

In Defense of Life – just the way it is
Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church
March 26, 2017

READING

“The Apology”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Think me not unkind and rude
That I walk alone in grove and glen;
I go to the god of the wood
To fetch his word to men.

Tax not my sloth that I
Fold my arms beside the brook;
Each cloud that floated in the sky
Writes a letter in my book.

Chide me not, laborious band,
For the idle flowers I brought;
Every aster in my hand
Goes home loaded with a thought.

There was never mystery
But 'tis figured in the flowers;
Was never secret history
But birds tell it in the bowers.

One harvest from thy field
Homeward brought the oxen strong;
A second crop thine acres yield,
Which I gather in a song.

SERMON

In Defense of Life – just the way it is
the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Today is the last Sunday of the month, and our final investigation into the theme of forgiveness. We were reminded earlier of how useful apologies are – the simple (and sometimes not so simple) “I’m

sorry's" for everything from ruining a roof to stepping on toes. One person says, "I'm sorry," and hopefully there is a pardon that follows – forgiving each other, forgiving ourselves.

We heard a different kind of apology this morning – from Ralph Waldo Emerson – who was not saying "I'm sorry" and want your forgiveness so much as "this is who I am" – an apology, as it were, in defense of himself and his life choices.

Think me not unkind or rude that I walk alone . . . that I go to the God of the glen to fetch his word . . .
chide me not for the idle flowers that I brought . . .

Emerson is explaining himself – defending his choices against the pressures of the day to be and do otherwise, to value something different.

And it made me wonder if Life itself has a defense to offer us, that we might forgive, in some way, its disappointments, its seeming unfairness, its inequities, and challenges – why some struggle and others appear not to; why some have capacities that others lack; why random appears to be the nature of things. Why some are born into oppressed communities and others born with privilege? Why . . .

If Life were an individual, what would its apology be? And how might we forgive its impact on our lives? It begs the idea of a place more perfect.

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As it happens, a few of us began re-examining Genesis several weeks back. (We've only made it through the Flood, so you're all welcome to jump in knowing you haven't missed too much so far.)

The writers of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures – and there were likely many writers over a long period of time with the influence of both oral and written traditions – painted an early picture of just such an exquisite and more perfect place to live. We remember (and picture in your minds): first the sky and then light, two great lights, actually – "the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night" (Genesis 1:16). And then there were waters with swarms of living creatures, and birds flying above the earth; and every living creature that moves: "cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." It was good. In my mind, I imagine a place like the Amazon, with the sounds of waterfalls and exotic birds and chimpanzees. I've never been to the Amazon, so it's all in my head, but that's what I imagine! And then, humankind – male and female; and a garden, with its own river to water it; every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food – well, except that one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – don't eat from that.

It feels like it should be always summer in this garden, this Eden. That may be the Hawaiian influence for me, but I have a hard time imaging Adam and Eve in the Arnold Arboretum in the middle of winter – or even now, actually, when it is officially spring. It's a bit chilly!

Eden is green and lush and warm but not too warm, and sunny, but just sunny enough. The grass is soft; food is plentiful. Likely no books. Definitely no movies. But then, you know, no war; no disagreements that we're aware of; no Republicans or Democrats – that might be nice. No knitting, because there's no need to cover anything, of course. No guilt because they haven't done anything to feel guilty about . . . yet. Everything is gentle and easy and provided for . . . and perfect, right? Maybe not especially interesting, maybe not very exciting – but peaceful.

So, we were imagining this Eden in our small-group discussion, and one person said, "Wow . . . that sounds kind of . . . boring!"

Well . . . I don't know. I guess that might have something to do with whether Adam and Eve were attracted to each other. There might have been some entertainment there, in a way.

But once that has been sated . . . there might have been only another perfect piece of fruit! Adam, look! Nothing bruised or misshapen, even without genetic modifications.

Boring might be a good description of perfect. On the one hand, it sounds pretty great – like the kind of place you might want to go on vacation for a while. You wouldn't have to pack much.

