

If It's Not One Thing, It's Another
A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz
Sunday, February 11, 2024
Unity Church Unitarian

It just goes to show you...it's always something! If it's not one thing, it's another! That is the great philosophical insight from the late comedian Gilda Radner, from her skits on Saturday night live – maybe as far back as in the 70's. Now, I know that there are some of you in this room who never watched that show or perhaps who weren't even born when it was on, but that phrase," it's always something " has made its way into our popular culture. Our facilities manager, Robert Baker and I have been saying it this past month when I ask him "so, how's the building holding up?" And he laughed and said "well, it's always something," to which I chimed in "if it's not one thing, it's another."

And isn't that what life feels like almost all the time? Like the carnival game of whack-a-mole, we just whack down one problem and another pops up; and the speed at which we are required to whack increases until we just don't want to whack anymore. And that's when this month's theme enters the game. This month our theme is "choosing," and it's a rich topic as we consider such heady theological questions such as free will, determinism, karma and freedom of choice. I see this as Part I of a two part sermon. Part I is the theological and spiritual reflection on freedom and personal choices. The February 25th sermon, entitled "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," will look more at the political ramifications of choice – both for political and religious progressives and conservatives. But for today, we are going to do a deep dive into the dilemmas of choice; the promises, possibilities, and pitfalls of this thing which we humans believe we have – free will and freedom to choose.

One of the most successful books about Unitarian Universalism was a little book called "Our Chosen Faith." First co-authored by Rev. Dr. Forrest Church and John Buehrens, it was,

for many years, handed out to new members. It was a great teaching tool as it stressed the fact that for seekers looking for a religious alternative to their inherited faith – ours is a faith that stresses personal freedom. You are not handed a dogmatic catechism to memorize to make you part of the club. Instead, you are asked to do something much more difficult; to examine your beliefs; to hone them in the fire of thought; to have them challenged in community with others and to make intelligent and heartfelt choices drawn from a variety of sources – and from your own life experiences. The second part of our name – Universalism, was founded on a rejection of the belief in a form of pre-destination.

Okay – here I’m going to go into a little theological excursion. Calvinism – the father of modern-day Presbyterianism, believe that God has already decided who will be saved and who will be condemned to hell before the world was created. Calvinists believe that God has chosen a limited number of souls to save at the beginning of time and that nothing a person can do during their life can change their eternal fate. Now to be fair to Calvin, he goes into great detail about why he thinks this is a helpful belief, primarily to humble the proud and to comfort the humble – but for our ancestors and our modern day ears – this idea of us not being able to affect our own destiny – because God – some supernatural being has already pre-ordained it – well, that just doesn’t cut it.

This is what’s called theological determinism. But just this fall, I came across a review of book whose premise utterly flummoxed me. I’ve been thinking about it ever since, knowing that the theme for the month of February is “choosing.” The book is by a Stanford neurobiologist named Robert M. Spolsky, and the book is: ***Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will.*** Spolsky’s thesis is that he thinks the time has come to accept the truth about determinism and acknowledge that human beings have NO free will at all. And because we have no free will, he

continues to argue, he would say no one is ever blameworthy – or praiseworthy for that matter, for doing anything¹.

So, if theological determinism is based on a God making decisions about human activity; then what is scientific determinism? (which is what Spolsky's book is about.) "Spolsky draws on explanations at every level – from atoms to culture – to make the case that everything we think and do is caused by something other than free will. We can't control, say, the conditions of the crucial first nine months of our existence." Spolsky writes: "Lots of glucocorticoids from mom marinating your fetal brain, thanks to maternal stress, and there's increased vulnerability to depression and anxiety in your adulthood." (Oh dear – one more reason to blame moms.) "You thought your failing marriage was to blame for your depression," he continues, "but it turns out it was all bound to happen long ago. It isn't so much that our blame was aimed in the wrong direction as it is that blame, in the strict sense, never truly made sense." So – if everything is determined, if we have no freedom of choice – then there's nobody to blame for what happens?

There's two problems I see with this idea. First, we – as human beings – love having choices. It gives us the feeling of human agency. When I visit my grandkids, they are constantly being asked "do you want to wear this outfit, or that one?" "Do you want peas or broccoli?" It seemed to me that having to make decisions all day long about one thing or another would be overwhelming for a three-year-old. But, as it turns out, this is a psychological tool in helping children not only learn about what they want or need, but to give them agency over their own lives. When I attempt to put on the blue socks instead of the red ones that they chose, a battle ensues. Because a three-year-old – like a thirty-year-old – like a ninety-three-year-old, wants to

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https://onedrive.live.com/edit?id=71148625CBC72A7E!72920&resid=71148625CBC72A7E!72920&ithint=file%2c docx&authkey=!Av-nzC46Z_oDZTI&wdo=2&cid=71148625cbc72a7e

believe we have control over our lives. We don't want to believe that either a supernatural being, or the strict dictums of neurobiology can dictate our choices. We want the freedom to choose our own way.

I've always been struck by that quote by Victor Frankl, in his book *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*. In that book, he describes what it was like to live in a Nazi concentration camp; a place where all freedom of choice was taken from him. Frankl observed this: "The last of the human freedoms: (is) to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you become the plaything to circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity..."

Frankl's point is that there are some circumstances one cannot choose. He did not choose to be shipped to a concentration camp. Yet, Frankl insisted that in each circumstance, he could determine – not his fate – but his attitude; his spiritual comportment, if you will, for how he would orient himself in the face of such disaster. I think this is, in part, why I "chose" the song that you heard earlier. "I don't know wanna know about evil; I only want to know about love." When I first heard that song, it seemed so earnestly hopeful; so 60's; change the channel when it comes to the bad news; the barking corrupt politicians, the sufferings in Palestine and Israel; in Haiti and Yemen, the terrors inflicted upon our LGBTQAI+ and BIPOC loved ones on a daily basis – the lies propounded by politicians - I don't want to know about evil – I want to choose to know about love.

It reminds me of this morning's reading – of Christian Wiman's daughter, who said "Daddy, I can't sleep, everytime I close my eyes I'm seeing terrible things." Oh, I know it child. Don't we all? Is there one among us who hasn't awakened at 3 AM and thought of all the terrible things that have happened or could happen? Because we know, *if it's not one thing – it's another – it's always gonna be something*. He told her to hold in her mind all the good things that she loves – don't think about evil, honey – think just about the things you love. Pray about it, he said. And you heard her response. She said "I asked God to turn me into a unicorn – and look how that's worked out..."

I would say that in this case, God made the right mistake by not answering her prayer turning a little girl into a unicorn. Our human freedom of choice – our ability to choose our own way – also means accepting the consequences of that choice. We can argue with theologians and philosophers about whether we are all products of choice – or our every decision is predetermined – but what we can't argue about is that for better or worse - we all live with the choices that have determined our lives, choices either we – or maybe someone or something else – has made.

Okay – time for a quick recap of what we've learned about how the Western traditions that most of us know best view the question of whether we really make choices. The original Christian Catholic position has been that an all-powerful God that knows and sees all past and future has created us with a gift, the gift of free will, which works up to a point and makes us responsible for our sins. Reformation Protestants like John Calvin said that everything we do is predestined – but does that mean it doesn't matter how good we are, because some are from the beginning of time and forever in God's graces and others are not? That sounds a lot like a spiritual caste system to me. And then, on the philosophy side we have the determinists of

different schools including the scientific determinism of Robert Spolsky – who makes the argument that everything is determined biologically – everything from atoms to culture is determined by factors beyond any human free will. And why won't we accept that? Spolsky's answer is that we're skilled at concocting stories in which we're in charge. The way humans often counter events that are beyond our control is to say "well, everything happens for a reason. We just don't know the reason is." For many theists, it's God's reasons and that's mystery that's not for us to quibble with. The conversation stops. Finally, within our Western religious and philosophical traditions, we come to the important humanist position that is popular among all of us, that we are both individually and collectively meaning-makers in this world. We determine the values that we will honor, we agree on how we will articulate them and enforce them and seek to educate our generations to be good moral decision-makers.

This summary of the Western tradition, however, is not the only game in town. The Asian religious and philosophical traditions have a very different way of addressing the issues of cause and effect, determinism, and free will, that began thousands of years ago with Hinduism and that was transmitted through Buddhism and these days is understood and practiced widely in the West. I am so grateful that one of the ministers of Unity Church, K. P. Hong is deeply grounded in Buddhist philosophy and practice and I want to thank him for reflections on what comes next in this sermon ! Asian religious traditions, and particularly Buddhism propose that we consider our universe as existing in an infinite and interdependent network of cause and effect. In popular American culture, we have become familiar with one of the words used to explain this deep philosophical tradition and teaching – karma. I know you all have seen that bumper sticker from some years ago "My karma ran over your dogma." That's a cute meme, but it does point us towards a different way of looking at choice than is discussed in the West.

Karma, as we talk about it popularly in the West is the consequences of your past choices and actions. That is only partially right. Sometimes we use the metaphor of fruit to describe the consequences of our actions, as in the phrase, “the fruits of our labors”. But consider a ripening mango, and ask yourself about all that went into that almost ripe mango you bought at Mississippi Market being ready for tomorrow’s fruit salad. If we were to break that down into all the (quote) “causes” that made that mango possible, we would have a very long and incomplete list. Karma is not just the consequences of your immediate present actions, (such as planting a watering a mango), but in a very important and real sense everyone’s actions throughout space and time that has led to this ripe mango moment.

Karma also arises because of what each of us does next, and it includes both the action and the intent behind an action. In that choice we make as to what we will do next, in the intent of that action, we create new karma. New Karma is a creative act, and it is conditioned but not pre-determined. Not only is not pre-determined by what happened before, it is opportunistic. We each freely make new karma with the actions of our lives as a gift or a curse to the rest of the world. The Buddha offered a teaching to his son, Rahula, about developing three qualities in his actions: wisdom—that is, acting for long-term happiness for all; compassion—intending not to harm anyone with his actions; and purity—which means, checking the actual results of his actions, and learning from his mistakes so as not to be fooled by an intention that seems wise and compassionate but really isn’t.² So, if I interpret this complex Eastern philosophy correctly; karma is both persistent in its consequences but can be unravelled. We – ourselves – through our moral and ethical choices – have the power and moral responsibility to make choices that lessen the suffering in our lives and in the larger world. But this happens most effectively if we

² <https://tricycle.org/magazine/thanissaro-bhikkhu-karma/>

recognize the interdependence of all our lives. As Rev. KP noted when he read a draft of this sermon, it is not individual moral agency that should be our focus, but relational moral agency. Three big words – “relational moral agency” sound complicated– but let me offer a translation – they mean CHURCH!! Relational moral agency is what we do every day in Church!

So how do we know what’s the right choice? We know because we are not alone in making our choices. We are backed up by a wisdom tradition represented by this church and by the people who make up this present community. Sure, every choice we make can carry with it unexpected consequences and the possibility of harm, failure or mistake. So I go back again to Robbie Robertson’s song lyrics and I think about how being part of church has shaped and changed me I hear these words: “Gotta change some old habits, Tryin’ to turn a new leaf, I gotta stop chasing rabbits but I got hooked beyond belief, Let it go, they told me But I just couldn't hear their plea, Let it go, they warned me – cause I’m just trying to make the right mistake.” Unitarian Universalism hasn’t captured all of the best wisdom of this world, but it’s my chosen faith. Here I stand! And if trying to live a principled life in an unprincipled world makes me naive or silly – then let me make that right mistake. If turning the other cheek and forgiving someone makes me a bleeding heart, then let me make that right mistake. And if laughing too loud or loving too much makes me a fool for love, then let me make the right mistake.

Because life will bring us so many challenges and so many choices. Because, as you all know - “if it’s not one thing, it’s another. It’s always something.” Would you rather offer your brutality or your blessing? Would you rather make someone miserable or make their day? Even if the scientific determinists are right and we really have no free will – that everything is determined in advance – the grand script has already been written – I'd still rather live a script where I choose over and over again, to love without conditions, to try to live a life of integrity,

service and joy, to practice hope instead of indulging despair; to remember and to be inspired by the words of adrienne marie brown, who wrote: “with our brief and epic lives ; ..every day we are given the option of love. “ May it be so.