

GREAT (RE-INVENTED) EXPECTATIONS

The Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg

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OPENING WORDS *Life Is Not What You* ~ Sharon Dolin¹

expected – cows
ruminate by the highway
even in rain or bat their
ears forward and back and how
you thought the story of your life
would get told: the children you thought
you'd already have by now partially grown
books and other accomplishments – houses
owned cities seen lakes traversed – and now
we're stuck in traffic
and it's not even rush hour
with the hurricane storm
moving slowly north from Alabama.
How come it's raining here already
somewhere south of Albany – just one
damned thing after another and those
injections you've had to give yourself and
your dad's bypass surgery. Just look:
Evening primrose all along the roadside match
the painted line and Queen Anne's lace
on the other side rows of young corn
joe-pye weed blurred to Scottish heather.
When you go for a walk blackberries have started
ripening you pluck two
from each bush notice tadpoles suck air
along the fountain's rim. Such small swishings
of joy maybe
this is it – every day puts forth a new song deer flies
dive-bombing your head when the breeze
lets up –

Just look. In this time together, let us pause, and look.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Maybe Tomorrow* ~ Charlotte Agell

(Elba and Norris couldn't be more different. Elba drags a block around with her. Norris dances with butterflies.)

READING *Lessons from a Car Radio* ~ Jackie Clement

Years ago, when my former car (rest its soul) turned ten, it developed an unpredictability and surliness often associate with adolescence. In the beginning it was

¹ Sharon Dolin, *Realm of the Possible* (Four Way, 2004)

just little things, like a rash of burned-out headlight bulbs and rogue seat adjustments, but the one quirk that really got on my nerves was the radio. It turned on and off at will, and seemingly at whim. At first it would just take a little while until the car warmed up before it started working. Later it would turn on when I started the car, and go off a few minutes later, then back on later still. For a while it worked when it was hot – and then it worked when it was cold. Basically it came on and went off whenever it felt like it.

Over a period of ten years, I learned a lot of things from my car radio – like all the words to “Achy Breaky Heart,” and the fact that I still remembered all the words to every song from the sixties, although I could barely remember my own phone number. But during the four years I was in seminary I stuck pretty much to National Public Radio, and since I often drove up to three hours a day, I learned a lot from my radio. The greatest lesson though, was this: Never get attached to an NPR [or CBC] story because you never know when the radio is going to turn off. This lesson – repeated many times in the years since – was a lesson in letting go.

My radio acted as a Buddhist mater, teaching me not to become attached to the state of things as they are, or to a particular outcome. I haven’t given up hoping for the best. But I’ve come to realize that while sometimes the outcome I crave is formed from high-minded ideals based on experience, reason and research, other times it’s just what I want. And when what I want doesn’t happen, it’s like Galinda says in the stage show *Wicked*, “Something’s terribly wrong. I’m not getting my way.”

The challenge for me is to see the longer view beyond my limited perspective. It helps to remember that life is impermanent and imperfect. This, coupled with the faith that everything is innately connected, reminds me that clinging to particulars is both futile and unnecessary.

There’s one other thing that I’ve learned from my car radio. When I graduated from seminary, three churches within commuting distance of my home were looking for ministers. They were all prestigious pulpits and they were not looking for someone fresh out of school. The night after I received the third rejection letter, I headed out to a meeting at my internship site, feeling dejected and blue. When the car started, the radio was silent. And then, about two minutes into the trip, it turned on, to give me half a line from the Moody Blues’ “Nights in White Satin.” The words said, “I love you.” I know it was only the car radio, but somehow I believed it. *(pause)*

MESSAGE *Great (re-invented) Expectations* ~ Rev. Julie

Remember little Pip in Dicken’s *Great Expectations*? He received a small inheritance, which allowed him to imagine a different reality. As is said of Pip by another of the book’s characters: “...he has Great Expectations....He will come into handsome property...immediately removed from his present sphere of life and from this place and be brought up as a gentleman--in a word, as a young fellow of great expectations.” Pip dreamed of being released from his impoverished circumstances and to become, essentially, someone else.

Doesn’t this happen for us all the time? At least it does for me. We receive some little glimmer of hope, some opening of possibility, some promise of success, and we enlarge that little glimmer into a bright and promising star...one which we are most certain to attain.

