

# “The Examined Life: Why Me?”

Rev. Lynn Harrison  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
4 November 2018

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.

“Why me?”

Why am I experiencing such misfortune?

That’s the way we might first hear this question—  
as an expression of lament.

An asking of Life, or God,  
for some explanation, some reason or logic,  
for sorrow that seems unfair  
or out-of-the-blue.

It’s something many people do  
in almost a childlike way...

Even if they don’t believe in a higher power that directly influences  
their personal lives.

In his classic book “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People,”  
Rabbi Harold Kushner told stories of families  
who’d experienced terrible tragedies...

And then, because of their beliefs,  
wondered if somehow they had been responsible.

Kushner's young son had died from a rare genetic disorder.

He'd written the book, in part,  
to try to make sense of his family's experience.

He concluded, and I quote, that "painful things that happen to us are not punishment for misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of a grand design on God's part."<sup>1</sup>

This was a reassuring message for many.

But it also had a "flip side"—that people might as a result see their suffering as completely random and therefore meaningless.

We human beings have a way of seeking explanations... perhaps especially at difficult times.

Kushner wrote, "We [can] bear nearly any pain or disappointment if we [think] there [is] a reason behind it, a purpose to it.

But even a lesser burden becomes too much for us if we feel it makes no sense."

That is likely why, throughout history, many people have sought meaning through something called "theodicy"—an attempt to explain how an all-powerful God could also permit the existence of evil.

Of course, in Unitarian settings today—  
and indeed in many progressive religious communities—

---

<sup>1</sup> Harold Kushner, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" in [\*My Jewish Learning\*](#)

Many, if not most of us, no longer believe in a direct “cause-and-effect” relationship between a Higher Power and the tragic events of our lives.

Things happen.

They happen because of bad luck,  
because of our human biology,  
because of the interplay of forces in the natural world,  
because of hatred, born of fear.

Knowing and accepting the reality of all these things,  
our challenge is not to rail at a meaningless  
and perhaps Godless universe...

But instead to cultivate a relationship with whatever  
Source of Deeper Meaning we can conceive.

To help us bear witness to the sorrows of the world...  
help us bear our own sorrows...  
and help us do what we can to lessen the sorrows of others.

When we do that,  
leaning on our sense of Something More,  
we may be guided toward a life of greater meaning.

It's no surprise that after Harold Kushner wrote  
“When Bad Things Happen to Good People”, his next book was  
called “Living a Life That Matters.”

## §

After the mass shooting at his Tree of Life Synagogue  
last Saturday, Rabbi Jeffrey Myers lifted up the power of love to  
overcome hate.

He said, “I will not let hate shut down my building.”

Yesterday, Solidarity Shabbat services were held across North America and the U.K.

Many of us joined to form a Ring of Peace surrounding City Shul on Bloor Street.

Shawn and other ministry colleagues attended the service there, while I went to Shir Lebeynu, the congregation that meets here for High Holy Days services.

Around the world,  
and during Holocaust Education Week taking place now, people are joining together in support of the Tree of Life—

The synagogue, yes, and also...

What Philip Hewett called,  
In a reference to Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible,

“The Tree of Life that sustains us all.”

§

When we consider that question, “Why me?”...

It might seem virtually meaningless,  
if we see it as “what did I do to deserve this?”

But what other ways are there, to explore that question?

What could strengthen and inspire us now?

§

Perhaps “Why *me?*” Why am *I* here?

Have you ever stopped to truly contemplate that question?

Have you ever reflected on the sheer improbability that you would be sitting here, this morning, with all the particular joys and sorrows and quirky personality traits you happen to have?

A man named Ali Benazir did.

He set out to calculate the likelihood of his own (and therefore my and your) personal existence.<sup>2</sup>

He was intrigued by a famous teaching of the Buddha, called “Yoke With a Hole”.

In the story, a “yoke” or life preserver is cast into an ocean made up of all the water in the world.

A blind turtle is swimming somewhere in that ocean, surfacing only once in a hundred years.

When it does, it happens to bob its head up into the hole of the life preserver.

That, the Buddha said, is how unlikely it is to have a human birth.<sup>3</sup>

“Fact-checking” this ancient story

---

<sup>2</sup> Tara Macisaac, “[Scientists Calculate the Probability of Your Existence, Conclusions Similar to Buddhism](#)”, Epoch Times, July 5, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Dutiyachiggalayuga Sutta (SN 56.48)

with today's mathematical calculations,  
Dr. Benazir concluded that the odds of the turtle  
bobbing up into the life preserver were about  
700 trillion to one.

Pretty impressive, right?

Well, he took it even further, applying his calculations to the human  
chain of mating and reproduction...

Thinking about the odds of one's father and mother  
meeting in the first place...

Staying together in a relationship long enough  
to mate and have offspring...

And the unlikely chance of the specific sperm  
meeting the specific egg that would create you...

All of which starts to sound pretty improbable.

He then traced it back through the tree of our ancestors,  
tracking the extreme improbability of each of those forefathers and  
mothers mating at the right time to allow the chain to continue to  
this day.

The figure Dr. Benazir came up with at the end of his calculations is  
so large it defies my grasp,  
but I'll share it with you.

It's one in ten to the power of two million,  
six hundred and eighty-five thousand.

Which is to say: the odds of you and I existing at all  
are very, very, very small.

Practically zero, actually.

Dr. Benazir writes, “A miracle is an event so unlikely as to be almost impossible.

By that definition, I’ve just proven that you are a miracle.”<sup>4</sup>

And I agree. It’s truly a miracle that we are here.

That Adrienne Anne is here.

That Christopher Wulff, who’ll be ordained this afternoon, is here.

It’s also a real flesh-and-blood fact that we are.

(I’ll include a link<sup>5</sup> to a fascinating infographic about all this in my sermon on our website. It’s also in the print version in the bookshop today.)

## §

Last week Dave and I were in New York City.

We were amused and assisted by a map in the subway that drew a big circle around our particular location with one word in the center, in capital letters:

YOU.

Not “You are here.”

Just “You”.

---

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ali Benazir, “[Are You A Miracle? On the Probability of Being Born](#)”, Huffington Post, 6/16/2011

<sup>5</sup> Dina Spector, “[The Odds of Your Being Alive are Incredibly Small](#)”, Business Insider, June 11, 2012

We both were amused by it because of its simple truthfulness. The unvarnished fact of our presence in that exact location...

Which of course is now tracked by GPS systems all over the globe.

What is here? Why...me!

I am here.

I am now.

And that is as much an ordinary, plain-and-simple matter of fact...

As it is a mind-blowing, statistic-defying, honest-to-goodness miracle.

And because of that, I feel not only called... but I would say empowered to use the improbable reality of my presence in not only positive, but also highly-personal ways.

## §

The songwriter Holly Near did that this week, in response to the Pittsburgh shootings.

She wrote a new verse to her song “It Could Have Been Me.”

It starts with the line “we gather for the naming”... because at that service, a baby naming ceremony was taking place, much like the one we held this morning.

Her new verse adds to a list of many acts of violence

referred to in the song.

But what I'd like to share with you are just a few words from the chorus:

“It could have been me  
But instead it was you  
So I'll keep doing the work  
you were doing as if I were two.”<sup>6</sup>

As the song suggests, the question  
“Why me?” can point to our good fortune  
as much as it can our misfortune.

And sometimes the details of that good fortune  
can guide us toward choices we can make,  
or work we can do,  
to serve life more fully.

I was recently part of a survey conducted by the  
Unitarian Universalist Association, and I was asked directly:  
“how has racism influenced your ministry?”

I had never been asked that question before,  
but immediately I realized the answer, which was,  
because I am descended from people in the American South, some of  
whom were plantation slave-owners on my father's side, I have  
benefited directly from systemic racism.

---

<sup>6</sup> Holly Near “[It Could Have Been Me](#)”

It provided generations of my family with advantages that blacks did not have...and going back even further, the “ownership” of the land itself took place at the expense of indigenous people.

So, when I look at the question of “why me?”  
I have to ask, “why am I, in particular,  
called to address racism and hatred in our time,  
to the extent I am able and in the context I find myself?

Why? Because I was born to it.

I’ve inherited that responsibility,  
along with my privilege.

## §

No matter how clear the call, though,  
there are times when I feel inadequate to the task.

When the sorrows of the here-and-now seem so overwhelming, and I  
wonder how I can respond to them  
with any degree of strength and courage.

At such times, I find inspiration in the voices of people  
such as Rabbi Myers and his congregants,  
who are using the tragedy that has befallen them  
to amplify a message of love over hate.

I am called to add my voice to that chorus...  
knowing that I offer but one small voice...

Yet knowing, too, that my voice springs from  
one improbable, singular and inherently worthy life.

A me that has a “why”—simply because I am here.

I find both courage and solace, too, in words of the Talmud:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.  
Do justly, now.  
Love mercy, now.  
Walk humbly, now.  
You are not obligated to complete the work,  
but neither are you free to abandon it.”

During hard times, we all will likely have moments  
when we feel we’re inadequate to the task...  
when the “why me?” is a lament,  
rather than a call to engage uniquely with life.

This is a normal experience.

Feelings of deep sadness, anger and even despair  
are part of living.

But with the support of others,  
and the Source of Strength that sustains us,  
we can face the world squarely as it is,  
and answer evil with love.

## §

Marianne Williamson’s writings are inspired by the  
spiritual teachings called “A Course in Miracles”  
based on the Christian tradition.

In a passage often misattributed to Nelson Mandela,  
she addresses the relationship between our fear of our own  
powerlessness...

And our potential to use our singular existence  
for the power of love.

She writes:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,  
talented and fabulous?”

And if I might take the liberty of inserting an update for  
our times:

Who am I to be a leader?  
To take a risk to help another?  
To be one who lives courageously in the light of love?

Williamson continues:

“Actually, who are you not to be?”

You are a child of God.  
Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

We were born to make manifest the glory...that is within us.  
It's not just in some of us, it is in everyone.

And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people  
permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,  
our presence automatically liberates others.”

§

At the top of our Order of Service this morning  
are words from the Jewish teacher Hillel the Elder:

“If I am not for myself,  
who will be for me,  
If I am only for myself, what am I?  
and if not now, when?”

These are the questions of the examined life...

The questions that return us to the here and now...  
and the singular potential of each of us to make  
a positive difference in this world.

When we ask “Why me?”  
may our answer spring from the Love  
that is stronger than fear...

rising up through the branches of life  
that unite us all.

Amen.