

Serenity

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North Universalist Chapel Society

I have a forgotten joy this morning and a brief announcement. I will be making a quick departure after this morning's service. I have to make ready to go to General Assembly. I'm going to take off as quickly as I can, before the wave of departures. I don't want to get stuck in the parking lot.

Does the continuous living and working together impose temperamental stresses upon us? How do we find serenity in the storm? Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Please settle down and settle in so we can truly be together this morning. Welcome, one and all. No exceptions.

It's a good question, a good way for us to begin. Does the continuous living and working together impose temperamental stresses upon us all? Ringo Starr was asked this question and I really liked his answer. All of the Beatles were asked this question in a collective interview in the sixties. Paul McCartney responded. He said, "You know, we have all been mates for quite a long time, so we don't get on each other's nerves as much as we could." And then, the four of them pretended to beat the pants off one another. Years later, Ringo responded more thoughtfully. He said,

The general atmosphere, we all loved it. We all dug it, but you know, still in the band, we all had personalities and attitudes. We stopped at a motorway cafe, you know, to eat some grease. Paul had the keys and George was sitting behind the wheel, as we came up. And so an argument went on for at least an hour and a half. "I've got the keys." "Well, I'm sittin' behind the wheel." ...we had to sit there and go through this because no one was going give up. "I got the keys." "I've got the wheel."

We get struck sometimes. Ninety minutes, stuck in a parking lot with The Beatles. Can you imagine that? How do we escape from things like this?

I've watched a great show called Firefly. I bought the whole series on DVD. I love it so much. I've watched every episode except for the last one. I just don't want the adventure to end, you know?

Firefly is a sci-fi thing. Joss Whedon created it. He wrote for Rosanne and Buffy the Vampire Slayer and he wrote for Firefly.

According to the promo material,

Five hundred years in the future, a renegade crew aboard a small spacecraft tries to survive as they travel the unknown parts of the galaxy and evade warring factions as well as authority agents [who are] out to get them.

The show is pure adventure. It's fantastic and brave. It is not safe. These guys were bandits and thieves. There's nothing safe about that.

Firefly draws you in. Playful, engaging...great character development. I began to identify with the characters. I grew to love them, wanted to be like them. I always wanted to be a renegade. There's something about that culture that appeals to me. I've always wanted to travel through unknown parts of the galaxy and I have always wanted to avoid warring factions. I've always wanted to side-step the authorities. I never wanted to steal things but I still longed for the getaway car. I wanted to escape into a happiness everlasting.

In spite of how good it was, Firefly was cancelled after only one season. Luckily, there was a spin-off, a feature film. It was released in 2005. The film of Firefly is called Serenity. Serenity is the Firefly what the Enterprise is to Star Trek. As you know, I don't apologize for my Trekkiness. I'm not obsessed like some people are. Now, there are rap songs about stresses of life along the final frontier...and they're awesome. A young poet writes,

Engineering here.

We got a subspace anomaly, a graviton pulse
we got a catastrophic, diagnostic cycle result
inertial dampeners just went offline

and that's a 10 hour job but we'll do it in 5
I need a cryo sensor hyper spanner neutrino-probe
and a phase compensator for the warp manifolds
Cargo Bay Three is on the verge of collapse
with more subspace flux than the Delphic Expanse
I'm gonna temporarily reverse the polarity
of this module to monitor optronic disparity
but we've got to find the source of that plasma leak
or we're looking at a possible warp core breach
man, I was gonna hit Ten Forward tonight
I told Guinan I'd be by to try the Risan Delight
but I'm stuck in Engineering and I can't be surprised
because it's just another day on the Enterprise

I don't apologize for my Trekiness. Thank you, poet Reina del Cid, cool rocking the galaxy.

For Star Trek, the Enterprise was the name of the star ship and for Firefly, it was Serenity. Serenity didn't fight. She had no weapons of any power but Serenity was fast. She was agile. She was perfect for the perfect getaway.

