

OCTOBER'S THEME: POSSIBILITY
PLAYING RIGHT FIELD
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS

~ *Mark Belletini*

We are here to follow the promptings of our deepest heart.
We are here with expectations, alive, spoken and unspoken.
We are here because we are human.
Creatures of solitude and communion.
Wanting wholeness, knowing brokenness.
We meet here once again to remind ourselves of what we already know.
We open ourselves to word, story, song.
To whatever breaks in upon us or summons us to speak or act.
Our time together affects our time apart.
We want to participate, to be known, to be loved.
We know limits, yet so much is possible...

Come, let us be here, now, together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Playing Right Field

~ *Willy Welch*

(in this 'sung' story, a boy is consigned to playing right field, where nothing ever happens. Or does it?)

READING

Opportunities are Always There ~ *Rev. Peter Morales*

This message, from the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev. Peter Morales, was published in the summer 2014 edition of the UUWorld magazine.

My life, like your life I would bet, has not gone according to my childhood plans. Not even close. For that matter, it has not gone according to the plans I made as a young adult, either. Truth to tell, it has not gone according to the plans I made in early middle age. Stuff happens – often stuff over which we have no control.

In my own life, I found that when I tried to cling to my plans when they were no longer viable (or when I tried to recapture a past that was gone forever), I just made myself and others miserable. Conversely, when I have focused upon opportunities, upon new possibilities, a new and exciting future always appeared. My decision to pursue ministry was one of those new possibilities. What a blessing, what a life-changing path, that has been.

Opportunities, I now realize, are always there. We can only see them, however, when we are open to them. And opportunities only matter if we have the courage to seize them.

What is true for an individual is true for a congregation and for a religious movement. Things change. Especially today, ...religion is changing at a rate that is unprecedented. We are witnessing nothing less than a spiritual mass migration ... of people away from religious institutions. This is occurring after decades of relative stability. We see denominations struggling to adapt as membership drops and financial resources dwindle.

We cannot control these cultural shifts. We can control our response. One response is to continue to do what we have always done, perhaps redoubling our efforts. We can stubbornly cling to old ways, eating into our financial reserves and delaying the inevitable. Sadly, I see some congregations doing exactly that.

Or, we can look around for new possibilities. We can open ourselves to new ways of being, to new ways of being faithful to our core values. Ultimately, this is a spiritual discipline. This is about letting go, about exploring, about paying attention to what is happening all around us, about listening deeply to one another and to our inner voices.

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What our thriving congregations...have in common are qualities of spirit and culture. They know who they are. They know where they are. They have a shared vision of what is possible right there, right now. And our thriving congregations have leaders, both lay and ordained, who seize the opportunities before them. We need [these] passionate leaders – leaders in communities large and small.

I am convinced, absolutely convinced, that we live in an era of enormous opportunity for liberal religion. This is a time of historic possibility for us. Just look at how the culture is shifting in attitudes about sexuality, cultural diversity, and environmental sustainability. We can become the spiritual home, the supporting community, for the religiously homeless.

The great issue before our faith is whether we will adapt quickly enough. Think of your congregation, your location. What is your great opportunity? And what will it take to grasp that opportunity? Imagine what you might do in partnership with others. Imagine what we might do together.

MESSAGE

It's sort of odd for me to use a baseball metaphor, since I'm so NOT a sports fan. I first heard *Playing Right Field* in the form of a song, just as David sang it today, and since it came to me in musical form, it was both accessible and appealing. I fear that if my first encounter had been with the picture book, with the cover that's on the order of service, well...I probably wouldn't even have opened it.

Still, the song didn't just float by my ears one day...I had to click on a link...and I wouldn't have done THAT had it not come as a suggestion from a colleague. I opened the link to honour the friendship...to respond to what was shared. And you wouldn't have heard it in song today if I hadn't asked David, and if he hadn't said yes. So truly, using this story today was a possibility that came out of left field!

Still, the story contains real resonance – at least for me. How many here have had a similar team-picking experience, and waited, with a sinking spirit, as one by one, others were picked ahead of you? How many here have had the feeling that you are assigned to right field, wherever that field might be...because you aren't seen as 'good enough' to contribute elsewhere...stuck in a place where not much happens and not much is expected...feeling the outsider to the REAL action...and simply watching the dandelions grow?

If this is how your life feels, it's all well and good to say that there are always possibilities. Statistically speaking, though, playing right field does mean that many fewer opportunities come one's way.

Yet it's not so helpful...to see oneself as stuck. Let's look at another possibility... because a pity-the-poor-right-fielder perspective, even if it resonates with us, isn't so helpful. It's NOT about how MANY opportunities come our way, or how often they come, or how good they are. I think it's more helpful to consider: "How can we open ourselves to see life-giving, life-enhancing possibilities in every moment?" And so opened, and seen, "What can we do to bring those possibilities into being?"

You see, there's a subtle difference between possibilities and opportunities. Opportunities present themselves...they show up in the form of some advantageous situation. Opportunities come at us, like the ball that is streaming toward you even though you're in right field, and how/when/if they show up in our lives is pretty much out of our control.

Possibilities, on the other hand, are not quite real, at least not yet. Probability aside, they exist in an open field, leaving us to imagine what will, or could, happen. Possibilities exist in the ether of our imagination; and they are only possibilities until something happens...some choice, some action, some circumstance...that brings them from what COULD happen, to what IS happening. Yes, anything COULD happen, and assuming we might play a part in which 'anythings' become 'somethings', we would do well to consider what the preferred 'anything' might be ...what is the 'anything' that would change your mind, or open your heart, or stir your passion, or create more justice?

Even that little right fielder inside of us has options. We can choose to play, even when we don't get the position we want...or not. We can choose to think it our destiny to take up our place in right field...or not. We can dream about what might happen one day, or about being somebody else, some great hero. We can be prepared...by learning to catch and throw...just in case. We can attempt, and sometimes succeed, to catch the balls, the opportunities, that come our way...or not. We can even watch dandelions grow, which could be a lovely way to spend an afternoon.

When I was about ten, the made-for-TV movie, *Cinderella*, came out...the one with Lesley Anne Warren in the lead...(the same one that was remade some thirty years later with Brandy and Whitney Houston.) Do you know it? Though princesses and fairytales were not really my thing, I LOVED that movie with a capital L LOVE. I LOVED the music. I can probably still sing the whole Rodgers and Hammerstein score. I tell you about it now because two of its songs, about possibility, keep running through my head... one, when the mean sisters have gone off to the ball, leaving Cinderella to clean the house, and she sits by the fire, gazing out a window, and sings "In my own little corner, in my own little chair...I can be whatever I want to be." Even from this place, even though I want to be elsewhere, I can dream. And this makes that little corner bearable, somehow.

The other, *Impossible*, is sung by the Fairy Godmother...who encourages Cinderella to give up her fatalism, and see that there are possibilities. "Impossible! Things are happening every day!" And even as I sing it, a cynical little voice inside says, "yeah, if you're Cinderella and you have a fairy godmother!"

Someone sent me a video about possibilities this week...a true life fairytale, about an Illinois State Gymnastics Champion. The 'zinger' of the story is that this is a young woman who was born without legs, and yet she's a gymnastics champion. She was abandoned at birth, and adopted by a family who taught her that the only unacceptable word is 'can't'. The story is inspiring...and yet I still had the somewhat unattractive feeling that somehow, by nature of her spirit or upbringing or innate athletic ability or determination, she is at the center of the game...the exceptional one...not the one playing right field.

Dwelling in fairytales might be seen as a sentimental flight from reality...encouraging us to 'check out' of our lives, to not engage fully. Maybe that's why the Cinderella story has been so prevalent in centuries of mythology...with at least 350 tellings in existence. The earliest recorded, and perhaps attributable to Aesop, is the Greek story of Rhodopis in the 1st century BC¹. Another is found in the stories of Tuan Ch'eng-shih of China in the middle of the ninth century, this one with a golden slipper, and a fish as fairygodmother.² The Grimm Brothers told the story too, although in their more moralistic style.

Why are stories like Cinderella so popular? Why do stories like that of the gymnast capture our imagination? In "The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales," (1976) the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim³ argued about the value of fairy tales, and that they teach children the opposite of escapism. Their message, he wrote, is "that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence — but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles..."

Bettelheim may be an authority, but I'm not sure this completely captures why we like a good fairytale. Sure, they might show us that we can 'master all obstacles' as Bettelheim suggests, but I think stories, any stories, show us possibilities. They show us what 'might' happen, even if we aren't able to identify with the heroes, even if we aren't motivated by the 'supernatural.' They show us that struggles and perhaps even 'stuckness' is part of everyone's story, and suggest some possibilities for how to get 'unstuck.' They illustrate how meaning might be found, or offer a lesson. They show us that no matter what's happening, or where we are, possibilities exist...possibilities that could not only make the best of a hard situation, but might actually make it better.

