

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PEOPLE OF EXPECTATION

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
December 6, 2015

OPENING WORDS ~ *David Breeden (adapted)*

Through this season of waiting, we ask for patience, light, peace, and love.
We light the flame of hope, as we welcome the coming of the days we have waited for; a time when all peoples would be free.
We have realized hope, yet know that hope can never be realized.
We commit ourselves to patience;
To working to dispel darkness;
To working for peace;
We commit ourselves to love and to hope.

Come, let us enter this space together. Come into this time set apart to set ourselves aright and return to our centers.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Monsters' Monster* ~ *Patrick McDonnell*

(Three little monsters build what they hope to be the biggest, badest, monster ever. But what they get surprises them.)

READING *from How To Become Batman* ~ *Invisibilia, NPR*

On the NPR show, *Invisibilia*, Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller explore invisible things like emotions, beliefs, and assumptions, and try to figure out how they affect our lives. This reading is transcribed, and slightly edited, from a broadcast from January 2015.

Recently Lulu and I got a rat, and we brought it to work, and we invited people to go into this room, one by one, sit in front of the rat, look it in the eye, and answer one question. "Do you think that the thoughts that you have in your head, your private thoughts, can influence how that rat could move through space?"

It was almost unanimous. People did not believe that their personal thoughts about the rat would have any effect on the rat at all. And, if that's what you believe, you're wrong.

Bob Rosenthal, early in his career as a research psychologist, did something devious. Late one night, he secretly crept into his lab and hung signs on all the rat cages. Some of the signs said the rat in the cage was incredibly smart, and some said the rat was really stupid, even though neither of these things were true. They were very average rats, bought from a research institute that sells rats for a living.

Then Bob brought this group of experimenters into his lab, and says, "For the next week, some of you are going to get these very smart rats, and some these very stupid rats. Your job is to run your rat through a maze and record how well it does."

The experimenters did just as Bob told them to do...they ran the rats that they had been told were smart, and the rats that they had been told were stupid, through the mazes.

The results were dramatic. The smart rats did almost twice as well as the stupid rats, even though the smart rats were not smart and the stupid rats were not stupid. Science fiction? No one believed it at first. What Bob eventually figured out is that the expectations the researchers had in their heads, actually translated into a whole set of tiny behaviour changes. The expectations subtly changed the ways the experimenters touched the rats, and then in turn, the way that the rats behaved. When the experimenters thought the rats were really smart, they felt more warmly towards the rats and touched them more carefully. We do know that handling animals gently can improve their performance in challenges such as mazes.

And in people? This kind of dynamic happens in people too. Carol Dweck, a psychologist at Stanford was one of several researchers at Stanford who explained all kinds of surprising things that expectations can influence. She says, "You may be standing further away from someone you have lower expectations for...you might not be making as much eye contact...it's not something you can put your finger on. We're not usually aware of how we are conveying our expectations to other people, but it's there."

Similarly, teacher expectations can raise or lower a student's IQ score. A parent's expectations can affect the drinking behaviour of their middle-school child. A military trainer's expectations can literally make a soldier faster or slower, in military maneuvers.

Think about that. As you go through the world, be aware of the power of your expectations of others. Similarly, reflect on the notion that the expectations of others are constantly acting on you, making you smarter or less smart, stronger or weaker, faster or slower.

So, I wonder, how far does this go? *(pause)*

MESSAGE

(Exit sanctuary....speak from the foyer)

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,

and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

(Spoken from the foyer) What did you expect? That I would get up, as usual, at this point in the service, and speak from the pulpit? Did you expect that the next thing that would happen is the next thing that's printed in the order of service? What happens when your expectations are not met?

(Come back to the pulpit) So, how were you feeling in those first moments when the unexpected happened? Worried? Welcoming of the change? Perhaps you were relieved that I wasn't going to talk. Perhaps your expectations about what happens when the unexpected happens led you to think that something must be terribly wrong. Or maybe you were just enjoying the abnormal.

"This being human is a guest house," wrote Rumi. "Every morning a new arrival."

"Think that someone may bring a bear to your door, maybe wounded or deranged," writes Robert Bly.

"When someone knocks on the door, think that he's about to give you something large..." Really large, he suggests. Like that you've been forgiven, or that you don't have to work all the time, or that if you lie down no one will die.

