

“The Good, the Bad, and Everything in Between”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
6 November 2022

It's not every day that you see a guy shot out of a cannon.

But a few summers ago, I did just that,
not once, or even twice, but some thirty times.

I was in Montréal during the Just for Laughs festival,
and the place where I was staying had a perfect view
three times a day for ten days in a row
to see a man shot from a “human cannon” some five metres long.

Now, when I made my reservation for this place,
I had no idea this peculiar ritual unfolding outside my window
would become a significant part of my stay.

But unfold it did.
And try as I might, I could not avert my eyes.
Curiosity got the best of me every single time.

It always started in the same way.

The growing buzz of the gathering crowd outside
would serve as my cue to move to the window.

With much fanfare, the man in his shiny red spandex suit
would bid the crowd farewell and then disappear into the depths of the cannon.

A few seconds later, when he was ready for blast-off,
the count-down would begin: cinq, quatre, trois, deux, un: Poof!

Out of a big boom and an impressive puff of smoke,
the man would sail some 50 metres through the air
before landing in the safety of a small net.

As he hit the net, with a flourish of golden fireworks,
the crowd would go wild.

The daredevil would then heave himself over the edge of the net,
and before taking a bow to acknowledge the crowd's applause,
would drop to his knees and kiss the ground,

as though he'd just made it back from the moon.

It was quite something to see,
and it was certainly something to have seen it more than once.

In ways that surprise me still,
it became an important part of my summertime spiritual practice—
an invitation issued three times a day
to contemplate matters of life and death, of wisdom and folly.

It wasn't long before I started to wonder just how this guy got this job.

I found myself curious about what was listed on his resume.
Did he actually put down as his profession "Human Cannonball"?!

And where exactly did he ever get the needed experience
to say that this is what he does professionally?

How much practice does it take
before one can climb into a cannon with a complete sense of confidence?

Can you imagine how steep his learning curve must have been?
Can you imagine how hard it was to get that kind of experience?

No wonder he was so quick to kiss the ground!

And, yet, haven't we all been there?

As outlandish as it might seem to put ourselves in his shoes,
haven't we all found ourselves, at some point,
careening out of a cannon,
just hoping there's a net out there somewhere—
and praying that it holds?

Haven't we all gained much of our life experience
while flying by the seat of our pants?

I'm reminded of that sage old saying that
"experience is what you get
when you don't get what you want."

By that definition, the human experience comes
with a fair bit of disappointment and heartache,
even as we gain in knowledge and grow in wisdom.

Even with things going precisely our way,
experience often turns out to be less than we had hoped,
and sometimes more than we ever bargained for.

It frequently comes with scrapes and cuts and bruises,
and sometimes even worse.

Some of us have more than our fair share of scars.

Getting the experience we need and want,
as well as the experience that we don't,
tests our mettle and our resolve.

And, yet, all of it—
the good, the bad, and everything in between—
is our life, if we are awake to it.

All of it is the stuff from which a life is made.

It doesn't mean that it's easy, that it all makes sense,
or that it comes without some hefty regrets.

Of course, making mistakes is part of the game,
and, arguably, the quickest way to finding wisdom.

Nothing ushers in wisdom
like an experience we never want to repeat.

Once upon a time, a genie appeared at a university faculty meeting
and told the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behaviour,
he would be rewarded with his choice
of infinite wealth, wisdom, or beauty.

Without hesitating, the dean asked for infinite wisdom.

“Done!” said the genie before disappearing
in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning.

Dumbstruck, all heads in the room turned towards the dean,
who sat surrounded in a faint halo of light.

At length, one of his colleagues whispered, “Say something.”

The dean looked at them and said,
“I should have taken the money.”¹

Experience is indeed what we get when we don’t get what we want.

The gift of hindsight is sometimes bittersweet.

How often we hear people say. . .
“if I had it all to do over again. . .”

Usually, though, when people say those words,
they’re pointing to a lesson learned, an understanding
of how they would handle some situation differently if given the chance.

But rarely have I ever heard someone say
they would really want to live their lives over again—
especially without the benefit of knowing
what they have already learned the hard way this time,
without the hard-won wisdom that has carried them this far.

Can you imagine going back to square one and starting from scratch?

Sure, it might be nice to have an extra shot at life,
but would you be willing to give up the wisdom life has already given you
only to experience the hard lessons that went with it all over again?

I’m not so sure I would.
I’m not sure I’d push my luck.

As wild and hard and beautiful as this time through life has been,
I can’t quite imagine a second round.

In the words of the Humanist Manifesto, this life,
especially when we are able to live out our full years, is “all and enough.”

I love the way that Theodore Levitt speaks to all of this:
Experience[, he says,] comes from what we have done.
Wisdom comes from what we have done badly.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve had to make some epic mistakes
to have whatever wisdom I’ve amassed in this life.

¹ Adapted from a telling in Betsy Devine and Joel E. Cohen, *Absolute Zero Gravity*, Simon & Schuster.

