

# *When Life Isn't Fair*

A Sermon Delivered on March 14, 2010  
by  
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Justice is the very last thing of all  
wherewith the universe concerns itself.  
It is equilibrium that absorbs its attention.”  
-- Maurice Maeterlinck*

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**Meditation:** by the Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Martha Munson

It was Wendell Berry who said:

"For a time, I rest in the grace of the world and am free."

In this time of meditation, may you rest in the grace of the world and be free.

In weakness, may you sense the strength of the eternal hills, and rest in the grace of the world.

In failure, may you be upheld like the buoyancy of water, and rest in the grace of the world.

In limitation, may you remember that the choices may be as great as the expanse of the sky, and rest in the grace of the world.

In insecurity, may you feel the solid earth beneath your feet, and rest in the grace of the world.

In despair, may you hear the joy in birds' singing, and rest in the grace of the world.

In fear, may you feel the warmth of the sun, and rest in the grace of the world.

"For a time, I rest in the grace of the world and am free." So be it.

**Reading:** by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, from *How Can I Help?* (p. 76)

We hear stories of great tribulation. A man in great pain with advanced cancer is now denied the strength he always had as a professional carpenter, a supportive husband, and a father of four. A teen-ager is hurt in an automobile crash and has lost the use of both legs. A woman is told she can never have children; she's become alcoholic; they've just fired her from her job. We can easily feel in ourselves the likely reactions such people must experience under such conditions.

- My God, I can't believe this is happening to me!

- I'm so totally unprepared.

- I'll never be the same....

- I just plain feel sorry for myself, that's all.

- I feel trapped in this useless body....

- What did I do to deserve this?...

- I keep expecting to wake up and be healed.

- Why me?

**Reading:** by the 19th century philosopher William James, from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (p. 381)

Today, quite as much as at any previous age, the religious individual tells you that [God] meets [us] on the basis of [our] personal concerns.

Science, on the other hand, has ended by utterly repudiating the personal point of view. She catalogues her elements and records her laws indifferent as to what purpose may be shown forth by them, and constructs her theories quite careless of their bearing on human anxieties and fates... Our solar system, with its harmonies, is seen now as but one

passing case of a certain sort of moving equilibrium in the heavens, realized by a local accident in an appalling wilderness of worlds where no life can exist....

The God whom science recognizes must be a God of universal laws exclusively, a God who does wholesale, not retail business. He cannot accommodate his processes to the convenience of individuals.

**Reading:** by the 19th century Hindu sage Ramakrishna, a short tale entitled “When God Laughs” (Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 207)

God laughs on two occasions. He laughs when the physician says to the patient’s mother, “Don’t be afraid, mother, I shall certainly cure your boy.” God laughs to Himself, “I am going to take his life, and this man says he will save it!” The physician thinks he is the master, forgetting that God is the Master. God laughs again when two brothers divide their land with a string, saying to each other, “This side is mine, that side is yours.” He laughs and says to himself, “The universe belongs to Me, but they say they own this portion or that portion.”

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Last week it was time for our cats’ annual visit to the vet, for vaccinations and a general checkup. It was my job to take them in.

In many ways our cats seem to have a remarkably poor memory. Every day I remind them they aren’t supposed to sit on top of the dining room table, and they shouldn’t scratch the living room upholstery. When I gently but firmly remove them from the furniture they are abusing, they invariably give me a look that says “What? What’s the problem? Why are you bothering me?” As if this were the first time - rather than the tenth time that day - that I am setting them straight. When it comes to these things, the cats have a very short memory.

But when it comes to visiting the vet they have an amazing memory. The moment I take the cat carrier out of the basement, the cats are visibly alarmed, and immediately retreat to some hidden and inaccessible corner of the house.

Last week I was extra sneaky. I chose an appointment at the animal hospital at a time I know the cats like to nap, and are likely to be drowsy and off guard. But even so, despite my best laid plans, they put up quite a fight.

After much chasing around the house, I was finally able to cram them both into the carrier. But it wasn't pretty. It was a serious struggle and the cats were clearly scared out of their wits. I felt bad. They didn't know this was all for their own good, in the long run.

