

“A Worthwhile Risk”

Channing Memorial Church

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1 Intro: It must be more beautiful.

“It must be more beautiful.”

Orchestral conductors resort to all kinds of chicanery to get the sound that they want. They appeal to various techniques and to history, they make analogies, they plead, they cajole, they command, they even insult: Arturo Toscanini supposedly once told a musician, (I think it was a bassoonist), “You should have been a shoemaker!” Another thing conductors love to do is to tell stories about other conductors, to share and perpetuate the lore of their profession.

For half a week in early January of 1985, David Becker was a special person to me. I hope he is still alive and kicking. He was the conductor of the New Mexico All State High School Symphony Orchestra, and he told us a story of a famous world class conductor whose name, for the life of me, I cannot recall. Said conductor’s primary rehearsal technique was to rehearse a passage, to passionately say, “It must be more beautiful!”, and then to rehearse the passage again. Rinse, lather, repeat. After telling this story, Maestro Becker used the technique on us. Since we were now “in the know”, he always got a laugh, and, he always got results.

Our big finale was the last movement of Mendelssohn’s Fifth Symphony, known as the “Reformation Symphony”. This movement is a grand and glorious riff on Martin Luther’s beloved hymn {Ein feste burg ist unser Gott}, that is, {A mighty fortress is our God}. Incidentally and interestingly, Mendelssohn was Jewish. Anyway, the finale begins with a single flute, and it ends with a grand full orchestral chorale and amen. There is a place, oh, about 20 or 30 measures from the end that features the cellos, and many

times in rehearsal Maestro Becker pleaded with us to “make it more beautiful”. Needless to say, we knew this passage by heart.

During the performance, I remember arriving at this place in the music and then looking up. David Becker looked back at me and the rest of the cellos, and, without saying a word, instead using his hands and his face, he exhorted us once more to make it “more beautiful”. And so we did. It was a special moment. If I were to invoke God as Joy, with a capital J, then in that moment I knew God, and I praised the LORD.

2 A Little Secret

I’m going to let you in on a little secret. I’ve already told you my lead-in story. Sort of. I was going to tell it in the summer of 2015, but I had some kind of health thing and couldn’t make it that Sunday, so Ostara Hollyoak told it. Thank you, Ostara. But I was sad to miss out on the telling, and when I remembered it and realized it would suit my purposes for this morning, I did not hesitate to repeat myself.

Another little secret: I’ve also told the story “D.J.” sometime in the past few years. No apologies.

So, back to these special moments and the people that come with them, these experiences when we feel we could touch the Divine: we all have them; we all treasure them. I could stop talking now and pass the microphone around the room, and we could spend the rest of the morning sharing, and it would be a fine service, but I’m not going to do that. Instead, I’m going to let you in on another perhaps not so little secret: these people and these moments that we hold so dear are no more special than any other ones. We just pretend that they are.

3 Yahtzee!

We humans are a funny bunch. We're given this miraculous life and world, and yet we insist on ascribing meaning and specialness in order that we may treasure some moments, some events, some people, more than others.

But I've never done that, no sirree Bob, not I, said the dog.

Consider Yahtzee!

In the game of Yahtzee!, players roll and re-roll 5 six-sided dice a total of three times to score points for various configurations (many of which are based on poker hands), e.g., four of a kind, a straight, et cetera. Five of a kind is called a Yahtzee, and it is customary to shout "Yahtzee!" when this happens. If you are playing Yahtzee and roll five sixes, people who know the game will be very excited. The odds of getting a Yahtzee on a single roll are slightly better than 1 in 8000.

But here's the thing. A roll of, say, 42312 has *exactly the same* probability of being rolled, just slightly better than 1 in 8000, but no one yells "Yahtzee!" for that roll. The dice are different from one another, but we tend to treat them as the same. Imagine that each die is a different color, and perhaps you'll see what I mean. Each possible roll of the dice is exactly as likely, exactly as special, as any other one.

And just as each roll of the dice is exactly as special as any other one, so is each moment of our lives, so is each person. *All* moments are special. *All* people are special.

But that is not the game that we play ...

Good storytellers help us to see both the games that we play and the underlying truth that we deny when we play them. In his graphic novel, {Watchmen}, Alan Moore reveals the specialness of each life, I think quite eloquently.

4 Watchmen: Dr. Manhattan changes his mind

First, a bit of background. Jon Osterman is a young and brilliant physicist, who, as a result of a freakish accident, becomes endowed with God-like powers. He is the master of matter and energy, and he can manipulate them as he wills. He takes on the name Dr. Manhattan. And he's blue. In spite of his superhuman powers, he suffers an existential crisis and exiles himself to Mars, exactly when Earth desperately needs him.

Laurie Juspezyk is his ex-girlfriend who is trying to convince him to come back. Millions of lives are at stake. She's not doing well.

