

A Nickel's Worth of Free Advice—Stay Foolish  
November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
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Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. There's snow outside! It's true. It's true. I'm not sure if you noticed. ☺ Our good, old friend has returned to us. It is good see you again. It's been years... Well, it's been months...and not that many months. ☺ Today is Sunday, November 28<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is A Nickel's Worth of Free Advice—Stay Foolish.

Welcome one and all. No exceptions. Let no single heart from out the whole be gone from us, not gone from the widening circles of our affection...but held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is so good to be together."

Four, faithful fools freely let themselves fall into beautiful life. And immediately, they were joined by another three. It was Sunday, September 12<sup>th</sup>, just a few months ago, and we were trying to establish something of a tradition. I don't know what will become of it over time but it's a lot of fun right now...to jump into Silver Lake in all of our clothes.

People—less foolish people—were calmly eating lunch lakeside that day. There had organized themselves into several, small groups. When it was clear by our actions that we were all going swimming in all of our clothes, we attracted considerable attention. Everyone who noticed us wanted to know what was going on. They were confused. They were fascinated. They were somehow newly free. Wordlessly, they wondered: Why was this particular group—this group of sane, sober and otherwise rational-looking people—why were they preparing to take the plunge in normal clothes?

Wordlessly, they wondered and then, one woman just had ask. 'What are you guys to up to?' 'What are you doing?' And 'For God's sake, why?' When we said that we were from North Chapel in Woodstock, someone asked if we were Baptists! Theologically-speaking and historically-speaking, this is rather hilarious. Our religious break with that Baptists was severe. When early Unitarians moved away from the language of original sin (and toward the possibility of an original blessing), the ritual of baptism became a subject of contention. So, that moment was funny to me and I laughed out loud...but no one else did. I felt a little foolish but not really...not in the context of what we were getting ready to do.

After this exchange, the best moment for me was watching Polly Forcier, one of North Chapel's faithful fools, calmly explain that were from the UU church in Woodstock and that the year before, on the weekend of September the 11<sup>th</sup>, the minister of the church—me—had carried the Sunday morning flowers from the sanctuary to Silver Lake after the church service, honored the flag in remembrance of a terrible anniversary, walked out into the lake and just fell in. She said, "Last year, he did it by himself. But this year, he invited members of the congregation to do it with him this year."

It was so matter-of-fact. It sounded reasonable. Polly has this way about her. She has a special skill. She is able to say things that are absolutely ridiculous, things that no sane adult, no rational person should contemplate...she can just say it as if it were utterly normal, practical and mundane.

And the world changed all around us in that moment and the strangeness of what we were all about to do just melted away. Polly is magical like that. Life is magical like that. It is co-create process but you have to jump right in. The seemingly impossible world that we long for and dream about and we hope to achieve somehow is really not all that far away. We just need to be wise enough...and foolish enough...and deeply enough committed to bring it into being.

This morning's reflection was inspired as much by that Sunday at Silver Lake as by the 2005 commencement speech that Steve Jobs delivered Stanford. [Leland Stanford, incidentally, the man for whom the university is named, was a Unitarian. I don't know why I'm proud of that but I am.]

To the graduating class of wide-eyed, wild eyed students and their families, Steve Jobs offered up his best. He steered the students away from the old ways of doing things. He encouraged them to be brave enough to think for themselves. He encouraged them to have faith in the power of their own minds. He wanted them to believe in themselves and to act on their beliefs...because life is so brief...and because it's so important to really live your life. Life is precious. Jobs said,

...don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary. Stay hungry. Stay foolish.

That was his nickel's worth of free advice (although I'm sure that Stanford paid him handsomely).

These words stuck with me. I found myself, my heart, my soul, my spirit in deep agreement. I identified. I found the energy of those words already residing within the core of me...for Jobs was not the first to say such a beautiful thing. In a book called Nature, his essay of 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson reflected on the quality of his own religious experience. Emerson, of course, just like Leland Stanford, was a Unitarian.

Emerson longed for something new, original, unique. He resisted the assumption that wisdom is necessarily retrospective. He vied against the habit of building endlessly, exhaustively and exclusively on the traditions of the past, especially when it came to faith. He said,

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; [but] we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?

Emerson wanted to experience the joy and the tragedy of life directly, without a mediator. He wanted to see the beauty of the world through his own eyes. He said,

Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past...? The sun shines to-day also.

The thought he was foolish...and they thought he was mad...but they knew that he was brilliant so they didn't want to risk embarrassment. What is the old adage? It was Mark Twain who said,

It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think that you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.

