

THE HOPE OF CHAOS
Rev. Steve Wilson
Pacific Unitarian Universalist Church
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I was driving down the road the other day listening to a CD I got out of the Library: of Joseph Campbell talking about myth. I love Joseph Campbell. I could almost listen to him forever. Penny Trunnel, a regular in our Seekers group, is a big Joseph Campbell fan, and FYI—we have quite a few Joseph Campbell books in our library.

Campbell, a scholar on myth who popularized some very scholarly ideas about religion in a way few have, was talking about the promise in almost all religions about a golden age, a better time, a new kingdom, and how these new eras are often the acts of the gods of whatever culture they are studying are active at the time, in explaining how the yearning for a better time and place in most mythic traditions across time involves human agents involved, too. People, heroes often, but not always, whose actions at certain moments have a magnified, serendipitous impact in helping to usher in a new, better time.

I like that idea, that sounds like a theological idea I can get behind. I translate that to mean that across history, Campbell has discovered that on the largest broadest playing fields we have, individual humans do things that influence the whole swath of history. This is no revelation, but that idea turned me on.

Days later I was listening to a pod cast about chaos theory. I believe it was NPR's Radio Lab, but I'm not sure. What I do know was that it was interesting enough to stop what I was doing, pull over in the car, and start scribbling notes. This audio piece focused in on the pioneers of chaos theory in the late 1950s. Really, they were post grad physics students living in Santa Cruz. The radio show was suggesting that the discovery of at least some of the truths that have come to be grouped together under the banner of chaos theory can largely be attributed to a small group of physics students who pursued their instincts, followed through on educated hunches that there really was something a little too orderly about the way physics was being conceived of and taught.

Without knowing what was wrong, these bright young physicist rebels felt that the way math was being used to understand and describe reality was a little too predictable. They had enough experience to suspect that physics had *too* clean an understanding of how things worked to really represent the reality of the real world.

These guys—and they were early on all guys—lived about two hundred miles north of us here, in the classic California surfing town of Santa Cruz. I envision these post grad physics students living together like the band of friends in the show "The Big Bang Theory" do.

Following their dream, and living essentially a shared life, they were studying their craft at school, but back at home they were creating a physics that had not yet been named. Although they were advised that their pursuit was career poison, they had a hunch that could not be reasoned away. They were out to prove that "the world" was more complex than the world of physics they were studying described it as being.

The students began working on experiments at home. They had big garbage bins set up in their home that measured the actual the irregularity and thus the sheer unpredictability of simple things like how water drips from a faucet.

If traditional physics, they asked, was so good, how come it could only explain in hindsight why a kitchen faucet dripped two drips a second and then three in a row, and then paused, and then dripped once, and then ... well, you get my point. Something was fishy, they thought, with the presumed predictability of the world their physics books promised, and the randomness they saw.

About the same time, across the country at John Einhorn's alma-mater MIT, about the time when computers were *first being employed as real scientific tools*, a *young mathematician at MIT* began inputting data that processed the weather conditions from the west.

The temperatures of cold fronts in Canada, the barometric measurements of low pressure over Texas, and wind speeds in Colorado, all were imputed into some of the best computers of the age. The hope was that the aggregation of all measurements being processed could really be refined to predict the weather in Cambridge MA a couple days later.

It should be known as our story unfolds that scientists were hoping, perhaps expecting, that weather to be not only predictable, but controllable.

The *fifties* were of course heady days for the promise of technology. It was *after* this era it was expected that clean free nuclear energy would rule the world.

Test the reliability of these new super-computers in Cambridge, they decided to run the test again to see, not so much to challenge their assumption that weather was truly predictable was right, but if the computer was working. So they re-input all the weather data, and the prediction of the weather at the end was so different than the first test that they were convinced that they had discovered a computer glitch.

Frustrated like we all get with our computers, the student and over time his peers and mentors began to troubleshoot the problem. But, the trouble it turns out was not the computer. The problem was that when they re-entered the weather data from out west, they input the data with a single mistake, and what resulted was that the subsequent numbers it spit out for what the weather predicted in Cambridge changed profoundly.

On both coasts a great truth was emerging. And it is this. That so much of what we think is basically predictable is not. In reality subtle changes can, and do often make for huge unpredictable changes down the road. The last election is evidence enough of that.

