

Life Happens
By Rev. Jim Sherblom
First Parish in Needham
October 17, 2004

As a college freshman, I was eager to make something of my life. I wanted to be a lawyer, so when I saw a listing at the career advisory office for a part time legal clerk at a downtown law firm, even though it stipulated that only upper classmen need apply, I pestered the person making appointments until she finally gave me the last appointment of the day, at 5pm at this downtown office. I made sure I arrived early, the secretary was about to go home, but when I showed her my name at the bottom of the list, she agreed for me to wait for the managing partner when he was free. A few minutes later the managing partner, Ed Dolan, came out to see off the previous candidate. He looked at me and he looked at his schedule, clearly unhappy about yet another interview for this part time position. So I mentioned that I had noticed the bar in the ground floor of his building and asked whether we might better enjoy this interview in the bar, which Ed agreed to with alacrity.

He bought the first beer, I bought the next, and we talked of our families, of life, of my dream of becoming a lawyer. An hour and a half later I left the bar with the job secured. This is not how I advise my children to conduct job interviews, but I worked for Ed's law firm happily and successfully for the next three years. My father had wanted me to be a Baptist minister, and being a minister appealed to me, but I had left the Baptists over doctrinal issues, and it is hard to be a minister when one doesn't have faith. I majored in history, and the historical critical method of enquiry made my earlier Baptist beliefs seem thoroughly indefensible. I met a young woman that Fall, who was smarter and more sensual than any woman I had ever known, we fell in love and by the following Fall we were engaged to be married. So by my sophomore year in college my life plan was complete, I would do an honors degree in history, become a successful lawyer, marry this young woman, and we would live happily ever after.

As you can imagine, it didn't happen that way. Sophomore year I tore my hand open on a riot gate, and had to drop out of the honors history program. My fiancée and I began to have horrendous fights and we broke up when I discovered her being unfaithful with a mutual friend. After three years at the law firm, the two senior partners took me aside one evening, and talked me out of a legal career. So as a college Junior, I was depressed, alone, barely

making it academically, and with no clear vision of my future. My life had hit bottom and I lost my sense of joy and confidence. For those of you who have worried about your own son or daughter, perhaps you can imagine my parent's concern for how my life was unfolding. Life was happening in ways that I had never planned. That next year I met a woman, Loretta, who has been my life partner now for the last 28 years. I managed to graduate, though a year late and with a diploma that reads "by skin of teeth", and then went on to earn an MBA from Harvard with highest honors. Our life together has unfolded in ways that I never dreamed of as a child, yet in many ways it is everything I sought.

I spent a dozen years as a successful biotechnology entrepreneur and the last ten as a venture capitalist launching new biotech companies. Loretta and I have two wonderful children, Sarah is 22 and a college graduate, and Robert at 20 is a college sophomore. I returned to seminary at mid-life and last May was ordained as a UU minister, while continuing to serve as Managing Partner of the Venture Capital firm that I founded ten years ago. Life has been good to us, though it continues to offer us unexpected trials and tribulations. Eighteen months ago, as my son Robert finished high school and prepared for college, Loretta and I envisioned the joys of an empty nest, with both children flown. Then my daughter Sarah was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of ovarian cancer, which was life threatening. Our carefully constructed and predictable life descended into turmoil and despair. Our life became centered upon our deathly ill child, with all else in life unimportant. As a family, we journeyed with Sarah through ovarian surgery, followed by nine weeks of aggressive chemotherapy. The pain of the chemotherapy was so great that Sarah would break into tears at the thought that another weekly cycle was about to begin. Her fear and her pain tore deeply into our hearts, and we were powerless to make it better, other than to just be there for her with all of our love, tears and compassion. But we were supported in our troubles by our belief in the ultimate goodness of the universe, and the kindness and support of our fellow UU's. At one point, I needed to be at the Boston General Assembly in the middle of Sarah's cancer treatments, and I used it as an opportunity to ask every UU minister and layperson I knew to pray for Sarah, even if they personally did not believe in the power of prayer. By mid-summer we must have had a community of thousands praying for Sarah's recovery. One time in July she told me that she felt like she could actually feel their love, prayers and good intentions, and that she believed that it was helping. Thank goodness she has been cancer free for the last fourteen months, and our collective lives

have gradually begun a return to normalcy. I am thankful for all the friends and well wishers who walked with us on this desperate journey. I am thankful for the dedicated doctors and nurses who saved her life. I will be forever grateful for the UU community, and our collective belief in the goodness of the universe, which helped us to walk with her on this journey. Life is seldom as we had planned for it to be, and yet how we respond to whatever life holds determines the joy we will find.

