

**INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD #2:
To Learn or Not to Learn**

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Gathering *Joy, Woe; Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace* – by William Blake
Readings *Beyond the Scramble*, from Between the World & Me, by Ta-Nehisi Coates
 Only to the House of Israel, from The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 15
 It's Clear to Me Now, from Yes, Please, by Amy Poehler
 The Rules of Improv, from Bossy Pants, by Tina Fey

SERMON

When we come into the world, we don't know whether it will be dangerous or good for us. Humankind has, however, evolved a set of instincts and potentials that lets us respond to danger and goodness. We can learn ways to deal with what comes. The neurology of the human brain has evolved to give about four times the emphasis – in alertness, attention, and worry – to danger signals as to goodness signals – probably because if you miss a danger signal (like a predator's rustle in the bushes), you'll likely soon be dead. But if you miss a sign of goodness, you'll live to have another chance.

So we all have potentials that help us survive and thrive. Competence of mind and body in competition with others can help with survival. But without competence in cooperation with others, we are sufficiently vulnerable that we will not thrive and will not likely long survive.

That makes it a primary role of families, communities, and societies to help people learn to fully develop their potentials for cooperation in order to maximize the safety and happiness of their members. The great human question then becomes, To learn or not to learn both to effectively compete and to effectively cooperate.

This is perhaps a reason why the first commitment to which UU congregations covenant is to BE in covenant – that is, to cooperate in our work. And the second commitment is our first cooperative task, to promote and respect a sense of worth and dignity in every person – because that is what our potentials need if they are to develop into realities.

This is not necessarily easy or instinctual. Perhaps that is why, in the middle of the UU covenantal commitments is the commitment to promote the search for truth and meaning, by ourselves and by others – to learn and understand better, so as to do better. The covenant goes on to identify six sources for learning – really they boil down to four:

your own experience, other people's wisdom, the teachings of the world's religion, and the teachings of the sciences and humanities. These are our sources of positive reinforcement for our potentials.

Judging from the gospel stories about Jesus childhood, I presume he got lots of positive reinforcement about his potential. And in his society - always expecting a messiah - I imagine most Jewish children received lots of encouragement to fulfill whatever the societal ideal was.

But typical of peoples in regions of historical conflict, Jewish children probably heard mainly negative comments about Gentiles, and vice versa among Gentiles. So, in the Gospel stories, when a Gentile woman from Israel's ancient Canaanite enemy tribe sought Jesus' help for her daughter's madness and her own broken heart, he repulsed her, calling her a dog. Not a pretty Jesus, if you stop to think about it.

It makes me think about a recent movie, called "Mr. Holmes," which has a revealing parallel to this seldom-noted dark side of Jesus. At age 63, the legendary Sherlock Holmes had withdrawn from detective work and society, though at the time he was at the peak of his sleuthing powers. Now as he approached his final stage of life at age 93, the mystery even to him was why had he broken down and fled the world.

In his 63rd year Holmes had been hired by a man who feared his wife was planning to have him killed. But Holmes discovered that the woman was actually planning to kill herself. She had suffered two miscarriages, and without an understanding husband, she felt horribly alone in her grief.

Holmes met with her and duly discouraged her intention, even commiserating that he too struggled with loneliness and isolation. But when she asked for his supportive companionship, he said, No, better she return to her husband despite his callousness.

Shortly after they parted, the woman threw herself to her death in front of a train. Holmes then spiraled into depression at his grievous failure and withdrew from everything to a remote farmhouse in the hinterlands with one question: With all his vaunted intelligence, how could he have failed?

Not infrequently, it seems to me, people of high potential, like Jesus or Sherlock Holmes, get a belief engrained in them that stunts the development of their other potentials. It could be that the greatest curse for humans is to be conditioned to believe that what we know is enough and that we do not have either need or potential to learn and keep growing in understanding. Or maybe sadder, that we do not have or even need the potential to grow in kindness – that what we are is all we will be, except older.

For example, in the good, but troubling movie, Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri, a brutal angry police officer seems out to punish the world for imagined waywardness. He reminded me of an assistant State prosecuting attorney who once spoke to our monthly community meeting with the police department in Gainesville, Florida. Defending coercive prosecutorial practices, he said, "Everybody is guilty of something – so everybody deserves to do some time in prison."

