

readings: *Mr. Extinction, Meet Ms. Survival* Phillip Appleman
Darwin's Ark, Indiana University Press, 1984
To Live Deliberately Henry David Thoreau

Far as Human Eye Can See

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Sermon delivered December 4, 2010, at **Red River Universalist Unitarian Church**, Denison; not to be used elsewhere without permission.

The seeds for this story were first planted years ago when I heard a sermon by the Rev. Don Fielding. (When you see him, he might like to know I was paying attention.) He talked about the 'good news' of John 3:16, the core of the Christian message; *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* Instead of writing this out on a poster for football stadiums and the like, some just use a form of shorthand. Don then pulled out just such a sign with **John 3:16**, and then more with similar messages central to other faiths.

Then what about the Unitarian Universalist sign? Should it just be a question mark? What two or three words can we possibly use to represent our 'good news'? Would even a paragraph be sufficient, adequate to describe our non-creedal faith? Of course, who is going to write that paragraph, and how will we **ever** agree to its content? Each of us has our own 'elevator speech,' but which is the official version?

Don didn't even try to present such a paragraph. Instead, he pulled out a sign that read "Don's Good News" then more, one for each of us, until his hands were full. After all, we each have our own message. He then asked what we would write on our own sign, what would be the 'good news' each of us would share. I obviously found this question intriguing, as it is still percolating some fifteen years later.

So what IS my Good News? UUism is much too vague an answer, and if you talk with me for any length of time, or follow me on Facebook, you will know that I am passionate about education, about energy policy and conservation, a vegan diet and the cattle industry's impact on the environment, about reproductive rights and sexuality education, tasteful home furnishings and appropriate building materials, and any number of other issues. But those are just pieces of the puzzle.

For a short time, I thought I had my answer, but it was incomplete. Many of my spiritual high points have involved music, with the release involved in singing flat out, full-throttle, with eyeballs spinning like a Las Vegas slot machine. I remember one Christmas Eve service with a fine rendition of the Hallelujah Chorus, after which the daughter of a choir member, a bass/baritone who had just sung repeated e's above middle c, fortissimo, declared that she now know what the musical mark **ff** really stood for: Funny Face.

I recall several such instances of my own. I sang in choir a bit while in college, and one Sunday, we were in rare form for Ralph Vaughn Williams' *For All The Saints*, the tune you heard as our prelude. This was a new hymn to me, and it took several hours for my eyeballs to settle down. We only had three sopranos for the descant, but they planted their feet and their voices sailed across the sanctuary. "For all thy saviours, soldiers true and bold."

Or the service at All Souls Church for the '93 March on Washington, with 700 people packed into the sanctuary and more looking in the windows, and at least four or five people sharing a hymnal so that it was easier to read from the one in the pew in front rather than three people off to the side. The pipe organ could hardly be heard as we lustily sang the processional, and finally cut off applause for the sermon as it introduced the closing hymn; when we sang *Faith of the Free* like it had never been sung before.

General Assembly is another occasion for robust, or loud, singing, where the ministers process in for the Service of the Living Tradition as we all sing *Rank by Rank Again We Stand*, and

we sing them out with our words to *For All the Saints*. This annual event is where we recognize ministers retiring from full-time service, honor those who have died, and welcome new ministers into the fold. An institutionalist and historian at heart, I cannot go the whole time with dry eyes, especially as the first one I attended was in Yale University's historic Woolsey Hall.

Now church isn't the only place I sing, or the shower. I used to hang out at a bar on Friday nights where the pianist would put his hands on automatic and we would sing the oldies, with words printed in a songbook called *Hims We Love*. There was just something wonderful about this group of guys, cocktails in hand, belting out in tenor, bass, and baritone, "Where the boys are, someone waits for me." The joy of singing is a great emotional and physical high, but only a part of my 'Good News' - so what is the rest?

An answer finally came to me while I was shopping at Whole Foods Market. (Does that mean anything?) I had started thinking about hymns to use with this sermon, and one favorite came to mind- the 'old family hymn.' (I call it that because my grandmother was a fourth cousin twice-removed to Alfred, Lord Tennyson. A poor shirttail relation, but a Tennyson nonetheless.) Behold his words to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*:

*Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward, let us range.
Let the great world spin forever, down the ringing grooves of change.
Through the shadow of the globe we sweep ahead to heights sublime-
We, the heirs of all the ages, in the foremost files of time.*

The key to this puzzle is in my cockeyed optimism, a determination to find the good in each situation, and a belief that **good things will happen**. This is not a Pollyanna denial that bad things will not happen, but that the good will get us through the tough times, like stepping stones that let us cross a stream without getting soaked.

I found those stones to be useful a few years ago, when a friend, a teacher who was having trouble with her school, lost her father. The next week, another friend, who had recently lost his

mother and settled down after a long time of being single, was finishing up his MBA when he was diagnosed with Stage Four stomach cancer. News from the endoscopic surgery was not good, and the doctors didn't even look at the spots on his liver. Then, other friends, jewelry dealers, had their entire diamond inventory stolen shortly after his mother had a heart attack and her mother died. If that weren't enough, this was barely a month after their daughter's husband had left her; she was three months pregnant at the time. Other friends continued with assorted woes, like the one who had eye surgery the very same day her mother had hip replacement. Sometimes those stepping stones can seem far apart.

