

A MESSAGE FOR THE FUTURE

A Sermon Delivered for
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, February 3, 2008
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Ancient Reading
Modern Reading

“The Future”

Matthew 6:24-34
Wesley McNair, 1998

There’s an old Chinese story about a simple old man who lived with his wife and son on a farm. They didn’t have much, but they owned a horse that pulled their plow and tilled their fields so they were able to raise enough food. And they were proud their son, their only child, was growing up strong and good.

Then one day the horse disappeared. They looked high and low. They gathered the neighbors. No one had seen the horse. The neighbors began to commiserate, “O how terrible for you! What bad luck! How sad for you!” The farmer shrugged and replied, “You can never tell; you can never tell.”

Some months later, just as the last of winter had passed and spring was starting, the family was awakened by a noise. The farmer jumped out of bed and out into the yard. And there was a familiar form: their horse had come home, but not alone. With it was a beautiful black mare. It didn’t belong to any of their neighbors. By mid-day the news had spread. Everyone gathered. “Just think,” they said, “yesterday you had no horse, and now you have two! What good fortune!” The farmer shrugged and said, “You can never tell; you can never tell.”

With two horses, the farm work went quickly. So quickly, in fact, that the son had time to learn clever stunts riding the mare. He was soon the envy of all the other young riders in the region. But one day, just before harvest, he fell while riding, breaking a leg. “What a disaster!” said the wife, “Now we won’t have him to help with the harvest! We’ll spend everything hiring help. What a misfortune!” The old farmer once again said, “You can never tell; you can never tell.”

The next day a troop of the Emperor’s horsemen rode by, conscripting all the other young men to ride with them to fight a fierce war against the Mongols to the north. But because the farmer was old, and the son had a broken leg, the army didn’t take them.

The neighbors were all grieving their losses. When the oldest man in the village saw the farmer and his son, he remarked. “How strange is fate. The Mongols came when I was a youth. Many were carried off. But many of us also came back, some with riches. Perhaps we should not weep or worry, because sorrows also sometimes bring blessings.”

“Yes,” said the old farmer. “You can just never tell.”

Back in December I planned to preach a sermon called, “The End of the World – As We Know It.” But that was the weekend we were snowed out, and you were spared. The judgment of the universe on *that* idea! Although what I have to say today may prove to be just a variant on it. “You can never tell!”

During my mini-sabbatical for the month of January I was able to get a good start on the new book I’m writing. It begins by observing that the Religious Right in America is losing many of its long-time leaders and much of its political influence. Thank you, Jesus! And that many younger evangelical Christians, more progressive, are now joining forces with moderate and liberal religious people in action on issues like the environment, poverty, health care for all, and the wastes of war. There are also new diverse, networks of progressive religious people, growing, mostly still under the radar of the mass media, often on the web, but quite discernibly. Of course, whether all this is entirely a blessing remains still to be seen. One of the ironies of American religious history is that whenever there is a progressive political era, progressive religious groups start to lose members, rather than gain them. But you can never tell!

Like many of you, I suspect, I also spent much of the month fretting over the future of the economy. As an old friend put it, “My 401k seems to be becoming a 201k.” “My sinking fund,” I call it. But it’s no fun finding out that even if you can now refinance the house at a lower interest rate, it’s worth far less than you thought it was; or that the future of a fine little organization that you care about is riskier because its endowment has taken a big hit, even while the big ones, like Harvard’s, do just fine, thank you kindly. The playing field is increasingly tilted even in the non-profit world.

So I distracted myself from worry and work with more movies than I usually see. I decided to skip *Breaking Bad*—about the high school chemistry teacher who learns he’s dying of cancer and decides to start a meth lab to leave his wife and kids better off. The protagonist did badly, I understand, and so did the movie!

But Gwen and I did go with friends to see *The Bucket List*, about two unlikely hospital roommates, also facing bad prognoses, who set out to do a whole variety of things in the final months before they “kick the bucket.”