But, at some point, in the garden of perfection . . . what would you miss?

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I would miss the weeds. I'm not the best gardener in the world, but don't you think there's something very satisfying about pulling weeds? If the garden were perfect, what would we have to pull?

In a perfect world, what is required of me, of each of you, of our enormous penchant for creativity? Of response to the environment? If it's all done already, what is left for us? What need is there of any particular gift? Of mine, or yours?

"God, how about a new piece of statuary on the south forty?"

"Nope. Done. Already taken care of."

“Oh, well, how about a water feature? Adam thought that might be nice.”

“Nope. It’s perfect just the way it is.”

“A new shed down by that pretty brook?”

“What for? I take care of the yard work. I make sure everything is fed. You just run along and frolic.”

Nothing to add our creative juices to. What else? What else might we miss in a perfect world?

I was thinking I might miss a bit of competition. I’m not a very winning-oriented person, really. My goal at swim practice is first, to get there, and second, to make it through practice. But there is something to be said for the encouragement to push oneself a bit, to improve or strengthen one’s skills and abilities. I think I would miss that.

But, what occurred to me was that mostly, mostly I think I would miss learning. In a perfect world, where one is not challenged to be anything other than what they are, I would miss the opportunities for learning and knowing and becoming more.

Remember that the forbidden fruit was from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Adam and Eve tasted it, and became aware – aware of all kinds of things, not least their nakedness; but one imagines their imperfections, their limitations, their yearnings, their disappointments, their frustrations. We can imagine it would be a bit of time before they became aware of the other side of those coins – their capabilities, their resourcefulness, their resilience.

Without the first side, one is not aware of the second.

Without adversity, there is nothing to overcome. Remember the phrase: Necessity is the mother of invention? Certainly, there is some adversity we could do without, but how do we know what moves us the most, what transforms us or helps us to grow and become, before it happens?

So . . . am I suggesting that we should be happy with such an imperfect world as this?

To which one might reply: Do we have a choice?

Clearly no, and we could be resigned; but, I am not speaking of being **resigned** to what is. Emerson was not offering The Apology in service to resignation but to understanding. I am speaking today in defense of life, just as it is – encouraging our capacities to understand and allow for it – to forgive what we might consider its deficiencies, and find peace with them, even appreciation for them because we know, in our heart of hearts, that perfect would not serve us well.

In perfect, there is nowhere to grow, there is nothing more to become.

Doesn't that sound like its own kind of hell?

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We don't get to pick and choose, of course, what our challenges will be, and there are countless challenges we likely would not choose to learn from – things that make life harder either physically or emotionally or psychologically. Illness comes to mind, or loss – pretty much any kind of loss, not least death. But even before those lessons, there are countless challenges that we could curse life for: being different in tribes where sameness is celebrated, for example.

Life confronts us with so much confusion, all by itself in its random distribution of unique. Can we forgive it the frailties and loss? The hurt and the sadness? Can we forgive Life the unknowns in deference to the task of becoming?

Here we are in this mysterious, amazing life – where we know we will mess up, fall short, and offend; we will do too little, and do too much; we will get caught up in what's wrong and forget to attend to all that is right.

And here is Life saying in its own defense (with apologies to Emerson):

Think me not a cold teacher.
I am the garden filled with flaw.
I am the Way Will Open preacher,
Every opportunity for awe.

Curse me not for what is absent:
What you think you ought to know
Every thing I am is meant
To be a path on which to grow.

Forgive what I am not by way
Of what you'd like your life to be.
Recognize my gift, and say
That as I am, so will I be.

Life offers us this amazing opportunity to learn. In all its imperfections, it invites us to become more aware, more alive, more awake. Let's not get caught in our quest for perfection (for being just right, for having all we want, for needing others to be the perfect accompaniment).

In our wanting, let us not miss the amazing gift that is Life, just as it is.