

BEAUTIFUL UNPREDICTABILITY
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
May 11, 2014

OPENING WORDS *A Beautiful Assortment* ~ John T. Crestwell, Jr.

Our galaxy is on little speck among trillions of specks in the universe. Like the lines on a zebra or the human fingerprint, no two galaxies appear to be exactly alike. There are varying solar systems and planets, and many suns, in these galaxies, each with different dimensions.

We live in an expansive and diverse universe. But you don't have to go to outer space to learn that lesson, right here on earth there are millions of species of all types - animals, insects, trees plants, and sea creatures. There's fresh water and salt water, blue water, green water; tropic and arctic climates. And then there are the people - all types, with varying languages and customs. Life is a beautiful assortment! We have so much to celebrate!

FLOWER COMMUNION (Part 1)

(The congregation comes forward to bring their flowers and add them to a common bouquet.)

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Title and author*

READING *Wonder Box*

(A robin's egg and seeds...how do we know what will grow? Can we predict?)

MESSAGE *Beautiful Unpredictability*

Last month, the non-fiction book club...which you have probably realized provides a lot of sermon fodder...read *The Quantum and the Lotus*, a book presented as a dialogue between a Buddhist monk and an astrophysicist. It is dense and complex in the language of both of these realms...physics and eastern philosophy...and I have to admit that I didn't read the entire book. It's not that I didn't LIKE it...it was just a little overwhelming.

I find it impossible to predict which books will please which individuals in that group. In this case, I was surprised that Ed Adams very much liked *The Quantum and the Lotus*, or maybe more accurately, he liked half of it...the half that was about science. In our discussion, Ed told a personal story, one he has, in turn, allowed me to share with you.

Ed is a mechanical engineer. He was schooled in Newtonian science...a science that believes nature has laws which we can discover and know in exacting ways. Here in Peterborough, working for GE, Ed was assigned the task of designing the vessel that would contain a nuclear reactor. This required that he work with the physicists, because it was up to them to determine the dimensions for that vessel, in order that it be a size to safely contain the reactions.

In working with them, Ed soon came to realize that they were not Newtonian scientists. They were instead working with probability... something he found rather shocking. You see, the

physicists could not tell him exactly how big the vessel should be, because how many neutrons would be produced in the fission process can't be predicted... sometimes a split results in one neutron, sometimes two. So, as a result, Ed found he was working to design a vessel for an immensely powerful, potentially dangerous, reactor on the basis of something unpredictable.

Unpredictability generally scares us. Just do an internet search for 'unpredictable' and then look for articles and links that celebrate unpredictability. I can tell you, having tried it, that there are very few. The unpredictable is usually associated with chaos, with fear, with a lack of control, with suffering. I wonder why that is. I wonder why, in a world built out of unpredictable stuff, we are not more at home with it.

I offer a couple of Unitarian takes on this. Rev. Erin Gingrich preached:

"Quantum physics tells us that absolute knowledge, complete understanding, a total grasp of universal reality, will never be ours. Not only have our hopes been dashed for ultimate theoretical knowledge of the behavior of a single subatomic particle, but it turns out that in many respects life is organized in such a way that its behavior is inherently unpredictable, too. It's not just a pair of colliding electrons that defy prediction. The mutations and genetic interactions that drive evolution are also unpredictable, even in principle...."

In a flower communion sermon, Rev. Gary Kowalski shared this:

"...toward the end of the age of dinosaurs, about a hundred million years ago, something strange and very wonderful happened. Plants learned how to do a new thing. They learned how to reproduce through seeds instead of spores.

And with the invention of seeds came all of the birds that feed on seeds, the cardinals and the grosbeaks and finches. And the grass made grasslands and all the creatures that thrive on the grassland, horses and zebras and prairie dogs and antelope and deer. And plants learned how to produce fruit, as a source of food for the growing seed. And the fruit also provided meals for monkeys and chimpanzees and finally for you and me. And it all started with the rise of the angiosperms, which is the name scientists give to flowers or plants that produce seeds and flowers and fruits. The Earth took on a whole new look...."

This completely unpredictable happenstance...seeds...created the amazing diversity of life we have today...made it possible for humanity to emerge...in a diversity of life that is not static, but is ever ongoing in its unpredictably beautiful evolution.

On the most basic level of our beings...whether that be atoms, or quarks, or strings, or waves, or particles, or spirit...there exists unpredictability. We have no way to understand yet, and may never understand, how it all works... or to predict, let alone control, outcomes. Life is unpredictable. Since unpredictability is the stuff we are made of, why is it that we remain so suspect of that unpredictability, so cautious?

I imagine every mother, and every father for that matter, is deeply familiar with the unpredictability of becoming parents. I'm not talking about when the baby will come, or whether the birth will go smoothly or if there will be complications. I'm not really even talking about what gender the baby will be, although all of this can produce both stress and

wondering. The immense unpredictability is WHO that child will be. What will they look like? Will they be healthy? What will their personality be like? What choices will they make in life? Will they be happy? And what about who YOU will be as parents? Will you be up to the task? Will YOU be happy? We are born in unpredictability.

You plant a seed and you never really know what's going to happen. Like the ephemeral annuals in the reading earlier, seeds wait for their time. And when their time comes, no matter when that might be, they come into being, they bloom, or not. And we can't control it much. We can try to create the right conditions for a particular thing to happen, give that seed some nurture and encouragement...and then...all we can do is to try to appreciate what happens.

