

## **Sermon: A Lesson in Living the Good Life – Serendipity by Rev. Norm Horofker June 9, 2013**

I am indebted to Rev. Fran Dearman, for introducing me to the book “Religion for Atheists” by Alain de Botton. Fran was the interim minister in Halifax before I arrived.

De Botton’s premise is that religion has evolved to meet fundamental needs in human society and those needs continue to exist whether or not individuals maintain a belief in God. For example, de Botton argues that church is just about the only place where people regularly receive a message on how to live a good life... how to cultivate generosity, compassion, and love in our lives.

My message this morning is about living the good life. I will propose that serendipity is an important part of the good life and it can be cultivated as a quality of the human spirit.

The word serendipity was coined by Horace Walpole and his letter to Horace Mann, containing its very first use, on January 28<sup>th</sup> 1754, still survives. Walpole was impressed by a quality of spirit found in the main characters in a book called “The Three Princes of Serendip.” Serendip is an old name once used to describe the island of Sri Lanka off the south-east coast of India. Here is an abbreviated version of that story:

“In ancient times there existed in the country of Serendip, in the Far East, a great and powerful king by the name of Giaffer. He had three sons who were very dear to him, and being a good father he was very concerned about their education. He decided that he had to leave them endowed not only with great power, but also with all kinds of virtues of which princes are particularly in need.”

He searched for and found a number of scholars who specialized in a variety of fields in order to give his sons the best possible training. The three princes are very good students and over time they become very highly trained in the arts and the sciences.

As a final training exercise their father set them on a prolonged journey far away from the Island of Serendip to the land of Persia ruled by a great and powerful Emperor Beramo. They arrive in this strange land and are making their way through the country side when a merchant stops them to ask if they have seen a camel that he believes has been stolen from him. The excellent training that the princes have received now comes into play,

They ask a series of questions in turn:

Tell me of this camel. Was it lame in the left rear foot? Well, yes it was the merchant responds.

Tell me of this camel. Was it blind in the left eye? Well, yes it was...

Tell me of this camel. Was it missing a front tooth? Well, yet it was...

Tell me of this camel. Was it burdened with honey on one side and cream on the other? Well yes it was...

Tell me of this camel. Was it also carrying a young woman? Why yes it was.

And was this young woman pregnant? Why yes she was.

To which the three princes reply... No we never saw such a camel!

The merchant understandably is infuriated. The princes have obviously seen his camel and likely they have stolen it and its cargo. He calls for the royal guards and has the three princes brought before Emperor Beramo who asks them how they could give such an excellent description of a camel that they claim to have never seen.

The princes explain that as they made their way along the road, they observed camel tracks with the clear impression of three hooves and an indication that the fourth hoof was being dragged. Hence they concluded that the camel was lame.

They noted that the grass beside the path had been eaten, but only on the right side and hence they concluded that the camel was blind in its left eye.

They observed the manner in which the grass was pulled from the ground, leaving regular tufts, indicated that the camel was missing a tooth and they noted flies attracted to drops of cream and ants attracted to drops of honey on either side of the track.

From other evidence that I won't go into here, they concluded that the camel had a female passenger who was pregnant.

As it happened, while this questioning was going on, the merchant learned from a servant, that his camel had arrived safely at its destination.

Emperor Beramo was so impressed with the powers of observation and deduction demonstrated by the princes, that he invited them into his court and so began a long and profitable relationship between the rulers of Persia and Sri Lanka.

This story provides the rooting soil for the meaning of the word serendipity. Walpole himself, described serendipity as the gift for discovery by accident and sagacity (soundness of discernment and judgment) while in pursuit of something else. It is very important to note that the serendipity as demonstrated by the three princes was the result of their excellent training and preparation and their highly developed and sensitive powers of observation.

Serendipity is not to be confused with blind luck. Serendipity requires preparation of the powers of observation and an unusual openness to unexpected.

It is amazing to me that this word serendipity is such a late addition to the lexicon. Serendipity appears to me to be a quality or characteristic that emerges from the very nature of the universe. This quality of advance preparation is intriguing.

Neil Turok, one of the world's leading theoretical physicists has commented that nature seems to always be prepared for more than is necessary at the time. For example at the moment of the "big bang," the universe was pregnant with all the ingredients for the amazing universe we find around us today, even though it would be billions of years before stars and planets like the sun and earth came into being. Another example, the DNA molecule, which began and persisted for billions of years as simple green scum, had the potential to create advanced life forms including human beings from the beginning. And again, the human brain developed with the ability to model the world in complex mathematical formulae long before that capacity was needed for any evolutionary purpose.

I think you can make a good case that the evolution of life on planet earth is an ongoing expression of serendipity. It is in the nature of life that no opportunity goes unexploited. Life

explores and exploits every available niche. Our ancient ancestors were not in search of bipedal locomotion. They were happily scrambling around on all fours when by accident of successive genetic mutations they found something quite amazing that they were not searching for, and began walking on two legs.

In modern times the best examples of serendipity are found in the realm of scientific discovery. Louis Pasteur is quoted as saying: "Luck favours the prepared mind." A large percentage of scientific and technological discoveries are in fact the discovery of something very useful while in pursuit of something else entirely.

The word "Eureka" will forever be identified with accidental scientific discovery. Eureka translates from the Greek as "I have found it." It is reported as the word exclaimed by Archimedes when he noticed that the water in his bath rose and fell in direct proportion to the volume of his body that he submerged in the water. This accidental observation led him to be able to determine the density of any material and hence solve an ancient problem related to the adulteration of gold in jewelry.

