

# **“The Best-Laid Plans”**

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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*"But you had this idea you were going by train."*

That line from the beautiful and wise poem by Naomi Shihab Nye reminds me of a story about Albert Einstein. Perhaps you have heard it.

He was traveling by train, after speaking at Princeton University.

When the train conductor came along to punch his ticket, Einstein reached into his coat pocket and couldn't find it.

He then checked his pants pockets...but it wasn't there, either.

Next he opened his briefcase and searched there to no avail, and then he looked on the seat beside him. Still, no luck.

The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all do. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Please don't worry about it."

Hearing this, the great physicist nodded in gratitude... and the conductor moved on, down the aisle.

Several minutes later, he was walking back through the car.

And this time he saw Albert Einstein down on his hands and knees, looking under his seat for the missing ticket.

The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein. Please don't worry.

I know who you are. It's no problem at all...you don't need a ticket...I'm sure you bought one."

And then Einstein stopped, looked up at the conductor and said:

"Young man. I, too, know who I am.

What I don't know is where I'm going."<sup>1</sup>

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Isn't that so often the way?

I married into a family of Scottish heritage, so I'm very familiar with the saying attributed to Robbie Burns that:

*"The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley."*

Meaning...the best laid plans often go awry.

As we consider the theme of "intentions" this month, perhaps setting new goals and directions for ourselves, it's worth reflecting on how we respond when the journey does not go as planned.

Many, if not most of us, can look at our lives and notice how often we set out in one direction and end up somewhere else.

It happens over the course of a day and the course of a lifetime.

It's not that our intentions aren't important, or meaningful.

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<sup>1</sup> Story attributed to Rev. Billy Graham, from an address to the United Nations. Found in several sources.

It's just that the fullness of life, and the forces of circumstance, work with our intentions in ways we can seldom foresee...no matter how intentional we (well) intend ourselves to be.

If our intention is to be open and curious,  
listening for the call of life, and where it leads us...  
we can learn to move more gracefully through our journeys...  
releasing our sometimes rigid approach to intention.

This approach to the journey can, I believe, can lead us to a place of greater compassion, both for others and for ourselves.

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As we remember the beloved spiritual teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, we might consider how spiritual practice can support us as we work with the theme of intentions.

While sitting in meditation, I might set the simplest of intentions: simply to stay present and still for a period of time, and to stay focused on my breath.

When other thoughts or impulses--other intentions--arise during this time, I try to simply notice them and let them go, returning my attention to the present moment where there is nothing to do other than sit and breathe.

It's amazing how many little intentions arise,  
and can be released, during even a short time.

With regular practice, this helps me develop the capacity stay mindfully present in whatever circumstances I find myself, especially ones I find difficult.

Full disclosure, I am very much a student at this.

Like so many others, and probably all of you,  
I tend to get attached to a particular goals, feelings or experiences...often  
"missing the boat" because my wilfull  
intention is to stay on the train.

As Thich Naht Hanh wrote in his book "*The Art of Power*"

"Whatever path you take, if you are attached to the form,  
you cannot get the happiness you want.

"If you're committed to only one idea of happiness, you're stuck.

[...] The idea of happiness that you have  
may actually be an obstacle  
preventing you and your loved ones from being happy."<sup>2</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh taught mindfulness meditation in the Zen Buddhist  
tradition...

But prayer, too, in its many forms, can be helpful in directing us toward  
sources of strength beyond our own personal will.

In prayer, we acknowledge our own limitations, welcoming in another  
source of wisdom, however we may define that.

This can often open up different possibilities for "intention"--directed less  
toward personal desires and achievements,  
and more toward selflessness and love.

Also, when seen as a spiritual practice, creative expression in every form  
teaches us to work skilfully with our intentions, as we are continually  
dancing between our goals and hopes--for the painting, poem, sermon or  
song--and the way the work actually turns out.

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<sup>2</sup> Thich Naht Hanh, *The Art of Power* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) 86-87.

When we approach life from a spiritual perspective,  
we are always balancing our intentions with our acceptance.

Trying to integrate and reconcile  
"The things we can (and should endeavor to) change..."  
with "the things that we cannot."

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Like Einstein on the train, we set off with our intentions in place...but we  
often lose track of them, or life takes us in a completely unexpected  
direction.

Like it and not, we are always immersed in the creative flow of life, which  
involves us and includes us  
but does not depend on us  
and certainly cannot be controlled by us.

This may seem like bad news for those of us  
who like to be in control,

Who like to know where we're going at all times  
and how it's all going to turn out.

Folks like us might tend to want a system to follow.  
A set of rules or guidelines...a road map if you will.