I think that this is the lesson of “Play the Ball where the Monkey drops it”! We cannot control life, no matter what we try, life simply happens. It often helps for us to make plans, to dream about how our life will be, and to work to earn the life that we dream about, yet we must do all of this with the awareness that life unfolds independent of our plans. We must set our sights on what can be, enjoying and honoring all that is good about our lives, never holding too tightly to a dream that may no longer be possible. Life requires that we be flexible. We cherish that which is good of what we have now, letting go of that which is no more. Setting our sights on all that we can be, we don’t hang on to that which will no longer be, no matter how we cry or try to deny it. Through my chaplaincy training and ministry I have met many people struggling to make sense and adapt to life as it is for them. I honor the teenage girl, badly burned and disfigured by a fire, yet who learned how to greet the world with joy without her physical beauty. I honor the twenty five year old, who having dropped out of college, found joy and a new job doing painting and construction work. I honor the thirty something couple that discovered they could not bear children of their own but adopted a child in need of a parent’s love in order to have a family. I honor the forty year old man who learned to slow down his career and lowered his expectations at work in order to find time for his family. I honor the woman in her fifties who worked hard every day from when she turned seventeen, but then had an aneurism last year, and who now partially recovered, must learn how to be in the world without working, and still to feel as if she is someone of value in the world. I honor all those who have held positions of importance in the world, the Generals, Governors, Senators, and CEOs, long tenured teachers, dedicated employees, mothers, fathers, care givers, who upon retirement must discover anew who they are when they no longer hold these posts of importance. Each one of them learning to let go of who they were and becoming of significance in a new way in the world as they find it now to be. Some of us learn this quickly, some slowly, and some not at all!

I am reminded of a story told by the Dalai Lama in his book *The Art of Happiness*. He recounts his story as follows: “Two years ago, a friend of mine had an unexpected windfall. Eighteen months before that time, she had quit her job as a nurse to go to work for two friends who were starting a health-care company. The company enjoyed meteoric success, and within the eighteen months they were bought out by a large conglomerate for a huge sum. Having gotten in on the ground floor of the company, my friend emerged from the buyout dripping with stock options – enough to be able to retire at the age of thirty-two. I saw her not long ago and asked how she was enjoying her retirement. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘it’s great being able to travel and do the things I’ve always wanted to do. But,’ she added, ‘it’s strange, after I got over all the excitement of making all that money, things kind of returned to normal. I mean things are different – I bought a new house and stuff – but overall I don’t think I’m much happier than I was before.’

Just around the time that my friend was cashing in on her windfall profits, I had another friend of the same age who found out he was HIV positive. We spoke about how he was dealing with his HIV status. ‘Of course, I was devastated at first,’ he said, ‘And it took me almost a year just to come to terms with the fact that I had the virus. But over the past year things have changed. I seem to get more out of each day than I ever did before, and on a moment-to-moment basis, I feel happier than I ever have. I just seem to appreciate everyday things more, and I’m grateful that so far I haven’t developed any severe AIDS symptoms and I can really enjoy the things I have. And even though I’d rather not be HIV positive, I have to admit that in some ways it has transformed my life ... in positive ways...’ ‘In what ways?’ the Dalai Lama asked. ‘Well, for instance, you know that I’ve always tended to be a confirmed materialist. But over the past year coming to terms with my mortality has opened up a whole new world. I’ve started exploring spirituality for the first time in my life, reading a lot of books on the subject and talking to people ... discovering so many things that I’ve never even thought about before. It makes me excited about just getting up in the morning, about seeing what the day will bring.’ Both these people illustrate the essential point that *happiness is determined more by one’s state of mind than by external events.*”

This appears to be a law of life: how we respond to what happens in our lives is far more important in determining our ultimate happiness than what objectively happens in any absolute sense. Our lives have many opportunities for joy and for sorrow. Which will we dwell upon, which will come to define who we are? Like Henry David Thoreau, I wish for each of

us to live deliberately, learning what life has to teach us, and not when we come to face death, to discover that we have not fully lived our lives. Live deep, suck out all the marrow of life. If life proves to be mean, to get the whole genuine meanness of it, and if sublime, then enjoy its bliss! As one who has experienced life's tribulations and hardships, and also enjoyed marital bliss, fatherhood, and success in the world, I know this is both hard and necessary to make the most of our lives. Life will be as it is. Each of us brings our unique stories and experiences to the journey. I would that we each live our lives as fully as we are able, and in the end collectively sing a hymn of praise to the life that we all share. Amen.