I'm drawn to Narrative Therapy, which is based on the premise that our identities, and even our realities, are shaped by the stories or narratives we tell about ourselves.⁴ A narrative therapist encourages us to fully describe our stories and trajectories, as well as to explore the possibilities associated with them. Seeing the possibilities in our stories frees us from the stuckness...where we are trapped in a story that is not life-giving. It asks us to imagine preferred outcomes, and to consider how to encourage the possibilities that would bring about those preferred outcomes. Seeing possibilities is a way to live in hope, and inspiration, and motivation. Even if nothing else changes, an outlook toward possibilities changes our lives.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhodopis>

² <http://www.mythsdreamssymbols.com/cinderella.html>

³ <http://www.mythsdreamssymbols.com/cinderella.html>

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_therapy

Possibilities. What is it that you wish to have happen next in the story of your life? In what ways might you see and tell your story so that it affirms who you are and who you want to be? What is the message you need or want to hear? What would inspire you and give you purpose? What would uphold your principles and values?

Playing Right Field is promoted as a story about self-esteem. And you could choose to see it that way if you are in need of a message about resilience or courage or confidence. One possibility is that this story helps you to be prepared for when opportunities come your way.

Or, you could read this as a story about blooming where you're planted...about being "content with such things as ye have." Seeing it that way might help you to accept your lot in life...even if it's right field...and to do the best you can with it.

Or, maybe today you need a story about the potential in each person...and in yourself. Notice how our right-fielder really surprised his teammates...and that even though they'd left him to the last, he saved the day. Seen this way, it's the story of an unlikely hero. Is that your story?

It could even have been a story to illustrate how good things come to those who wait...about how things always 'work out' in the end. Just hang on, the ball will come to you. And not only that. You're going to catch it! And all will be right with the world.

See, you can interpret the story, and add to it, in the way that is meaningful for YOU. There are possibilities in every darn moment, and believe me, there are possibilities on every page of your story. Maybe it's simply a matter of seeing that "right field" exists only in our imaginations. What if we were all, each of us, willing to be at the center of our own story, our own game, playing the best we know how? Content to dream about possibilities, and empowered to seize those possibilities and to run with them when the time is right? What if that were our story?

Of course, sometimes the multiplicity of possibilities can itself be as debilitating as the stuckness. You might recognize this feeling...of being in a supermarket aisle, and seeing ten different kinds of marmalade, or thirty different kinds of toothpaste. Which is the best one? The sheer number of choices seems to make the decision WAY more important than it actually is. Ask, "What matters?" and be led by the answer that comes to you.

About ten years ago, I traveled to Israel and Palestine, the West Bank, with a group from my seminary. One of our visits was to the YMCA in Bethlehem, whose work is very different from the "Ys" with which we are more familiar. Their work is the rehabilitation of children in Palestine who are suffering psychological harm and physical injuries due to the occupation.

Rafit Kassis, the director at that time, told us that he believes that hopelessness or apathy is a privilege available only to those who can choose it - and that for those who have limited choices, hope is the only viable option. I asked what he meant, and he said that when one's back is up against a wall...a life or death wall...you cannot practice escapism. In that position, there are only two choices, hope or hopelessness...to see the possibilities or to not see them.

Yes, we do have the luxury of choice. Maybe too many choices. It is possible to say, "ah, it's hopeless" or "I'm stuck" or "there aren't any good options" and to turn away from life without risking anything...without going out onto any limb.

Maybe the challenge for us is to embrace the possibility that, while difficult, while improbable, is that one that will make a difference. We have, all of us, the capacity to be welcoming to, generous with, and loving toward each other. We each are capable of choosing to live in the spirit of peace in our relationships. We have, each of us, the possibility to spend our life's energy and our resources, on things that matter to us, that are worthy of our attention. Or not.

Earlier, Paula read about possibilities for our faith tradition, about how we might take risks to be leaders. I have been speaking mostly from the perspective of the individual, one player, but I must also speak to the possibilities for this community. We are soon entering our annual canvass season, and I can't help but think about how we, and I mean specifically this congregation, often express ourselves as consigned to right field...restricted by our abilities, or our location, or our resources. And seeing ourselves through the lens of limitations allows us, if I may say so, to take the safer route, the one that won't open us up to failure or disappointment or risk...or glory.

Anything's possible. I could pick up a book that has NO appeal to me, and find inspiration within its pages. I, or you, could say or do something today that opens up a new world for someone else...that helps them to see things in a way they haven't before. I could stare at a dandelion for an hour or so, and see in it a message that connects me more deeply to life. We could risk our own significance by choosing to embrace a possibility that some would say exists only in fairytales.

Anything could happen. So be it.

READING *Everything is Waiting for You* ~ David Whyte

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.
Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease
into the conversation. The kettle is singing
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots
have left their arrogant aloofness and
seen the good in you at last. All the birds

and creatures of the world are unutterably
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

CLOSING WORDS *Letters to a Young Poet* ~Rainer Maria Rilke

...have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart.

Try to love the questions themselves,

like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language.

Do not now look for the answers.

They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them.

It is a question of experiencing everything.

At present you need to live the question.

Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the
answer, some distant day.

Go now, and dwell in possibility.

Amen.