The world of physics, which seemed from Newton on through Einstein to promise that with perfect information perfect predictability and control was assured, was being shaken. What was now being paid attention to was not the predictability of the laws of physics, but the impact of very subtle variables on end results. The phrase "butterfly effect" comes from this wisdom.

Eyes were opening to the truly unpredictable way life unfolds. Eyes were opening to the way a little rain falling on this or that side of the mountain can build a river system, and over time an entire ecosystem in this or that state.

About this time more people were realizing, as paleontologists were telling us, that even as evolution did involve an overall arc towards greater intelligence, a more careful look revealed much more chaos than expected. There was no direct line from the apes to us. The kind of impact

a gust of wind or contour of the land can have on the shape of a river, the flight of an arrow, the arc of history, is real but *un-predictable*. Knowable only with hindsight.

The world is unpredictable. How different the world would be different if Hitler was loved for his art, or killed earlier. What if the meteorite never killed the dinosaurs? What if the American soldiers ready to fight Valley Forge had not been willing to eat lichen to survive? The world is more a variable than a given.

Respecting the power of unpredictability is oddly part of our UU legacy too. For UUs, one of the chief pieces of our faith is that "revelation is not sealed." That our eternal fate is not sealed in some eternal book, but within our control. For all that we hesitate *not* to say about the way the way the world is for risk of offending people or boxing it in, we as Unitarians and Universalists say definitively, that fate is not fixed; history not pre-written.

And that is a religious position that takes guts. I want you to take a moment of silence and pride that you are part of a faith that can admit that the future is not fixed or orchestrated from on high.

You sit in one of the few religious traditions brave enough to say that *fairly obvious truth*, if you are courageous enough to existentially accept it. Here is one cool story of chaos working for good.

We all likely are familiar with the Ceausescu Regime in Romania. Once thought of as the most long-running and brutal of all the Soviet satellites, Ceausescu crushed all dissent ferociously. In November 1989 Ceausescu, who had been in power for decades, was re-elected President for another five years in yet one more ridiculous election.

Shortly after his election there was a small uprising in a few small western cities, further away from Bucharest and Ceausescu's control. In areas that have larger number of Unitarians as well. One of those cities was called Timisoara, and quite predictably Ceausescu squashed that. As a show of power, as was his custom, Ceausescu on December 21st held a big public rally in the Capital city. One solitary man in the crowd, Nica Leon, sick to death with Ceausescu and the dreadful circumstances he created in his country, bravely started shouting in favor of the revolutionaries in Timisoara.

As the story is told, the crowd around him, obedient and fearful of the regime, thought that when he shouted 'Long live Timisoara!' it was some new political slogan in favor of the Government, so people willingly joined in. It was only when the rogue protester yelled, "Down with Ceausescu!" that the surrounding crowd realized what they were actually chanting.

Terrified of the possible awful consequences of their act the throng pushed away from him, dropping the banners they had been carrying. In the crush and bustle, the wooden batons on which the banners were held began to snap underfoot and that started women screaming. From up on Ceausescu's balcony the ensuing panic sounded oddly like booing, and the frenzy looked like a riot.

As Ceausescu stood there on his balcony with his handlers, what had seemed the unthinkable, seemed to be happening. Protests were breaking out, right here at a public rally in front of the dictator. For a moment captured on the live telecast, the President stood ludicrously frozen in uncertainty.

Even the official camera shook with fright. Then the head of security walked swiftly across the balcony towards him and whispered, "They're getting in." This phrase, innocuous as it may be, inaccurate as it actually was, was clearly audible on the microphone in front of Ceausescu and was broadcast all across Romania on live national radio. This was the start of the revolution that undid a dictator. Within a week Ceausescu was killed. He famously said, weeks before he was toppled, that democratic reforms would occur in Romania only when pears started growing on apple trees.

I want to tell you a different story as if it happened. It has yet to—but it could. I will tell it with the optimism and commitment that it could. But, I am going to tell it as if it already has.

As the call for a new national civic morality grew, it of course met all the resistance that could be expected. It was said that what was being attempted was a dream...was too expensive ...was unrealistic ...too idealistic ...and contrary to human nature. But the effort to build a new world marched forth maybe a little blindly, but maybe also a little blessed, and lucky to get through the first obvious nay-sayers and obstacles to confront it.