"Give us rain when we expect sun. Give us music when we expect trouble," writes Michael Leunig. "Give us tears when we expect breakfast. Give us dreams when we expect a storm. Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations." A stray dog? I should expect that?

Expect the unexpected. Learn to relish surprise.

Where's the value in that?? Doesn't it stand to reason that if we are to be people of expectation, then we should be able to name what it is that we're expecting? Doesn't expectation imply something knowable and solid?

You've all heard the wisdom, I expect, that the only constant, the only thing we can really rely on, is change. So we should expect change. Yet, most of us live as if we expect constancy. We behave as if the way things are is the way things will always be. I mean, after all, we can't go around expecting that the sun won't rise, or that tomorrow our cars will all be pumpkins, or that the next person we meet is going to betray us.

Maybe the theme for this month, rather than 'what does it mean to be people of expectation' should be 'what does it mean to be people who explore our expectations.'

In this month's Journeys packet, which was sent out with Friday's email update, or which you can pick up in the brochure rack, you'll find a link to an interesting interview with Chris Berdik, the author of the book "Mind Over Mind." His premise is that expectations matter. Just like the researchers with the rats that today's reading told of, Berdik contends that expectations have a 'placebo effect' and can, in some sense, bend reality. Expectations of a wine's quality change the level of activity in the brain's reward center; people who 'act' in the virtual world with tall and good-looking avatars behave in ways that taller, better-looking people tend to act. People who stand in powerful poses (like Superman) for a minute or two,

have similar hormonal changes to people who are given actual power and authority. Our expectations don't become reality, but they can shift it in small but often important ways.

But, what if our expectation is for the unexpected? What if our expectation is that things are constantly in a state of flux and change? If you're like me, I both welcome and have some anxiety about such an expectation. That's great if the 'unexpected' is a delightful surprise, but what if the unexpected unsettles me, shifts the ground on which I stand, or brings suffering to my door? Speaking again of the visitors who come to our guest house, Rumi said, "Even if they are a crowd of sorrows who sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight."

To welcome the unexpected is to get comfortable with the reality of uncertainty. It is to open your doors to the possibility of delight.

There's a public policy foundation in Washington DC called New America, which has, and which I find really fascinating, Fellows in the Future Tense. One of these fellows, Jamie Holmes, has written "Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing," a book about the many ways that uncertainty shapes human behaviour.

It remains to be seen if uncertainty and expecting the unexpected are the same thing, as uncertainty by definition means not knowing what to expect, while to expect the unexpected implies a certainty in knowing that we do not know what will happen. Still, I find Holmes' ideas germane. He says that we often do feel, or even know, two seemingly opposite things at the same time, but we are, as human beings, ambiguity-reducers. Since the world is so complex, we are constantly trying to reduce non-identical things into the identical, so that we can simplify things. When we can't understand something, we deal with it by putting it into a category, assigning it a particular value or association.

According to Holmes, we all have a natural distaste for things that are unfamiliar to us, things that are ambiguous; and that distaste goes up and down from situational stressors; in other words, we do not always feel the same amount of comfort or discomfort with uncertainty. But, note this: extremism of any kind is characterized by a high need for closure, for resolving ambiguity, as this leads to stereo-typing, and creating boundaries for in and out, us and them. Apparently, the lower our need for certainty, the healthier our minds. And, also of great interest, recent work in this area shows that multicultural experiences lower our need for closure and certainty...making us healthier.

I might be making a huge leap in reasoning here, but this would seem to indicate that those of us who choose to embrace diversity, who are open to new ideas and experiences...(and I take the liberty of assuming that this includes all of us in this room)...we are the ones who are training ourselves to be more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. Or, you might say, we choose to expect the unexpected. It seems to me that in this quickly changing and uncertain world, these are good, healthy, necessary skills to develop...skills that could make us more resilient, more 'sea-worthy' in shifting seas, more capable of being generous with compassion and understanding.

So far, I've introduced two concepts. One, that our expectations have some affect on what happens, and two, that while we have an innate desire for certainty, to learn to get comfortable with ambiguity might be the more desirable path. The first suggests that if we choose to have

expectations for the results we desire, the possibility of those desired results being realized is increased. The second would seem to contradict, saying that expectations can lead to a rigidity that limits the possibilities. But maybe this is some of the ambiguity we are called to hold.

