

WHEN FATE STEPPED IN

**SERMON PREACHED BY
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My sermon title this morning is “When Fate Stepped In.” It comes from a recent Liz Smith column about Lady Diana of England published in *The Blade*. Ms. Smith writes, “[Diana] was a great figure in popular culture . . . [who] moved millions to champion her. Diana lived her life like a great heroine of romantic fiction—Scarlett O’Hara or Amber St. Clair—and the real sadness of her passing is that she was blossoming, more vigorous and attractive than ever, when fate stepped in.” The last clause an obvious reference to Lady Diana’s death in an automobile accident in Paris.

I have felt a need to set myself to thinking about fate in response to a question from one of our parishioners. Recently, a parishioner who has suffered great losses and difficulties in her life asked me whether I believed in fate. Her question was prompted by an interchange she had just had with an acquaintance. In hearing some of her recent life story, her acquaintance had said that all of the tragedy she had faced was just fate. Our parishioner was evidently taken aback by this remark and asked whether I believed in fate.

So I offer this sermon in the interest of working out an answer for myself and being supportive of my beloved friend of this congregation and in the interest of responding to James Luther Adams’ admonition for us to live according to an examined faith. And I thank you so very much for coming out on a Sunday when we have no Religious Education or choir to serve as an extra attraction.

Since I want to speak from my heart to yours, I have framed the sermon as an open letter to my friend, whom I will address as Stephanie.

Dear Stephanie,

Your question about fate brings back for me all you’ve told me of the sorrows and difficulties you have faced during your lifetime. You have been courageous through all the “slings and arrows” that life has hurled at you. You have not yielded to despair or self-pity, however tempting either option may have been. Despite everything, you have not lost a sense of your own dignity. I, whose life has been blessed in so many ways, want you to know how much I admire you. I hope that, when sorrows come, I can be half as strong as you have shown yourself to be.

You have twice now asked whether I believe in fate. The first time I ducked the question, not realizing how seriously you took it. But now I get it: You really want to know whether I, a friend you respect, believe in fate, whether I agree that the universe is governed by destinal forces which, for one reason or another or perhaps no reason at all, picks out individuals like yourself for an especially rough time while giving others a free pass. For me as a leader of your congregation, this, of course, unveils a theological level to the issue of fate. And that is whether the universe or even just this little life humans have on this one planet IS governed by any “force” at all. If so, what is the nature of this “force”?

One view of divine forces impacting humans is brilliantly stated by Homer near the end of his epic, the *Iliad*. As depicted here, the gods affect human life most often without caring much about

the impact of their interventions: They are pursuing their own agendas, which are often quite petty. Yes, people offer sacrifices and prayers, but up goes the smoke from the altars and, if the gods are not in the mood to respond favorably, it makes utterly no difference to them. The epic builds up to a climactic encounter between the Greek hero, Achilles, and King Priam of Troy. Following the death of Priam's son, Hector, at Achilles' hands, the two meet in Achilles' tent in the middle of the night. There they sit, both weeping—Priam for his dead son, Achilles for HIS dead father, who died years before while Achilles was stuck in this apparently endless war outside the gates of Troy. Finally, Achilles stops crying and admonishes Priam to do the same. Tears are of little help. In the heavens, he says, the gods have two jars—one containing blessings and one containing harms. They tip these jars over and let the contents rain down on humanity willy-nilly, blessings and harms jumbled up together. The only thing a human can do is to bear up with courage, strength, and equanimity and to keep moving forward through life with dignity, undaunted by troubles.

This is the heroic philosophy. Given this pretty stark picture of divine forces, it behooves people just to go on ahead, uncowed, not expecting any divine favor nor having to lament that the gods are against them. Preserve your integrity as a human being—that seems to be the primary issue. Stephanie, I said at the outset of this letter that you had weathered your storms in just this fashion. I admire you completely for doing so. Achilles would be proud of you.

Not every culture has seen the divine/human nexus in the same light as the Greeks. Ancient Hebrews, probably of the priestly class, had a very different spin—one that still is echoed today. Sometime take a look at chapter 28 of the last book of the Torah, Deuteronomy. There you will find these words: "If you faithfully obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments which I lay on you this day, then the Lord your God will raise you high above all nations of the earth, and the following blessings will all come and light on you, because you obey the Lord your God." Verses 3-14 outline these blessings. Verse 15 says, "But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and statutes which I lay upon you this day, then all the following curses will come and light upon you." Verses 16 through 68 list all the ways in which God will curse humankind for disobeying His laws.