When the door of the carrier was finally securely closed, and the cats slowly caught their breath, I am sure they were wondering, why were they being treated so cruelly? Why was I torturing them? As far as they were concerned, this simply wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

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Most of the time our lives operate according to predictable patterns. Most of the time when we work hard, we reap the rewards of our efforts. Generally, when we exercise regularly and watch our diet, we are blessed with good health. Usually, if we are attentive to our associates and neighbors, and caring toward family members, we will enjoy a large circle of supportive friends.

These common, straightforward connections between what we sow and what we reap are blessings, some would say, God's blessings. The divine blessings we receive extend beyond anything we ourselves do. As Wendell Berry puts it, there is a certain grace in the world. A strength that upholds us when we are weak. An expansiveness that allows us to transcend our limitations.

This is the good news. This is the positive side of life and of faith. And yet the good news is not the whole story. There is more to life. As Ram Dass reminds us, we have all heard stories of tribulation. Each of us has heard stories of undeserved illness, unanticipated accidents, unforeseen losses.

Most of the time life is good and fair. But sometimes it isn't. Sometimes we lose our jobs because of factors far beyond our control. Sometimes relationships fall apart for reason we can't comprehend. Sometimes those we love suffer, and there seems to be nothing we can do to ease their anguish. Sometimes the fate we are dealt simply isn't fair.

\* \* \*

Peter Trachtenberg is a journalist who has struggled with these issues, and written a book about it, called *The Book of Calamities*.

He starts out by explaining a bit about his own experience. He says, he always considered himself a stranger to suffering. Although he was a drug addict and an alcoholic for twenty years, he considered this to be "voluntary" unhappiness. It was suffering he brought onto himself. Apart from that, and the grief following his parents' death, he thought he had lived a privileged life, well-insulated from tragedy. He shared the common fantasy that tragedy is something that always strikes "elsewhere," and that suffering afflicts "other people," people with bad habits, who somehow deserve what they are dealt.

But then, one day, a friend, a woman his own age, with no bad habits to speak of, died of breast cancer. She was a good person. She was, in fact, the perfect embodiment of what Trachtenberg had in mind whenever he described anyone as good. But despite her goodness, she was subjected to years of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. There were experimental treatments and false remissions and more metastases. There was excruciating pain. And in the end, she died. It wasn't fair.

The death of this friend broke his heart, and opened his eyes. For the first time, he recognized the pervasive reality of suffering. And he realized how deeply he had been denying this reality for the majority of his life.

In Trachtenberg's mind, his denial of suffering was not unique, but rather a very typical American phenomenon. He writes,

“We live in a country whose politics and culture sometimes resembles a vast machine designed to deny the inevitability of suffering. The machine works by promoting the fiction that suffering happens to other people, under circumstances so exotic and bizarre as to be statistically impossible... This fantasy of immunity arose out of traditional American exceptionalism but became prevalent only amid the euphoric abundance of the postwar years. It is a child's fantasy, and it has made us a nation of children. I believe it accounts for our collective helplessness in the face of illness, our paranoia about crime, our contempt for the disadvantaged. It's why we have no national health policy and vote for politicians who slash medical aid to the poor. It's why antidepressants are among the most widely prescribed drugs in the United States. It's why the attacks of September 11 plunged us into a paroxysm of incredulous rage and self-pity that instead of being allayed by the successful invasion of Afghanistan, keeps seeking new cathartic outlets: today Iraq, tomorrow who knows?” (p. 11)

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How can we make sense of suffering? How can we make sense of the tragedies that befall us? How can we make sense of the fact that bad things happen to good people?

Our struggles with these questions are not a modern phenomenon, and they are not unique to Americans. Thousands of years ago, our Jewish ancestors famously grappled with these issues in the story of Job. It is a story that remains poignant and pertinent to this day.

Job was a good man, and yet lost his health, his wealth and his children. Even his friends turned against him. Why was he subjected to such suffering? It was because the God and the devil were having an argument about the nature of faith. God said, faith is not merely a product of good fortune. It is grounded in something deeper. To prove his point, God subjected his most faithful servant to undeserved and unprecedented misery. Toward the end of the story Job's faith waivers. He challenges God and demands an explanation. The answer God offers does not mention his wager with the devil. Instead God chides Job for questioning his divine plan. After all, what does Job know about

what it takes to run a universe? “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” God asks him. “Tell me, if you are so smart.” “Have you commanded the morning, since your days began? Have you caused the dawn to know its place?” When God is finished explaining his point of view, Job is quiet. He realizes that a mere human is in a poor position to understand the ways of gods.

God offers an explanation similar to the one William James attributes to science. Science says the laws that govern the universe are much grander than our small human anxieties and fates. Like Yahweh, the God of the scientists does wholesale, not retail business.

Ramakrishna’s God laughs, because, like Yahweh and like the god of the scientists, he knows his powers and his knowledge vastly exceed the knowledge and the powers of humans, who innocently imagine they can control of life and death. Ramakrishna’s God laughs, because humans imagine they can possess the earth, even though it is abundantly clear that the entire universe belongs to God.

\* \* \*

If life is sometimes unfair for reasons impossible to comprehend, then asking “why me?” is the wrong question to ask.

Ram Dass and Paul Gorman say life invariably includes both pleasure and pain. Pain is unavoidable. However, the spiritual struggle for meaning which turns simple pain into profound suffering, this is something we can influence. Pain is unavoidable, but our sense of misery and despair, which turns pain into suffering, this can be avoided. We can alleviate suffering when we are able to better understand it.

As humans, we have a vast range of responses to suffering, Dass and Gorman write, “Some of us become obsessed by our suffering; others try to ignore it. Some curl up in a fetal position and withdraw into themselves; others wander about confused, grabbing at straws in the wind. Some keep businesslike; others childishly irresponsible. Some keep a stiff upper lip; others cry and turn to jelly.” (p.85)

No matter what life throws our way, we have a choice in how we respond. If our goal is to relieve suffering, the first thing we need to do is to face it. Based on what we see, based on what we learn, different responses will be needed. To address suffering, Dass and Gorman write,

“Our immediate responsibility is to do what we can to alleviate the concrete conditions of human affliction. We work to provide food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, healthcare for the sick and feeble, protection for the threatened and vulnerable, schooling for the uneducated, freedom for the oppressed. *To this order of service we must always attend first.*” (p. 87)

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Life may not always be fair, but overall life is good, it is filled with beauty and wonder, it with joy and purpose. The ways of the universe cannot be bent to accommodate our every human need and desire. Sometimes the meaning of life may elude us, but that does not mean life is without meaning.

I would like to close with a poem by Judith Viorst entitled “The Pleasures of Ordinary Life.” She writes:

I've had my share of necessary losses,  
Of dreams I know no longer can come true.  
I'm done now with the whys and the because.  
It's time to make things good, not just make do.  
It's time to stop complaining and pursue  
The pleasures of an ordinary life.

I used to rail against my compromises.  
I yearned for the wild music, the swift race.  
But happiness arrived in new disguises:  
Sun lighting a child's hair. A friend's embrace.  
Slow dancing in a safe and quiet place.  
The pleasures of an ordinary life.

I'll have no trumpets, triumphs, trails of glory.  
It seems the woman I've turned out to be  
Is not the heroine of some grand story.  
But I have learned to find the poetry  
In what my hands can touch, my eyes can see.  
The pleasures of an ordinary life.

Young fantasies of magic and of mystery  
Are over. But they really can't compete  
With all we've built together: A long history.  
Connections that help render us complete.  
Ties that hold and heal us. And the sweet,  
Sweet pleasures of an ordinary life.

No matter what fate we are dealt, may we have the wisdom to enjoy the ever-present pleasures of our ordinary lives. May we have the vision to see greater meaning ever-waiting to unfold, and greater love and justice ever-waiting to take shape in our every word and deed.

Amen.