

## THINGS DON'T HAPPEN FOR A REASON

Rev. Steve Wilson

Pacific Unitarian Universalist Church

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Our sermon begins when the kind well-dressed matron walks up to me at my Mother's wake, comfortingly touches me, and says "Everything happens for a reason," I wasn't hurt. I wasn't comforted, I was not even offended. Her intentions were benign, and I could feel she felt some of the loss I was going through.

What her "Everything happens for a reason" tweaked was my inner philosopher.

But nearly four years after it happened, I remembered it enough to dedicate a sermon topic to it.

"Everything happens for a reason" is just the kind of pat response to a great unanswerable question that my inner stubborn skeptic loves to hate. Uttering "Everything happens for a reason" is hardly a war crime. It is said, of course, to provide a silver lining to a tough moment. We lean into these kinds of statements when we are attempting to console ourselves in the face of unfortunate circumstances or tragedy.

At its shallowest, "Everything happens for a reason" is one of many available platitudes used to comfort us. It can be classified in the same group as "I know exactly how you feel," or "He or she is in a better place," or "When one door closes, another opens."

It is of course either a passing thought or a worldview speaker may or may not even believe, it is said in an effort to bring ease. We know it as one of a broader kind of sentiments that we might find as the tag line at the bottom of a motivational poster with a pretty sunset, or a soaring eagle. The opening quote of a daily affirmation book. "There is no such thing as coincidence" and "It's all part of the great plan."

*And, if she believes it, as I wished I did, I don't have any desire to rip her faith away,*

Now, having started into this sermon which is about to challenge this, I feel like a bit of a jerk.

If you are into philosophy, these statements are cliché apologetics akin to a philosopher named Leibniz's apologetic claim that "This is the best of all possible worlds." Platitudes like this are cloaked in the belief, or maybe better the wish that there really is a cosmic order, and or that sadness as a response to misfortune is unacceptable.

And who knows, maybe there is layer of magical connections between what happens in life and some cosmic plan, I don't know for sure, but I don't generally believe it. I don't know either, really, whether there is a great author of creation: there could be, and there could not be. I don't know if we in any non-physical way carry on past this life.

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I don't know if there is an invisible web of spirit that exists at the psychic level, or that the experiences humans have of having past lives, *déjà vu*, and ghosts is just a product of our wishful imaginations.

Truth is, I really don't have any of the comforting answers to the questions people who doll themselves up in robes like this are generally culturally assigned to provide.

However, I don't know, and neither with any certainty do I suspect you do either. Maybe I shouldn't have this role. Sometimes I feel that way.

This is a hard sermon, and it might be the right or wrong sermon for where you are at. I don't know. Mary Ann Stein says what she likes about me is that I am transparent and authentic, so I'm going with it.

Here really is the sermon's beginning.

We are all constantly trying to understand "why." Right?

As humans we are always wanting a reason for the things that happen to us. "Why?" is a natural product of our frontal lobes. Our very capacity to ask why things happen or don't happen to us is exactly why we sit at the top of the food chain. But for humans, "why?" can be distracting. Not always a good rabbit hole to chase our mind and heart down.

Let's pause for a minute and ask ourselves what big "why's" have been answered by thinking about them. Seriously ask yourself—

Is the question of whether there is a God solved by all the gray matter we have spent on it? Has the wealth of print spent on "What the meaning of life" led to an answer? Has, "Is there a life after this one?" or "Why we are here?" been cleared up by the academies and monasteries?

As far as I can tell, not one of those above questions has been answered by thinking deeper or longer about them. In fact, the more we think about them the more fanciful the answers we find. There is something ironic about philosophically coming to the realization that thinking doesn't help.

Socrates, who is famous for the phrase "The unexamined life is not worth living," may have been completely wrong. *Maybe it is the examined life that is not really lived.*

We turn to beliefs or platitudes like "Everything happens for a reason," for a number of reasons.

One, they might be true. We at least are not sure that they are not. Mostly, though, I don't think it is their accuracy that makes them persist. These statements "work" for us because we constantly struggle to have control over a situation that we so desperately want control over.



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We struggle to understand why things happen as they do because we are compelled to attribute to our experiences a broader meaning and intention within the universe when there seems to not be any.

We struggle to understand why and how such things happen because we quite naturally struggle to live in a universe so indifferent to this insignificant temporary vulnerable creature that is us. And because it is painful for us not to.