He sounded just like a childish catechism lesson, that in Adam and Eve we have all somehow fallen from grace by our own choosing, beyond any self-earned redemption, and that our salvation is only possible through undeserved grace from God.

I want to ask such believers – the prosecutor or the priests - what does deserving or undeserving have to do with the endlessly flowing, evolving, learning energy of the universe and its potentials? When will we wise up?

One of the many things I like about improv artist Amy Poehler's book, Yes, Please, is that she takes that question seriously and questions her own wisdom in writing a book at age 43, just when she realizes she doesn't yet know all that much. The beauty of this book, and others written with the same "Who knew?" attitude, is that she tells her story as much to learn about her own life as to share with others what she has really learned. We can do that.

At age 40, in the grim memoir Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates describes a spiritual development similar to Poehler's. When he was a child his mother taught him to use writing to question and discover his own deepest motives and those of the world. As a college student, falling in love with a person who alarmed him with her inclusive circle of friends, he came to see that discrimination didn't just happen to him, but by him.

Both these authors discovered that some of their growing-up beliefs no longer were helpful in fulfilling their potentials. So often they had lived out of the brainstem's reactive fear, avarice and delusion. But they had come to realize that they could learn to live better out of conscience and compassion. We can do that.

How? The way Poehler and her pal Tina Fey describe Improv seems to encapsulate time-tested wisdom for such living. In short: First, understand and say YES to whatever is said by your partners (and your partner is whoever you are talking with, regardless), seeing nothing they offer as a mistake, but only as a new opportunity; then Second, add your own amendment, amplification, or redirection to advance the story you are sharing in a way you both can play in and enjoy.

The mystic poet William Blake illuminated this guidance, noting that we have potentials for experiencing both joy and woe. One will guide us in fruitful directions and one will

guide us away from hurtful directions. Both are important. And backing these up we can hope in the greatest human potentials - mercy, pity, peace, and love.

In that spirit, I think, is a proposal called “Baby Bonds,” circulating these days among some economists and policy-analysts. The newspaper reported on the idea last Sunday. It starts with the understanding that “The key ingredient of how successful you will be in America is how wealthy your family is.” This is simple recognition of the well-researched finding that the different classes and categories of Americans do not have anything close to equal opportunity for pursuing their potentials either for safety or happiness. This is humankind learning.

Baby Bonds would be a grant to every child, from \$500 for the richest to \$50,000 for the poorest. The money would be invested and held like Social Security until the children turned 18, when as adults they would receive the money to invest in their futures.

This seems like it would do much toward reparations rightly owed Native, African, and Asian Americans, and probably the descendants of many indentured European Americans. Perhaps we could add one thing to the plan – that the living generations of poorer families would also receive a similar grant and support services so they could adequately prepare their children to effectively use more equal opportunity.

As we are hearing daily in the news, where there is a significant power differential, sooner or later there will be destructive exploitation, driven by the brainstem’s survivalist fear, rapacity, and delusion. Where conscience and compassion are not developed, behavior will become that of a two year old in an adult body, where everybody else is “no” and everything else is “mine” – and other bodies are seen as things.

But it has been seen that with a leveling of power differentials will come a vaster fulfillment of all potentials. I think of an essay in the Christmas day issue of Time Magazine by author Faith Salie. She describes her husband cradling their newborn, softly welcoming him with “Hi, sweet pea” and opening in her the hope that - like father, like son - her son would define himself through sweetness, not anger, lust and pride.

To conclude, let’s go back to Jesus. He said to the Gentile woman, “It’s not right to take the food of the children of Israel and throw it to the dogs.” And what did the woman say? Did she spit in his eye as he deserved? No. She did Improv. She said, “Yes, Lord. Yes, yes - yet do not even the dogs, Lord, eat the children’s crumbs that fall from the master’s table?”