Or just the opposite? We get a rejection letter, trip over an obstacle, or see clouds on the

horizon, and predict that gloom, despair and agony are sure to descend on us. We fall prey to our inner critic, or our inner Eeyore, and suddenly there's nothing we can do right, which doesn't really matter anyway because the world's going to hell in a handbasket.

As Paula mentioned earlier, in some ways, we're talking today about the optimist and the pessimist, not as things that we either are or aren't, but rather as two voices that show up, often at the same time, to influence our decisions. Parker Palmer² has spoken of how we exist and make choices while in the gap between the difficult realities of life and all that we dream to be possible. He says that the ability to stand in that gap is a very important life skill...to stand there without becoming either an irrelevant idealist or a hopeless cynic...to know that we can't 'fix' what is, but also trusting that we will find a way to move on. It's the ability to hold hard truths alongside our hopes for the future.

In essence, it seems to me, Palmer is saying that if we can hold both optimism and pessimism at the same time, in tension, and especially if we can do that within a community of support, we are more likely to become co-creative agents in making a new way. Holding both, while not falling completely one way or the other, is a quality that helps to move us all forward, individually, and collectively, step by step toward the just and sustainable world that we dream of.

Something like Rev. Jackie Clement's car. There's an example of a hard reality, right? Many of us have experienced this...a car we can't afford to replace...a car we desperately need to get to a job or to get the kids to school...a car that by no stretch of the imagination is perfect, and yet somehow it keeps going...a car we feel makes us a laughing stock...a car we fear might even be unsafe, and which is definitely not fuel-efficient...and yet... it's the car we have.

To be an irrelevant idealist might find us focusing so much on the car we WISH we had that we pay no attention to the car we HAVE. We might forego critical repairs in favour of buying lottery tickets. We might stop driving it for fear of being associated with it, and by doing that, miss school or lose our job. We might not even see it when a good affordable used car comes our way.

To be a hopeless cynic would have the same results but with a different attitude. We'd refuse to drive that car because it certainly would fail us; and we wouldn't care for it because it certainly didn't deserve our attention. Either way, we'd be left sitting along the roadside as life passed us by.

But Jackie navigates the gap. She keeps driving the car. Even though she can't completely rely on the heating and cooling systems. Even though the radio goes on and off randomly. And what is so wonderful is that in that gap, something happens. She reflects. She is changed. She benefits from even the partial NPR stories. She learns about letting go. She learns not to be attached to outcomes. She learns that while life isn't perfect, she can still hope for the best.

And what of Elba and Norris, the two little beings in today's story?³ You probably ascertained that the intended message was that of sitting with, and listening to, a friend in their grief. But if we set Elba's loss of Little Bird aside, we can look at these friends using Parker Palmer's paradigm. Norris is the irrelevant idealist, with his head in a cloud of butterflies, and Elba has

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK0dXNK94BM>

³ Refers to today's story...*Maybe Tomorrow*, by Charlotte Agell

embraced hopeless cynicism, and carries it with her in the form of a heavy block.

And then the story works itself out in the gap between them. In order to create a way through, Norris has to set aside his dreams of spending days picnicking at the beach, and Elba has to find some spark of willingness to move, to get up. And after days of simply sitting together, and then walking and talking, and walking and not talking, they find a way. Norris recognizes that helping a friend to carry their grief is more important than going on picnics. Elba, recognizing she will always carry some of her grief with her, begins to enjoy the very present sunsets and butterflies.

Yep. There are cows on the road, AND evening primrose along the way. There is one damn thing after another, AND there are blackberries ripening. Just look.⁴

Whatever our expectations...whether we are convinced that we are going to win the lottery or are sure that lightning will strike us dead...things probably won't turn out exactly the way we had predicted. And yet, our expectations have some effect on us, and even change how we move through our days.

There's plenty of research⁵ that shows that what we expect to happen affects our actual experience. Whether it's the expectation of pain or pleasure, hot or cold, bitter or sweet, our pre-conceived notions of what is going to happen influence the way we see the world, and actually affect our experience of it. We come to a meeting, and our expectations and intentions influence whether we have a boring or stimulating experience. We set alarm clocks, and our pre-conceived notions about mornings affect whether we groan or rejoice when that alarm rings. We set a goal, and our expectations about how realistic it is that we will reach it affect its potential actualization. As expressed in a poem shared here a couple of weeks ago, our pre-conceived notions of 'skunk' affect whether we see something dangerously stinky or something with soft fur and beautiful eyes.⁶

And, as will be discussed at the congregational meeting which follows, our expectations of the veracity of our commitments and the depth of our resources will have some affect on how, and even whether or not, we are able to address accessibility needs in this building.