I like adventure movies. I like detective films—for the skillful coordination and the timing and the teamwork.... I like that stuff. I like it and I've always wondered why. So, I started reading. I came across the book called American Civilization by C.L.R. James. It was written in 1950. James was really into context. He liked knowing the backgrounds of things.

C.L.R. James loved popular culture. He saw real beauty in it, in regular people, in everyday things, in average miracles...and so do I. I've been touched by his writing, particularly by his passage about conditions. He wrote,

...we have to examine more closely the conditions in which these new arts, the film, and with it the comic strip, the radio and jazz have arisen, in order to see exactly why they become an expression-of-mass-response to society, crises, and the nature and limitations of that response.

Not everyone is as thrilled about C.L.R. James and his writing but I can't express to you how important he's been for me. His writing helped me to imagine and to more deeply understand American culture, our complex culture, in beautiful and compassionate ways. Average things. Average American things. Deeply beautiful, average, American things...like wiffle ball games and baseball caps, weekend cook-outs and supped-up cars from the 1950s. In keeping with this, the poet David Wilcox writes,

Well, I don't look all that ragged for all the time it's been
But I'm weakened underneath me where my frame is rusted thin
And this year's state inspection, I just barely passed
Won't you drive me 'cross the country, boy,
This year could be my last
I'm a tail-fin road locomotive from the days of cheap gasoline
And I'm for sale by the side of the road going nowhere
A rusty old American dream
[singing?] I rolled of the line in Detroit back in 1958...

On the road of life, one can learn so many things. I because I rolled of the line in New York back in 1965...and I confess to feeling rusted thin every now and again. When was it that you rolled of the line and came into being? Was it the day you were born...or was it when you realized what it meant to be an average, American miracle? Was is when you first found serenity?

A wise man once said, "If you want to know what a word means, don't look it up in the dictionary. Look how the word behaves in the world." If we were to look up the word 'serenity,' we'd find the following definition:

se•ren•i•ty: noun (plural **serenities**) the state of being calm, peaceful, and untroubled: an oasis of serenity amidst the bustling city.

So it is that serenity is defined but the word serenity behaves in different ways. It behaves as it is defined but Serenity is also a sci-fi spacecraft, operated by thieves and bandits and by adventurous pioneers. Serenity is a peaceful state of being and it is also a solemn prayer.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference;
Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,
Enjoying hardship as a pathway to peace;
Taking as He did, the sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His will,
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

This is the Serenity Prayer. Reinhold Niebuhr, an American theologian, wrote this prayer in the 1930s. In the 1940s, Alcoholics Anonymous adopted a shortened of this prayer in its courageous program of recovery for those who have struggled with addictive experiences.

Addiction can be crushing, soul-crushing. It can be a highly destructive experience. Addiction has the power to compromise the meaning of our lives. It can take life itself. It's deadly and its dangerous. I never struggled with drugs or alcohol—I really don't know what that's like—but I am not unfamiliar with the challenges of addiction.

Many years ago, a good friend of mine who was having trouble with alcohol took me to an AA meeting in Boston. I loved being there. I found the people to be so honest and genuine, so clear and fragile and strong. I loved the sense of community. I felt akin to them but awkwardly because I did not struggle as they did. I was welcomed warmly and invited back but I did not return to that meeting. My old friend and I parted ways soon after that experience. We had been roommates and one of us moved out and moved on. I don't remember if it was him or me but when we were no long sharing our old apartment, we just naturally and amicably parted ways. I've been thinking of him this week...after I made a bit of a fool of myself.

I was looking at Facebook and I came across a picture of a storefront, road sign. The photo was taken by someone I didn't know.

The sign in the photograph poked what I experienced as playful fun at the Serenity Prayer and I wanted to share that playfulness with others...and I did. Many of my friends saw the storefront road sign and received its message in the same way that I had but one of my friends felt differently. One of my friends was hurt by it.

Now, I can't tell you how many times one of my friends has said something or done something that I found offensive, especially racially. I can't tell you how many hours I have spent doing the emotional labor and spiritual labor of explaining why a joke isn't funny, why a news story is important and what not. There is no end to that work and it is exhausting. So, I was very glad—and also embarrassed—when my friend shared her experience, an experience that I was not having. It was difficult at first. I was saddened by what I learned, saddened by what my friend experienced.

I shared what I thought was a light-hearted joke. Whether it was or not is not the issue. The issue is that one of my friends reached out, gently and respectfully, and let me know that what I had shared was not light-hearted for everyone.

I felt embarrassed and I felt guilty. I wanted to justify myself, to defend myself somehow. Have you ever experienced reactions like these? I reached out to my friend privately but I did not deliver my anxiety. I had realized that the punch line of the joke did not really belong to me. I still see the humor in the storefront, road sign and I am saddened my friend cannot join me in that laughter. So, I took the picture down compassionately and I'm at peace with my decision. I won't defend from safe distance a light-hearted joke at the expense of a friend who is still in the thick of it. It's more important for me, now, to learn and to grow and to surrender to something deeper. I took the post down and in its place, I left a message that read as follows:

I came across a photo of something that I thought was cute. I posted it and it hurt the feelings of a friend of mine. Someone who i don't know well but love. So I've taken it down and I'm searching for the humor that makes us all smile.

I wasn't trying to please my friend. I wasn't apologizing and I hadn't been asked to. I'm not entirely sure what I was trying to do. It's still unfolding. What is folded up in me goes back decades.

I'll never forget that back in the 1980s, I was a counselor at a UU summer camp. I was part of a staff of maybe 25 counselors and we were in charge of about 100 kids. The staff were from different backgrounds but mostly Unitarian Universalist. Different cultural and economic experiences. Different sexual orientations, political perspectives and gender expressions...but we were aligned about giving the campers a good experience.

We did everything by consensus which meant that decisions took a really long time. In a democracy, you vote. Majority rules. Winner take all. That's the conflict model. In consensus, things are different.

The consensus model posits that laws emerge from a general agreement among members of society, reflecting shared values and maintaining social order. In contrast, the conflict model argues that laws are shaped by power dynamics and serve the interests of dominant groups while marginalizing subordinate ones.

At camp, we didn't marginalize anyone. We talked and we talked and we talked—so long it drove us crazy—but over time, we found value in it. We realized that we couldn't take a stand on everything. We had to choose. It was give and take. As staff, we realized that we had to figure out what we believed most passionately. It was cool to fight for that but we'd have to let the lesser things go a bit. It was fascinating...because in the process of talking things out, we realized that there were deeper values that were important to us...like caring for everyone...no exceptions. That was a value we all embraced. Honoring one another. Assuming good intentions. These were things commonly believed among us.

Now, I'm making a little UU joke here. Perhaps, a very little joke. Let me take a moment to explain. Years ago, a Unitarian minister named William Channing Gannett put pen to paper and delivered a historical document, a religious document. It was called "Things Commonly

Believed Among Us.” It was a list of nine tenets that were central and binding to a church that enjoyed being free. He began as follows:

“We believe that to love the Good and to live the Good is the supreme thing in religion;

“We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief;

“We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new;

“We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion;¹

Even though this was not a long document, I won’t go through them all this morning. Each of them takes time to understand.

So, I won’t go through them all today but, at some point, we should go through them. It will be good for us to know precisely where we used to stand. Knowing this makes it possible to know where we are going.

Williams Channing Gannett presented “Things Commonly Believed Among Us” to the Western Unitarian Conference in 1887. This conference was something like the General Assembly of its time. Like I said, I won’t go through them all but I will hold up one tenet because it serves our conversation. It’s the seventh tenet of the nine.

“We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all;

Counting nothing good for self that is not good for all...

