

Making It Up as We Go Along

The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

Reverend Shawn Newton

June 16, 2019 - Father's Day

Reading

*Our reading comes from one of my all-time favourite poets,
Wisława Szymborska, though not able to read her in her native Polish,
I've never really known whether it is she or her translators that I love most.*

“Life While-You-Wait”

Life While-You-Wait.
Performance without rehearsal.
Body without alterations.
Head without premeditation.

I know nothing of the role I play.
I only know it's mine. I can't exchange it.

I have to guess on the spot
just what this play's all about.

Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.
I can't conceal my hayseed manners.
My instincts are for happy histrionics.
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.
Extenuating circumstances strike me as cruel.

Words and impulses you can't take back,
stars you'll never get counted,
your character like a raincoat you button on the run,
the pitiful results of all this unexpectedness.

If only I could just rehearse one Wednesday in advance,
or repeat a single Thursday that has passed!
But here comes Friday with a script I haven't seen.
Is it fair, I ask
(my voice a little hoarse,
since I couldn't even clear my throat offstage).

You'd be wrong to think that it's just a slapdash quiz
taken in makeshift accommodations. Oh no.
I'm standing on the set and I see how strong it is.

The props are surprisingly precise.
The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.
The farthest galaxies have been turned on.

Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere.

And whatever I do
will become forever what I've done.

~ Wislawa Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*

Sermon: “Making It Up as We Go Along”

If you haven't figured it out already,
I'm going to let you in on a very big secret.

Most of the time, I have no idea what I'm doing.

It seems only fair that you should know, here and now,
that most of the time,
I'm just making it up as I go along.

Now, that's may not be what you were expecting
to hear from your minister.

But, it is the hard truth.

It's true for me,

and I suspect, more often than not,
it might be true for you, as well.

Do we all not know something of those words from Szymborska?

“Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
I trip at every step over my own ignorance. . .
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.”

Do you ever wonder just what you’ve gotten yourself into?
Or question how you got so in over your head?

There certainly are days when I do.

In this life, where all the world is a stage,
I, for one, am endlessly looking to the footlights
in the hopes that someone—anyone—
might feed me just a few of my lines
to help me make it to the intermission.

Surely then, I think,
I’ll have time to rustle around backstage
and find that elusive script.

But the poet reminds us that there is no script.

Szymborska’s words resound
with the bittersweet frustration that is so often ours
when we stand before the mysteries of our living and our dying—
feeling ourselves so inadequate and oh-so-small,
those moments when we discover
that the script we are so desperately seeking
isn’t to be found somewhere out there,
but is written anew each day
with every beat of our fumbling hearts.

So, it’s no surprise, then,
that we flub our lines, from time to time.

That our timing is all off.

And that the lighting is, at times, completely wrong.

It's no surprise, that we are overwhelmed
by what our parts demand of us.

Who knew we'd have to work so hard,
and endure so much?

It's no surprise that we find ourselves onstage
and wonder at these bizarre costumes that we're wearing –
as parent, child, spouse, and friend.

Yet, for all the complaints
we might want to lodge with Central Casting,
the roles we have are the roles of a lifetime—of our lifetime—
and they are ours to do with what we will.

“I know nothing of the role I play” the poet writes.
“I only know it's mine. [And that] I can't exchange it.”

Though we may not be able to exchange the role we have,
we can transform the part that is ours to play.

We can grow into the roles that we've been given,
taking them on with a healthy dose of grace and good humour,
and in the process, making of our lives
something ever-more true,
something ever more true to ourselves.

In a word, to embrace and even celebrate
that a life well-lived,
our life—and everyone else's—
requires a lot of improvisation.

How liberating it can be to realise
that we're all making it up as we go along.

That we all working with what we've got.
do the best we can,

and do, indeed, live and learn.

All the while, knowing
that, “*whatever [we] do will become forever what [we have] done.*”

On this Father’s Day, living as we do
within our own sometimes complicated web of relationships—
as parents, as children. . . as, mere mortals—

let us not forget that *it’s all about improvisation*,
and it always has been.

In this process of living out an unwritten script,
people make mistakes—
people just like us, just like our parents, just like our children.

Just like ourselves.

We are all asked to work with the props that are at-hand
and with the cast that’s already onstage
as we all pick up the threads of a plot
that we didn’t necessarily choose.