It was like so many efforts before rooted in the vision that we could as a people, we might as a species, be more than we were. It was like so many efforts before it rooted in the vision that we were more than we were exhibiting we were. This movement said that we Americans were better than that.

It seems that one of the key reasons it succeeded was that the people who conceived of this change linked themselves to the successful revolutions of the past. People understood themselves as walking in the footsteps of those who in the past had brought a larger liberty to humans.

They brilliantly choose to see their efforts to, as their banners would read, "create justice," "live peace," and "save the planet" as a natural extension of the transformation from kingly subjects to citizens that the American founding fathers saw. Their success, many in hindsight believe, was achieved because they saw themselves in the image of those like Gloria Steinham, and Moses, and Gandhi who tapped into the deep human desire for real justice and a larger sense of liberty.

They began to importantly first see and then instinctively market their ideas as the next natural improvement for humanity. "One More Step Forward" became a catch phrase in the movement. The first pioneers, those who could really tell their grandkids that they were there when the species came of age, spoke of a time when the feeling of scarcity, of there not being enough love, care, or resources or possibility, dissipated a little for everyone. There was a collective calling that now, yes now, was the time.

Oddly enough as the cultural wind shifted, in just a subtle way it seemed that drug lords, dictators, the mafia, and street gangs seemed a little bit more antiquated. A little more ready to slip into the history books to be remembered alongside marauding barbarians, eye-patched pirates, and cowboy bandits. When it started, an interfaith gathering on the street described it like "Amos' dream of justice, pouring down like a mighty river, had finally began."

In this cultural shift those that supported those humans and animals facing the greatest challenges were given a new level of cache. And in this time supermodels began to look even a little sillier than they had before. Education and community activism rose in value in a way people remarked reminiscent of the time Kennedy called Americans to service. Stable funding for music and art in the schools became as obvious as it always should have been, to those who knew the real sense of what was important.

It was in hindsight from this reporter's perspective a time when even if people simply just had new attitudes, it was as if they had new eyes. Windmills came to be called as techno flowers, and kids began to draw them into natural parts of the landscape, and they became in a generation as pretty and as natural as old barns. Kids in church schools asked why they looked so much like peace signs, as teachers just smiled.

Overtime, all this helped building the world we wanted to live in become a believable, achievable, so obviously essential goal that suggestions that we were blessed by a war economy, or that a thriving stock market served all, came to be seen as efforts to distract ourselves.

As this change set in the idea of distracting us from our problems at home by constructed nightmares of a great evil other overseas, became laughable and ridiculous. As these changes seeped into the very assumptions about what a human is, and what civilization is, the question of why and, how did this happen, arose.

Some sociologists began to hunt back for trigger events and people who fostered this change at just the right time. Like a detective looking for a shred of DNA to hang the case on, social scientists begin to look for where this global change seemed to have its root, where it seemed to have been the strongest the longest and the earliest.

As best they could, they rooted the change to being most importantly located in the United States and from there to the Pacific southwest. Hot on the trail of where, they interviewed people and discerned that the initial seed change, the first drop, the flap of the proverbial butterfly's wing that made the real difference seemed to have begun in LA. After extensive interviews were done, as the story got told, some of the most important change took place in a small church perched on a canyon in the South Bay. A church that had in a way that turned out to be very impactful started to really live its professed values.

As the detectives, looking back to the one of the world's most peaceful revolutions, found it to be connected to here, to us. That with its faith in a better day and a better way engaged its community more than most. It discussed issues around the globe, and took time to dance, and create a safe, fun, space for all kinds of people. They, those that were interviewed in their area, took their values and wore them on their sleeves. And ever so slowly it worked. It didn't burst change out of its glass walls, it seeped.

Always there are those who get it, and one day, more than today, those voices began to win. Will it be perfect? No! But hope is in part real because chaos exists in the world. And that is good news.

I want a few facts to wash over you. As I lean into it a lot, we as a species have largely eliminated cannibalism, human sacrifice, and the broad scale acceptance at least of slavery from the planet. Those are facts. Think of all the other things that might be possible.

There are truths that need life. There are truths that need life, and we are the people to breathe them full of life.

That hope, and that this hope could manifest, is my good news.

AMEN