

# **Is Pleasure Enough?**

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Unitarian Church in Charleston  
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What is the purpose of it all?

About twenty years ago, I stood in this sanctuary that I loved so much and announced that I was leaving Charleston to pursue ministerial studies in Boston. Sixteen years ago, I stood in this sanctuary as you laid hands on me and ordained me into the Unitarian Universalist ministry. The picture I have of that event is one of my favorites, for it has most of the people who have meant the most to me in my life. Though this congregation has grown so splendidly in the past decades that few of you were actually around when I was here, it still feels like I'm reporting home when I preach here. I have never seen this sanctuary look so beautiful; truly my cup runneth over.

The message I have this morning is drawn more from the Universalist side of our faith than the Unitarian and it comes out of my sabbatical project, which is a book updating Universalist thought as it relates to the vexing problem of evil. As one who practiced criminal law for 20 years and ministry for 15, I think I have a unique perspective on this problem. The book is accepted for publication by Skinner House and I am under the gun to complete a first draft by May.

We start out with the observation that bad things happen, and in these last months there are a lot of them in the public sphere. Outrageous police shooting of unarmed black men in Ferguson, MO and Staten Island, NY, coupled with a refusal of grand juries to indict the officers, led to massive community protest. In the middle of last year, the suicide of Robin Williams hit us all hard, for who has not laughed silly

at his comic genius? The situation in Iraq and Syria continues to deteriorate, with the so-called Islamic state continuing its murderous path.

Here in the charming South Carolina lowcountry, these troubles can feel remote, yet we know that we are all interconnected. TV used to bring wars into our living rooms, but now the internet brings video of almost everything that happens to our computer screen or smartphone within minutes. You can get away from the news, you can go golfing or hiking and I recommend for us all to spend some time drinking in the beauty all around us, but when you come inside and flip on the screen there it will be, awash in problem piling up on top of problem, problems presenting themselves in new form and yet surprisingly familiar.

And for some of us, the bad things happening in the public sphere will not be as bothersome as what is happening in our own lives: disease, disability, loss, estrangements, loneliness, betrayals, financial woes.

You may agree with me that we're in a mighty pickle and yet wonder what this has to do with the purpose of it all. I will try to make the connection. Since time immemorial, people have looked at the sorry state of the world and wondered why bad stuff happens. And most of them for most of history have believed that all that we see around us was created by a God or Gods, so the question gets personalized as, how does God allow this sort of thing to happen? Isn't God supposed to be good and loving, isn't God supposed to be all-powerful, isn't God supposed to be all-knowing?

Universalists, in particular, historically have founded their faith on confidence that God was so loving that no human could go to hell, that everyone would be saved. We express this idea of universal salvation today in our First

Principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Or in a bumper sticker that says, God loves the whole world, no exceptions.

And that brave statement comes slap up against some hard realities in such a time as this. Of what value, you may well ask, is the love of an infinite being if that love does not

prevent people from dying like flies before the ebola virus, if that love allows the creation of hundred of thousands of refugees in Iraq and Syria, if that love did not save Michael Brown from death at the hands of the police or Robin Williams from death at his own hand? We have no need of a divine abstraction, something we can sit back and debate like the weather or the Unified Field Theory. This world is hurting, we are hurting, even here in this Holy City, this Kingdom By The Sea.

John Hick is a Twentieth Century philosopher who has tried to engage with this big question of God's justice in this classic book, *Evil and the God of Love*. He takes pains to carefully describe the main Christian perspective on the problem of evil, arising from St. Augustine, and then demonstrates why that is not adequate. Augustine basically had two arguments for how you could have an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-benevolent God and still have evil. First, God gave humans free will, and when humans freely chose to do evil, this could not be God's doing.

"For, as He is the creator of all natures, so also is He the bestower of all powers, not of all wills; for wicked wills are not from Him, being contrary to nature, which is from Him."<sup>1</sup>  
Got that? Our nature comes from God and is good,

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<sup>1</sup>Augustine, *City of God* Bk. V Chapt. 9.

but when we do evil, we are acting contrary to our nature and God is not responsible.

Augustine's second argument is aesthetic: a painting would be dull indeed if it consisted entirely of one color. You need a variety of tones to create a beautiful picture. Life in this world would be dull indeed if everyone always did good.

Hick spends a good part of his book demonstrating why both the free will and the aesthetic defense are not adequate, and then he moves on to the solution he proposes, which stems from some suggestions of the second-century church father Irenaeus. And it is this which led Hick to consider God's purpose in creating the world and in creating humans.