“Witness something majestic.” “Laugh until you cry.” “Help a complete stranger for no reason.” It’s all rather cliché, with trips to Paris, the Pyramids, and Mount Everest; but it’s also a somewhat better movie than I had expected. The wealthy white guy, Jack Nicholson, hard-bitten and much-married, is actually changed a bit by Morgan Freeman’s character—black, brilliant but working class. “What’s the measure of anyone’s life?” he asks; and answers, “Measure yourself by the people who measure themselves by you.”

Or as Marian Wright Edelman puts it, “What we owe our children”—and, I would add, everyone around us—“is our best effort to be a person worth emulating, and thereby to send a message to the future through our lives that is worth passing on.” Nicholson’s character says as much at his friend’s funeral. The good guy dies; the rich bastard lives. Yeah. But whether that’s all bad or not—you can just never tell.

Sometimes it takes bad things happening to good people to wake up people who, if not exactly bad, aren’t exactly working hard at becoming any better. And none of us has forever to start to get it right, you know.

In her spiritual autobiography, *Traveling Mercies*, writer Annie Lamott talks with great self-deprecating humor about being a single mom, and a recovering alcoholic who has found that all prayers come down to two: “Thank you, thank you” and “Help! Help!” She also writes about why she decided to insist that her son Sam come with her to church, no matter how “uncool” that may make her, or him, look to most folks around them in super-cool Marin County, California.

“The main reason [I make him go], she says, is that I want to give him what I [finally] found in the world, which is to say, a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I [most deeply] want, which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy, are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray or practice their faith, they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians, people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle, [and] they are part of something beautiful.”

I heard that passage this month included in a sermon by friend, Mary Harrington, at the quarterly meeting of the UU ministers in the area. Mary “retired” last year, at 56, after being diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease. So Mary is dying; as we all are. But I know few people who live their lives with more full attention to every moment, or more caring for others, than Mary. And what she was trying to tell her fellow ministers, her colleagues, is that what we do really matters. It’s part of something beautiful. Our communities do matter; trying to lead lives of “purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy”—all that matters. Trying to pass on to our children—to one another, and to one another’s children—just some part of what we have learned about living more fully and faithfully, in the here and now, without being too controlled by our fears, without acting out on others what we ourselves have suffered, and without trying to over-control the future. That all matters.

I think of a rabbi, telling dirt power people many years ago not to worry about what they would eat or drink or wear, but to seek instead the reign of God in their hearts, and its righteousness. And then I think of myself, in my relative privilege and comfort, worrying about unworthy things, saying, “the Market giveth, and the Market taketh away; blessed be name of the Market!” And I wonder if I shouldn’t take some of my anxieties and just let them go, let them go.

During the January storm, when the power went out for a while, Gwen and I played cards that evening by the fire, like the couple in Wesley McNair’s poem, “The Future.” And I was reminded that all that mattered, as I looked at her face in the half-light, and the very cards in my hands disappeared, was the deep moment of looking, and her looking back, and the realization that there is no future, at least none that you can ever tell about, only right now, which is all that any of us has ever had, or will ever need.

So I hate to tell you, and I know you may not believe me—I know Gwen won’t—but it may not really matter that much who wins the Stupid Bowl this afternoon. It may not even matter who wins the party primaries this coming Tuesday. You can never tell.

But I can tell you this much: You do matter. Here and now matters. So thank you, for giving me the time this month to remind myself of why I so love being a minister.

You matter to me, and to the future, often more than you know. If only through those remarkable kids you heard here last week, who are our collective message to the future.

In the finite time we have together, the greatest gift we can give to them and to one another is the gift of helping one another to learn to live less from fear of that future than out of the faith we carry within. At times our own candle will go out, as Schweitzer said. So let us learn to be faithful to those around us who have learned to follow a path illumined by a brighter light than their own candle.

And, since you can never tell, perhaps together we can in that way best help to brighten the world's future more than by being frightened by it.

So may it be. Amen, and amen.