

“Play It Again”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

The musician was playing a solo concert, in front of a large audience.

When she finished her last song, a thunderous response came from the crowd...and she heard several cries of “Play it again.”

She bowed and said, “How very kind of you. Of course I’d be very happy to play it again.” And so she did.

Once again, the audience response was deafening. And she heard many cries of “play it again.”

This time she came forward, smiled, and said,

“Thank you so much. I’ve never before had such a strong response from an audience...and as much as I’d like to play it again for you, I must go play another concert in New York...so, thank you so much again, and goodnight.”

At which point a single voice rang out from the audience, saying:

“Stay here and play it again! Maybe you’ll get it right!”¹

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¹ Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 23.

That cry of “play it again”...it’s welcome, isn’t it, when things are going great.

We want to repeat, even re-live, experiences that are pleasurable. We’re eager to have those good feelings come around again.

We may not be so eager for a repeat performance of anything we find painful or embarrassing or deeply challenging.

And yet, of course, those darker moments of life do return, whether we want them to, or not.

They are, like the bright and shining moments, an essential part of the pattern of life, which continually holds us and shapes us.

If the joke carried on from where we left it, I doubt the performer would happily pick up the song again, with as much verve and confidence as she had before.

Confronted with her imperfections, she might want to immediately exit stage left...

But indeed it might be exactly the time to stay, and play it again.

§

All this month here at First, we’ve been reflecting on the theme of “play.”

As part of our exploration, many of us have remembered games we played as children, and thought about many activities humans do for fun and amusement.

Many games involve circuits, patterns and repetitions.

In fact, pattern and repetition is such a central part of play, we almost don't notice it.

It's a feature of play that's so obvious, it seems hardly worth remarking on.

And yet, I wonder if the patterns of play—and in particular the patterns of falling down and rising up, letting go and catching, “loss” and “win” if you like—actually teach us how to grow.

It may be that through these playful patterns, we learn that the deepest growth does not take place via a straight line...but through a series of patterning circles that may not at first seem to change, but that do, often in the most subtle of ways.

It may be that in the pattern of rising and falling, again and again...

...being brought down like the embarrassed performer in the story, and then recovering...

It may be that through that ongoing interchange, we come to know the full spectrum of life more deeply...

...so we can become more courageous and compassionate.

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When our son was very young, he wasn't a very good sleeper.

He tended to wake up in the middle of the night and want to play. I remember getting up with him once around 4:00 in the morning.

I wrote about this particular time, which is why I remember it now. I think Tucker was about eighteen months old.

He wouldn't go back to sleep, so I decided to play with him. We'd build a tower out of blocks, and it would get pretty high and then it would fall down.

I'd say, "All fall down," and Tucker would laugh and laugh. And then he'd say, "Again!"

And I'd build the tower up again and it would fall and he would laugh and say "again," and I would start over...

Even though there was nothing I wanted more than to go back to bed, and be spared the repetition of that endless-seeming game...

A game that was based on disaster, actually. On falling.

A game based on impermanence and loss of control.

How telling that the toddler, not having learned the ways of the grown-up world, found this a source of joy and laughter...

Unlike his mother, who, if memory serves, was having a difficult time being home with a baby.

Who felt that she'd been letting far too many things drop, including a career and housekeeping.

Who felt that she couldn't control anything, even something so basic as when she could sleep.

There was nothing to be done, in that pre-dawn morning, but build up the block tower once more, knowing full well it was going to fall down again.

The child seemed perfectly okay with that.

The grown-up, not so much.

§

The Franciscan writer and teacher Richard Rohr wrote a book with the playful title, “Falling Upward.”

In it, he talks about a “necessary pattern” for spiritual growth.

He writes, “We must stumble and fall, I’m sorry to say. And that does not mean *reading* about falling,” he adds, for those of us who’d rather skip the real lesson and go back to bed!

He says, “It seems that in the spiritual world, we do not really find something until we first lose it, ignore it, miss it, long for it, choose it, and personally find it again—but now on a new level.”

“Falling, losing, failing, transgression and sin are the pattern, I am sorry to report. Yet they all lead toward home.”

He continues, “In the end, we do not so much reclaim what we have lost as discover a significantly new self in and through the process.

Until we are led to the limits of our present game plan, and find it to be insufficient, we will not search out or find the real source, the deep well, or the constantly flowing stream.”²

I find it interesting that Father Richard not only talks about pattern here, but he also refers to play, when he talks about our “game plan.”

As adults, that game plan is often one of controlling, winning, getting things right and being on top.

² Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2011), 66-67.

But when we think back to childhood play, and even something as seemingly frivolous as the rides at an amusement park, we see the constant cycle of rising and falling.

It's only play...it's only a game...it's only temporary.

And yet perhaps it helps us carry on in the grand interplay that is Life Itself.

Perhaps one deep purpose of play is to teach us to trust in those rhythms...even to welcome the falling-downs as much as the lifting-ups.

As Louis Armstrong said, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

Well, all of life's "got that swing"—and maybe therein lies its meaning.

§

Here's another joke for you, this one from a cartoon.

A woman is visiting a fortune-teller, who peers intently into a crystal ball and says:

"You will make the same mistakes you have made before.
And you will make them over and over again."

This would be discouraging if there wasn't hope to be found in the cycle itself...

In the promise that by facing our mistakes, or our fears, we can move through them to a place of new insight.

Whether we're looking at our personal lives, or this congregation, or the wider world...it can seem at times that negative patterns are repeating without variation and that change is slow or nonexistent.

And yet, we have evidence that positive change does occur.

Certainly that is true this weekend, as we stand here embraced by this beautiful rainbow flag, which will accompany a large group of us on the World Pride parade route this afternoon.

Just a few days ago, one of our Lay Chaplains, Margaret Kohr, officiated at the Grand Pride Wedding in which 110 same-sex couples were married—many of them coming here from around the world.

Last week, as Shawn reflected in detail on the progress made in human rights for the LGBTQ community, he also noted that much more needs to be done.

When any major change is needed, we can be sure to return, again and again, to feelings of frustration and discouragement at times.

But these painful feelings need not be paralyzing; instead they can be understood as part of the necessary cycle that deepens our compassion.

That expands us. That empowers us. That grows us.

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No matter what spiritual tradition inspires you, you're likely to find reference to cycles and turnarounds...patterns and reversals.

They're highlighted in art, music and storytelling. They're abundantly evident in all of nature.

When we start to notice these cycles and play with them in our own lives, we can minister to ourselves...become our own wisdom teachers.³

In Unitarian Universalism, we affirm direct experience as a source of insight.

Not coincidentally, our own deep insights echo those of other wisdom teachers throughout the ages.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last."⁴

And in three gospel accounts—Mark, Matthew and Luke—we find Jesus' teaching, "Anyone who wants to save his life, must lose it. Anyone who loses her life will find it."⁵

The Persian poet Rumi, whose teachings became the basis of a Sufi order, wrote:

"Where there is pain, the remedy follows. Wherever the lowlands are, the water goes."⁶

The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield puts it this way: "Inwardly we often touch the light and then lose it, falling back into separateness, despair, or unconsciousness.

³ See also Thomas Moore's *A Religion of One's Own: A Guide to Creating a Personal Spirituality in a Secular World* (New York: Gotham, 2014).

⁴ Matthew 20:16

⁵ Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:24; Mark 8:35.

⁶ Rumi, Mathnawi, II 1938-40 in Helminski, *Living Presence* (124)

This may happen many times in the repeated cycles of opening and letting go, of death and rebirth, that mark our spiritual path. Yet it is this very process of death and rebirth that leads us to freedom.”⁷

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Despite our awareness of the cycles of life, at many times, we may vision our journey as a straight line and one we travel alone.

It’s seen that way in the song we’re about to hear, James Taylor’s “Lonesome Road.”

When we’re at play, life doesn’t look that way.

We might be content simply whirling in place, like the Sufi dervishes, or dancing, or swinging on a playground swing.

We might not be going anywhere in particular...and that might be just fine.

The linear lonesomeness of a road is a far cry from the holistic circle that centers us wherever we are.

Yet, even in this song about a lonely road, there is reference to return, and to turning to the moon above, a reminder of our place in the cosmos of cycle and change.

There is the sense that although the lonesome road may seem long at the time, it too will follow a curve, like the curve of the earth: an earth human beings once thought to be flat and linear.

⁷ Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life* (New York: Bantam, 1993), 149.

And although the road may seem lonesome, the song—like the great song of life— is offered today in harmony, surrounded by community.

Our lives are singularly our own...and yet, when we come together as we do this morning, we form a pattern of human experience...in which each person's journey resonates with each other's.

May we walk these spiraling roads together, in faith that they will lead us home...

To a place of love, peace and belonging.

Where we come together to play, returning again and again.

Amen.