

White Bear

Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 11 April 2010

Always Almost There

David Schwartz, ministry intern

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651/ 426-2369 dschwartz@whitebearunitarian.org

Always Almost There

A few years back I taught high school. Ninth grade world history. And the very first week of school, I overheard this conversation—two high school freshman talking with each other in a study hall.

"I can't wait until we're seniors," one said, "they can do so much, we're like, ugh."

We all talked funny one way or another at that age. So, though it isn't eloquent in the traditional sense of oratory, there is nonetheless a great deal of meaning contained in those words: a belief that what they had now was worthless: they had none of the benefits, advantages and privileges that would surely come in time, they were not adults like those high school seniors were.

It's difficult to convey the total emotion behind that 9th grader's statement "we're like... ugh." A disgust with where they were, but more than that, in the words you could see so clearly a total trust and belief in the future. These two kids really, honestly, wholly believed that when they were seniors in High School, *everything* would be better than it was as a freshman.

We can laugh at that sort of thinking, because, most of us discovered at age 18 that it was really the 21 year olds who had it made. And then, of course, by age 21, we realized it was the 25-year olds who lived the good life.

And by 25, we were either looking forward to retirement or back to high school.

The promise of wholeness and the good life is tantalizingly close and always out of reach. Just ahead of us, just a moment out of reach, almost visible, a promised future.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's book, "The Great Gatsby" is in large part, about just this idea. Maybe you remember the closing lines from High School English. Maybe they resonate even if you've forgotten them:

"Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us, it eluded us then, but that's no matter--tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms out further... and one fine morning----"

We can almost see it: a better job? a bit more money? if we could just pay off those credit cards, or live in a better neighborhood, or go on a longer vacation, or have the cabin on a lake, or a partner who better satisfied us. These things may have eluded us before, but that's no matter--tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms out further...and one fine morning----

But the future recedes before us year by year, and if we measure ourselves against a vision of that orgastic future, we will never arrive, for it slips back no matter how far we travel.

We reach sometimes a certain point where wholeness and the good life had been promised, only to discover ourselves as broken as ever when we arrive, still incomplete, and crisis erupts.

We used to have the mid-life crisis: a generation was told that once they had a good job and kids, a house in the suburbs and a car, they would have "arrived" and everything would be well. Perhaps you've read or heard about the new "quarter-life crisis." It's a variety of the mid-life crisis: a generation was told that once they go to a good university and graduate and get a good job, and a car, and a nice apartment, they would have arrived and everything would be well.

I remember a conversation with a co-worker a couple of years ago when I was back in Boston, still in school. We were carpooling home, sitting in traffic. I was telling this coworker about my plans for the future, about ministry, the preaching and teaching I was doing. We were waiting at a long light. The sun was just over the horizon, and though there was light in the sky, the air was cool and purple and autumn.

She said: "Dave, I don't know. I don't know what to do. I've worked at this company for a few years, and I don't know what comes next. Maybe more school? Maybe... Something..."

This is the crisis: the future has arrived, and we were promised that we would be whole when we got here. That was the deal, wasn't it? But we are not whole. As we approach, the future slips further out of reach.

The same idea:

I read, a few years back, a survey examining American's satisfaction with their income. Across all income levels, the majority were unsatisfied with what they had, they wanted more. Nothing so bad about that, right? It's ambition, it's the American dream after all! And I invite you to consider for a moment (and you don't have to tell anyone the answer to this question) but answer it: the wealth you have, and the wealth you would prefer to have. How much more do you want?

Well the surprise in the survey was not that people wanted more, the surprise was how *much* more they wanted. And how much more do people want? Just... a little more. No one making 30k a year wanted to be a millionaire. They wanted to make 50k a year. No one making 150,000 a year wanted a ten million dollar mansion. They just wanted a little more, just a little more. Across all income levels it was the same--if only there was a little more.

If we measure the good life in dollars, no one ever arrives, no matter how far they've come! Year by year, the future recedes before us, and we are always almost there.

Why do we think this way? I know it starts early.

