

“Intentional Being”

A Sermon by the Rev. Terry Sims
Unitarian Universalist Church, Surprise, Arizona
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Story for All Ages: Do you know the difference between doing something on purpose and doing something by accident? If something is an accident, we say we didn't mean to do it, don't we? If you're riding your bike with a friend, and you hit a bump that makes you fall and hit your friend's bike and she crashes, what would you say? Maybe, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen." If we do something on purpose, we mean to do it. Like learning to read or going to see a movie.

Well, today's story is about the difference between doing something by accident and doing something on purpose. Shannon was in the 3rd grade. One day when she went to school, there was a new boy in the class. He and his family had moved to her town in the United States all the way from Mumbai in India. The new boy's name was Yezdi.

Shannon liked her 3rd-grade teacher. Her name was Ms. Dyer. Ms. Dyer talked to Yezdi before class and then told him where he could sit. She introduced him to the rest of the class. But at recess, no one asked him to play tag. So he just stood off by himself.

When they went back to the room, Ms. Dyer asked the class if anyone could name all the planets in our solar system. No one raised her or his hand. So she asked Yezdi if he knew the answer. Yezdi said he did. He got them all right. But he didn't say the names of the planets the way Shannon and the other kids did. It sounded different and kind of funny. Shannon and some of the other kids laughed a little. Yezdi looked embarrassed. The teacher explained that when people grow up in different parts of the

world and speak other languages, sometimes they say things differently from the way we're used to. Ms. Dyer called that speaking with an accent.

When Shannon went home that day, she told her big brother Mike about Yezdi and his accent. Mike was 16 and he knew lots of stuff. Shannon also told Mike that she laughed when Yezdi said "Jupiter" in a funny way. Shannon said she thought that had made Yezdi think she was laughing at him. But she really wasn't. She didn't mean to hurt Yezdi's feelings. She just thought it was funny.

Mike said, "Sometimes we hurt people's feelings when we don't mean to."

Shannon said, "Yeah, like when you told me that my hair looked funny, and I started crying."

Mike said, "Yeah, like that. So when we hurt someone's feelings and we don't mean to, we have to say we're sorry. And then we can do something else."

Shannon said, "Like what?"

Mike said, "Like doing something nice on purpose. Maybe you could do something nice with Yezdi to show him you didn't mean to make fun of him."

"Well, I guess I could ask him if he wants to play soccer with us at recess," Shannon said.

Then her big brother gave her a hug and said he thought that sounded like a good thing to do. And the next day, Shannon did ask Yezdi to play soccer. He did, and that's how Shannon and Yezdi got to be friends.

Reading: "TAOISM: Go With the Flow," from Chapter 7 in Wisdom Walk, by Sage Bennet, Ph.D.

In her book, Wisdom Walk, Sage Bennet opens her chapter on Taoism with a quotation from Lao-Tzu.

“How can a man’s life keep its course
 If he will not let it flow?
 Those who flow as life flows know
 They need no other force.
 They feel no wear, they feel no tear,
 They need no mending, nor repair.”

Then Dr. Bennet writes: “Water is a common symbol in Taoist texts, reminding individuals that pliability is also a sign of strength. Nothing seems more flexible than water, yet it can also wear away stone. At the core of Taoism is *wu wei*, or ‘noninterference,’ which instructs one to move with, rather than against natural processes and change. . . .

‘[O]ur lives have an intelligence and mystery guiding them like an invisible river that knows its way back to its source. This intelligence that weaves through seasonal changes runs through our lives. We may see evidence of this river in our lives bringing to us the people we need to meet, the opportunities that allow us to prosper, and the challenges that cultivate our inner resources. What if an intelligence greater than ours is running our lives? Wouldn’t it be wise to bring ourselves in accord with this flow, be humble in front of its mystery, and be willing to yield to this intelligence?’¹

Responsive Reading: “Universal Ministry,” Isaiah 61

“The spirit of God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

To bind up the brokenhearted,

To proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,

To comfort all who mourn,

To give them a garland instead of ashes,

The oil of gladness instead of mourning,

¹ Bennet, Sage, Wisdom Walk, Nine Practices for Creating Peace and Balance from the World’s Spiritual Traditions, New World Library, 2007, pp. 151-157

The mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

*They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations,
the devastations of many generations.*

You shall be named ministers of God.”

Sermon: My extended family and I used to canoe together on the Big Sugar River in Missouri. It was a small river and it didn't move very fast. I remember seeing a solitary leaf on one of those trips. The leaf was bright crimson, gold, and bronze. In the late afternoon sunlight, it floated lazily on the surface of the water alongside our canoe, rising and falling with the gentle current and the little waves our paddles made. It was a tranquil, calming thing to see that leaf float along.

Dr. Bennet, who wrote our reading about Taoism, also had this to say about the religion founded on the teachings of Lao Tzu: “The inner posture, or approach, that allows us to go with the flow is deftly described in this poetic paraphrase of Lao Tzu’s philosophy, a favorite of mine:

We must let ripen
And then fall.
Force is not
The way at all.

. . . It’s humbling that creative acts in nature come to fruition by a mysterious process, independent of our action. Why interfere with, or try to control, what already is magnificent in its own natural flow? Still, it is challenging to keep our hands off. We want to control, alter, and sometimes force things to go our way. What can we do to cultivate a way of life that does not resist the river?” “Probably one of the hardest challenges that westerners face is to *let* things happen instead of *make* them happen. We have strong ego drives that convince us that being in control, or in the driver’s seat,

is being responsible, self-determined, and in charge. This posture is not always the best approach.”²

I have sometimes been that leaf floating undisturbed on the river of life. Whatever life brought, wherever it took me, I'd try to deal with it. But I didn't have a big purpose or plan for my life. When I was floating down the river of my life, I was being mostly passive, not intentional. And I didn't want to make waves; I didn't want to disturb my life or the society on which I floated.

I also have a different, distinct image involving a river. I remember a time when there had been a lot of rain and another river was in flood stage and moving fast. Well away from the bank, a brown squirrel was being swept along with the fast current, amid a lot of debris. The squirrel seemed to be fighting the river. I could imagine that it was trying to find something to hang onto. As I watched, the squirrel was panicked and struggling to keep its head above water.

At times in my life, I have also been that squirrel. Life was coming at me too fast and too hard. I was driven, not by purpose, but by too many things to do in too short a time. It didn't seem like I was in control of my life, or enjoying myself, or even that I had made conscious choices to be where I found myself. I wasn't being intentional or driven by purpose. I was just frantic, driven on by my own busyness and trying to keep afloat.

It is true that regardless of how intentional we are, some things will happen that are random, or at least out of our control. Two weeks ago I was making a left turn in my car to go to my law firm. The first two lanes of traffic going the opposite direction stopped to let me make my turn, as opposing traffic often does at that intersection. And I thought I could see that the third, curb lane was also clear. But by the time I got there,

² *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

a truck was there, too, arriving just in time to hit my car solidly on the front passenger door.

I also believe that chance decides what family we're born into, in what country, whom we meet, and what our initial opportunities are. We cannot say that nothing happens without our intention for it to happen. The physical world goes along without us most of the time.

But the thing that fascinates me is that some things simply will not happen without our intending them, willing them, into being. I was the prime mover in becoming a lawyer and then a minister, in continuing to play cello. I'm officiating at four weddings this Spring. People choose to form lifelong partnerships with their mates, and often where to live, how to make a living, whether to try to have children. Nothing I know causes me to believe that some other force decrees our fates in those decisions. And the bad things in our world tend to continue unless someone sets about to change them.

I hear lots of people say that everything happens for a reason. But I don't believe that. In his popular book, Purpose-Driven Life, the Christian minister Rick Warren's first chapter is entitled, "It All Starts with God." Rev. Warren's first sentence reads: "**It's not about you.** The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born *by* his purpose and *for* his purpose. The search for the purpose of life has puzzled people for thousands of years. That's because we typically begin at the wrong starting point – ourselves. We

ask self-centered questions like, ‘What do *I* want to be? What should *I* do with *my* life? What are *my* goals, *my* ambitions, *my* dreams for *my* future.’ But focusing on ourselves will never reveal our life’s purpose.”³

I like Rev. Warren’s title of Purpose-Driven. I don’t think we can be fully human without purpose or intention. And if I thought anybody actually knew, as opposed to just believed, that there was a super-being in control, I might agree that becoming an intentional being is just a matter of aligning our intentions with God’s. But since I don’t think anybody knows that, I think it is up to each of us to decide whether to act purposefully or not. And to decide what our purpose is.

What would being truly intentional look like? We would take time to ask ourselves how we really want to be in this life; to form an intention, a direction, a goal. We wouldn’t be passive like the floating leaf or frantic like the squirrel caught in the flood. We would decide, make choices, take responsibility for our lives. And that is why being intentional can be hard. But we can be intentional in different ways.

This story comes from Seventh Son, a novel by Orson Scott Card. Vigor is the eldest son of a family moving across the Midwest in a covered wagon. Vigor’s mother, Faith, is pregnant and about to give birth to another boy, a seventh son. As we pick up the story, the family is about to cross a small river and the pregnant mother will not leave the wagon. ‘Not much of a river,’ Vigor had said, but the clouds came up and the rain came down and the Hatrack became something after all. Even so, it looked passable when they got to it. The horses strode in strong, and Alvin was just saying to Calm, who had the reins, ‘Well, we made it not a minute to spare,’ when the river went insane. It doubled in speed and strength all in a moment, and the horses got panicky

³ <http://www.purposedrivenlife.com/en-US/AboutUs/AboutTheBook/FirstSevenChapters.htm>

and lost direction and started pulling against each other. . . . Almost as if the river knew they were coming and saved up its worst fury till they were already in it and couldn't get away.

'Look out! Look out!' screamed Measure from the shore. Alvin looked upstream to see what devilment the river had in mind, and there was a whole tree floating down the river, endwise like a battering ram, the root pointed at the center of the wagon, straight at the place where Faith was sitting, her baby on the verge of birth. . . .

Vigor didn't know there was no hope. [He] leapt out when the tree was no more than a rod away, his body falling against it just above the root. The momentum of his leap turned it a little, then rolled it over, rolled it and turned it away from the wagon. Of course Vigor rolled with it, pulled right under the water – but it worked, the root end of the tree missed the wagon entirely, and the shaft of the trunk struck it a sidewise blow. . . . 'The baby's coming' whispered Faith."

While I was in seminary in Berkeley, the Zen Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn, came to town. Thich Nhat Hahn is the founder of a movement known as "Engaged Buddhism."

I went to hear Thich Nhat Hahn speak at a large high school auditorium. Hahn is well known. So even though I arrived early, the parking lot and lobby were already packed with people and quite noisy. But as I entered the auditorium, I saw the thirty or so Buddhist monks who were traveling with Hahn. They were all seated on the stage in three staggered rows. All their heads were shaved of hair and the monks sat there in their saffron robes, motionless, meditating. Ushers at the door asked us to enter in silence, because the monks were meditating on peace and lovingkindness for the world.

And we did. No one wanted to disturb the silence and meditation. What we witnessed was a simple, but intentional, presence; a concentration of positive intention for the good of the world. There are all kinds of ways of being intentional.

In the presence of that focused, practiced meditation group, I believed that if more of us meditated with the intention of creating peace and lovingkindness within ourselves and for others, it could come about. But we would have to give up a lot. We would have to forsake our passivity and our frantic pursuit of possessions. We would have to give up our hectic schedules; our measurement of our worth by how much we do in a day, or in a lifetime; our sense that time is slipping away from us, so we have to pack as much in as possible.

“Engaged Buddhism refers to Buddhists who are seeking ways to apply the insights from meditation practice and *dharma* teachings to situations of social, political, environmental, and economic suffering and injustice.”⁴ “During the Vietnam War, Hahn and his *sangha* (spiritual community) made efforts to respond to the suffering they saw around them. They saw this work as part of their meditation and mindfulness practice, not apart from it.”⁵ “In 1998, while on retreat in Bodhi, Gaya, India, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama told those . . . who were participating in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue that sometimes, Buddhists have not acted vigorously to address social and political problems. He told [the] group, “In this, we have much to learn from the Christians.”⁶

Thich Nhat Hanh outlined fourteen precepts of Engaged Buddhism”⁷ in his book Interbeing. These are three of them: “Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engaged_Buddhism

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ <http://www.emptybell.org/articles/engaged-buddhism.html>

⁷ *Ibid.*

suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.”

“Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.”

“Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.”⁸

In an article on liberation theology for The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought, Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh S. Pyper write, “Every theology is ideologically based and supports a social configuration of the world and political structures. . . . [So] any theology, even in the more apparently detached forms, carries a responsibility for the social conditions in which people live. Traditional theology can be a powerful ally of the status quo[. It can] either show[] indifference to structures of human oppression, or oppos[e] social changes that may threaten the privileged position of the church. Theology thus becomes an instrument for sacralizing structures of oppression. . . .

Without denying the reality of individual sin, liberation theology concentrates on the structural aspects of sin, that is the macro-structures that perpetuate social injustice, poverty, and violence around the world. International trade agreements and the economic system are identified as sinful since they are responsible for the collective

⁸ http://viewonbuddhism.org/resources/14_precepts.html

poverty of people in Third World countries[. They] also convey images of what is right and acceptable that often contradict the Christian meaning of life. Consumerism, greed for wealth, and the reduction of economic activity to the pursuit of profit are some of the values thus made acceptable, which induce people to sin.”⁹ If we accept everything as it is, nothing that should be changed changes. If the world is to improve, it is up to us humans to provide the intention to change it.

What I want to move toward is becoming clear on what my intention is when, and then to live according to those purposes. I don't want to go through life either as a floating leaf or a frantic squirrel; as if life only happens to us and our only choices are passivity or panic. There are things we do not control. The gift of life has come to us from some Mystery. But the paradox is that we also create our lives as we become fully who we are. Our lives are both sometimes within our control, and sometimes beyond our control. We live in the balance of acceptance and struggle, of non-resistance and resistance.

I close with this. There are different ways of becoming an intentional being. But I am sure that if we are not intentional about our lives, we miss being fully human. One way to be intentional is the Taoist approach of going with the flow, of non-resistance. We can be intentional in that way to the beauty and wonder of life, and to those things over which we truly have no control. Because if we choose always to fight the river, we exhaust ourselves and miss at least some of the beauty and joy of life. Sometimes we

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http://books.google.com/books?id=ognCKztR8a4C&pg=PA388&lpg=PA388&dq=structures+of+oppression&source=bl&ots=WYErF3G1vL&sig=OZK-p-AB6AuD4qYg0xbtCNWzEOE&hl=en&ei=h25xTd7LAof2gAeY6fRO&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=7&ved=0CEQQ6AEwBigK#v=onepage&q=structures%20of%20oppression&f=false, accessed on March 4, 2011

need to let ourselves be carried by the current of life, to float with the river of time and history.

And sometimes we need to leap into that river of time and history and struggle against it. If we always choose just to be carried along, that intention can make us overlook what is cruel and unjust. Constant intention not to resist is to be complacent about what needs to be changed. We need to throw ourselves into the torrential river of racism, homophobia, poverty, and violence. We need to be in that river, even if being there is frightening, or seems hopeless, or we do not see the changes we want. That is what being free, intentional beings is about. No good intention or action is wasted. Amen.

Benediction: May we live up to our mysterious and evolutionary heritage by living as intentional beings. And may our lives reflect both a calm openness to life and a fierce commitment to improve it for all of us. Blessed be.