Yes, in part she spoke instinctively for the survival of her beloved little girl. But also she spoke reflectively, reframing Jesus’ perspective ever so slightly and respectfully to include her child, so his conscience and compassion displaced his contempt. Doing so, she freed

up gracious powers for healing her daughter and freed up gracious powers to liberate Jesus to expand his ministry from only the children in the house of Israel to all humankind. And so he said to her in words along these lines – and as he could subsequently say to many who found strength in his strength, “Go in peace. Your understanding of grace (the power of life) has expanded mine and I know it will heal your child.” And that was when Jesus was saved.

And oh, yes, Mr. Holmes on a path similarly narrow as Jesus had traveled. Years after he fled society, on some inexplicable impulse, Mr. Holmes began to care for bees, then for a deprived but curious child, then a grieving man, then his struggling housekeeper. I think it was when his feelings moved him to help that he realized the reason for his tragic failure with the suicidal woman – he had somehow feared to let his potential for feelings influence his capacity for thinking in response to the need of the woman.

The mystery was solved. And he realized he could still open his heart to the housekeeper and her son and help them toward the fulfillment of their potentials, whatever blessing that would bring, and thereby fulfill his own potentials. For it turned out that the question is not just whether to learn or not to learn, but also whether to care or not to care. So Sherlock Holmes found a new understanding and a new caring - and in the end Mr. Holmes, too, was saved.

So may it be for us.

READINGS

Gathering/Meditation

Joy & Woe; Love, Mercy, Pity, & Peace, by William Blake

Joy & Woe are woven fine, a Clothing for the Soul divine;
under every grief & pine runs a joy with silken twine.
It is right, it should be so; we were made for Joy & Woe;
and when this we rightly know through the World we safely go.
And every one, of every clime, Who prays in their distress,
Prays to the human form divine, Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace

Readings

Beyond the Scramble, from **Between the World & Me**, by Ta-Nehisi Coates

My son, when I was a boy, the streets could not help me see beyond the scramble of each day.... Your grandmother (my mother) taught me to read when I was only four. She also taught me to write, by which I mean not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation.... The writing had to answer a series of questions: Why did I feel the need to talk at the same time as my teacher? Why did I not believe that my teacher was entitled to respect? How would I want someone to behave while I was talking? What would I do the next time I felt the urge to talk to my friends during a lesson? Your grandmother was teaching me how to ruthlessly interrogate the subject that elicited the most sympathy and rationalizing – myself. Here was the lesson: I was not an innocent. My impulses were not filled with unflinching virtue. And feeling that I was as human as anyone, this must be true for other humans..... I am black, and have been plundered and have lost my body. But perhaps I too had the capacity for plunder, maybe I would take another human’s body to confirm myself in a community. Perhaps I already had. Hate gives identity. The nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, of being a Man. We name the hated strangers and are thus confirmed in the tribe.

Only to the House of Israel, from **The Gospel of Matthew**, chapter 15

In the district of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman came and started calling to Jesus, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon. Cast it out.’ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He responded, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of

the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’

It’s Clear to Me Now, from Amy Poehler’s Yes, Please

It’s clear to me now that I had no business agreeing to write this book. I have a job that keeps me shooting twelve hours a day, plus two children under six. I am going through a divorce and producing many projects and falling in love and trying to make appointments for cranial massage. All of these things are equally wonderful and horrible and keep me just off balance and busy enough to make spending hours alone writing seem like a terrible idea. Plus, I am forty-two, which is smack-dab in the middle. I haven’t lived a full enough life to look back on, but I am too old to get by on being pithy and cute. I know enough now to know I know nothing. I am slugging away every day, just like you. Nonetheless, here we are. I’ve written a book. You have it.

The Rules of Improv, from Bossy Pants, by Tina Fey

The Rules of Improvisation: Rule #1: Agree, and say YES.... whatever your partner has said and created, Rule #2: Not only say Yes, but YES, AND – agree and then add something. Your initiations are worthwhile. Rule #3: MAKE STATEMENTS. Don’t sit around asking questions, but be part of the solution. Rule #4: THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, only opportunities, beautiful happy accidents. And many of the world’s greatest discoveries have been by accident. I mean, look at the Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, or Botox. (Or as Tina’s close friend and partner in Improv, Amy Poehler, put it, “Listen and say yes and support your partner and be specific and honest and find a game within the scene you both play.”)