Now, like I said, at camp, we talked and talked about everything. Not bitterly. We argued in the positive spirit of consensus. We struggled within ourselves and we struggled with one another until the good way forward naturally emerged. We got good at it...or at least, we thought we did.

At the end, when camp was done and done and the kids had all gone home, the staff decided to go out for a celebratory lunch...one last meal before we naturally and amicably parted ways. So, we drove over

¹ <https://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=2200>

to the nearest restaurant with decent menu options. There were no alternatives nearby. After three weeks of camp food, all of us were looking forward to a decent meal, a meal we choose...but one of us objected. The restaurant that we had chosen served alcohol—wine and beer—and this made one of us uncomfortable.

Camp was three weeks long. We were all exhausted. I had a five-hour drive in front of me in order to get home to New Jersey. I was sympathetic then but I was also hungry and a bit frustrated. We argued in that parking lot for hours. We were like The Beatles, like Paul and George—"I've got the keys." "Well, I'm sittin' behind the wheel." Back and forth we went, arguing about whether or not to go inside and get something to eat. It was a terrible way to end what was otherwise a wonderful experience.

Now, I don't want for us to judge what happened. I don't want us to agree or disagree. I don't want us to pick sides in an effort to win or lose in conflict—winner take all and what not. I want us to consider what William Channing Gannett knew that we commonly believed...“that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all.”

Now, I don't know how we resolve these things. And I don't know if we resolve them. What I know is that there is a real need for healing. Shame accompanies addiction. Shame accompanies. Not guilt but shame. As Brené Brown reminds us, guilt and shame are very different. Guilt translates as 'I did something bad' and shame translates as 'I am bad.'

When we were arguing in the parking lot about going to that restaurant, I was in the dynamics of guilty for wanting to eat a decent lunch before getting on the road for a 5-hour drive. The dynamics of guilt (or 'I did something bad') led me and many others to feelings of frustration and anger...and the needs of my appetite did not help the situation. When my friend was arguing in the parking lot about going to that restaurant, my friend was in the dynamics of shame (or 'I am bad').

I believe that this led her to feelings of humiliation and distress. I believe that she was afraid that she was being punished or banished, isolated or held apart from the people that she loved...and this, as a consequence not of what she did but of who she was. "I've got the keys!"/"I'm behind the wheel. We had been stuck in that parking for forty years. I got out for the first time just last week...when I took down the post about a storefront, road sign that poked fun at the Serenity Prayer.

I don't know how to resolve the problems the keep us in the parking lot. I just know that life is messy...which is good because a deeper joy is possible, a joy that we may have forgotten. Deeper joy is not made possible because we coddle one another but because we care. And deeper joy is not possible if we choose to close our minds, our hands, our hearts, our spirits. The way forward is bigger than us and it requires that we heal and that we are brave. Fierce as serpents and gentle as doves. Let's not dig in. Let's not entrench. Let us open up for something new. Ferron writes,

I give up my fisted touch, my thoughts strong like fences
My totem-pole stature, body chipped to the bone
I'm nobody's savior, and nobody's mine either
I hear the desert wind whisper, "But neither are we alone"
Sure I long to ask how you're doing, if you got to the lightness
That you wanted so fiercely when we drifted that way
There's no telephones ringing now, but I feel something calling me
And I'm ready to go, I just need time to say
Hearts are like meadows, with their weathered potential
With their reasons diluted by reason itself
I may be shivering at the foot of this slow-giving mountain
But the tiny spring flowers can look just like you
And I won't ask the purpose of all of my footsteps
And I won't let my eyelids cast down
I am looking for something outside of forgiveness
You might call it the jewel of the crown

Out beyond our suffering, we can more truly connect...shorn of all our fences and defenses. We get up when we fall down...and it's a powerful thing when we do. There is clarity and consequence in living each and every day.

Like an island rising coming slowly from the sea
causing tidal waves to beat and causing some catastrophe
the damage done another sun will rise and shine the day

This rising and this shining reveals to us the good way forward. Keeping things in balance, we find serenity...together.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.