Suddenly, while they talk, she learns who her real father is, and that her true parents have been hiding this from her for her entire life. She loses it and breaks down, weeping, when suddenly, Dr. Manhattan changes his mind. This is what he says.

"Thermodynamic miracles... events with odds against so astronomical they're effectively *impossible*, like *oxygen* spontaneously becoming *gold*. I long to observe such a thing.

And yet in each human coupling, a thousand million sperm vie for a single egg. Multiply *those* odds by countless *generations*, against the odds of your ancestors being *alive*; *meeting*; siring *this* precise son; *that* exact daughter... until your mother loves a man she has every reason to *hate*, and of that *union*, of the thousand million children competing for fertilization, it was *you*, *only* you, that emerged.

To distill so *specific* a form from that chaos of *improbability*, like turning *air* into *gold*... *that* is the crowning *unlikelihood*. The thermodynamic *miracle*."

To which Laurie replies, "But... if me, my birth, if *that's* a thermodynamic miracle... I mean, you could say that about anybody in the *world*."

Dr. Manhattan: “Yes. Anybody in the world. ... But the world is so *full* of people, so *crowded* with these miracles that they become *commonplace* and we *forget*... *I* forget.”

So yes, we’re all special. Each of us is a thermodynamic miracle, the result of thousands, perhaps millions of rolls of the dice. Yahtzee! And that includes – Jesus.

5 Jesus

Jesus was special. But here’s something you won’t hear in a non-Unitarian Universalist church: he wasn’t any more special than the rest of us. More influential and more revolutionary than most of us? Probably. More aware and more insightful than most of us? Definitely. But more *special* in the eyes of God than the rest of us? I say, “Not so much.”

Moreover, I contend that *Jesus himself* knew this. Why do you think he spent so much time hanging out with the publicans and the sinners? Let us turn to this morning’s reading.

4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repert: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

4:18 And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother; casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.

4:19 And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

4:20 And they straightway left their nets, and followed him.

This passage is often invoked when one considers a major life change. A new career, a new field of study, a new relationship. Basically, have faith and just do it. But I want to consider it *internally*. The way I see it, in any given moment, the possibility of living fully, that is, the Kingdom of Heaven, is at hand. And your nets are whatever it is you are tangled up in, whatever you are thinking and doing that is mere survival; your nets are those worries about tomorrow; that place you'd rather be; that thing you'd rather be doing.

Wake up! Put down your nets and be aware of the miracle of this moment, of this person right in front of you. That's what it means to follow Jesus. The wondrous thing is that once you learn this, you can have your cake and eat it too. You can go back to whatever it was you were thinking or doing, but now when you do so you are awake, you are alive, acknowledging the miracle, in the presence of God.

I'm going to share with you another special moment from my life. Last Sunday it was my turn to clean the bathroom. Historically, I've found this to be a necessary, yet distasteful chore. But recently, I've rather come to enjoy it. So there I was, scrubbing the toilet, when I realized that this, too, was a truly special moment. For those of you who are familiar with Thich Nat Hanh, it was a "washing the dishes" moment. If you cannot scrub a toilet in the presence of your God, then **YOU ARE DOING IT WRONG!**

Yes, life and death are not at stake in a musical concert or a dirty bathroom. Nevertheless, I say that Jesus's teaching applies *across the board*: you may be under great duress, you may be undergoing great suffering, you may have incurred a great loss – even so, dropping your nets and acknowledging the Divine can only make your life better, can only change you for the better. I'm not talking about a Pollyannaish "all things for the best" optimism; it's more like that old "footprints in the sand" parable, except you don't have to wait until the end of your life to learn that God was with you all along.

Adopting the spiritual practice of acknowledging the Holy in all the moments and all the people in our lives is not a prescription to avoid loss or suffering, but it will help us to endure the harder times, and it will help us to do the right thing. And I contend that, deep down, each and every one of us *knows* this. Each and every one of us. Just like we all know that in the end, we all must die. When a loved one dies, acknowledging the miracle of their life, and the miracle of all life, is a good thing. It's a sacred ritual called a funeral, and it is practiced universally.

So, what is the risk? What happens when you choose to acknowledge the Divine in every moment and every person? You do lose something. You lose your previous viewpoints, your ingrown perspectives; you lose your opinions, your sorrows, your fears. The Buddhists would say that you lose your attachments. And in the instant that you do so, you connect with the divine, and the moment becomes special – “It must be more beautiful”.

This sounds like a “win/win”, like a “no-brainer”, and yet we hold fast to our attachments, because so often our concepts of self and self worth are tied up in them. And so even though we all know that in the end, we ultimately *must* let go of our attachments, the idea of doing so is terrifying. And so the risk is *real* to us. Realistically, many of us don't or won't completely let go our attachments until we die, but since all we really have in this world is the time that we are given, it is, I believe, a risk worth considering taking, at least from time to time, for it is a worthwhile risk.

Amen.