We say things like "Everything happens for a reason" and don't mean the laws of physics, or the randomness of chance, because our vulnerable place in the world means that our need for comfort quite naturally feels compelled to nudge its way into our philosophical conversation.

Admitting that, as the actor Kristen Stewart intends to pass on in her own beautifully crass way, that "Things don't happen for no reason," really means giving up the dream that life is supposed to be easy, the universe tidy, fundamentally just, and concerned about us.

Human beings seem to have an innate sense of entitlement that we are owed a pain free existence. *This is probably rooted in our wish that it was true. I know in some deep cognitive crevasse that I feel that way.*

We say everything happens for a reason collectively because we don't want to accept that struggle or blessing, our joys and concerns, are both an inevitable, and a random part of the human experience. We turn to "Everything happens for a reason" because the stakes are too high for us not to.

Yuck. Now, I'm ready to join a cult that tells me I'm unique and everything is going to be fine.

Aren't you glad you came to church today?

When the going gets tough, we want to know it has a purpose. But that is not the only reason why we say platitudes like EHFAR. (Everything Happens for a Reason)

We also say these things and want to fix it, make it better, not just because we don't want our friend to be in pain, but because it is so uncomfortable for us to witness her pain.

Vulnerability researcher Brené Brown has observed that in our desire to avoid seeing people suffer, we "reflexively look away." "Everything happens for a reason" is an effort to turn away.

As a blogger named Doherty said, when someone says, "Everything happens for a reason," what they're really saying is "I'm very reluctant to feel sad or uncomfortable even for a minute, so I like to delude myself into believing that every apparent misfortune is actually a good thing in disguise. Come, won't you be delusional, too?"



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This attitude may be driven by a deeper belief that feeling sad, angry, depressed, or lonely is somehow "wrong" and that immediate action must be taken to escape them.

Brown writes "that to pretend that we can get to *helping, generous, and brave* without navigating through tough emotions like *desperation, shame, and panic* are profoundly dangerous and misguided assumptions.

Those who rail against such faith believe those well-intentioned statements are more selfish and destructive than we are inclined to think of them as being, because unconsciously such platitudes serve to cover up the very real pain and grieving that inevitably needs to be felt to be processed.

That feels a bit harsh to me, but I get the point.

The angriest of the bloggers I stumbled across railed against these responses to misfortune as expressions of a false confidence that those who utter them are privy to a broader plan, we the suffering are not.

Another blogger suggested "Everything Happens For A Reason" was a statement that managed to combine "the maximum amount of ignorance with a maximum amount of arrogance."

That made me chuckle.

I'm not sure that such platitudes are all that bad, I have not had that kind of trauma, I don't even know whether they are more distracting than good. Platitudes, whether true or not, can be comforting.

Although we can never be certain whether something is, or for that matter is not part, of "God's plan," or some pre-destined fate, it seems unlikely, and even cruel if it was.

Holding onto the idea that "Everything happens for a reason" also means that it is God's plan for someone to have cancer, and be present at the location of a mass shooting.

God's will is not for an innocent child to be brutally murdered. God's will is not for a teenage girl to be raped. God's will is not that one suffers chronic pain, illness, disability, or death. It also doesn't, if we follow it, make sense.

The world is not as Leibniz asserted, the "Best of all possible worlds," it isn't, it's just the world. Chernobyl, slavery, women's oppression, unexplained tumors, and mass shootings all could or couldn't have happened.

What I think happens, is this. We don't dispute that gravity works. We don't regularly, or for that matter ever, see heavy things miraculously fly away.

To search for deeper solutions beyond the science is to try to outwit the imperfect way the world just is. Things don't fall apart so that other things can fall together. That's a mistaken way to view it, even if that is a more comfortable way to perceive and



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experience life. You don't lose your eyesight so you can cultivate your hearing, but it does work that way. And, things falling apart does allow for that.

So, even though things likely don't happen for a scripted cosmic reason, we do have to make reason out of things that happen. But the Bible, which is all over the map on this eternal question, gets this right. "The rain falls on the just and the unjust."

Said another way, the truth is, everything does happen for a reason. And the reason is, the universe is flawed and indifferent to us, and the experience any one of us have in this universe of ours is both somewhat random, and somewhat predictable, based on one's history, disposition, behavior, race, gender, location, and luck.

