

**EXPECT NOTHING**  
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH  
REV. JULIE STONEBERG  
SEPTEMBER 1, 2019

**OPENING WORDS**

*Expect Nothing*

~ Alice Walker

Expect nothing. Live frugally  
On surprise.  
become a stranger  
To need of pity  
Or, if compassion be freely  
Given out  
Take only enough  
Stop short of urge to plead  
Then purge away the need.  
  
Wish for nothing larger  
Than your own small heart

Or greater than a star;  
Tame wild disappointment  
With caress unmoved and cold  
Make of it a parka  
For your soul.  
  
Discover the reason why  
So tiny human midget  
Exists at all  
So scared unwise  
But expect nothing. Live frugally  
On surprise.

Come, let us be surprised together.

**STORY FOR ALL AGES**

*Drawn Together* ~ Minh Lê

*(In this book of mostly pictures, a boy who expects to have a dreary day with his grandfather is delightfully surprised by something they have in common.)*

**READING**

*Expect Nothing*

~ Robin Tanner<sup>1</sup>

These words were inspired by Alice Walker's reminder to: "Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise."

I had finally begun to relax – a bit. We were enroute to Pennsylvania. My friend, a formal part of our "family," was visiting. We decided a visit to a crayon factory was the perfect winter outing for toddlers. The day was clear and crisp with typical bumper-to-bumper traffic for northern Jersey.

I adjusted the radio station when my eyes caught the approaching car in my rearview mirror – too close to my bumper. I had to hit the brakes because the cars were slowing down. We stopped. The car behind edged closer to my bumper.

"Seriously!" (although we know I said more than this word)

My friend was jarred into a wakeful state.

I had become accustomed to Jersey drivers: the honking, occasional yelling and sometimes a gesture or two. At first, it was a shock from North Carolina drivers who refused to blow a horn when they ought to blow it; but good grief, the minivan behind me could hold a deck of cards to my bumper.

Then, the honking started.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/braverwiser/expect-nothing>

“Okay, okay, just pass me,” I shouted as my son echoed, “Otay, otay” from the backseat as if negotiating a cookie swap with his sibling.

The navy minivan moved between lanes, jockeying toward the lane beside me as traffic started moving again. So, now they were going to pass me on the right. Whatever. The minivan approached. I could see the man had rolled down the window on the driver’s side and his arm was already out of the window.

I braced myself for a gesture.

As the car passed, he made a peace sign and shouted “Justice!” The man was smiling broadly. I raised my eyebrows in complete confusion. What the heck?

It took my friend from the congenial state of North Carolina to remind me that I was driving my wife’s car with a Black Lives Matter sticker.

Sometimes, people surprise you. Sometimes, our expectations are wholly insufficient.

**MESSAGE**                      *Expect Nothing*                      ~ Rev. Julie

Expect nothing. A pretty self-effacing way to begin my message, eh? Expect nothing, because that’s about all you’re gonna get. And that’s a pretty popular way to interpret this advice...expect nothing, and at least you’ll never be disappointed.

Does that have a pessimist ring to you? It does to me, but it also is uncomfortably familiar to me. I have high expectations about a lot of things, and my experience is that reality often falls short of those expectations. For example, each Sunday morning, I stand at the door here expecting... hoping... that you and all of your friends will show up. You see, I have this picture in my mind: one time before our Day of the Dead service I had to go to Party City to pick up some supplies, and it was a madhouse there. Cars were roaring into the parking lot, and people were streaming through the front doors, filled with excitement. For Halloween supplies! For shopping! And I got to wondering why it couldn’t be like that here on a Sunday morning...and every Sunday morning I think about that experience.

And the effect of having those expectations is that I count cars and bodies, and miss being fully present to, or delightfully surprised by, each one of you as you enter. In this case, my expectations actually prevent me from living my values...which would have me be attentive to, and grateful for, each one of you.

We all have expectations, don’t we? A vision for something we’re planning? A picture of what success looks like? An expectation of perfect weather for an anticipated trip or outing? Expectations of ourselves or our children? An expectation that people will respond in a particular way? Or will do it our way?

For today’s purpose, ‘expect nothing’ is better expressed as ‘have no expectations.’ Don’t depend on things turning out just the way you planned. Don’t be tied to outcomes. Have no need to control what happens. Be content with the bits of surprise that will pepper your days if only you could stop over-salting everything with expectation.

What do you expect? Here we are, at the beginning of a month when we’re focusing on being a ‘community of expectation.’ The Buddha is purported to have said that there are at least 84,000

paths, and that all we need to do is pick one. Just so, there are many different ways to consider the role of expectation in our lives. Today we pick the path of 'expect nothing;' next week we'll look at expectation in a different way. Expect nothing, and you may be pleasantly surprised.

As you heard earlier, after I talk for a while, we'll have a bit of time for conversation. I'm not going to 'expect' that you will participate, or that what you will share will be especially wise. Instead, I will be delightfully surprised by whatever happens when you're offered the chance to speak. When that time comes, I'm going to ask what your experience has been with expectations. Have they served you? Or changed the outcome? Or led to frustration? You might tell a particular story, or just pontificate on the question. Until then, try not to get your expectations up about what will happen, okay?

I've been reading a bit of internet wisdom, and Zen Buddhist wisdom, about what it might mean to live a life without expectation. Different folks have different takes on it...in fact, one website listed 35 quotes on expecting nothing.<sup>2</sup> I found I could clump those quotes into a handful of sentiments, and those groupings provide the framework for what I'm sharing this morning.

Several of those quotes are some version of 'expect nothing and you're never disappointed,' and are attributed to such as a poet who put her head in an oven, a poet who was once trampled by a cow, and to a writer of vampire novels. I expect their life experiences and their personalities informed their perspective...as is true for us all. But in the majority of the other quotes, there exists a more 'half full' outlook.

Some others speak of expecting nothing and then doing something. For the planner and the humanist in me, I appreciate this. Just because you release expectations doesn't mean that you have to give up participating in creation. It doesn't mean we have no responsibility. You can dig into the possibilities without being attached to a specific outcome. And part of the 'doing' is in making the mental effort to resist building up false hopes.

Others speak of expecting nothing and accepting everything. There is something quite beautifully open-hearted about this one. Expect nothing. Accept everything. It's the quintessential definition of equanimity, right? Accept what is. I like the reminder that comes from Lama Richen: "It is more likely for something not to turn out as you expected than it is for it to turn out in that exact way."<sup>3</sup> There are millions of possibilities out there, so why do we pin our hopes, and our happiness, on something happening in one particular way? Accept everything.

Or what about, expect nothing, and experience freedom? Freedom from grasping, from anxiety, from disappointment. Freedom from the constraints of what is expected. This perspective awakens a bit of judgment in me. It feels a little selfish, or adolescent (perhaps it's no coincidence that this perspective is expressed by two of my favourite authors...from when I

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.awakenthegreatnesswithin.com/35-inspirational-quotes-on-expecting-nothing/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://exploringyourmind.com/expect-nothing-and-you-have-nothing-to-lose/>

was a teenager!<sup>4</sup>) But I have to remind myself that judgment is an indication of underlying expectations, so I guess I have to do some more thinking about this one.

Then at the other end of the spectrum, there's expect nothing and give everything. One writer even defines love as giving 100% and expecting 0%.<sup>5</sup> She sees that the problem with love lies in what we expect, because we tend to want those we love to be and act a certain way. Her solution lies in being selfless, and giving everything, all the time. I'm not so sure about this either, except that I know that she's right about how expectations of others don't allow us to accept who they are, and she's also right that love is best expressed without expectation of receiving anything in return.

Which is the point that another author makes<sup>6</sup> ...that giving without expectations is where joy is found. I'm going to have to take another look at her writing when canvass time rolls around next month!

And on the receiving side of things there's this: that when we expect nothing, then everything is a gift. For us. Expect nothing and you're sure to be happy. Expect nothing and the universe will give you options. Expect nothing, but appreciate everything. This perspective resonates with Alice Walker's poem, doesn't it...to expect nothing and to choose instead to live frugally on surprise. It's about living life with inquiry and wonder and about being open to personal transformation! (which is all part of our congregational purpose statement)

How about, expect nothing and show up authentically? (Well, this doesn't come from that quote collection but rather from my reflections on how I feel standing at the door on Sunday mornings.) Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote: "Our expectations often get us where we need to be; but they can also seriously impede our ability to experience anything freshly because we insist on measuring it against those expectations."<sup>7</sup> My measurement of attendance against some expectation of what a successful Sunday looks like, gets in my way... of being more light-hearted. Of adapting more easily. Having no expectations means that I'm not at the mercy of what happens. I don't have to apologize for things not going as expected. I can simply be present to your fresh faces...all of who you are and also to what you bring in the door with you.

All in all, it's good to think about expecting nothing, isn't it? It's very zen. It's all about letting go of control and releasing our grip on what should happen. And ultimately, to expect nothing seems very good advice in all of our relationships. As in the story today, when we approach one another and 'ring the doorbell', we never know what will happen, and to embrace that unknowing allows us to drop pretenses and expectations.

Or when I encounter someone I don't know, as was true in the story about the drivers that Meredith shared, maybe I could let go of my expectations created by prejudice and instead meet the person where they are. I bet that could lead to more substantive and meaningful

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<sup>4</sup> Ayn Rand and Nikos Kazantzakis

<sup>5</sup> <https://thoughtcatalog.com/marisa-donnely/2017/02/maybe-real-love-is-about-giving-everything-and-expecting-nothing/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://medium.com/personal-growth/5-ways-to-give-and-expect-nothing-in-return-28c782444178>

<sup>7</sup> Bryan, Clarice, *Expect Nothing: A Zen Guide* (Journeys Editions: Vermont, 2001) Chapter 10

relationships and encounters. I love these words of Pema Chodron:  
“The truth you believe in and cling to makes you unavailable to hear anything new.”<sup>8</sup> Our prejudices are expectations that cloud our vision of each other.

If I expect nothing particular of you, and appreciate all that you are, imagine how that changes things. If I don't need you to understand me or fix me or to do what I want, then I can be delighted by the ways you express your humanity with me. If you expect nothing of me, maybe I can release worrying about living up to your expectations of me, and simply contribute all of who I am and what I'm able to give.

So, what do you think about all of this? What is your experience of expectations? Have you felt the burden of expectations? Do you have expectations of yourself and of others? When have expectations helped you, and when have they gotten in your way? Are you practiced at expecting nothing?

We'll just pass the mic around to those who want to share, and simply be in conversation for a few minutes.

**CONVERSATION**      *What Do You Expect?*

*(Conversation ensued...and we ended with these two quotes:)*

We cannot fix the world, we cannot even fix our own life. By accepting failure we express our willingness to begin again, time after time. By recognizing failure we change, renew, adapt, listen, and grow. It is only by participating without expectation of success that we can ever truly open to the world, to suffering and to joy. ~ *Thich Nhat Hanh*

It doesn't matter what you've been given, whether it's physical deformity or enormous wealth or poverty, beauty or ugliness, mental stability or mental instability, life in the middle of a madhouse or life in the middle of a peaceful silent desert. Whatever you're given can wake you up or put you to sleep. That's the challenge of now: what are you going to do with what you have already - your body, your speech, your mind? ~ *Pema Chodron*

**READING**      *Valentine for Ernest Mann*      ~ *Naomi Shihab Nye*

You can't order a poem like you order a taco.  
Walk up to the counter, say, "I'll take two"  
and expect it to be handed back to you  
on a shiny plate.  
Still, I like your spirit.

Anyone who says, "Here's my address,  
write me a poem," deserves something in reply.  
So I'll tell a secret instead:  
poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,  
they are sleeping. They are the shadows  
drifting across our ceilings the moment  
before we wake up. What we have to do

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Chapter 15

is live in a way that lets us find them.

Once I knew a man who gave his wife  
two skunks for a valentine.

He couldn't understand why she was crying.  
"I thought they had such beautiful eyes."

And he was serious. He was a serious man  
who lived in a serious way. Nothing was ugly  
just because the world said so. He really  
liked those skunks. So, he re-invented them  
as valentines and they became beautiful.

At least, to him. And the poems that had been hiding  
in the eyes of skunks for centuries  
crawled out and curled up at his feet.

Maybe if we re-invent whatever our lives give us  
we find poems. Check your garage, the odd sock  
in your drawer, the person you almost like, but not quite.  
And let me know.

**\*CLOSING WORDS**            *Expect Nothing (reprise)*            ~ Alice Walker

Expect nothing. Live frugally  
On surprise....

Wish for nothing larger  
Than your own small heart  
Or greater than a star...

Discover the reason why  
So tiny human midget  
Exists at all  
So scared unwise  
But expect nothing. Live frugally  
On surprise.

Go in peace and love, rejoicing in each other!

**EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**