You know the saying, "Hope for the best; expect the worst." Or how about this one: "The best way to avoid disappointment is not to expect anything." Both of these adages ring true, (don't they?) yet contain hints of troubling cynicism. They create ambiguity in us. We can agree with them and at the same time believe them to be bad advice...or even disagree with them while at the same time believing them to be good advice. We don't want our expectation of the worst to actually make the worst happen, but we don't want to be unprepared. We don't want to experience disappointment, but can't quite imagine a life without hopes and dreams.

So how are we to be people of expectation when even the advisability of expectation seems so uncertain? We have already acknowledged that we have different ideas of what constitutes expectation...of how it's related to hope, or to judgement, or to living in the present, or to anticipation, or to what exactly we can put our trust in. But here's how I like to see it... We are alive, and we are sentient beings. Our mental capacity for looking backward and looking forward creates a tension that pulls us away from living in this moment, right now...an ability and practice that many sages highly recommend. Yet, we benefit from, and live within, a great story...some of it our own, some of it our community's, some of it told and retold as the story of this planet and all of its beings. A storyline gives us some sense of control...there's a path we've followed from the past to the present...as well as a sense that we can predict where it's going.

This kind of expectation is a good thing; it helps us to make meaning. It frames our beliefs. It gives our lives purpose within an understandable context. Take for instance these well-quoted words of Martin Luther King Jr: "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice." He is stating that he expects movement toward a more just world. Was he ever disappointed by this expectation? Of course. He must have been. But the alternative would be to expect things either not to move at all, or to move in the opposite direction. So, the story he told, the prediction he made, the actions he took, all bent his future reality...toward an expectation of justice.

Take our first principle...the affirmation, the expectation, that every person has inherent worth and dignity. If we did not expect that to be true...in every interaction, in every relationship, in every new encounter...would we not live in distrust, and fear? And, if Berdik is right, doesn't this expectation of one another...an expectation of worth...actually support each other in actualizing worthy lives? We can feel, you can feel it, when someone treats you with respect, right? And doesn't that change you?

Finally, I believe that the expectation of the unexpected is a sacred opening to the divine. It is the recognition that we cannot predict the future. It is appreciation for the gifts that the unexpected can bring, no matter how unwelcome they might be in the present moment. To expect the unexpected is to be humble in the face of our finitude. To expect the unexpected is to relinquish control...to let go of what is not meant for us. And to live, with that uncertainty, at peace.

I recognize that while there have been many both unexpected and unwelcome events in my life, I have lived a relatively protected life. I cannot imagine what it would be like to be given the terrible and unexpected news that my loved one had been gunned down in a mass shooting. I cannot imagine a life in which unexpected civil unrest made it impossible for me to remain in my homeland, requiring me to abandon all that I know, and to rely on the help of total strangers. And, while I recognize that such things could befall me, as they have so many, I do not want to live in a world where such things are acceptable and expected.

But, I do want to live in a world where my heart is broken, and broken open, by the unexpected. Unexpected acts of extreme kindness, unexpected outpourings of welcome, unexpected reversals of oppression. I want to expect that beautiful things will happen with regularity, because this is what I both expect and believe to be true of humankind. And, I expect my expectations to matter.

Berdik suggests that it is worthwhile, from time to time, to examine and question our expectations...to explore the connections between what we think and what we experience. When we see expectations that seem inevitable and permanent, that's a good indication that it's time to shake things up. Let's start with ourselves. Just slightly change one small negative or confining expectation you have of yourself and see if it leads to a different outcome. See if you can treat yourself more gently and with more love, and perhaps you will run a better race. Perhaps your inner-monster will be more compassionate. Perhaps the sign on your front door will begin to glow out a welcome.

So be it. Amen.

READING *Affirmation* #470

We expect and affirm the unfailing renewal of life.

__Rising from the earth, and reaching for the sun, all living creatures shall fulfill themselves.

We expect and affirm the steady growth of human companionship.

__Rising from ancient cradles and reaching for the stars, people the world over shall seek the ways of understanding.

We expect and affirm a continuing hope

__That out of every tragedy the spirits of individuals shall rise to build a better world.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Brent Smith and Frederick Buechner (adapted)

My friends...look around you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. Seeing there is nothing to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, let us go forth into the world in peace."

So be it. Amen.