It is worth noting that Twain himself was rarely ever 'silent.' And we are all the better for it. [touch Twain book] His contributions to the culture of the world have been extraordinary. This should tell us a thing or two about the value of foolishness.

According to my computer dictionary, the word "fool" has a single definition and three permutations. A fool is "a person who acts unwisely or imprudently; a silly person." Used in a sentence, the dictionary offers an example: "*What a fool I was to do this.*" Historically speaking, a "fool" is "a jester or clown, especially one retained in a noble household." Informally speaking, a "fool" is "a person devoted to a particular activity," as in "*He is a running fool.*" And archaically, a "fool" is "a person who is duped." Unfortunately, I can see myself reflected in all of these definitions. Or, perhaps it's better if I should say, 'Fortunately, I can see myself reflected in all of these definitions.' It is my hope, my prayer and my suspicion that it would be good if this could be said of all of us.

Because Connie Francis wasn't wrong when she sang the words that were written for her by Howard Greenfield and Jack Keller. In a song called Everybody's Somebody's Fool, she sang...

I told myself it's best that I forget you  
Though I'm a fool, at least I know the score  
Yet darlin', I'd be twice as blue without you  
It hurts, but I'd come running back for more  
Cause everybody's somebody's fool...  
And there are no exceptions to the rule

Connie Francis recorded this #1 song back in April of 1960. Needless to say, April is an excellent month for foolishness.

And the members of a band called The Main Ingredient weren't wrong when they sang the words that were written for them by Williams, Bailey and Clark. In a song called Everybody Plays a Fool, they reminded us that...

Everybody plays the fool sometime  
There's no exception to the rule  
(Listen, baby) It may be factual and it may be cruel  
(I ain't lyin') Everybody plays the fool

Everybody. No exceptions. So, you think that we might be easier on ourselves but that's rarely how it works. We are hard on ourselves. Too hard, most probably. This habit is written into us both by our individual challenges—as real and as great as they are—and by the universality of the experience life itself.

This is why it is so important to make life's experience extraordinary. I am not suggesting that we all jump in the lake [although, I have to say that I have imagined the visual and I think that that image instantly changes the world for the better] What I am saying is that we need to have the tenacity and the bravery and the humility...we need to be wise and foolish enough to cherish the beauty of the lives. We need to stay open to seeing the beauty, wherever and however it shows up in life. We need to stay hungry for it, come what may.

Fortunately, I identify with the various incarnations of foolishness—both the good incarnations and the bad incarnations, much to my mother's chagrin. As for the various definitions that we've considered, I can identify with them as well...although, I have to say, the computer definitions seems incomplete. It does not explore the trickster dimension of foolishness, the clowning jests that are designed to make us wise.

Noam Chomsky once said, "If you want to know the definition of a word, don't just look it up. See how it is used." If you want to drive yourself crazy, take his nickel's worth of free advice. Literally. I promise you, I'm not kidding. In fact, the meaning of the word "literally" provides us with an excellent example.

Jane Fonda, in her role as Leona Helmsley on a TV show called *The Newsroom*, helps us to further understand our predicament. She was trying to prevent the hostile take-over of her media company. To her adversaries (who also happened to be members of her own family), she said,

Webster's dictionary expanded the definition of the word 'literally' to include the way it is commonly misused. So, the thing is, we no longer have a word in the English language that means literally. [And 'literally'] doesn't have a synonym... So, when I say that I am literally going to set fire to this building with you in it before I hand over the keys..., you don't know if I'm speaking literally or figuratively.

It's important to pay attention to how words behave.

With that in mind, I set out on a little quest. I've done this a number of times in my life and it's usually pretty fun. I asked, of course, how the word 'fool' appears in popular music and, of course, I asked how the word 'fool' figures in faith. In music, there are tons of examples. I just picked the ones I liked and started listening. I listened to Connie Francis and also to a band called *The Main Ingredient*. I listened to *Foreigner* and to *Pete Townshend*, to *Whitesnake* and to *Elvis Presley*, to *Aretha Franklin* and the *Rolling Stones*, to *Meshell Ndegeocello* and to *The Pretenders*; and, of course, I listened to *Frankie Lymon* and the *Teenagers* who famously asked, "Why do fools fall in love?"

And I listened to the *Doobie Brothers*. I listened to a song that they records in 1978. I remember when I first hear it. I was absolutely amazed. I had never heard harmonies like this before. It was ahead of its time. I get it. Not everyone can sense these things but does anyone know what I am saying here? I listened the song

just yesterday and it's still ahead of its time. The song is 43 years old. I have been singing this song for 43 years, for most of my life, and at 43 years of age, the song is still ahead of its time.

