

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BEING BORN AND HAVING TO DIE
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
REV. JULIE STONEBERG
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OPENING WORDS *Welcome to this Community of Seekers* ~ Alexis Engelbrecht

Welcome to this community of seekers, of questioners,
and of those open to the revelation that comes from experiences with one another and
the Spirit of Life.

May we remember that while we have some answers,
we don't have all the answers;
while we know some things, we don't know everything;
and while we have lived, others have experiences very different from our own.
Welcome to this community full of questions and possibilities.

Come, let us be curious together.

STORY FOR ALL *Don't Be So Nosy, Posy!* ~ Nicola Grant

(A annoying little pig asks too many questions, but her curiosity saves the cow!)

READING *Delicious Ambiguity* ~ Marisol Caballero

"I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't
rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not
knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without
knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity." ~ Gilda Radner

How is it that I, a minister and known skeptic, am able to: a) not run around screaming
that the sky is falling and, b) do my job at all? This question perplexes those belonging
to religious traditions that offer comfort in the form of certainty.

For some, answers to life's toughest questions offer reassurance that there is order in
this chaotic world and in our sometimes chaotic lives. For others, such as myself, the
Great Mystery does not cause panic, but instead eases my mind, reminding me that I
don't have to understand or know everything; that we are all just feeling our way
through this life together. No one is an expert. Which, for those who expect a minister
to be an expert at all things crucial and who look to clergy to get them through the most
difficult days of their lives with reassuring certainties, I would definitely not be the one
to call on.

As a chaplain, I once had a patient who was dying. Though he was unable to speak, he
would communicate by writing on a legal pad. He told me that he was afraid. I asked
him what he was afraid of. He wrote, "I've never done it before..."

This patient was deeply Catholic, yet I knew him well enough to understand that his
honesty about the unknown was more a request to witness the reality of his anxiety
about the unknown, rather than to disabuse him of it. Questions of the hereafter have
always struck me as the easiest to enjoy for their ambiguity. It's almost as if I don't want
any spoilers on the surprise adventure that awaits me after I die.

Lately, however, it seems that so much of our living world, the here and now, is more topsy-turvy than usual. It's a human spiritual need to want to make sense out of the events of our lives. We not only want, but need life's unexpected changes to have a deeper meaning. If not a "perfect ending" or poems that rhyme, we would at least appreciate "a clear beginning, middle, and end" every once in a while. It's much harder to treat daily ambiguities as adventures we should face with excitement, especially as big changes seem to have a way of raining down all at once.

The longer I live, the more I am taught the same lesson, over and over, by wildly different circumstances: the more I expect the unexpected; the more I roll with the punches of life's tragedies and revel in life's joys and victories; the more I give in to the reality that I am not in charge, and cannot plan as much of, this life as I would like, the more I can fully experience and even come to enjoy the deliciousness of my journey's ambiguity. *(pause)*

THE CURIOUS CASE....

~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

As you may be aware, May is *Shifting Gears* month here in Peterborough, and while my practices are not (yet) shining examples of sustainable transportation, I am becoming more mindful and walking to the office or other locations when I can. What this has afforded me, particularly over the last few days, is an opportunity to see spring flowers in bloom up close...in all of their magnificent, colourful glory. It is a great year for tulips!

So, I was wondering yesterday, passing by a drooping bleeding heart loaded with blossoms, and then past a spectacular magnolia bush...why we can't have this beauty all the time? These precious flowers come and go so quickly, almost in the blink of an eye. I want their beauty with me, all the time, and it's hard to understand why such a thing of pleasure should have such a short life.

Which made me think about the days of this weekend, knowing that even as we might celebrate the warmth of this particular day, the heat will surely contribute to the demise of the spring flowers. Joy and grief intertwined.

And as I considered this, it was not lost on me that the same is true for all that is... things come into being...arise and then pass away. Whether a house fly or an ironwood tree, whether a perennial or biennial or the mysterious ephemeral annual, whether a speck of dust or a distant star, a farm animal or a farmer...all things arise and pass away, taking on new forms as the atoms that formed them dissemble and then rearrange themselves into something else.