Isaac Asimov has made this observation: "The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not "Eureka!" but "Gee... That's funny!" When a scientist notes "now that's funny," he or she is bringing to bear their training that first tells them what they should have expected to happen and then calls upon their scientific curiosity to realize the significance of what others might fail to assign significance to or might even fail to observe at all.

My favourite example of this is the discovery of the drug Viagra, which was originally tested as a treatment for angina. It was almost immediately found to be less effective than nitroglycerine for coronary artery dilatation. But then the patients in the first clinical trial reported an unusual, not at all undesirable and now well-known side effect. Someone said "Gee... That's funny" and the rest is history.

It is no wonder that the patients became depressed when the first clinical trials were brought to an end, and it was requested that the unused pills be returned to Pfizer. The company noted that never had so many unused clinical trial pills been reported as lost, misplaced, or accidentally flushed down the toilet.

The example of Viagra illustrates another characteristic of serendipity. If the Pfizer company had set out to discover a drug to treat erectile dysfunction it is not at all clear that they would have succeeded. In the first place the marketing data was not there to substantiate the investment. The extent of ED and the potential demand for a drug to treat it was essentially unknown because it was a cultural taboo. Fact is, we often don't know what it is we need, until we actually see it.

Secondly understanding the physiology sufficiently to develop a specific drug is extremely hard work. Thus the definition of serendipity that is attributed to Erin McKean. "Serendipity is when you find things you weren't looking for because finding what you are looking for is so damned difficult. As far as I know Pfizer never did find a better drug for angina.

In writing about the times we live in, Richard Eyre observed that the problems we face are too diverse to have a single answer, unless that answer is a paradigm shift in attitude. What is

needed is a new attitude that can give guidance to life, turn adversity into adventure, impatience into insight, competition into charity, boredom into beauty. Such is the promise of serendipity.

As you know, I was trained as an engineer. My training was all about making plans for the future, calculating expected outcomes, working on carefully constructed time lines with specific outcomes at specific dates, bringing projects in on time and on budget.

But now I am finding that the old paradigm of time management: control, plan, and manipulate, often just leads to frustration. There is too much happening – changes are coming too fast. The old model of time management no longer meets my needs.

As Richard Eyre has written: “The problem with time management is that time is like tides and currents. It needs to be used and harnessed, not managed. It is far better to learn attitudes that help us use time and flow with it than techniques for trying to manage it. There is an ebb and flow to time. Time has eddies and slow, stretched moments when certain things can happen – things that could not be forced or should not be forced at other times. Serendipity teaches us to respect time rather than manipulate it. – to shift directions within its flow and to use its power rather than thrash against it.”

A personal observation: I am struggling to adapt to the modern interconnected world. A world where communication is not in the form of carefully crafted letters or even emails, but rather spontaneous and immediate tweets and text messages and blogs and internet postings. Such a world seems to require a paradigm shift and a trust in the spirit of serendipity. It seems to me that flash mobs and crowd sourcing and internet events are all about serendipity.

As in all things there is need for balance. There will always be a need for careful planning but the good life requires living with a certain grace that allows us to lift our eyes from the road map and observe the beauty of the changing terrain. We must cultivate an appetite for surprise and provide for a quick response to an unexpected opportunity. We must allow ourselves to hear the subtle whispers of the universe that are offering opportunities that come from somewhere outside our conscious thought processes.

Sometimes things happen in our lives that take us off course. We have a choice in such cases. Do we struggle to get back on course, trying accomplish the thing that we have willed should be done? Or do we interpret the forced detour as a signal that we need to attend to, a wake-up call perhaps. At such times it is often said of our plans “it was just not meant to be,” and we recognize the need to go in the direction that the tides in the affairs of our life are pulling us.

For those who believe in God in one form or another, serendipity can become a bridge between our goals and God’s will. Serendipity can be seen as a shift from a paradigm of control and manipulation to one of awareness and guidance.

Living our lives with the intention of trusting serendipity requires that we take risks. Joan Erickson has written: “Vital lives are about action. You can’t feel warmth unless you create it, can’t feel delight until you play, and you can’t know serendipity unless you risk.”

I will close with a recognition of a real life problem with the idea of allowing for more serendipity into our lives, and an opportunity. Taking risk requires that you have a certain

tolerance for error. Those of us who are living our lives close to the edge, financially, emotionally, spiritually... At these times we have a limited capacity for risk. Failing to plan carefully for next month's grocery bill, or rent check, failing to provide protection for a frail and vulnerable emotional state, failure to take prescribed care of a medical condition. failure to cultivate a robust understanding of how the world works, (my definition of faith)... All of these things inevitably reduce your tolerance for risk.

At the same time it is when we have the fewest resources that we may be most in need of, and open to, the blessings of serendipity. How often have we heard stories from people who are at the end of their rope, out of options, when an unexpected event or benefactor rescues them from disaster?

The extent to which we can each live into serendipity is unique to our own circumstances and character. But I am convinced that there is room for each of us to move more in this direction and I know that our loving Universalist Unitarian community can help us to do that. Part of that tolerance, that margin for risk, is the result of our faith system and our community of support.

That quality of serendipity related to the careful observation of the environment around us is the same quality that makes us sensitive to the problems and the emotional state of those around us. In a congregation like ours it is serendipity at work when one of us reaches out to help another who needs comfort and our support.

May this community, the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax, be a source for your ever expanding serendipity and confidence and faith in the world. May you know that you are held and supported in love here with others on the journey to Serendip.

May it be so.

Amen