If it weren't for that belief in good things, no amount of mood-elevating drugs, legal or otherwise, would have lifted my depression. Nobody else is allowed to get sick, because at times I've felt a bit like a friend of Job, and get tired of sending get-well and 'thinking of you' cards. When the friend's cancer seemed to be responding slightly to chemo, someone else had to find a different malady- hearing loss that did turn out to be genetic, not a benign tumor, and which was addressed with a hearing aid. Yet another friend stricken with West Nile Virus was in intensive care for three weeks, and in rehab for a year. Sometimes it seems like the flood will never end.

*Oh, we see the crescent promise of our spirit has not set;
Ancient founts of inspiration well through all our fancies yet;
And we doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of all are widened with the process of the suns.*

My 'live life to its fullest' approach is inspired by Thoreau's writing as well as by the story of Auntie Mame, whose approach is summed up with her statement that "Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death." If you ever get really down in the dumps, go rent a copy of the movie (the 1958 version with Roz Russell, NOT that awful thing with Lucille Ball!) and you will find a zest for life that is infectious; or you might dig up a copy of Russell's autobiography, entitled (what else?) *Life Is a Banquet*, and see how her story echoes those of Mame.

In contrast, I remember how an uncle of mine lived a repressed existence, always with an excuse for remaining closeted, and for not going out and living life. He died with plenty of money, because spending any of it, to go visit relatives, or even to wear the new clothes still in their wrapping instead of his old rags, would have been too much trouble. How I wish I could have hired Auntie Mame to seduce him, because he was starving, missing out on life's banquet.

So, my theology according to Thoreau and Mame is something like this:

- 1) Live a graceful life in harmony with nature, and with respect for our fellow beings.
- 2) Leave your world a better place than you found it, whether that means cleaning up the kitchen you share with someone, planting flowers or a tree in your yard, or teaching the neighbor children something useful. There's a Jewish name for this, Tikun Olam, which translates as 'to repair the world.'
- 3) Remember that life is a series of highs and lows that fit together and sometimes seem to fall apart; without that variety, life could seem like a perpetual drive across West Texas. Our job in life is to use what we've learned, appreciate it and pass it on, and to learn some more.
- 4) Finally, have some fun along the way, and take advantage of every opportunity, but do it with a bit of class and style.

This approach based in optimism, of expecting good things, came together for me on a warm summer Sunday afternoon. Less than an hour later, I heard the first reports of the tragic shooting at our congregation in Knoxville. It was that promise of good that gave me hope, as I knew our other congregations would be supportive, that our leaders would respond, and that our children would prove resilient. Like many, I was surprised by the outpouring of support from other faiths, and by all the sympathetic media coverage. It might have been good exposure, but we paid a very high price for that 'free' publicity.

I was also gratified to hear of the swift response by the congregation as they quickly cared for their wounded, sheltered the children, and tackled the gunman, who had the nerve, the gall, to complain they were ‘hurting him,’ those soft, weak liberals who did happen to break his arm. Would Miss Manners have them apologize? As the congregation gathered next Sunday for what was a powerful service; they sang the first song in our hymnal, *May Nothing Evil Cross This Door*, and the children joyfully led the singing of *Tomorrow*. Those stepping stones of good and of hope made it easier to cross the rivers of grief and sadness.

*Yes, we dip into the future, far as human eye can see
See the vision of the world, and all the wonder that shall be
Hear the wardrum throb no longer, see the battle flags all furled,
In the parliament of all, the federation of the world.*

So if I ever do get around to writing my *This I Believe* essay (even though the program no longer runs on NPR) and somehow manage to confine myself to only four minutes, it would probably be with my theme that good things will happen. I am convinced that world peace is possible, and that warring groups can learn to get past their theological and ethnic differences. Though it might take decades, our nation will repair the damage to our international relations caused by the recent administration. And maybe, just maybe, I might even get my house cleaned someday.

I also believe that one day, children will have enough to eat and a safe place to sleep, that their parents will read to them, helping them learn without expecting schools to do all the work, and that they will grow to live without a constant fear of poverty or strife. The schoolteacher in me also believes that people will someday stop abusing the apostrophe, as it has no place in simple plurals!

I even cling to a thread of hope that we’ll stop inserting ‘and’ into numbers, when it is only proper in lieu of a decimal point. When the temperature gets up past one hundred five, it’s really hot, and the year is two thousand ten, with no ‘and.’ There, language lesson is done for the day.

It is gratifying to see good things that I've helped happen, which is one reason I work as an elementary substitute teacher; I enjoy getting kids excited about literature, and helping them unlock the mysteries of math. Recently, a Fifth-grader remembered the name of a book I had read to her class- back in First Grade!

I also believe we can get past the 'isms' that divide our nation. In the past hundred-fifty years, we have made great strides in overcoming racism and sexism; even in my relatively short lifetime, I have seen significant progress. Homophobia is fading, with today's youth much more accepting of others. For me, a simple bumper sticker marked a pivotal time in our culture- if you remember way back when, they were usually found plastered on the activists' cars- VWs in the '60s, Volvos and Hondas in later years- worn-out heaps with many miles and more than a few dents, usually in need of a thorough cleaning- *sounds like my car* - never the sedans of the bourgeoisie. It was shortly after the '93 March that I saw a rainbow sticker on a new Lincoln Town Car, with Mississippi plates yet! I knew then that our nation had undergone a paradigm shift.

Finally, I believe that our nation will one day get in the habit of reducing and recycling before it's too late, that we will get closer to being energy self-sufficient, and that humans will learn to coexist with the planet and the other beings also here. And in the middle of the hot and dry Texas summers, I hang on to hope that it will rain again one day.

With such a list, it isn't too far a stretch for me to believe that our congregations will strengthen and grow. I invite you to write your own essay and to live out your "Good News," whatever it is. And - **What's on your sign?**