To bring up the most profound example of how and why everything actually does happen for a reason, it is only really in our country, where we love our freedom to purchase automatic weapons is valued over the freedom not to live in fear, that we have more than one mass shooting every day.

And although that is hardly a wistful outlook, those are as far as we can tell the reasons everything happens. The fact that we don't like that is the short version of all the reasons we listed as to how things happen.

However, if there is no fated cosmic reason why so much does happen, there is a reason for grief, and that is too slow us down, and to disable us for long enough give us a full dose of "That just happened and there is nothing now that I can do about it but heal and try to prevent it from happening again."

Even though the lessons we learn from tragedy or even simply life's disappointments are not worth the cost, if one can learn to be independent, if we can learn to be strong and independent, we can learn to be there for others who experienced what I learned, to take care of others. Probably, most importantly, we can learn to love amidst our brokenness, love those around us, *love our life, and love what is to come* – the good, the bad, and the ugly. And learn not to take for granted what is with us. Whether the grief is worth it or not.

We can, while of course we might not be blissfully and blindly thankful for what happened. We can, given that this is the imperfect world we live in, and certainly we can collectively and personally challenge our instincts to turn away, and live with as much love as we can muster.

Admitting that things don't happen for a reason can undo the feeling that we feel like we have been wronged. The truth is, we all struggle. We all suffer. We all experience pain, heartache, and loss. And there's just no reason other than we are human and pain is a *part of the process*.

Consequently, so weirdly from the pat explanations that surround us, I think it's the opposite that we want, accepting our real spiritual duty.



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We need to face honestly that even if there are lessons and strength that can often be derived from loss, tragic loss is not laced with inherent specks of good. There is nothing good about someone being raped. There is no good in murder or abuse. We have to create the good. I believe the spiritual journey is work to let compassion grow in the hard soil of life's randomness.

As one angry blogger said, "Do you know how God gives us trials so that we can learn from them, sounds to someone who hasn't eaten a normal meal in three years and lives on a feeding tube? Do you know how that sounds to someone who has seen countless, innocent children dealing with the terrible fallout and aftermath of sexual abuse? It's ridiculous to think that a good and just God would *want* any child to be sexually abused. It's offensive for me to think that God intentionally deprived me of food for three years *just so I'd learn my lesson.*"

It's not the God of love that I know. Stuff happens. People make bad choices that hurt others. The body does strange and random things that we don't understand and can't control. God is not pulling the switch on everything. He is not the master of circumstance. If he is, or was, he would be malicious.

There should be a pause here.

There has to be a turn here. As true as the above is, if there is anything we might know about God's will, if such a thing exists, it is that being spiritual means...God's will is not the path we walk, but rather how we walk the path. So even if God's will may not be an event that happens to us, God's will might be present in how we respond to what happens.

I think the proper response, or better the deeper spiritual disposition to the challenges of life, is much more complicated.

I think the proper response requires a bit of the realism of the pessimist who expects to bear some of the suffering likely, if not inevitable, in life, and some of the optimism of the person who knows when we grieve, that largely feelings are temporary, and that an adjustment in our expectations is necessary.

Shit's gonna happen.

I think the proper response requires the wisdom to see that although often the lessons are not worth it, that there are lessons and strength to be gained.

Let's say that together.

Although often the lessons are not worth it, that there are lessons and strength to be gained.

I think the proper response to the misfortunes in this life that can push us to want to say "Everything happens for a reason" is to remember that even though we may not be built

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to be able to answer why things happen, but when healthy we have a near remarkable capacity to eventually digest, integrate, and process all it is that we have to get through.

That may be where the "holy" or the miraculous does live in this story.

If all that is true, the power of being on a spiritual path I think is not so much to assert what your circumstances need to be, but to help you cope with them.

Someone phrased God's power is most strongly felt not in creating an ornate intellectual infrastructure of answers that we suspended in the firmament, but in standing there as best we can when it has shattered it into a million pieces.

And in that view, that makes our role as spiritual people more like the humble janitor who faithfully arrives on the scene to help you clean than the architect who built the structure. Viewed that way means saying that "Everything happens for a reason" makes as much sense to me as blaming the paramedics for the accident.

The best we can do is teach what it really means to live with hope. Teach, by example, that you can be happy in suffering. Teach how to love. Teach people, through your grace and dignity in suffering, what it means to endure. Teach them what it means to persevere. To me that is our spiritual challenge. That is the kind of character development the Unitarians and Universalists of old would reference.

**AMEN**