

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Encountering the Unexpected”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 31, 2019

Call to Celebration

What are your expectations ... this morning?

There are things that happen here every Sunday the same way. We start with a Call to Celebration and end with a Benediction and we *always* have an offering. We use the same words to light and extinguish the chalice. The hymns are mostly familiar if you are a regular attender over a number of years or if you are familiar with our hymnals because you have been part of another UU congregation. If you are new to UU, you may recognize the tune for the hymn but the words may surprise you as being different, being unexpected, but hopefully more acceptable theologically. You will not find exclusive male references to God for example.

This regularity creates a sense of safety, comfort and ease, especially for those who might be new to our congregation and just getting familiar with us. People appreciate order and predictability ... but not all the time.

So there are often little unexpected elements in our services. Think of the mistakes like when I forget to extinguish the chalice as one of those moments. Sometimes these moments are disturbing to that sense of order and predictability. At other times they add a little humor and stimulation. The unexpected can be fun and exciting. And my sermons often have elements of the unexpected too.

So, there is something unexpected that will happen in our service this morning. It isn't in the order of service. I hope you will experience this encounter with the unexpected as a pleasant surprise, maybe even meaningful and emotionally affecting.

Sermon

A farmer had only one horse, a beautiful stallion. One day, his horse ran away. His neighbors said, “I’m so sorry. This is such bad news. You must be so upset.”

The man just said, “We’ll see.”

A few days later, his horse came back with twenty wild mares following. The man and his son corralled all 21 horses.

His neighbors said, “Congratulations! This is such good news. You must be so happy!”

The man just said, “We’ll see.”

One of the wild horses kicked the man’s only son, breaking both his legs.

His neighbors said, “I’m so sorry. This is such bad news. You must be so upset.”

The man just said, “We’ll see.”

The country went to war, and every able-bodied young man was drafted to fight. The war was terrible and killed every young man, but the farmer’s son was spared, since his broken legs prevented him from being drafted.

His neighbors said, “Congratulations! This is such good news. You must be so happy!”

The man just said, “We’ll see.”

I love this story that powerfully illustrates how uncertain the twists and turns of our life journeys can be. Evaluating our situation at any point is difficult since nothing is more certain than uncertainty.

I recently had someone ask me, “What was the worst experience of your life?” I struggled to answer that question because some of the worst experiences of my life may have been the most important in shaping me into who I am today. I’m sure all of us can think back on our lives and identify with the farmer and respond, “We’ll see.”

What probably matters most when the unexpected happens is how we encounter and respond to it.

After all, life would be incredibly boring without the unexpected. One of the powerful draws to travel is a delightful sense of adventure and discovery. My travel to California on Amtrak at the age of 20, traveling alone to Thailand in 2006 and Sri Lanka in 2014 were full of daily encounters with the unexpected.

On *Philomena* and my recent cruise in the Caribbean, we had our first experience on one of these massive cruise ships. There were lots of unexpected moments getting on, getting settled, going on daily excursions, and finally getting off. We learned that people reserve outdoor lounge chairs on the deck by putting a towel on them with colorful clips. The etiquette is putting a personal item on a chair reserves it for you. Our best unexpected experience of the trip was taking a hike not knowing where we were going and finding a secluded beach with crystal clear blue water for a swim on St. Johns in the Virgin Islands National Park.

Another very enjoyable dimension of the unexpected is humor. In:

The Moon’s A Balloon, British actor David Niven writes about an instance when the American playwright and screenwriter Charles MacArthur approached Charlie Chaplin for advice on how to improve the classic banana peel sequence, in which a person slips on a banana peel and falls to the ground. MacArthur wondered if his scene should start with a shot of a fat lady and then go to the banana peel or vice versa.>>>

Chaplin suggested that MacArthur start the scene with the fat lady, cut to the peel, cut to a wide shot of the fat lady approaching the peel, back to the peel, and then, right before stepping on the peel, she steps over it and falls into an open manhole.

Why is this funny? Despite their surface diversity, most jokes are built using the same set of blueprints: they lead us down a path of expectations, build up tension, and at the end, introduce a twist that teases our initial expectations in a clever way. Humor arrives when we figure out how the punch line both broke and fulfilled our expectations. When this occurs we experience mirth, the reward of successfully connecting the dots of a joke. It's the "a-ha" moment of comedy, or what we feel when we "get" it. ([source](#))

This leads us to another area where we cherish the unexpected: the movies, theater, talent and "reality" shows. Whether a well-crafted story, superbly acted or anticipating a performance from a newbie to the stage, or watching contestants deal with a completely new challenge, the surprise factor keeps us engaged and interested. This is what I find fascinating. I can watch the same Shakespeare drama or comedy again and again and still be drawn in even when I know what the next lines will be. There is always novelty in the interpretation the actor brings to their part that has a little bit of the unexpected. The same is true for the performance of a piece of music. The blend of choral voices is always unique to that moment, of instruments in a symphony, and the interpretation of the conductor though the notes are exactly the same.

A distinguishing characteristic of many UUs is the love of learning, which is also often an encounter with the unexpected. I delight in learning some new bit of science that helps me better understand the human condition or how the body works. I'm endlessly fascinated with watching the processes of the mind and how they entangle with our sense of self that is independent of the content of our experience. This entanglement process is the source of so much of our suffering as we identify with what is actually not self. And on the macro scale, pondering the enormity of the universe as we look up at the sky is enhanced by the unexpected postulates of dark matter and energy.

Sadly, there is a more unpleasant dimension to the experience of the unexpected. It happened to me this past Tuesday. I am in the habit of going to the Honest Weight Coop on Tuesday mornings because it is the one and only morning each week they have my favorite muffin, the Pumpkin Spice muffin. I usually do my Coop shopping on Tuesday mornings before coming to work so I can start the day with one of those delicious muffins.