And it's one thing, somewhat graspable, that this impermanence is true for everything outside of ourselves; it is a harder thing to grock our own existence. It is a very curious thing that this particular being...me...standing here before you...was formed and grew out of somewhat indistinct and random matter, and now is able to have a conscious experience of myself and my life and my place in the universe.

'Yesterday' I had no idea where and what Peterborough was, and today, I am walking down its sidewalk, smelling the roses as it were. 'Yesterday' I had never met you, and today I can't imagine what my life would be if it weren't shared with you. 'Today' I am alive and well;

tomorrow I may not be. It is simply a curious thing...to have been born, and to randomly be the person I am having the very real experiences that I have, and to know that at some point I am going to die, and all that was me will be gone.

And so it is with you. This experience we call living is indeed a curious thing.

It is said that religion arose out of humankind's need to create meaning from the mysteries of existence, and I have oft appreciated the words of the late UU minister Forrest Church, who defined religion as "our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." It is here in this religious home that we do collective sense-making. Religion, if you dare call what we do here that, is how we search for truth and meaning. As we just sang, "We seek elusive answers to the questions of this life."¹

Why? Why this impulse to make sense of it all? As far as I know, a tulip does not wonder why it was born, or what its purpose might be. A star does not spin with anxiety, worrying about its lifespan. While we know elephants feel emotion, I don't imagine that they spend much time wondering why they exist. So why do we?

Years ago, a young adult here gifted me with a mix of songs they thought I'd like. One was a piece of poetry set to music. The poem is called "Being Human" and the artist, or artists, are Naima.² I will intersperse lines from that wondering poem throughout my message today.

Like these:

I wonder if land feels stepped upon
If sand feels insignificant
If trees need to question their lovers to know where they stand
If branches waver at the crossroads unsure of which way to grow
If leaves understand they're replaceable and they still dance when the wind blows

Do you dance when the wind blows even though you know you're replaceable? Are you unsure of which way to grow? Speaking for myself, I waste too much energy worrying about the significance of my life, and I perseverate too much about making my life matter in some way. I wonder if there is some better way to bloom naturally, as I was meant to do.

But that's the curious trap of life, isn't it? Because we have consciousness, because our minds want answers and understanding, because we are aware of our temporary state of existence, we sometimes lose touch with the inherent beauty of that existence. In the process of trying to find meaning, some of us have difficulty remembering to live the lives we have to the fullest.

(Which is not to say that there is no natural beauty in our innate seeking and questioning... because there is... and that's another curiosity!)

In a sermon about the good life, my friend and colleague Rev. Jill Cowie told of the work of psychologist Frank Martela at the University of Helsinki.³ His research into human meaning-making apparently suggests that human blossoming requires three interconnected yet separate

¹ We Laugh, We Cry #354 (SLT)

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzGNqp5l3_U

³ <https://uuharvard.org/services/life-after-life/>

qualities. First, we need a certain coherence that comes when what we inwardly know to be true is reflected in the way we are in the world. This kind of coherence, by my lights, requires self-reflection and self-knowledge. We need to have a sense of who we are...at our core...to know if we are tulips, or jonquils, or hyacinths.

Then, according to Martela, we need purpose...a reason for being. To exist suggests that there is a reason that we exist. And the connective tissue between coherence and purpose is the third necessary quality for human blooming...which is to have significance...to matter.

So, if we are to blossom, if Martela is right, we need an inward/outward coherence, we need purpose, and we need to know our significance. And consciousness is a pre-requisite for understanding and realizing these qualities. This is how humans bloom. We might look to a tulip for inspiration, and we might wish for the 'mindlessness' of the non-human world, but we are who we are...stuck with the whole of our thinking, dreaming, wondering humanness...for better or for worse.

I wonder if the sun debates dawn some mornings
not wanting to rise out of bed from under the down-feather horizon
If the sky grows tired of being everywhere at once
adapting to the mood swings of the weather
If clouds drift off trying to hold themselves together
making deals with gravity to loiter a little longer⁴

Are there mornings when you do not want to rise, days when you feel pulled in every direction, times when you are barely able to hold yourself together?

It is such a curious thing, that our humanness both sets us apart from the rest of nature, while at the same time, we find great inspiration in nature to guide us, and to realign ourselves. As Mary Oliver wrote her beautiful poem, *Lilies*:⁵

I have been thinking
about living
like the lilies
that blow in the fields.
They rise and fall
in the wedge of the wind,
and have no shelter
from the tongues of the cattle,
and have no closets or cupboards,
and have no legs.
Still I would wait all day
for the green face
of the hummingbird
to touch me.

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzGNqp5l3_U

⁵ House of Light p 12

What I mean is,
could I forget myself
even in those feathery fields? ...

Could I forget myself? Could I let go, and act like a lily? I can't help but think of Jesus' words found in Matthew 6:

Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns...

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin...

Consider the lilies. Look at the birds. They are doing nothing but what they do...they do nothing but what it is in their nature to do. It is in our nature to search and to question, and it is in our nature to try to understand who we are and why we are here. It's in our nature to want to have a purpose and to know our significance.

So, no matter how much mindfulness meditation we do, no matter how enlightened we may become, we still remain human, with some combination of a thinking mind, a feeling heart and a sensing body, all of which serve us well, but which also, sometimes, get in our way.

I'm wondering...maybe it's not consciousness that gets in the way of simply acting like a tulip. Maybe it's not the fact that we question, but more the spirit in which we question that can be our undoing. Seeking and searching can be done with simple curiosity, or they can be undertaken with anxiety and fear. Questions can be grounded in honest wondering, or can grow out of insecurity and distrust. (And I in no way discount the very real experiences many of us have had that have laid down a path of perhaps appropriate fear and anxiety within us.)

Wondering and worrying are both human capacities, but feel very different in our bodies. Acknowledging impermanence and fearing death are both possible responses to our mortality, but run very different energy. I wonder...

If storms have regrets
If volcanoes get stressed
If compost believes in life after death
I wonder if breath ever thinks of suicide
If the wind just wants to sit still sometimes
and watch the world pass it by
If smoke was born knowing how to rise
If rainbows get shy backstage not sure if their colors match right⁶

I wonder. I wonder how wondrous it is that I can try to understand rainbows and smoke and the wind. I wonder at my ability to feel a storm, and to smell compost, and imagine myself to be like a tree, or a leaf, or a tulip.

And I wonder if knowing that one day I will die is not the exact truth that makes my curiosity

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzGNqp5I3_U

so wondrous, and my brief life so meaningful. As far as I know, I had no choice in the matter of coming into this world. I do know that I've had lots of choice about what to make of the life I have, and I hope those choices have brought more joy, more peace, more love to the world. But ultimately, I have no idea what difference any of that will make when I'm gone. That's the curious case of being born and having to die. We have what we have...and like all of life, we have it for a limited time.

A colleague recommended an app that I installed to my phone this week. It's called WeCroak, and its sole activity is to poke me with messages and quotes, about five times a day, that remind me that I'm going to die. I guess it's a technological version of the Buddhist practice of contemplating death. As I understand it, this practice...cultivating a comfort with death...is meant to release our death-grip on life. It deepens our connection with the spirit of life itself. Knowing, and acknowledging, that we are going to die, makes life all the more meaningful.

I'm not sure about this app yet...so far, it just makes me laugh. There is so much that I don't know. So much to be curious about. So much I don't understand.

The end of Naima's poem suggests that our efforts should just give way to existence. Simply exist. As the humans we are. Isn't this existence a wondrous and curious thing?

May it always be so.

READING

When Death Comes

~ Mary Oliver

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?
And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

*** CLOSING WORDS** ~ *DeReau K. Farrar and Marisol Caballero*

Go your ways...approaching this moment, this day, this week, month, this year, this life
as an adventure whose ending we do not yet know.

Go, embracing each plot twist with innocent wonder, that all which is in us and all that
is around us may constantly draw us to our holiest selves.

May we go, committing our hearts to the call of making life more abundant – for
ourselves as fiercely as for others and for our planet.

May we be reminded every day that we are not the end of knowing.

Blessed be. So be it. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME