

“Possibilitarianism”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Meditation Reading

“The Silk Worm” - Rumi

I stood before a silk worm one day.
And that night my heart said to me,
“I can do things like that. I can spin skies,
I can be woven into love that can bring warmth to people;
I can be soft against a crying face,
I can be wings that live, and I can travel on my thousand feet
throughout the earth,
my sacks filled
with the
sacred.”
And I replied to my heart,
“Dear, can you really do all those things?”
And it just nodded, “Yes”
in silence.
So we began and will never
cease.

Sermon: “Possibilitarianism”

Admittedly, it must have been a startling way to wake up.

Earlier this month, Ruth Hamilton, who had been asleep for hours
in her home in Golden, British Columbia,
was jolted awake by the barking of her dog.

A moment later, in the pitch-black dark of her room,
there was an explosion, leaving her covered in debris.

Hamilton leaped from her bed, turned on the lights,
and not knowing that else to do, phoned 9-1-1.

While talking to the operator, who pelted her with questions,
Hamilton “rolled back one of the two pillows [she]’d been sleeping on

and in between them [saw that there] was [a] meteorite.”¹

An alarmingly short distance from where her head had just been, while she lay sleeping mere moments before, was a chunk of rock that had hurtled through space, entered the earth’s atmosphere, and at great speed tore through the roof of her house and the ceiling of her bedroom, to end its cosmic journey there on her pillow.

Understandably, she didn’t initially know what to make of her unannounced guest.

She wasn’t sure how the rock, roughly the size of a melon, had found its way into her bed.

She said she was “shaking like a leaf.”

Thinking that only earth-bound explanations were in the realm of possibility, she and the Mountie who was dispatched to her home initially thought it may have been a rock somehow sent her way from a nearby construction site.

When contacted, though, the construction company explained they hadn’t been doing any blasting that night.

But they did report that some of their workers on the night shift had spotted a shooting star and heard a couple of nearby booms.

Scientists have since confirmed that the rock in question was, indeed, a shooting star.

Hamilton has decided to keep the rock, once the scientists are done examining it.

Finders keepers, after all.

It’s hard to imagine just how jarring all of this must have been.

After spending several hours just shaking and several days processing what happened, Hamilton said she’s just feeling “pretty grateful to be alive.”

¹ Woman rocked awake by meteorite chunk crashing into her bedroom, CBC News, 12 October 2021.

The Buddhist teacher Bo Lozoff,
says that the challenge of being alive is to accept—
and to know it in our bones—that,
“Anything that can happen to a human being may happen to me.”

True as that may be, most of us, I assume,
don't lie in bed at night thinking that tonight could be the night
that a meteorite crashes through the ceiling, just above our sleeping heads.

It is a possibility, though,
remote as it may be.

In saying that, I sincerely hope this fact doesn't keep you up tonight, or any night.
Something being possible, of course, is not the same as it being probable.

But there are moments in this life,
here in this beautiful and complicated universe of ours,
when we are reminded that almost anything can happen.

Our efforts to make sense of such moments
have given rise to many of our ways of making meaning of our existence—
from science and philosophy to theology and art,
to say nothing of our simply trying to decide
how best to spend the afternoon.

It's been fairly common down through the ages
for people to believe that what happened on earth,
especially the parts that were tricky to explain,
were the work of the some deity in the sky
or some other spiritual force at play in the universe.

In many theologies, of course, it's been a divine figure above
pulling strings to animate life down below.

In the Christian tradition, there's been and remains among some
a doctrine known as Predestination,
the belief that from the foundations of the Earth,
God has given an order to everything that will happen,
especially with regard to who gets into heaven, and who doesn't.

That doctrine was enthusiastically embraced by our Puritan ancestors,
who felt that one's success in this life was a sign of God's favour
and an outward assurance
that they would be among those headed to a heavenly reward.

My own childhood church, a Free Will Baptist congregation,
was a branch of Protestantism that rejected this doctrine,
believing instead, among other things,
that humans are endowed with free will—
the ability to choose whatever course of action they wish.

Arguably, and a bit strangely for me,
this is clearly an area of theological overlap
between the fundamentalism of my youth and Unitarian Universalism today.

But the notion of free will isn't what it used to be.

Over the past century and some,
there's been a stream of thought called "biological determinism"
that questions just how much freedom there really is in free will—
believing, instead, that the direction of peoples' lives
is largely determined by their genes.

This theory at its extreme is not without controversy,
and it, horrifically, has been used to bolster the eugenics movement,
as well as other racist ideologies and homophobia.

One of its champions, however, left to us to debate
through his memorable turn-of-phrase,
whether the course of our lives is shaped primarily by "nature or nurture."

For many decades now, those who credit nurture—
the view that we are significantly shaped
by the environment and circumstances that surround us—
have made a compelling case that we arise from a certain context
that largely dictates the direction one's life will take.

Of course, the debate is far from settled.
And more generally, so much of our being is a mix of nature and nurture.
With countless caveats and exceptions to given rules.