Just think of what dreadful implications this has for the way people think about themselves! If you suffer and suffer in life, you must be a real rotter. Otherwise, God would send you blessings. Stephanie, I dearly hope your question about fate doesn't bear any such implication. Please, please, please—do not think that all your difficulties are due to your sinfulness. The beloved religious community to which you belong acknowledges your shining integrity. We may not have much of a common corporate theology to present to the world. But one thing I do know—Unitarian Universalists join with the writer or writers of the Book of Job in saying that this Deuteronomy theology is simply childish if it is not also vicious in its lack of feeling for the real circumstances of real people.

Despite that fact, it is very easy to encounter the Deuteronomy theology in one's everyday experience. I'll never forget my astonishment at the response of a local minister to the admonition that, when visiting the sick, one should never say that their illness is due to their having sinned. A wonderful Hospice chaplain had just made this point in a pastoral care workshop I was attending when from the back of the room came a voice: "Oh, but that's wrong," boomed the voice of one of the ministers in attendance. "People who are sick in the body ARE being punished for their sins."

That is balderdash. Never let yourself think this way.

This, of course, is not to say that our actions do not sometimes bring sorrow to us. Look at the recent number of home foreclosures. Look at continuing to smoke tobacco despite all the bad long-term health consequences. Look at becoming addicted to drugs like cocaine. Look at accidents one can cause when driving drunk. These actions certainly lead to sorrow and suffering for us and for others whom our actions harm. But these are OUR responsibility, not God's punishment for our sins.

And maybe some of these actions and choices are an expression of our character or our character flaws. Why does Judy keep getting involved with one man after another who beats her up? Why does Samuel keep being taken in by con games? Why does Brianne shoplift items that she has enough money to buy? Perhaps they are driven by character flaws which they can't overcome. And maybe some of the pain you've suffered is the result of ill-advised choices or the particularities of your character. That's not for me to say. But it's worth looking at, if you are concerned about why life has turned out for you as it has.

In some sense, then, we could say that character can act as fate—a force that propels us into certain circumstances. Can we change our character and therefore change our fate? I think that—with a great deal of courage and hard work—we can change or at least modify our character. Even more, we can learn in what directions our character tends to lead us and choose other directions that, let's say, are not as counterproductive as those we ordinarily take. Character does not have to rule us with an iron hand.

But let's be honest. All the difficulties and even tragedies that you've found yourself in—they can't all be the result of your character fating you to make this or that choice. Some things just do happen to us as Achilles says—illness, accidents, chance encounters. And even if it is frightening to think of, even if it makes us fear that life IS meaningless after all, I really think we do have to acknowledge that things just happen without any agency being responsible—either our character or the intervention or eternal plan of some extra-human or superhuman power.

A commonplace one often hears to explain what is happening to people is this: "Everything happens for a reason." This too raises philosophical implications that are worth looking at. Some people who believe in a divine power they can trust may really mean this: We're part of God's plan which is good even if this bit we're experiencing is difficult and sad. For others who use this cliché, I think it's a way of looking for something good in the bad—if life gives you lemons, make lemonade, to cite another cliché. John is hurt in an auto accident and can no longer do the kind of work he is good at. Because Sarah had a stroke, her daughter now must quit her job, move Sarah in with her, and spend full-time as a care-giver. Well, if you can say, "everything happens for a reason," maybe doing so helps you move forward looking for positive changes that result from even sad circumstances. John and Sarah's daughter find a patience they never previously had. They credit this important change to having to deal with their altered circumstances. Finding that some good has come from their struggle is surely a positive way to look at troubles. I credit those who turn tragedy into triumph for their pluck. But, in the sense that John HAD to be hurt and Sarah HAD to have a stroke BECAUSE John and Sarah's daughter needed to learn more patience, no way. I just don't think the universe works that way. That smacks of Deuteronomy thinking, where character failings replace sins. Again, I say, that's balderdash.