The song is called What a Fool Believes. It is the story of a man who desperately tries to rekindle a love that was never real in the first place.

He came from somewhere back in her long ago  
The sentimental fool don't see  
Trying hard to recreate what had yet to be created...  
Only to realize it never really was...

As he rises to her apology  
Anybody else would surely know  
He's watching her go  
But a fool believes he sees  
The wise man has the power to reason away  
What seems to be is always better than nothing

So, he stays within the world of his illusions, foolishly...according to that old Doobie Brothers song, the one that hasn't really aged a day. And, of course, I listened to The Beatles.

Day after day,  
Alone on a hill  
The man with the foolish grin  
Is keeping perfectly still  
But nobody wants to know him  
They can see that he's just a fool  
And he never gives an answer  
But the fool on the hill sees the sun going down  
And the eyes in his head see the world spinning round

The 'fool on the hill' is judged by others but he is wise enough not to listen. By the end of the song, it really isn't clear who's being foolish. Is it the man on the hill—his head in the clouds, stuck in the world of his illusions—is it him or those who judge him? Who really is the greater fool?

As I shared earlier, I set out to see how the word 'fool' behaves in music and in faith. I did a quick survey and found the following results. There is a single reference to foolishness in each of six sources—the gospels of Mark and John; the epistles of Timothy and Peter; and the epistles of Galatians and Ephesians. There are two references in Titus and two in James. There are three in the Book of Isaiah. There are four in the Gospel of Matthew. Four in Romans and four in Corinthians. There are five references to foolishness in the Gospel of Luke. So, according to my brief survey, of the four canonical gospels, Luke wins the prize for foolish references.

Tying things up, there are seven references to fools or foolishness in Psalms and seven as well in Ecclesiastes. There are fifty-five references in Proverbs,

besting the Gospel of Luke by a factor of eleven—once again, according to the brief survey.<sup>1</sup>

Proverbs—29:20

Do you see a man who is hasty with his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Proverbs—26:5

Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

Proverbs—27:22

Crush a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his folly will not depart from him.

It can seem like there is no end to foolishness...and yet, the things that I most love about the human spirit are foolish things, foolish things by which we live our lives. Don't give up on foolishness. Sometimes, foolishness is wiser than you think. Sometimes.

I have been reading Barack Obama's book, A Promised Land. In it, he shares a story about feeling foolish. It was early in his political career, before he really got started. Obama wrote,

IT'S HARD, in retrospect, to understand why you did something stupid. I don't mean the small stuff... I mean dumb choices in the wake of considerable deliberation... That was me running for Congress.

As an unknown, he went up against veteran congressman Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther. He got trounced. He lost by thirty points.

It was real learning for him and you can tell by how he tells the story, by how it has lived within him over the years. You can tell by how he chooses to tell the story. His words were these:

[A] few months after my loss, a friend of mine, worried that I'd fallen into a funk, insisted that I join him at the 2000 Democratic National Convention in L.A.

Everything went wrong on that trip. When he landed in Los Angeles, he couldn't rent a car. When he got to the convention center, he couldn't get on the floor. When he tried to go to an exclusive party, he wasn't able to get in. He slept on the couch of his friend's hotel room and then flew back to Chicago. His mood was low. He writes,

I was almost forty, broke, coming off a humiliating defeat and with my marriage strained. I felt for perhaps the first time in my life that I had taken a wrong turn; that whatever reservoirs of energy and optimism I thought I had, whatever potential I'd always banked on, had been used up on a fool's errand.

And look how things turned out for that poor fool! It doesn't matter to me whether or not you voted for him. It only matters that you can value the fact that he did not

foolishly give up on his dreams. I can judge him for this if I choose but it won't be clear who's being foolish, who is being the lesser or the greater fool...and why.

"The greater fool" is actually an economic term. It's a patsy." This is more of what they say in The Newsroom. I love that show. As they explain,

For the rest of us to profit, we need a greater fool, someone who will buy long and sell short. Most people spend their lives trying not to be the greater fool. We toss him the hot potato. We dive for his seat when the music stops. The greater fool is someone with the perfect blend of self-delusion and ego to think that he can succeed where others have failed. This whole country was made by greater fools.

Day after day and year after turning year, alone on our hills we may stand but what is it that we see? From that high perch, from that station above where more of the horizon is visible, what beauty do we see with our own eyes? So,

...don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. Have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. Stay hungry. Stay foolish.

And if it's too hard to remember all of that, go jump in a lake in common clothes...and the water (and the ridiculousness) will return whatever wisdom we may have lost. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.openbible.info/topics/fool>