Wherever we find ourselves in all of this, though—
what we even casually believe about these doctrines and theories—
from the gods pulling the strings,
to the roadmap embedded in our genes,
to the enduring influence of our background,
can profoundly impact just what we consider
to be genuine possibilities for our own lives.

I invite you to take a moment now, in silence,
to consider where your beliefs about what is possible are rooted.

Who and what gave shape to your sense of what paths your life might follow?

What formed your understanding of what is in the realm of possibility?

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As I've been part of conversations with people about this month's theme,
I've been struck that when we speak of possibility,
we are prone to cast the term in a positive light—
seeing possibilities as almost always being good things.

But as Catherine's story reminded us, sometimes it's hard to tell.

What seems one way in a given moment
may come to be better or worse in a different light,
or with the benefit of perspective that time often provides.

Obviously, we can't always predict how things will turn out,
in this universe, where seemingly anything could happen.

Where in one moment we might wish upon a falling star,
and in another, find that same star crashing into our bed.

Are such twists and turns, when they happen,
a good thing or a bad thing?

Who can tell?

Yet, with every day, we navigate the world through possibilities.

Choosing the apple over the banana for our breakfast.

Deciding to walk rather than take the bus. Just because.

Opting for this home over that one,
because we like the way the light filters through the windows.

Taking that job over another, even though it paid less.

From picking partners to picking paint colours,

choosing a career path to devoting ourselves to a cause,
at every point along the way we are entertaining possibilities,
and then, even when it's hard,
even when we put it off,
even when we are incredibly indecisive and annoying to everyone around us,
we make a choice by which possibility we pursue,
be it actively or passively.

This is how we create a life.

The school of thought called Process Theology that I often reference
says that we are co-collaborators with the divine in the unfolding of universe.

That here in our little corner of the cosmos,
we have a say in how things go.

By our thoughts, our words, and by our deeds—
by what we have done and by what we have left undone—
we give shape to what is and what will be.

It often may not feel that way.

I mean, it was just a banana.
Or a job. Or an apartment.

None of these possibilities
may have felt nearly so grand
as the great honour of co-creating the universe.

But our choices
become our legacy on this earth.

And to some degree, our choices
will leave behind an imprint of our lives when we are gone.

Put that way, it's not always easy to know what to do
with such a great responsibility.
With the gift of our being human.

But this sacred burden begs for intention.
For due consideration in the choosing.

It asks if our choices align with our values.

And, I might suggest,
whether they resonate with the principles of our faith.

Whether they reflect who we believe ourselves to be,
and who we aspire to become.

In the end, we may not feel that what we make
of the possibilities before us has any cosmic significance.

But how we live, how we treat one another,
how we treat the great web of life,
and how we treat ourselves
has a way of rippling out to change the world around us,
for better and sometimes for worse.

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UU minister Robert Walsh tells the story of a man he knew
who had stationery that carried at the top the proverb:
“Nothing is settled. Everything matters.”²

“Nothing is settled. Everything matters.”

Walsh explains that this proverb really got under his skin,
and he found himself in deep disagreement with it.

In response, he ranted:

It’s not true that nothing is settled.
In the past year choices have been made, losses suffered.

There’s been growth and decay,
commitments and betrayals.
None of which can be undone...

One day this year I was present when someone needed me;
another day I was busy doing something else
at the moment someone needed me.

One day I said something to a friend that injured our relationship;
another day I said something kind.

² Robert Walsh, *Noisy Stones*, 22-23.

The best and worst of those days are written.
And nothing,
not tears, not joy, not sorrow can erase it.

In time, though, Walsh came to see this proverb in a different light.

And he realized that:

... even though the past is the past,
what is not settled is how the story turns out.

As long as we are alive, the story of our life is still being told,
and the meaning is still open.

What is done is done, but nothing is settled...
and if nothing is settled then everything matters:
every choice, every act, every word, every deed.

They matter in the days ahead
and, most of all they matter today.

I think of this attitude—this way of being in the world,
this way of opening ourselves to what the next chapter might hold,
as a Theology of Possibility.

A way of understanding ourselves in the world
as having some real degree of agency, some real ability,
to influence the course not only of our own lives but of the world around us.

I'll admit there is a degree of privilege in this.
The circumstances and, more importantly, the constraints
that affect one life are not necessarily the same as those that affect another.

And I appreciate, as I get older, that with each passing day,
more of the course of our lives has been set,
with the future only seeming to branch out beyond what already has been.

As Robert Frost put it, with his “how way leads on to way,”
the trajectory of our life can seem like a sure and certain thing,
and our available options limited.

That is, perhaps, until a meteorite comes crashing through the ceiling.

Or some other event occurs that reminds us
that the future isn't necessarily written in stone, after all.

Because almost anything could still happen,
let us open ourselves to a Theology of Possibility.

Let us faithfully practice Possibilitarianism,
knowing that our choices matter,
and that the story of our lives is still unfolding
underneath the starry and not-so-distant skies.

Blessed Be.