Now, it IS unavoidably true, without a doubt, that everything DOES happen for some reason. John is hurt because he was driving to work at a certain time on a certain day on a certain road. John is hurt because the driver of the truck behind him that day was blinded by the sun. John is hurt

because by being so blinded he could not see that traffic on the expressway was stopped and thus smashed his truck into John's car. The traffic was stopped because construction up ahead had narrowed the expressway down to one lane. The construction was necessary because so many people like John and the truck driver used it every day. And so forth and so on.

So we CAN say that "everything happens for a reason" and be speaking the truth in that sense. How consoling this is when bad things happen I hesitate to say. The one thing it does do is to soften the terror of having to admit that the whole of life may be a sequence of random events.

If we believe that everything is predetermined according to some divine plan, that can either seem oppressive or reassuring, depending on your viewpoint and, I dare say, depending on whether "good things" or "bad things" are happening to you. The famed Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, found this idea of predetermination reassuring. After all, he was an emperor. Why wouldn't he? Marcus writes, "Has some [harmful] chance befallen you? It is well; from Universal Nature, from the beginning, all that befalls was determined for you and the thread was spun." (*Meditations Book IV, #26*) "What befits every man has been laid down for him as appropriate to the natural order. So, too, we say things 'befit us' as workmen talk of squared blocks 'fitting' in walls or pyramids bonding with one another in a definite structure. For in the whole of things there is one connecting harmony, and as out of all material bodies the world is made perfect into a connected body, so out of all causes the order of Nature is made perfect into one connected cause. . . . So welcome all that comes to pass, even though it appear rather cruel, because it leads to that end, to the health of the universe, that is to the welfare and well-being of Zeus. For he would not 'send' this [harsh circumstance] to one, if it were not to the well-being of the whole. . . .

In a nutshell, keep your mouth shut and accept whatever comes to you as part and parcel of a divinely ordained plan. The divinely ordained plan is the important thing and not the pain and suffering that you may experience, infinitesimally small part of the perfect whole that you are.

Stephanie, although I like a lot of what Marcus Aurelius writes and wish I could be as stoical and as focused on moral living as he was, this part of his thinking sets my Unitarian Universalist teeth on edge. I just don't share this belief in a perfect whole with all the parts fitting into their place like blocks in a wall. How could I given what I know and what is commonly known about scientific observations of the physical universe, in all its constant change within the parameters of physical laws? A cyclone hits Bangladesh and thousands on thousands are killed and have their homes and livelihoods destroyed and we should accept this with equanimity as part and parcel of some perfect divine plan?

I just don't think this way. It would be smug, it would be cruel of me to say that such suffering is necessary to preserve the perfection of the whole. It would be smug and cruel of me to say that your difficult life is a necessary part of the whole as is my life of relative smooth sailing. Good grief! Sorry, Marcus. I don't find your theory helpful or true.

For those who DO believe and trust in the ultimate goodness of an extra-human or superhuman power and who can cope with things with greater equanimity if they attribute what happens to such a power or being, I can only say, "If blaming these events on fate or God's plan, if claiming that 'everything that happens, happens for a reason,' if these thoughts ease you through difficult times—and there are examples all over the place that they can—then please accept my encouragement to think this way, to trust this power as a good power that means well in the long run even if you can't understand why you have to go through the tough times. In thinking this way, You do run the risk that some day things will get so bad that you stop trusting and begin to believe that you're in the

control of some big force that, for some undeterminable reason, has it in for you. But that may be a risk that you're willing to take.”

In the end, Stephanie, for me, the issue is not what I think is behind bad things. The issue is the way people deal with the circumstances they find themselves in. What Achilles says makes a lot of sense. Put the tears aside to the extent that you can. And move on. Not easy advice in the throes of fresh loss. But that, in the end, is what we must do. The human spirit is capable of remarkable endurance and admirable courage and strength. The world at large has so much suffering in it, yet people weather on, weather on with hearts filled with fear or sorrow or both, but weather on. When I hear your life story, I don't think you were fated to have all this happen to you. I think, “Boy, I really admire the way you can just go on despite all the chaos surrounding you. You are some human being. I can only hope that, if I had to deal even with half of what you are coping with, I would show some smidgen of your courage and strength. So keep on, keep on knowing that I and many of those who know you and have known you love you, admire you, and want to do all we can to ease your burden as you would do all you could to ease ours. For that is our calling in this life—to help each other along to the best of our ability.

Love, Bob