And so it is with each of us. We were once seeds of a kind, and we came into being through the magic of our human biology. But, WHO we become cannot be predicted. We can make the best choices possible, we can take risks to grow, we can show up in community for moral and spiritual guidance, we can offer and receive nurture and encouragement...and still, there's something unpredictable about the results. Beautifully unpredictable.

And really, would we have it any other way? Did you ever see the movie, Pleasantville? It is a film about life in a small town where everything is predictable...where everything happens just as it should. Everyone takes on their assigned roles in life without question. The same things happen at the same time...over and over. The film begins in black and white, and then something (I won't spoil it for you,) something shakes up the predictability of the town, and little by little, colour enters the film, creating chaos and anger and putting most everyone off balance... except for the few young people who welcome the incoming colour with joy and excitement.

Beautiful unpredictability. We wake up every day not knowing what is going to happen. Will it rain or shine, or snow? We are most assuredly preoccupied with predicting the weather, yet, while we can assign some probabilities, we can't completely predict what the day will bring.

Remember the probabilities in Ed's story? That the vessel to contain a nuclear reactor was designed based on probability? While they couldn't know whether fission would produce one neutron or two, on the whole it seems, by averaging millions and billions of reactions, apparently we (read, some brilliant scientist) could be pretty sure of the space needed to contain those reactions. It's about the probabilities.

Perhaps the same is true for seeds. We can't know for sure what one seed will do, but if we plant enough, and if the seeds are viable and find enough nourishment to grow, it's probable they will. We can't know for sure when an ephemeral annual will bloom in the desert, but we can assign some probability to how often they might provide a spectacular show. We can't know for sure that seeds spread along highways and ditches will produce lupines and milkweed and goldenrod, and yet, each year we have a pretty good idea that we'll see them there, blooming in their glory.

The same is true of humans, for us in this community, and even this flower communion. We could not predict what flowers or plants would be in bloom for you to bring this morning...it was beyond prognosticating. Yet you brought what you had, and this bouquet is the result. Sure, Lori and I worried a bit. We got a few 'store-bought' flowers to ensure there would be 'enough', and then we had to trust in probability...we had to trust in you. You showing

up...you bringing what you have... you being who you are. These flowers, representative of each of you, the bloom that you are, also represent the strong probability, the trusted probability, that in bringing a community together, there will always be enough...always be sufficient... always diversity to be celebrated.

Here's my point...the fact that you are here, as who you are, could not be predicted. Yet who you are, just as you are, is a thing of beauty, one unique part of the incredible assortment that makes up this community, this planet. As you embrace that truth, you might connect with some gratitude for all the forces that created you, that encouraged the person you are into being, with all the beautiful potentialities you still contain. And as you feel that gratitude, you can see that around you are other beings who are also things of beauty, who are also each a unique part of this beautifully unpredictable community. And as you see these beautiful beings around you, you can begin to see all the potentials they contain...maybe can even see those possibilities more clearly than they themselves can. And as you see those potentials, perhaps you will be drawn to use your gifts, your flowers, your fruits, to nurture and encourage the potential you see in others, just as others have in you. You never know what might happen, what might come to pass.

We can't know that showing someone compassion will directly result in transformation, for us or for them. We can't know that trusting in another's possibilities will bring those possibilities to life. We can't predict if our encouragement will be the bit of nurturance needed for another person to bloom. But it's highly likely that without compassion, without trust, without encouragement, without celebrating our diversity...well...it's extremely probable that less will bloom or thrive.

You see, I suspect...that is, I think it's probable...that if we see the potential in ourselves and in others...if we expect flowering rather than withering...if we trust that there are seeds of great possibilities within each of us, just under the surface...if we commit to using our powers to draw out those possibilities...I think it's probable that those seeds will grow and bloom.

Why do we fear unpredictability? Would we really rather have it any other way? What if we embraced the unpredictable? What if we woke up every morning excited about the unknown, looking forward to new experiences, thirsty for interactions with difference, curious about what's going to happen and how those around us are going to bloom and flourish? What if we gave our ourselves in service of all of the unpredictable and beautiful possibilities around us. I can't help but feel that embracing the beauty of unpredictability will lead to the probability of beauty embracing us all in return.

In unpredictability we exist. In unpredictability we create incredibly beautiful diversity. And in beauty we shall dwell.

Amen.

FLOWER COMMUNION (Part 2)

(The congregation comes forward to take a flower from the common bouquet.)

CLOSING WORDS

Song of the Universe ~ Manish K. Mishra-Marzetti

For each child that's born, a morning star rises and sings to the universe who we are.

Listen carefully....Can you hear the song? The one sung for you when you were born.
The song sung by a cosmos in motion rejoicing at your life.
You, the result. You, the outcome. You, the celebration.

Listen carefully...Can you hear it still? A song of possibility.

A reminder that we still have time to be who and what we need to be.

Listen carefully....The vast expanse echoes a recognition that it's not always easy.

Possibilities can be hard to pursue.

Roads not taken, wrong turns, destinations that disappoint. Through this, the song persists. The universe sings no less because time and space wear us thin.

The music calls us to recognize our limitations, to recognize the song is best sung with others.

Here in community, bringing alive that most primordial and original impulse, the desire to sing to the universe who we are, to celebrate and share our lives with others.

Can you hear your song? Now listen. All around you is a chorus of other songs, each a celebration.

Go, and celebrate the diverse and beautiful unpredictability of all that surrounds us.

Go in joy!

Amen.