

“The Good Enough Life”

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I don't know exactly when it happened,
but somewhere along the way, I simply lost count.

That said, I know that I have now officiated
at well over a hundred funerals,
many of them, of course, held here.

Others in funeral homes or family houses.
Some at gravesides or at the water's edge.

Between now and when I retire,
at least still a few years down the road,
it's likely, life and death unfolding as they do,
that I will officiate at many more.

One learns a lot officiating a hundred funerals.

A lot about life and love,
about regret and resilience,
about hurts, and forgiveness, and healing.

I have learned that most people's lives
are far more complex than they often seem from the outside.

I have learned that most everyone
has struggled mightily with something.

And I have learned that most people
were usually doing the best they could,
given the circumstances they were in.

I have also learned that we collectively tend to sugarcoat
the story of a person's life, once they are gone.

On one level, this is natural and fitting.

There is an expectation of respect that sets in
that makes it taboo to speak ill of the dead.

While this can certainly honour the deceased,
sometimes it can also cause pain for those who were, shall we say,
better acquainted with another version of the story.

The disconnect between who we remember
and who others remember
can make the hard work of grief even harder.

In designing a memorial service,
it can be a bit of a balancing act
to lift up a person's positive attributes,
while also ensuring there's a genuine understanding
of who a person was, blemishes and all.

It's for this reason that I will sometimes speak
of someone as having been a complicated person.

That's not necessarily a bad thing.
Frankly, some of the best people out there are complicated.

There are days when I aspire to such complexity myself,
and, perhaps you do, too.

But, I think the most important thing I have learned
in leading so many funerals
is that much of what we might tout as someone's
great accomplishments rarely come up during the service.

I'm inclined to agree
with *New York Times* columnist David Brooks,
who says that there are two types of virtue.

There are the resumé virtues—
the achievements that round out a person's CV—
the list of outward accomplishments
that might include degrees earned, jobs held, skills employed.

The list may be long and impressive,
or rather run-of-the-mill.

But I can tell you, either way,
that that doesn't much matter, in the end.

What will make a difference—
what you and I will be most remembered for
are what Brooks calls the eulogy virtues.

These are, of course, the attributes of one's character.

The traits that are lifted up in tribute,
often with a lump in the throat.

Far more than what fills out our resumé,
what people will remember about us when we are gone
is whether we were kind, or brave, or generous.

Whether we were caring and compassionate.

Whether we were truly capable
of loving life and the people around us.

So much of the world we live in
rewards the resumé virtues,
while often discounting the virtues
that will be the stuff of our eulogies.

This came home to me in a new way on Friday
when I heard the news that the actress Felicity Huffman
had been released from her two-week stay in an American prison.

You might recall that she and several other wealthy parents
had gone to extraordinary and illegal lengths in recent years
to ensure their offspring would be offered a coveted spot
at a prestigious university.

While it's one thing to want the best for one's children,
these parents were so focussed on building up

their children's resumé virtues
that they neglected to appreciate
how deeply their actions would diminish their own eulogy virtues—
and leave their children with some hard lessons to learn
about their parents' true values.

While it's easy to focus on these extreme examples,
they are, I believe, simply symptomatic
of some of the most worrying aspects of our wider culture—
a culture obsessed with hierarchical success,
that praises achievement and rewards perfection,
without much concern for the development of character.

It is a culture that consumes—
a culture that too often consumes us
and so much of the world's resources.

A culture that is unsustainable.
A culture that harms people in many ways.

It is a culture that demands more and more,
rather than coming to terms
with what it means to be and to have enough.

It's no wonder so many people in our culture
live with such pronounced anxiety these days,
given that the markers of status are gained and lost
with each "like" or dislike meted out via social media.

What I most fear
is that through the curated lives people live online,
and the increasingly disconnected lives we live in person,
that we are losing something precious and good.

I worry that we are eroding our
understanding of what it means to be fully human.