Last Tuesday I arrived, looked on the shelf where these muffins are displayed, and there were NO Pumpkin Spice Muffins! I asked about it and none were being baked that day. My expectation of that delicious muffin was dashed.

We love predictability don't we? Fast food chains have made a fortune on predictability. Go to McDonalds and order a Big Mac. It ALWAYS tastes the same. Their French fries have a consistent taste. Much of restaurant chain food follows this formula. You get it just the way you expect it. One of my complaints about these Pumpkin Spice Muffins is that the quality isn't consistent. Sometimes the texture is just right and other times it isn't. Getting that texture right for a gluten free muffin is really challenging!

One of the most annoying sources of unpredictability is our bodies, especially as they age. When I get up in the morning, I don't know what is going to ache or twinge. Illnesses come on unexpectedly, as do accidents.

Another distressing source of the unexpected are natural disasters. That quiet, pleasant stream nearby becomes a raging torrent after a downpour. I remember minding my own business on the second floor of the house I shared in Oakland when the whole room began to sway and shake unexpectedly – it was the Loma Pri-et-a 1989 earthquake in progress. And who was expecting two airplanes to hit the World Trade Center? I've been in demonstrations that suddenly go crazy as the police rush the protesters or people start throwing rocks. First responders live with the unexpected on a daily basis not knowing what they will face when they respond to a 911 call.

When I worked as an engineer, the unexpected was my enemy. A good design needed to have a high tolerance for uncertainty. A resistor is rarely 100 ohms exactly. The cheaper they are, the more uncertainty in the actual value. The engineer wants his design to work perfectly if the resistor is 110 ohms or 90 ohms. If the design only worked if the resistor was exactly 100 ohms, that would increase the cost of the design to an unacceptable level. The designer can take into account many different uncertainties but one law always applies, Murphy's law, if anything can go wrong, it will.

I did a little checking into the origin of Murphy's law. Humans have probably always known that anything that can go wrong will go wrong from firsthand experience. Technology has amplified the power of this law. In the 1940's, researchers were trying to understand the effects of rapid deceleration on the human body using a rocket sled on a special track. Edward Murphy designed a special sensor to measure that g force that didn't work in multiple iterations. He blamed these failures on the ineptitude of his assistant who wired it backward and made numerous other errors. The assistant's relatives remember it differently, blaming Murphy's arrogance and bad direction. What Murphy was reported to have said about his assistant is: "If there's more than one way to do a job, and one of those ways will result in disaster, then he will do it that way."

One of the greatest feats of engineering is the jet engine, one of the most reliable bits of complex technology ever designed. It is nothing short of amazing to see how many jet engines are in use on any given day that are working flawlessly. And still they fail – which is why commercial airplanes always have more than one.

From the black box reports, it looks like the two Boeing 737 Max 8 plane crashes happened because of one faulty sensor. Typically in aircraft design there are redundant systems for critical components, usually three of them. If one of the components fails, the other two will reveal that failure. I expect the engineer who designed this system felt that the component was so reliable, failure wouldn't happen. We violate Murphy's law at our peril.

What is always at stake when facing uncertainty is loss of control. Our survival can be at stake if we can't respond to each new situation that arises. Expectations give us a jump on the next moment so we can be prepared.

I don't know how I'd face the world on a day to day basis *without expectations* to moderate the anxiety of not knowing what might happen next. Driving would be a nightmare if I couldn't rely on other drivers to stop at stop signs and red lights. We couldn't negotiate roads very well if we didn't

agree to all drive on one side of the road and pass on the other. Social conventions for how we greet each other and interact relieve social anxiety. All these expectations of social behavior create behavioral boundaries that are helpful overall rather than harmful.

And as I discussed earlier humor and theater depend on expectations for their creative work that we so enjoy. We want those social expectations while we also want to play with them and make fun of them.

So expectations are important and valuable while at the same time can be great hindrances. They especially become problems if we are not aware of them shaping how we think, how we feel and how we perceive the world. As we encounter the unexpected, we have the opportunity to recognize our inner process of expecting and our behavior that follows from those expectations.

One place in our congregational life we regularly review our expectations and whether they are being met or not is our religious education program. How we transmit our UU values and traditions to our children and youth depends a lot on what we've done in the past that has worked, the stories handed down from previous generations, and resources available from the UUA and other UU congregations. We have some great learning tools that are work really well. Our Neighboring Faiths curriculum that introduces children to local religious organizations is very successful. Our "Our Whole Lives" curriculum of sexuality education is also greatly appreciated. The Rite of Passage program is also a valuable way for our youth to work on recognizing their own beliefs.

And there is often a lot of experimentation going on in different UU congregations. We are not limited by having to do things a certain way. We benefited from my congregational visits during my sabbatical in 2006 especially from my visit to the UU congregation in Golden, Colorado observing the way they welcomed visitors. I anticipate we will also have unexpected benefits coming from allowing Leah to have a couple of months to do some of those visits too. The unexpected encounters that happen when you step into another congregation are impossible to predict. I'm grateful our congregation is willing to give Leah this opportunity for growth and development.

So rather than having high or low expectations for Leah's sabbatical, let us take the wise approach of the farmer and say, "We'll see."

Benediction

E. Stanley Jones gave us these wise words:

Many live in dread of what is coming. Why should we? The unknown puts adventure into life. ... The unexpected around the corner gives a sense of anticipation and surprise. Thank [goodness] for the unknown future.

May the unknown ahead of us all be a call to live our lives to the fullest and enjoy the unexpected around the corner with gusto.

And when, unexpectedly, the Spirit moves in us and says do, let us do without hesitation!