He takes the analogy between God and a human parent, an analogy used extensively by Jesus, and argues that as pleasure, the good, is not the highest value in raising children, it is not the highest value in human life. Rather, a wise and loving parent will want the child to encounter the good and the bad in order to grow to spiritual maturity. You can't eat dessert all the time; sometimes you have to eat your spinach.

For me, this idea invokes the story of Prince Siddhartha. Prince Siddhartha was brought up in a wealthy household where his every want was satisfied, and his parents were very careful in what he was exposed to within the palace: no sick people, no dying people, no deformed people. But one day, Prince Siddhartha escaped the palace, and discovered to his shock that the mass of humanity suffered from hunger, want, disease and death. He was

greatly disturbed by this, and went out into the wilderness to live the life of an ascetic, eating and drinking the barest minimum to keep himself alive. After several years of this, though, he renounced asceticism in favor of what he called the middle way, a regime of moderate food and pleasure. He attained his enlightenment while practicing this middle way, and we know him today as the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

Prince Siddhartha would not have attained enlightenment had he not been exposed to the suffering of the world. A world of pure pleasure without any pain, without any evil or suffering, might be some ideal of paradise, a state to which we could repair after death or after the Last Judgment, but it would not be very good for growing spiritual maturity.

Peter Fleck was the minister who founded and fostered the fellowship which grew into the congregation I serve on Cape Cod; he was personally well acquainted with evil. A Dutchman of Jewish heritage, he and his wife narrowly got out of Amsterdam ahead of the Nazis. In America he became an investment banker and then a UU minister. Peter wrote a wonderful essay called "The Blessings of Imperfection," from which I read earlier. Here's another quote:

"One could say that the imperfection of creation is meant to challenge humankind to make creation less imperfect, and that creation has endowed humankind with the means to do just that. And so it is that imperfect men and women are engaged in the

process of trying to make an imperfect world more perfect...

"What if the world were ever complete? There would be nothing left to be done; the human task would be fulfilled, the human role ended.

"Don't worry. While we may — yes must — strive for perfection, perfection is not attainable. It is the striving towards perfection that counts. Only the idea of something can be perfect. Its material expression, or, to use a loaded word, its incarnation, cannot be perfect."<sup>2</sup>

One of the things distinguishing Universalism from orthodox Christianity is that in Universalism, there was never a Fall, never an original state of perfection, but rather, we grow towards perfection. Albert Ziegler, the last Universalist to articulate Universalist theology, said this in 1959:

"The problem of evil [is] the fact that man does not do as he 'ought' to

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<sup>2</sup>Fleck, Peter, "The Blessings of Imperfection" from *The Blessings of Imperfection: Reflections on the Mystery of Everyday Life* (Boston: Beacon Press 1987) p.5

do; in short, the dilemma of man's imperfection. The whole structure falls when we realize that it provides a solution for a dilemma which does not exist. Imperfection exists, but it is not a dilemma. Orthodoxy supposed a completed universe, a perfect, finished creation, and so finds a problem in the existence of imperfection in it. Reason, and any healthy faith that illumines it, must know that creation is moving on, not running down; that the universe is in process; that life did not begin in perfection but, in the working out of a perfect purpose, is still moving from chaos into order.

"What is more natural, then, than that there is imperfection, in the universe and in man?"<sup>3</sup>

A loving parent would not try to shield his or her children from the imperfections of the world, as Prince Siddhartha's father did, and John Hick argues by analogy that God does not either. The presence of suffering, death, disease, poverty, environmental degradation in the world is not a flaw, it is woven into the fabric of being, for the purpose of it all is not to give us pleasure, but to give us

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<sup>3</sup>Ziegler, Albert, Foundations of Faith  
Boston: Universalist Publishing House 1959, p. 41.

progress.

Now at this point, those of you who are humanists and religious naturalists will be uncomfortable, because my frame of reference up to now has been a theistic one. The whole question of theodicy, how can bad things happen in a world created and ruled by a loving God, assumes a God. Many UUs, and many in this congregation, in the words of the French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace "have no need of that hypothesis." What does science have to say about why bad things happen?

I have just been reading this new book by Edward O. Wilson, one of the creators of the discipline of sociobiology back in the 1970s and a world authority on ants. Here he turns his powerful intellect on the human species: *The Meaning of Human Existence*.<sup>4</sup> Evolution, says Wilson, can operate at two levels: on the individual and on the group. He describes the evolution of the genus *homo* from its earlier incarnations such as *homo habilis* and *homo erectus* to *homo sapiens*, and then summarizes the meaning of such evolution:

"Probably at this point, during the habiline period, a conflict ensued between individual-level selection, with individual competing with other individuals in the same group, on the one side, and group-level selection, with competition among groups, on the other. The latter force

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<sup>4</sup>Wilson, Edward O. *The Meaning of Human Existence* (New York: W.W. Norton) 2014.

promoted altruism and cooperation among all the group members. It led to innate-group wide morality and a sense of conscience and honor. The competition between the two forces can be expressed succinctly as follows: Within groups, selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, but groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals. Or, risking oversimplification, individual selection promoted sin, while group selection promoted virtue."

"So it came to pass that humans are forever conflicted by their prehistory of multilevel selection. They are suspended in unstable and constantly changing positions between the two forces that created us. We are unlikely to yield completely to either force as the ideal solution to our social and political turmoil. To give in completely to the instinctual urgings born from individual selection would be to dissolve society. At the opposite extreme, to surrender to the urgings from group selection would turn us into angelic robots -- the outsized equivalents of ants.

"The eternal conflict is not God's test of humanity. It is not a machination of Satan. It is just the way things worked out. The conflict might be the only way in the entire Universe that human-level intelligence and

social organization can evolve. We will find a way eventually to live with our inborn turmoil, and perhaps find pleasure in viewing it as the primary source of our creativity."<sup>5</sup>

Wilson offers us here a purely naturalistic explanation of good and evil. This underscores the larger picture: In the world we know through science, there was no state of perfection, no garden of Eden; even the idea of perfection is a human creation. Nothing in nature is perfect — in fact the term is meaningless. Everything is complete in itself, but everything is also evolving. Before there was something, there was nothing, and then the Big Bang happened, and everything that is here unfolded from that.

Let me tell you the story of someone I will call Lucy; Lucy went to see a movie starring Matt Damon and fell head over heels in love with him. She went right out and saw every other movie of his she could, and it got to where she would dream of him at night. Lucy's marriage wasn't going so well, and she fantasized about how Matt would be the perfect mate. One day, she was in a hotel elevator in Boston, and who should walk in but Matt Damon! Lucy started to go up to him and her mind was racing trying to find something impressive to say, but all she got out was "uh... uh...". But when he got out three floors below, what she realized was that the real Matt Damon was a lot shorter than she was, smelled of garlic, and has one arm shorter than the other. In other words, the perfection which she had worshiped from afar came undone when she got close up.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, pp. 33-4.

Perfection on the silver screen is achieved through camera angles and manipulation of the images. How many of us have stories like Lucy's?

I don't know about you, but I felt like a piece of my heart had been torn out when I heard of Robin Williams' suicide. I hadn't known how connected I felt to him until that moment. The connection, which I shared with millions of other fans, was to the person we thought we knew, the incredibly agile comic mind which could riff on nothing for half an hour and keep an audience in stitches, who could start a sentence in a fake Bulgarian accent and finish it in a Korean one. Behind all this brilliance, we have all - discovered this week, was a human being who carried a burden of severe depression and substance abuse. And apparently he was recently diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

The comic perfection which entranced us from a distance displays his all-too-human flaws as we come closer. We cannot know what was in his mind, but it may be that he was himself such a believer in his own perfection, which depended on extraordinary physical and mental agility, that he was unable to face the fact that Parkinsons would soon slow him down.

If that is the case, I wish I could have introduced him to my father. My father was a brilliant lawyer who suffered a disabling stroke at age 50, when I was in high school. He had to give up his law career, but he worked hard at his physical rehabilitation and reinvented himself as a sort of lay minister, and spent many days visiting the sick and

homebound. He was in many ways a kinder, gentler man after his stroke than before, but there was an additional cost: he developed a bipolar mental illness. This made him a burden to the family, particularly to my mother, and he knew it. It is a characteristic of this kind of illness that one exaggerates one's negative impact on others, and when I was in my late 20's, Dad acted on these feelings by taking his own life.

It is hard to live on half a loaf when you are used to having all the bread you want. My father did adjust to his disabilities for ten years, but ultimately he needed to get out, just as Robin Williams did. The point is not whether we approve or defend a person's decision to take his or her own life and in what circumstances. The point here is that life is not about perfection, and it offers itself to you even when your circumstances may be reduced. Spiritual maturity consists in meeting life where it meets you.

The point of life is not to offer us an easy road to attaining every kind of pleasure. In saying that, I am not glorifying suffering and pain; I reject that part of the Christian tradition which holds up suffering as noble. Suffering is not noble, but it is inevitable. And life is about the whole shooting match. There is not something wrong with life because there is pain, suffering, death, disease and injustice in it. These are part of its warp and weft, and yet we are called as people of faith to do what we can to heal, to right the wrong, to bind up the wounds, to release the captive, to witness and to fight for love and justice.

We find ourselves in helping others cope with the

imperfections of life. Robins Williams recognized this in an extraordinary interview he gave to Diane Sawyer in 2006, after it became publicly known that he had been battling addictions.

"Diane: Was there one moment when you fell into it again, was there one day...

Robin: It's very gradual, you're standing at a precipice and you look down. There's a voice, it's a little quiet voice that goes 'jump.' This same voice, it says 'just one.' There's a voice that goes 'jump,' and the idea of 'just one.' And for someone who has no tolerance for it, that's not a possibility.

Diane: To talk about it as caused by something ...

Robin: It's not caused by anything, it's just there. It's just, you know, latent, waits. It lays in wait for the time when you think, 'it's fine now, I'm Ok.' And then the next thing you know — beep — "it's not OK. This not going so well.'

Diane: Is there a sadness about these past two years, then?

Robin: Yes there's a sadness and then you have to go, then there's also hope. I mean there's a sadness like you wished they hadn't happened, but they did. And the purpose is to make you different. This is what they call a Buddhist gift — I would call it the ultimate Christian gift. It's that idea of, you're back and you realize that the thing that matters are others. Way beyond yourself. Self goes away. Ego, bye-

bye. You realize there are a lot, a lot of amazing people out there to be grateful for. And a loving God. And other than that, good luck."

Other than that, a loving God can and does allow a world in which there are values besides pleasure, where life presents us with challenges which bring out the best in us. Everything is interfolded. In the comic is the cosmic, in the end is the beginning, in the destructive is the progressive, in the evil is the good.

Amen.

Reading 1: from *Evil and the God of Love*, John Hick'

If our general conception of God's purpose is correct, the world is not intended to be a paradise, but rather the scene of a history in which human personality may be formed towards the pattern of Christ. Men are not to be thought of on the analogy to animal pets, whose life is to be made as agreeable as possible, but rather on the analogy of human children, who are to grow to adulthood in an environment whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realization of the most valuable potentialities of human personality.

Needless to say, this characterization of God as the heavenly Father is not a merely random illustration, but an analogy that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus treated the likeness between the attitude of God to man, and the attitude of human parents at their best towards their children, as providing the most adequate way for us to think about God. And so it is altogether relevant to a Christian understanding of this world to ask, How does the best parental love express itself in its influence on the environment in which children are to grow up? I think it is clear that a parent who loves his children, and wants them to become the best human beings they are capable of becoming, does not treat pleasure as the sole and supreme value. Certainly we seek pleasure for our children, and take great delight in obtaining it for them; but we do not desire for them unalloyed pleasure at the expense of their growth in such even greater values as moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, courage, humour, reverence for the truth, and perhaps above all, the capacity for love. We do not act on the premise that pleasure is the supreme end of life; and if the development of these other values sometimes clashes with the provision of pleasure, then we are willing to have our children miss a certain amount of this, rather than fail to come to possess and to be possessed by the finer and more precious qualities that are possible to the human personality.

... If, then there is any true analogy between God's purpose for his human creatures, and the purpose of living and wise parents for their children, we have to recognize that the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain cannot be the supreme and overriding end for which the world exists. Rather, this world must be a place of soul-making.

Hick, John, *Evil and the  
God of Love*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 1966 pp. 258-9

Reading 2: from *The Blessings of Imperfection* by Peter Fleck

All of us, at times, have experienced the sadness of disappointment upon the fulfillment of an ardent wish. The stream was not as clear as we imagined it; the sea not quite as blue; the mountains not quite as overpowering; the woods not quite as dark; our marriage not quite as happy; our children not quite as accomplished. Reality did not measure up to our idea of reality. And when we say that, we have stated one of the principal tenets of the philosophy of Plato. For Plato taught that only the idea of something is perfect and its realization, its expression in material, worldly terms, a mere shadow of that perfection.