To know ourselves to be flawed yet wondrously made.
Messy, but real.
Imperfect, but always and forever, enough.

Even as say this, I wonder
whether you believe these things about yourself.

There is a steep cost to not knowing ourselves to be enough.

Kirk Byron Jones, in his book, *Say Yes to Grace*, writes:

Too much of our existence is weighted down
by our not accepting ourselves.

To not accept who we are
is to place a great burden on our backs.

It is to be constantly weighed down
by the notion that we are not good enough as we are,
and any worth that we have any right to
must be earned and re-earned by constant struggle and toil.

Living in non-self-acceptance
carries the additional burdensome baggage
of suspecting that others don't accept us.

This often triggers drivenness,
feeling we have to do and overdo to make it in life,
to get people to like us, and to maintain a sense
of our responsibly pulling our rightful weight in the world.

The tyranny of it all transforms life
into a constant push and pull existence,
which causes us to feel chronically tired and worn.

[And] we live under continual duress,
uneasy, unsure, and unsteady in our inner and outer worlds.
[Worst of all,] we do not know peace.

Maybe that description misses the mark for you.
I would love if it does!

Yet, I know
through my conversations with many of you across the years,
that you struggle to believe the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism

actually includes you.

Some of you struggle to accept that you yourself
are a being of inherent worth and dignity.

And that, even with your sins and shortcomings,
you are somehow enough.

I stand here to say today that you are.

Now, this doesn't mean that your growing is done,
and it doesn't mean there's not ample room for improvement,
it simply means that, even as you are, you are enough.

It's worth saying
that this not some recently coined new-age, self-help slogan.

It is a bold theological claim.

It is a fundamental part of our tradition
that can be traced back to the origins
of Unitarian theology in the early 19th century.

Our Unitarian forebears rejected the Calvinist doctrine
that humans are born in total depravity, forever enslaved to sin.

They instead believed that we humans are not born corrupt,
but capable of doing both good and evil.

And, in that light, they championed the notion
that we are to actively develop our character
over the course of our lives.

While this theological shift was a welcome change
from the narrow doctrines of the Calvinist Christianity
from which we emerged, it, unfortunately, I think,
also set us on a path to perfectionism.

It held up as the shining goal
human perfection through the cultivation of character.

There's much to be said, of course, for stretching ourselves, for growing and improving into our best or better selves.

But the problem enters in when perfection is the standard, and when we lack a developed doctrine of our own to help us make sense of our imperfections, to accept our shortcomings as part of who we are.

Without this understanding, we are, somewhat ironically, saddled with the burdensome expectation of purity and perfection that weighed upon our Puritan ancestors three centuries ago.

The Buddhist teacher Tara Brach calls this, "the trance of unworthiness. . . . The belief that we are deficient and unworthy makes it difficult to trust that we are truly loved. . . . Convinced that we are not good enough, we can never relax."

What she sees as the antidote is radical acceptance, of ourselves and each other.

For me, this means simultaneously knowing that we are a creature of inestimable worth, while also embracing great humility, as well.

There's a story attributed to Rabbi Simcha Bunim, who lived in Poland in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and was a leader of Hasidic Judaism.

Rabbi Simcha said that everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each, so that they can reach into the one or the other, depending on the needs of a given moment.

When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket,

and, there, find the words:
“For my sake was the world created.”

And when feeling high and mighty,
one should reach into the left pocket,
and find there the words:
“I am but dust and ashes.”

We live out our days, held between these two pockets.

The blessed beneficiaries of so much
of what the universe has conspired to bring into being.

And, at the same time, but a speck in the annals of time.
A sacred bit of dust, alive for too short a span of years.

But, specks that we are, we are enough.

So, from there, from that foundation,
let us build up the virtues that make a life truly worth living.

Let us honour the fact
that a good enough life is already an extraordinary thing.

May we cherish each day we are given
as the wondrous gift that it is.

That when the day for our own funeral arrives,
it may be said that we lived our days with virtue.

Blessed Be.