And as painful as it has sometimes been,
I can't imagine trading any of it in for a second chance.

When I look at the path my life has taken,
I find I cherish all of it in some odd way—
perhaps because I simply can't imagine who I would be
had life not unfolded as it has.

All of the disappointment, devastation, and heartbreak I have known
has had a hand in shaping me—most often for the better.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in reflecting on the mixed blessings of her own life, writes:

In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count.

I have set out to be married and ended up divorced.
I have set out to be healthy and ended up sick. . . .

When I was thirty, I set out to be a parish priest,
planning to spend the rest of my life caring for souls
in any congregation that would have me.

Almost thirty years later, I teach school. . . .

While none of these displacements was pleasant at first,
I would not give a single one of them back.

I have found things while I was lost
that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path.

I have lived through parts of life
that no one in her right mind would ever willingly have chosen,
finding enough overlooked treasure in them
to outweigh my projected wages in the life I had planned.²

I think Taylor's words, more than any I know,
point to what it means to truly see,
in the immortal words of Joni Mitchell, "both sides now"—
to glimpse the start of the many other possible paths
your life might have taken,
but to embrace the meandering path that you're on,

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, pp. 72-73.

knowing that it is yours and yours alone,
and that its many detours, smooth spots, and rough patches
are what make up the substance of your days on this earth—
and are the source of the wisdom and experience
that you have carved out of being alive.

Toward the end of his life in 1960,
the Broadway lyricist, Oscar Hammerstein got at this with great eloquence
when he described why he considered himself to be a happy man—
using words that are as eerily apt today as they were some six decades ago.

Why do I believe I am happy?
Death has deprived me of many whom I loved.
Dismal failure has followed many of my most earnest efforts.

People have disappointed me.
I have disappointed them.
I have disappointed myself.

Further than this, I am aware that I live
under a cloud of international [chaos].

The cloud could burst, and a rain of atom bombs
could destroy millions of lives, including my own.

From all this evidence, could I not build up a strong case
to prove why I am not happy at all?

I could, but it would be a false picture,
as false as if I were to describe a tree only as it looks in winter.

I would be leaving out a list of people I love, who have not died.
I would be leaving out an acknowledgment
of the many successes that have sprouted among my many failures.

I would be leaving out the blessing of good health,
the joy of walking in the sunshine.

I would be leaving out my faith that the goodness in humanity
will triumph eventually over the evil that causes war.

The conflict of good and bad merges in thick entanglement.

You cannot isolate virtue and beauty and success and laughter

and keep them from all contact
with wickedness and ugliness and failure and weeping.

I don't believe he says] anyone can enjoy living in this world
[without accepting] its imperfection.

[We] must know and admit [that we are] imperfect,
that all other mortals are imperfect,
and go on in [our] own imperfect way,
making. . . mistakes and riding out the rough and bewildering,
exciting and beautiful storm of life until the day [we] die.”³

I don't know if Oscar Hammerstein was a Unitarian,
but with ideas like that, he certainly could have been.

Since the middle of the 19th century,
Unitarianism has held up the belief
that we are saved not by faith, by grace, or by good works,
but by the growth and development of our own character.

William Ellery Channing, who articulated this idea
of Salvation by Character, believed that our great task on this earth
was to commit ourselves to what he called “self-culture.”

He believed that by cultivating the self we worked out our own salvation
by caring for ourselves and dedicating our energies
to the unfolding and the perfection of our nature.

Now, Salvation by Character involves two important tools:
self-searching and self-forming.

To Channing, this meant we must make a careful study of our lives,
looking into those corners of our souls that need improvement,
and then making an intentional move
toward our continued growth and spiritual development.

While this may now seem the obvious stuff found in the self-help aisle
of any modern bookstore, it was a radical proposition back in 1843.

The prevailing religious views in North America at the time
championed dramatic conversion experiences that changed

³ Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, editors, *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, p. 107.

people's hearts and minds in an instant, rather than the
"slow and steady, self-managed progress toward wisdom and goodness."⁴

That slow and steady work, as much today as it was generations ago,
is the project at the heart of being a Unitarian Universalist.

To do this, as humans always have, we have to work with what we've got.

In his essay "Self-Culture," Channing wrote:

We pine for a sheltered lot, for a smooth path,
for cheering friends, and unbroken success.

But providence ordains storms, disaster, hostilities, suffering;
and the great question, whether we shall live to any purpose or not,
whether we shall grow strong in mind and heart,
..., depends on nothing so much
as on our use of these diverse circumstances.⁵

Dearly Beloved, we are called to look at our lives from all sides,
to cultivate from the diverse circumstances of our days
wisdom and experience that leads on to our own growth
and the betterment of the world around us.

May we, with every fiber of our being,
commit ourselves each day
to the work of love and justice
to which this great faith calls us.

Blessed Be.

⁴ "Salvation by Character," Rev. Christine Robinson, March 7, 2010.

⁵ Channing, *A Selection from the Works of William Ellery Channing*, American Unitarian Association, 1855, p. 437.