We might create religions and other organizations  
in such a way that they might clarify those intentions  
in what we currently believe is the correct way.

This may give us a certain degree of comfort, at least for a time.

But if we look at life honestly, we might recognize that whatever intentions  
will not guarantee that we'll get to a particular destination.

And if we hold onto them too tightly--  
hold too tightly to whatever form--  
we might unintentionally do quite a lot of harm.

This awareness might give rise to a healthy degree of humility, from which  
we are better positioned to offer acceptance and kindness to others...and to  
care for the world with awe and reverence.

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One of the things I like best about the story of Einstein on the train is that  
he actually admits to the conductor that he doesn't know where he is going.

How many of us would do that?

Speaking for myself, I can imagine feeling embarrassed  
that I had forgotten my destination.

And I probably wouldn't want to admit that I had lost my ticket.

Putting myself in this situation, I can imagine that I would have been  
flattered to be recognized as "the great Dr. Einstein"...

And pleased to be let off the hook  
for what was, after all, my personal responsibility.

I'll talk more about intentions and harmful mistakes and responsibility in  
next week's sermon.

I'd venture to say that none of us would want to be  
the main character in this story.

After all, don't we all wish that we might somehow get to a place where we  
finally have it all together, always feel safe, never made mistakes, and never  
lose anything important?

I'm sure we all know, by now, that such a place does not exist.

In the story, we can imagine the great scientist wanting to know exactly where he's going, too.

But instead, he finds himself on the floor of the train, grasping for certainty, unsure of his destination.

He's honest about that, yet sure of himself at the same time.

"I know who I am. I just don't know where I'm going."

Mindfully self-accepting, even though his best-laid plans had suddenly gone awry.

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While I was on my brief sabbatical break, I attended an online talk by Dr. Kwame Scruggs, who was teaching in a course I'm taking on spiritual direction.

He's a Black American man who holds a Ph.D. in mythology, and has mentored Black youth in Akron, Ohio, for the past twenty years.

He uses stories and myths to inspire young people in their journeys which involve extremely difficult circumstances.

One of the stories he told had to do with a particular hero who unexpectedly encountered great difficulty, and had to very reluctantly get off his horse.

Once he did so, admitting he needed help, companions appeared to guide him.

In his talk, Dr. Scruggs said that  
"Our task is to remind each other

of what each of us is here to do."

To help each other find the destinations that are right for us...that emerge out of own unique gifts and unique path.

That is to say, the map within us.  
Which paradoxically is often completely unclear to us.

We need our companions in this world,  
as well as our "inner conductors" to guide us forward.

It goes without saying that the story about Einstein on the train may be what we call an "urban myth."

That is, it may or may not be historically factual.

The value of myth is not in its literal truth but in its universal meaning.

The value of story is to teach us the lessons we need to continually learn and re-learn, from childhood right through to our dying.

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It's important to say clearly, too, that life often carries us to places where we had no intention of going.

Places we would have done everything in our power to avoid.

Some of you here today may be in those places.

If you are, I pray that you are met along your path  
by kind companions who support you, as you set the new intentions that are called by your situation.

Those intentions may be as simple as getting through this one day.

Of taking care of one task, to the best of your ability.

Of giving or receiving care, in whatever form it can come.

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Speaking about her most recent book  
*Dusk, Night, Dawn: On Revival and Courage*, Anne Lamott  
passed along wisdom that had been told to her:

"The trick in life is not to try harder but to resist less."

This makes sense to me...not that I do it consistently, mind you.

In the same interview, Lamott also noted that for years she held the goal of getting on the New York Times bestseller list--something her father had wanted to do all his life.

Her book was on the list for awhile, which lifted her up...  
but then it fell off the list, which brought her down...

Teaching her that same timeless wisdom  
that "happiness is an inside job." <sup>3</sup>

Life is full of wise teachers,  
many of whom do not come in the form we might desire.

May each of us, in our own way, empty our pockets of the attachments that hold us back...

Turn toward the guides that can assist us...

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<sup>3</sup> "Not Trying Harder, Just Resisting Less - An Interview with Anne Lamott." Pasatiempo, March 5th, 2021.  
[https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/books/not-trying-harder-just-resisting-less-an-interview-with-anne-lamott/article\\_d5efa2a8-7ae1-11eb-b585-f3c144fd40a0.html](https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/books/not-trying-harder-just-resisting-less-an-interview-with-anne-lamott/article_d5efa2a8-7ae1-11eb-b585-f3c144fd40a0.html)

And offer our mindful and loving presence to one another,  
as we continue our journey together.

May it be so.

Amen.