taught how to make a bed, using hospital corners and tight sheets and covers that would bounce a quarter dropped on the bed. It was a difficult learning process because our den mothers would rip apart the bed each time the coin wouldn't bounce high enough, which was often for 8-year old novices. Although our bed today doesn't bounce any coins, I will admit to still putting in hospital corners when I make the bed and smoothing out all the wrinkles as Chip, my bed-making partner, patiently awaits for my obsession to be completed.

I'm not alone in this time-honored tradition. Recently I was speaking with one of our Unitarian Universalist chaplains who had just returned from a tour in the Guantanamo Prison. She was telling me about her military training, which included inspections of their quarters, and their beds, after they arose at 4:30 in the morning. Quarters are still bounced and the hospital corners have to be an exact 45-degree angle. Because such perfection is even more difficult to achieve in the early morning hours when the body still aches for sleep, my chaplain colleague and others in her area used to fix their beds the night before and then sleep, fully dressed, unmoving, on top of their beds in order to pass their rigid dawn inspections.

How did we get into this uncomfortable position of trying to make and then sleep on our perfect beds? Why do we hold ourselves to such rigid standards?

One explanation that I have concluded is that our bed of perfection is built on our human need to be supported in living with the common chaos surrounding us. We need to find comfort when all around us we experience change, the unexpected, the constant movement that produces tension and conflict. Early in our conceptual development, which was formed by our growing knowledge and imagination, we developed strategies for living in the face of conflict and confusion. Most came to believe that the world was controlled by Gods and Goddesses. In time, one God in the vaulted heavens would become the predominate belief structure throughout our western culture. If we don't find some relief, or state of perfection "Somewhere Over the Rainbow", then when we die we can find it in this heavenly realm.

The entry into God's heaven has typically been our ability to align ourselves or become more like our supreme, supernatural, perfect deity. Even our heroes and heroines within our mythologies maintain characteristics of gods and goddesses. And our own social and political leaders, like a Gandhi, Mother Teresa, or the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., have often been seen as being more than human. Oh, if only we could aspire toward their examples...

For the non-theists, the names and places may have changed but the overall need to see a realm of unbridled perfection remains the same. And this need is translated as a type of optimistic, social Darwinism. As an example, the first Humanist Manifesto spoke of creating a worldwide egalitarian society; later it was the elimination of poverty. In the latest version, adopted in 2003, the Manifesto reiterates that Humanism is a "progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity." A more perfect world is to be had, if we but plant the seed today.

Both of these strategies meet our common need to deal with change and the vagaries of existence. And they have worked and continue to fulfill the needs of many people on this planet; including many in this congregation. There is comfort and hope to be found there.

However, there is a downside to the belief in the possibility of perfection. Such a belief is just not consistent with reality. Nothing in our universe, including ourselves, can ever be perfect because perfection implies completeness. A finished universe? It has never stopped; it doesn't even

pause. Even the stars that explode and extinguish themselves send out stardust to interact, mix, and coalesce with other entities. And as an offshoot of such universal forces, when we humans reach for the stars or a new standard of existence, we are likewise an eternal work in progress.

When we ignore this reality, we eventually shoot ourselves in the foot. If we hold people to a perfect standard, we get the experience such as my chaplain colleague who has to sleep uncomfortably on her bed. Psychologically we become very judgmental and are quick to point out flaws and shortcomings in others. Or we try to ignore those with these faults, which creates a lack of understanding and empathy for others. Judgment leads people to feel isolated. We are afraid to reveal our own failures or shortcomings to others. And we are afraid to relate to others that suffer from these flaws of form or character. Ask any person with HIV or a mental illness how often they are hugged.

So if we strip heaven from our skies and openly acknowledge the shadows in our own corners, where do we find our comfort within the stresses of growth and change? What happens when we sidestep perfection and look into a forever changing future that holds no solid ground? On the surface it looks pretty scary.

When the sky seems so empty in its openness, I have found it helpful to return to our limited knowledge of the universe and its workings. Go to the smallest quirky quarks of existence, those frenzied, constantly moving, bursts of energy and look to see what settles them. Individually they may appear random, chaotic, out-of-control. But an individual quark's action and form is tempered by being in relationship with another. Balance is created in the in-between state, the tugs and pulls of forces that happen among the energy loops. Grow the connections and we have what we refer to as the interconnected web of all existence—which holds us all together. It is being part of the web that provides our internal and external balance. When I can watch a sunset in all its deepening hues of golden reds or have my grandchild wrap her arms around me and say, “I love you Grandma,” my stresses melt away. I feel a deep peace as if the universe is holding me close.

The universe does not change in its less than perfect nature. Neither the stars nor my Grandchild are static or complete. Many of my Grandchildren are characters whose antics, though at times appearing quirky and strange,

with too much quark-y energy, are very endearing to me and fill my life in wonderful ways. And I have to admit that there have been several times when my children have said: “Mom your crazy! And you’re supposed to be a minister?!” But it is often through our “faults” that we feel deeply connected to each other. I call it the Spirituality of Imperfection.

I have also met so many people who are anything but perfect. They live daily in struggle with their shortcomings. Many have suffered with childhood abuse or violence, or illness, physical and mental. And yet they have become treasures in my life. I cherish them because they struggle with their flaws. In spite of their isolation, of feeling alone, they nonetheless continue on with courage and compassion for others. Their stories, marked by their strength of survival, are truly transformational. They actually remain a source of strength for the rest of us. As we relate to them, we can open ourselves up to our own courage and compassion. We may even be able to embrace more fully that imperfect part of ourselves which we would rather hide. The paradox is that by embracing our imperfections, we, paradoxically, embrace the wholeness, the rightness of ourselves. And in our collective vulnerability of being human we can learn not to be afraid of ourselves, or of each other.

In the days to come when stresses overwhelm you and you yearn for perfection, stop. Search your imagination to engage the transformative power of our vulnerability. Imagine if this were the last day on Earth, for everyone. What would you do and with whom would you do it? How would you make this day the most meaningful day for yourself and for others in your concern? What gifts of your being or of your wisdom, imperfect as they are, would you offer up? We certainly won’t be able to set everything just right. But our deep compassion or love will be there to guide us as we face an end together. Indeed our loving vulnerability will make this a day a rare blessing that will be cherished by the wholeness and peace that we will feel for each other. And in those final hours we’ll probably be grabbing on to the earth or clinging onto each other, or raising our hands to the sky and want, more than any perfect tomorrow, a longer time on this precious earth together.

Om, Peace. Amen. Blessed Be.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by the Reverend Lisa A. Wiggins at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

on February 11, 2007. The spoken sermon is available on audio cassette at the Fellowship.)