I must have been eight years old, there was an ad on TV for a toy. Now, my mother didn't know it, but I could tell immediately: this was not just any toy. This was The Greatest Toy the World Had Ever Known. It's funny now, because I can't even quite remember what the thing looked like exactly: I think was some kind of plastic robot thing with decal stickers and it launched a second robot car... I pestered my mother for it constantly and after great length, and much discussion, she relented. On the drive over to the toy store, I knew, with total certainty, that The

Greatest Toy the World Had Ever Known would revolutionize my playtime, would fill those afternoons with joy -- the possibilities were endless for what I could do with this thing.

You know the end of the story, of course, you've lived it too. Perhaps you had a toy like this too, or a job, or a house, or a relationship: after what seemed like months of aching for it with your entire being, you got it. And once you got it... well, it just wasn't all that great. Nothing changed. Or, perhaps you were satisfied for a moment, but almost immediately, there was something more desired.

Why do we think this way? We're wired for it.

Friends of mine who are recovering from drug and alcohol addiction tell me this. They say: "I never just wanted the drink in my hand, I only ever wanted the next one. And that never changed no matter how many I got."

Our brains are wired for it. Our culture encourages it. We're living in an "always almost there" world. Looking to be fixed. For something else to fix us.

This isn't a new problem unique to 21st century Americans. It comes with being human. Two thousand years ago Jesus was talking about this same sort of problem with his disciples. We don't often quote the bible from this pulpit, but this is a good story, a story as old as people. The teacher says:

"Do not worry about your life," he says, "what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body or what you will wear... can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Can you add one inch to your height? why do you worry about clothing?"

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" But strive first for the kingdom and for righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Do not worry about tomorrow. What an odd thing to say! I remember reading this saying and being perplexed by it.

Here we have Jesus telling people: "do not worry about your life, about what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." I read that and, being a practical person, I thought to myself: "come on, we've got to wear clothing (we live in Minnesota, it gets cold!), we've got to eat food." This is one of those scripture passages that makes sense in the context of Jesus' ministry—it's hot in Judea!—but isn't really something for my own life.

But the key word, as I read the passage now, is *worry*. "Do not *worry*" about these things, Jesus says. And it means: don't obsess; don't ruminate all night long on them; don't spend any more time on them than they need. He doesn't say, "go naked and go hungry and go thirsty," he says: these are not the things which are important in life, these are not the things of real value. These are not the things to cling to, to stretch out your arms for.

He says: "Do not worry, about those things. It is perfectly clear that you need them. But strive first for the kingdom and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Strive first for the Kingdom—and that means: work to building a just world here and now; strive first to do good, to be whole. To live well is not to finally make it to the future receding before you, to live well is not to run faster, is not to stretch our arms out further, is not to make it up to the next income bracket—these things are not why we live our lives. Strive first to live as a whole person: to grow your soul, to serve the world. Strive first for righteousness.

In the good times we must tend carefully to that inner flame of divinity, that guiding light steering us towards righteousness, strengthening us on the journey. And in the difficult times, the light of another can rekindle our own.

The poet Robyn Sarah writes about this quiet strength that comes from living life. Whether from a Divine source, or just from the act of living. It's called "Riveted":

It is possible that things will not get better
than they are now, or have been known to be.
It is possible that we are past the middle now.
It is possible that we have crossed the great water
without knowing it, and stand now on the other side.
Yes: I think that we have crossed it. Now
we are being given tickets, and they are not
tickets to the show we had been thinking of,
but to a different show, clearly inferior.

Check again: it is our own name on the envelope.
The tickets are to that other show.

It is possible that we will walk out of the darkened hall
without waiting for the last act: people do.
Some people do. But it is probable
that we will stay seated in our narrow seats
all through the tedious dénouement
to the unsurprising end — riveted, as it were;
spellbound by our own imperfect lives
because they are lives,
and because they are ours.

For the future that recedes before us, the promise of wholeness, of "if only" is lovely to look on, and its song beckons gleefully, it calls for us to run faster, to work harder, it promises perfection, it promises that if we just stretch our arms further, that one fine morning will arrive and---

So instead, strive first for the kingdom – that is, for peace within and without. Strive first for righteousness.

This is the work of a lifetime. Be patient with yourself, be compassionate with yourself. Be diligent.

Amen.