Fact is, our human minds cannot stop trying to predict the future; that is our nature. But we should be aware that the act of anticipating, changes our very physiology, and therefore changes our experience of what we see and what we are able to do. That's because we tend to experience the reality that we anticipate.

I'm layering several things here. One layer is the recommendation that we get more comfortable in the space between cynic-producing realities and the impossible dreams, without being swayed too heavily in either direction. Learning to reside more easily in the in-between space enlarges the possibility of creating life-giving outcomes. The practice of staying there requires us to be okay with murky, foggy unknowns.

Another layer is the evidence-based reality that the way we lean (optimist or pessimist) has an effect on what happens. Being pessimistic, no matter how reasonable that stance, seems to contribute to gloom and despair. Being optimistic, no matter how irrational it may be, seems to

⁴ Refers to opening words

⁵ One example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTTBruF21Fk>

⁶ <https://poets.org/poem/valentine-ernest-mann>

contribute to more sunny results.

And then there's another layer. Which is that we always, always have the ability to shift our expectations. So what if my car radio isn't reliable; I can choose to celebrate when it reminds me that I am loved. If the particular star I have hung my dreams on suddenly goes dim, I can learn more about hanging out in dimming light. If I have been defeatist about some project, when it succeeds, I can still embrace the positive changes it brings.

All this to say that we can re-invent the greatness (or smallness) of our expectations. We can change course. We can re-frame the block so that rather than weighing us down, it offers us a place to sit. We can turn the annoyance of a silent radio into an opportunity for quiet self-reflection. You never know, we might be surprised by the messages we hear.

Rev. Victoria Safford speaks eloquently, as she always does, about such changes of course.⁷ It's not that we should choose to see silver linings or necessarily resign ourselves to how things are, and surely we don't have to be thankful for our hardships. Rather, she says, it's about choosing gratitude and wonder. It's the willingness to stop and look. There is meaning-making to be done in every situation, something beautiful along every path, some gift in every loss. Yes, the reality is very often the cloudy sky, the rocky road, the darn-shitty situation. But the religious life, the well-examined life, is the ongoing, daily process of re-orienting ourselves toward new revelations and transformation.

Life breaks us, and disturbs our plans, and upends our expectations. But no matter what, life calls us on...to justice and to joy and to love. Better not to expect to escape our lives and circumstances, but to expect ourselves to be able to flexibly navigate our lives with purpose and meaning.

Palmer says this work is exercise for our hearts. Literally exercise. Repeated weight-lifting. A committed practice of turning our hearts to wonder and to gratitude so that our hearts become more open, even bigger, more capacious.⁸ And bigger hearts have more space for compassion, and understanding, and love. Maybe even more room for change.

See, the thing is, I believe in you. I believe in us. I believe that we are surrounded in beauty and that the healing and change we need is at hand. I believe that love can flow unobstructed through us, and that we have the strength to answer the call to service in the name of life itself. This is our inheritance. This is what we've been given. This is the inheritance on which we can build great expectations...as long as, that is, we're willing to re-direct, re-frame, and re-calculate as needed.

I believe in you. I believe in us. And all the people said...amen.

READING *Recalculating* ~ Victoria Safford

"We crave order and control and predictable patterns in this life. When we can't find them (because they mostly do not exist), we get anxious and we make them up, imposing our will or our opinion or our expectations of ourselves, of everybody else, all over the place, and when the universe rears up on its hind legs and says, "Well, actually no. You're not the boss of the world, and this is not how it's gonna go," we are mightily disrupted..."

⁷ <https://whitebearunitarian.org/recalculating-02-18-18-sermon/>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK0dXNK94BM>

How we weather the disruptions; how we welcome them sometimes, or at least acknowledge them, honor them; how we grieve completely when loss or affliction assails us – how we grieve completely, and keep on moving forward anyway, however incompletely; how we let go of one idea, or one assumption, one dream, and re-orient our minds, our spirits, our plans around new revelations of reality – well, that is the religious life...” *(move to piano)*

***CLOSING WORDS** *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front (excerpts)*

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.

Listen to carrion -- put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts...

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nearest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go.
Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Reframe. Reinvent. Recalculate. Go in peace and love, and with great expectations.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME