

Are We Doing any Good?
(and is that the measure of life?)

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
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Rev Paul Beckel

*There are days I am envious of my hens:
When I hunger for a purpose as perfect and sure
As a single daily egg.*

Barbara Kingsolver

- 1. Try new things, expecting that some will fail*
- 2. Make failure survivable, because it will be common*
- 3. Make sure you know when you have failed*

Tim Harford, in *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure*

*Want what you have,
do what you can,
be who you are.*

Rev Forrest Church

WELCOME

Good Morning. As we gather today, we each bring different needs and hopes. Some of us carry the weight of sadness or loss. Others bring the joy of new beginnings.

Some of us bring a living passion, and seek new challenges. Others seek the comfort of a caring community.

Some seek renewal through the movement of the spirit; others seek to be reminded of guiding principles. Whatever you bring today, we welcome you, and thank you for being here.

Let's find the quiet inside, now as we settle in ...

PRELUDE *To Dream The Impossible Dream*

INTRODUCTION

Every day, people of goodwill tell me, "Have a good day now!" Or if it's a Friday they'll tell me, "Have a good weekend!" I smile and say, "you too." And then, just so there's no misunderstanding I add: "By 'good' what I mean is that I expect you will *do* good, you will *feel* good, and you will *have a good attitude!* Have I made myself clear?"

Then they get this weird look on their face and scurry away. IT'S LIKE THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW THAT I'M A MINISTER AND THAT *IT'S MY JOB* TO MAKE THIS WORLD AND EVERYONE IN IT *GOOD*. And how can anyone know if they're having a good day or a good life if we don't set some standards around here?!

Today we'll explore together some questions around having a good day or a good life. Is this mostly a matter of doing good work? Or is there more to life? And whatever The Way forward is, how do we know if we've been moving in the right direction?

COVENANT / LIGHTING THE CHALICE

GATHERING SONG #1008 *When Our Heart is in a Holy Place*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Hunting the White Cow*, by Tres Seymour

Summary: Despite all of the farm family's efforts, the white cow remains tantalizingly out of reach... reminding us that something ultimately unrealizable may still be worthy of pursuit, even if we get scraped up along the way.

ERACISM MINUTE Cat McIntyre

READING from *Tao te Ching* #77

This will be a very long introduction and a very short reading.

There are a handful of words that I use maybe once a year that I've never learned to pronounce. Or maybe I've heard how to pronounce them several times but I still second-guess all the time because the letters and the sounds don't correspond. And maybe I mumble and apologize over certain words simply because I don't want to imply that I *know* these words — as if they're mine. Because I'm not of the social class who use that word. Or the word comes from a culture that I don't want to pretend that I can take as my own.

That's the way I feel, sometimes. And it's ridiculous.

So before we go any further, I want us all to be able to simply say *Tao te Ching* without hesitating or apologizing... so we can get on to talking about the idea rather than the pronunciation. When I went online yesterday to confirm my understanding of the pronunciation, I was happy to learn that it's becoming common to *spell* the word in English more like it *sounds* in English.

So, in the future, we'll print in the order of service "Dao de Jing." That is, the T's become D's and the Ch becomes a J. Like in David-David-Johnson. *Dow De Jing*. Let's say it together... one more time... and three times fast....

Those of us who don't speak Chinese will never get it exactly right, but sometimes it's better to *do something* imperfectly than to *do nothing* perfectly. Some purist might jump on you for saying "the" Dao de Jing. She might say: "You don't say "the" because the "the" is already in there (the Chinese means "the" book of the way and virtue) so don't say "*the* Dao de Jing" just say Dao de Jing. And so you just say, "When does the Super Bowl start?"

We will never get the interpretation exactly right either, and that's just fine. That's the mark of its depth. There are countless interpretations, and the best we can hope to do is make our own interpretation of someone else's interpretation. That's the way it is with religious scripture of *any* kind.

And, just like the teachings of other religious traditions, Daodejing is full of paradox. Some days, for me, this juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible truths is confounding. I just want *something* to be clear. And on other days it is strangely comforting to be told that The Way is both inescapable, and impossible to grasp.

I'm going to share now two different interpretations of a single verse in which the Tao, the Way, is compared to the bow of an archer. Most interpretations of this verse refer to how, for the bow to be useful, the top must come down, and the bottom must come up. There are all sorts of things we can do with that image: In order for the bow to be useful, the top must come down and the bottom must come up. It can help us to think of moderation, or balance. Or turn the bow sideways in your mind, and think of how the extremes need to come to the center.

I came across a children's version this week that offers a slightly different image. It reads, simply: "Stretch the bow to the very full, and you'll wish you stopped in time."

[this picture book, *The Legend of Lao Tzu*, by Demi, is available at the Bellingham Public Library]

Isn't that true as well? You might try to ultra-maximize some power by concentrating *every* thing *every* body to the *very* center *all* the time, with catastrophic consequences.

Let's share a moment of silence.

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

Some mornings I just can't turn on the radio. I can't listen. But maybe not for the reasons you're thinking.

For a while there — I don't know how often this ad runs any more but for a while there it seemed like every morning I'd hear that funding for NPR programs comes from the Andrew Carnegie Corporation, seeking to "do real and permanent good in the world."

Seeking to do real and permanent good in the world. What a lofty vision to set in juxtaposition to recent news reports.

Wow! To do real and permanent good. Today? Again?

Is this a moral imperative?
Is it an honest, soulful hunger?
Or naïve piety?

And how do we even *know* if we're doing any good?

There's a golden rule, of course, but is there a golden ruler? A way to *measure*...so that if I was there/then...and I'm here/now...I can know that some portion of this movement constitutes progress?

In old-fashioned races between tortoises and hares, it may have been hard to tell who was winning, but at least we knew where the finish line was. There was probably even an agreement about the path each participant was *supposed* to follow. But now we may need to create some new fables for a postmodern age in which neither the goal nor the path are given...and new competitors jump in and out throughout the contest. It's discombobulating. In order to keep up today, we have to adapt the rules and adjust our roles so often that it's not only difficult to show we're making progress; it's hard sometimes to know what progress is.

How do we know if we're doing any good? I'm interested in this question on a personal level. I'm guessing that many of you, too, wonder at times if your efforts are worthwhile... whether you are doing the right thing... or to what extent your *well*-intended labors might have *un*-intended consequences.

We also ask this question at an institutional level. As we make our way into the season of fundraising, we are naturally going to ask ourselves about our shared purpose and potential: the beauty and the power of this group of people drawn forward by a mission — a vision worthy of our collective aspiration.

So I'm interested in my own quest for purpose and I'm interested in this congregation's quest. Unfortunately, it's all too easy to be drawn into speculation about whether *other people and other institutions* are doing any good.

And these can be legitimate questions. A good citizen will ask if society is living up to its potential, and fulfilling its promises. But in assessing any situation, we need to *begin*, of course, with ourselves... begin where we have the greatest opportunity to know what's going on... begin where we can make changes.

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But all of this, even the appropriately focused introspection, is about *doing, transforming, fixing*. Is that all there is to life?

Growing up Catholic, I came to understand that the salvation of my soul was dependent on doing good. Or at least on meeting some undefined ratio of good-to-bad. I was about 8 when I started discussing this with my Lutheran friend Todd. I was shocked, then, to learn that all *they* had to do to get to heaven was to have faith in Jesus. I thought that was so unfair. You mean you don't have to *do* anything? His rebuttal was: Oh, you Catholics can't complain; you just do what you want — then go to confession and have all of your sins wiped away. There was a moment of tension between us. And then one of us probably said something like: "Hey, let's go shoot off some bottle rockets."

I wonder what we would have thought, at the time, if we had met a little Universalist kid telling us that, "A loving god could not conceivably damn *anyone*, not the worst sinner, to an eternity in hell."

Apparently everybody has some kind of get out of jail free option.

Later on, I learned that there was this thing called the Protestant Work Ethic, which really pissed me off. Protestants supposedly work harder? But the work ethic theory is attributed to a fairly specific brand of Protestantism: that of the Calvinists. Calvin taught that neither faith, nor good works, nor the sacraments, not prayer, and certainly not God's goodwill... none of these things was going to keep anyone from eternal anguish. *For we are all sinners in the hands of an angry God.*

But don't let that get you down. Work hard, follow the rules, and be of good cheer. Very few will be saved from eternal torments... and whether you're in or out has been predetermined from before you were born. Asking "why?" is a sign that you might be on the bad list. But worldly success — which is not important in itself — worldly success *can be a sign* of grace. An indicator that you are on the good list.

So work hard, be of good faith, follow the rulers. Not that this does any good, for only God is good. But it's always nice to know that you're on the right team.

American Unitarianism arose around the time of the American revolution, tapping into a general rebellion against this kind of authoritarianism. And tapping into fragments of religious tolerance that had popped up now and again in Europe as the various Protestants and Catholics warred with one another. Tapping into the growing call for a separation of church and state. Tapping into increasingly rational, rather than dogmatic interpretations of scripture. But perhaps most importantly rejecting the Calvinist notion that there is nothing that we lowly humans can do to make ourselves worthy. Nothing we accomplish can change one iota of God's masterplan.

That Unitarian rebellion lives in our blood today. The simple affirmation that *we humans do have the ability to freely choose* between doing good and doing evil. And that *that* seems to have been the point of the life of Jesus. And that these choices *can make a difference* here and now.

So doing good dwells deep within our traditions. And just about everyone else's. Some are inclined to do good because that's the way to get what you want. Some because they're afraid. The early Universalists believed in doing good as a way to reflect God's radiant love. The early Unitarians might have said, "We do good because we can." (Self-assurance is in our blood too, and not always to our benefit.)

And just as we may have different *reasons* for doing good, and different *definitions* of doing good, we each probably have our own ways of *assessing* whether our methods are working.

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When the Beckel family was looking at colleges a few years ago we wanted to make the most of our investment. We looked closely at what prospective colleges have *accomplished* in the past, and whether they had the *resources* to continue the good work.

There was no shortage of guides for ranking colleges. But there's little clarity about whether the guides themselves are any good. Each year, four times as many guides are sold as there are

beginning college students! So it's hard to know what the incentives are for publishers. And even if they use objectively *measurable* criteria for their rankings, it's hard to know if these are the *right* criteria.

In the midst of this, though, an unconventional analysis done by *The Washington Monthly* magazine caught my eye. Their ranking system looked not just at the typical factors like student/teacher ratios; how many applicants want to get in but are turned away, or stats on alcohol use and crime. Instead they raised a question which was more compelling to me: "Which colleges are producing graduates who make the world a better place?"

Now that may seem impossibly subjective, but they chose some interesting metrics: the number of graduates who participate in advanced research, or national service, plus a formula for social mobility — which gave points to colleges that graduate proportionately more low-income students, and those with lower tuition. The result of all of this is that the elite schools topping typical lists encounter some tough competition from those less well-known.

This is an assessment of a specific type of good that may have nothing to do with your life. But it's an example of how simply asking our question in a new way can help us to rethink our criteria, and get a new perspective on whether we're really fulfilling our own values.

Now we may not *want* to ask new questions because they might lead us to new answers that we don't want to deal with. Or we may not want to ask new questions because the old ones were well understood. Irrelevant maybe, but at least they were clear.

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Our prelude today was a song from the musical, *Man from La Mancha*, about Don Quixote, who rushed about righteously, sometimes doing more harm than good. It's an easy caricature to make of those who are oriented toward doing. It is by no means an accurate portrayal of the average person attempting to do real and permanent good in the world.

I don't believe that every attempt we make to improve the world is self-aggrandizing. Nor do I believe that such efforts are futile. But caricatures can still be useful, at times, to give us perspective — to help us compare the variety of ways we might go about our doing.

Don Quixote undermined his efforts with his supreme self-assurance that he was right, and that anyone who got in his way was wrong. It's hard to see the folly in this when we actually are right. *Because sometimes we are right.* Sometimes we are doing the right thing — but even so it can be counterproductive to push ahead without some reflection.

How is all of that being right working out for you?

PHOENIX ENSEMBLE *Man in the Mirror*

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

For last week's sermon I asked several people how they'd observed, given, or received empathy, goodwill, or loving kindness. Just a little too late I heard from Eric Henry; I'll share his story today in order to reference back to those virtues. Because if our actions follow from empathy,

goodwill, or loving kindness, that's certainly a factor in determining whether we're doing any good.

Eric wrote: *Years ago, Ann and I were in Ecuador. Ann was teaching English and had become good friends with one of her students, Lilliam. Lilliam and her husband Arnulfo took us around their city, showed us the arboretum that Arnulfo managed; they fed and housed us... patiently nurtured me through communicating in basic Spanish and an unfamiliar culture, and treated us like honored guests. That, alone, was compassionate, but more was to come.*

Toward the end of the trip, I got very sick. Everything I ate or drank came back out violently. I couldn't even hold down a few sips of water. They took me to the hospital, where I got an antibiotic and an IV, then we returned to Lilliam's house, where I spent the next few days in bed, while Lilliam maintained my IV. She even lured a doctor to the house — someone who had been trained in New York and spoke English — to help me feel more at ease.

There are no dramatic plot twists in that story, just straightforward acts of generosity. Treating a stranger with dignity and compassion. Lilliam and Arnulfo may have no recollection of this. Someday Eric and Ann may even forget. But I don't think memory has anything to do with whether or not we've done any good.

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The song *Bread and Roses* is associated with a labor strike when 30,000 workers walked off their jobs at textile mills in Massachusetts in 1912. Through 3 bitter winter months they paraded, picketed, and clashed violently with the authorities.

The gist of the song is that labor (and these laborers were largely women and immigrants)... labor is not just about production. It was not just about earning wages. Human dignity requires beauty, pleasure, friendship, music, and time to pursue our own interests.

Connection to the sacred, cultivating knowledge, feeling love and feeling loved.

Each of these, like labor, is valuable for its own sake. Life isn't about choosing just one. All of these can be part of strategy to change the world for the better.

It's distressing that for all of the progress made by labor movements of the 20th century, so much of the work is unfinished. *It's also distressing, though, that there is so much strife among allies who don't get along because they are drawn along different paths toward the same goal.*

It's a good strategy, I believe, to make sure failure is survivable, because, if we're taking the risks we need-to-take to get things done... if we're taking the risks we need-to-take to see ourselves clearly, if we're taking the risk once in a while to let down our guard and simply be ok ... if we are going to take these risks, we need to make sure that our failures are survivable, because they will be very common. *I believe that failure will more likely be survivable if we can remain allies when we disagree on strategy.* And when each of us has some internal grounding, and a sense of our own dignity, that doesn't depend on fixing, everything, right, now.

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When I began my ministerial internship, I'd just completed another program that was kind of like emotional boot camp. It had been a valuable program of self-critique and getting very clear about my weaknesses. So at the beginning of the internship, I was worn down and had little energy to give. My supervisor looked at me then, listened to me, and said: "Let's focus on your strengths." So we did, and I thrived.

I don't believe one way or the other is inherently better. There's a time *to be aware of our weaknesses* and the work that remains unfinished. There's also a time *to be aware of what brings us joy, and how we can be best at bringing joy* to the world — not just in our doing, but in our being. Ideally, perhaps, we're aware of all of the above. And perhaps, once in a while, we'll meet that ideal.

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At lunch with Paul last week, we talked about a lot of different things. But finally, when we were drawn into the black hole of politics, we were able to shift course from sheer distress, and reflect on how a better social structure might be created some day — hammered out in a constitutional convention made up of at least some people who are not straight white men. It was an interesting discussion, I thought, but I especially like how it ended. When someone who hadn't said much up to this point wondered out loud:

Will changing the laws cause us to change who we are, and how we treat one another — that is, our culture? Will changing the laws cause us to change our culture? Or do we need to change our culture in order to be able to change the laws?

How do we know if we're doing any good? It's an important question to ask. It may even be something we can roughly measure. But is that all there is to living?

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

#109 *Bread and Roses*

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

#484

To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion; to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich; to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly; to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart; to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never. To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common. This is to be my symphony.

by William Henry Channing, 1810-1884, a Unitarian minister and leader in pre-Civil War social-reform movements. His contribution to Transcendentalist movement was to change its emphasis on the individual and instead to the progress of the human race as a whole.