To recognise this, not only for ourselves,
but for everyone with whom we share the stage,
can be amazingly freeing.

But to pull it off requires a fair bit of flexibility,
as well as an steady commitment to practise compassion
and the fading art of forgiveness.

When we realise that most people
are simply doing the best they can to make some sense of life,
we just might start to look differently at those around us.

And we might well begin to see ourselves differently, too.

Now, to be clear, improvisation is not
an easy justification for abusive or appalling behavior,
but truly knowing it to be a basic fact of life
can lead us to better understand

some of the tender, painful places in our lives,
and maybe even move our hearts with compassion
to see things in different light.

It might inspire us to release old resentments,
to right wrongs,
and let go of what can no longer be—
or what never was.

The hidden beauty of this improvisational attitude is its reciprocity.

For when we come to see the rest of the cast
as the humans that they are,
with challenging roles of their own,
we might find the freedom to clean up the messes
that we, ourselves, have made along the way of our lives.

One of my favourite illustrations of this is found
in the story that Robert Fulghum tells
of a cherished relic he keeps tucked away
in a cardboard box marked “THE GOOD STUFF.”

This keepsake “is a small paper bag. Lunch size.

Though the top is sealed with duct tape, staples,
and several paper clips, there is a ragged rip in one side
through which the contents may be [viewed].”

This bag was given to him years ago by his young daughter Molly,
who had packed it one morning with his lunch
and handed it to him on his way out the door.

When Fulghum asked why he had merited two bags,
on this particular morning,
his little girl simply explained that one was lunch
and the other one was “something else,”
“just some stuff,” which she was asking him to take with him.

Thinking little of it, Fulghum raced out the door and off to work.

Hours later as he scarfed down his lunch,

he unpacked the second bag to find
“two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, . . .
a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, . . .
a small doll, two chocolate kisses, and thirteen pennies.”

He smiled and thought, “how charming.”

Rising to hustle off to the business of the afternoon,
he “swept the desk clean - into the waste basket –
leftover lunch, Molly’s junk, and all.”

That evening when he returned home,
he was met by Molly at the door.

“Where’s my bag?”

“What bag?”

“You know, the one I gave you this morning.”

“I left it at the office, why?”

“I forgot to put this note in it.”

She handed over the note, and then added,
“Besides, I want it back.”

When he later unfolded the note, it said, “I love you, Daddy.”

It was clear that Molly had entrusted her father with “her treasures.
All that a seven-year-old held dear.

Love in a paper sack.

And [he] had missed it.
Not only missed it, but had thrown it [away].”

Feeling his “Daddy Permit” about to expire,
Fulghum trekked back to his office.

As he put it, “There was nothing else to be done.”

He arrived just ahead of the janitor,
“picked up the wastebasket
and poured the contents on [his] desk.”

“After washing the mustard off the dinosaur
and spraying the whole thing with breath-freshener
to kill the smell of onions,
[he] carefully smoothed out the wadded ball of brown paper
into a semi functional bag,”
replaced the discarded treasure, and quickly made for home.

The next day, he returned the goods to Molly,
but this time invited her to tell him
about the various objects in the bag.

“Everything had a story, a memory,
or was attached to dreams and imaginary friends.”

At the appropriate moments,
he managed to mutter “I see” several times.

And as a matter of fact, [he] did see.”

Days later, Molly entrusted him with the bag once again.
“Same ratty bag. Same stuff inside.
[He] felt forgiven. And trusted. And loved.
And a little more comfortable wearing the title of Father.”

This cycle of giving and returning the bag
repeated itself many times in the months to come.

Eventually, “Molly turned her attention to other things. . .
found other treasures. . .lost interest in the game. . .[and] grew up.”

Fulghum, on the other hand, was left “holding the bag”—
a gift that still reminds him “of all the times in this sweet life
when [he] must have missed the affection [he] was being given.”

What a friend calls
“standing knee-deep in the river and dying of thirst.”

“Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.”

Friends, the outlines of the epic story
in which we find ourselves are rarely clear.

As we improvise our part,
we may find ourselves pushed to our limits,
sifting for buried treasure in a garbage can.

Such are the demands of improvisation.
We make it up as we go along.
But we don't make it up from nothing.

That part we can choose.

Because what we do will be forever what we have done,
let us choose over and over
to make up our story out of everything we know of love.

Amen.