

Religion and Happy Endings

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
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The story of our lives. Are our stories really that different from each other? We certainly like to think so - - for don't we all have our own unique story? We freely acknowledge different circumstances that greet us at birth. Different events throughout our lives. Different dreams, (some broken; some fulfilled), and various interests, values, pursuits, economic advantages or disadvantages, influences on our youth and breaks we received or didn't as we matured. But in each story, we are the central character. Hey - it's my story...it's my life.

My story has a beginning and a middle and an end and a lot of drama throughout. But wait- did I say the story has an end? If my story's going to end that means I'm going to end, too. That makes me a little uncomfortable. Well, at least it carries some concern.

I really don't know much prior to my story beginning. Like, how did I get here in the first place? Suddenly I was the main character in my story. I really don't know much about what will happen when my story ends. Will there be an epilogue or better yet - - The Sequel. Or is it just like turning off the light and it's dark, and everything just vanishes? The curtain comes down and there's no cast party to go to. The show's over and there'll be none tomorrow.

I want to borrow a metaphor from a Unitarian minister, Bill Houff. A metaphor about flying fish. It will wind through most of the sermon today. I think you will always remember it...because it's easy. Metaphors are supposed to be easy...though the subject is not.

Flying fish. It's a lot like our lives from birth to death...the arching flight through the air of a flying fish. The fish's natural habitat is the ocean. It is, in fact, part and parcel of the ocean. But for some reason it leaves its natural element and takes flight through the atmosphere...like an arc...and then plunges back into the sea.

The metaphor: We humans leave the boundless deep, and are propelled into this finite realm. Breaking the surface we are born; we take flight. When we hold a newborn we are bound to say: "What a miracle; where did this come from?" Somehow this newborn broke the surface of the deep and is on its way up. We never really comprehend the source from which we came (let's call it the infinite ocean). But who cares, we're out there sucking air as we're ascending the arc of our flight and we're convinced that THIS is the world and so we spend time developing an identity; it becomes all about me and my story. I exist in this atmosphere. Existence....tastes so sweet. I am no longer part of the deep infinite ocean. Now I am set apart at last...set apart from everything else so let me engage in who I am as distinct from who you are because this is my arching flight and I'm going to love it for myself.

It's an arc. At some point on the decent we see the ocean again. (Oh I don't want to go there. I'm having too much fun here breathing the air and being...me). But regardless, I'm heading full steam back into that ocean. I don't think I can bear it. I don't want my living story to end. Ever.

But wait. Doesn't religion hold the promise of a happy ending? [Life is eternal. I like that!] My story can continue after I hit that blue body of infinity if I subscribe to a greater story that allows not only for my continued existence, but allows me to reconnect with all the people and family I have grown to love during my arching flight. That makes me a lot less afraid of ending my visible journey. It fills me with security as I head down towards that unknown place...or the place I've forgotten about during my arching flight.

Is there a religion that doesn't offer such security?

Well, probably on paper it would be the church where you're sitting now. We are defined historically as that rare religious institution that offers no happy ending or threatens no overheated alternative. We offer no blueprint of regulations that will bring us life everlasting. We don't offer this on paper, but that doesn't necessarily stop Unitarians from designing a next life on their own. In our Adult Ed course called Building Your Own Theology, the class on immortality rings wildly with very fanciful ideas about how we keep on going. And why not? We may be Unitarian but we're still human beings. Even us rational folks don't necessarily want the story to end. Virtually all of us (everywhere) share this glamour of living briefly out of the water like the flying fish, and share the dread of its journey's end.

It's very difficult giving up the journey and the story about me. Can't it somehow continue?

I've always had issues with heaven, trying to imagine what it would be like joining people who never had tolerance for each other in this world. And then they get to spend an eternity together. What will happen when a sheriff from Arizona, notorious for deporting undocumented workers, winds up playing the harp in heaven next to a Mexican? Will everything magically be forgotten? Do we carry our grudges with us into the next life or is everyone up there like Mr. Rogers? What happens when the Pope is singing with a chorus of angels and most of them are gay or were gay in their former lives? Does one stop being gay in heaven, or is everyone gay? What happens when Rick Perry winds up living in a neighborhood of secular humanists, or Sean Hannity sits at the banquet table with Rocky Anderson? Will there be convivial conversation at the Paradise Café when Sarah Palin sits down next to Tim DeChristopher? Will David Duke and Martin Luther King Jr. share a few good laughs in heaven over a breakfast of grits?

Or do people only expect to find other people in heaven who carry similar prejudices from this world? Or is heaven somehow limited only to Mormons, or to Baptists or to Catholics? Does heaven only accept like-minded people?

This question may well have been answered by a survey taken by the Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board, which determined that since 70% of Americans were not twice born they'd all be going to hell. So I guess there's lots of room in heaven...for Southern Baptists.

I seriously wonder about the extravagance describing the Muslim heaven, a place where every wish is fulfilled and you are dressed in costly apparel with inlays of gold and precious stones, and you take part in one lavish banquet after another. And if you die as a martyr during a holy war you are rewarded with beautiful virgins. Would God really exploit women to this end? And what happens to these women when they are no longer virgins? Will they feel shame and be rejected by their families as "ruined?"

But these versions of the afterlife are all tied up with happy endings: An antidote to satisfy our inability to let go of this precious ride through the arc of life. We can't envision ourselves entirely out of the picture. And thus we turn to religion, which makes us an offer: If we play by their rules while flying this incredible arc, they'll make sure our story continues. No wonder William James said: "Religion is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism."

But I want to focus this morning on something other than just mere egotism, although it's somehow related. On some level we know...at least we are intellectually aware of the fact ---that everything is impermanent. Things wear out. Washing machines wear out, cars don't last forever, stars don't last forever, nor do great big thousand year-old redwoods. They too fall in the forest. We know that the price of being alive is death – a universal truth. That's how life goes; that's how things work. But that said, we personally look for loopholes. We crave permanence. It's so hard to squarely face the impermanence of our own lives.

And so we avoid it. Look at the cost of extending life in an intensive care unit but for a few days. We demand permanence. Look at the health products and Botox and liposuction and cosmetics we buy to fight age and wrinkles and sagging skin and graying hair and baldness and everything that points to the fact that our arc of life, like the fishing jumping out of water, is headed straight back into the mystery. And then our story will end. [We want to escape the truth of impermanence.]

All life is impermanent. Even our own. This is hard on the ego, that which we have cultivated in our great arc out of the water where we amassed power, and control and comforts and - to the detriment of the world, a wall of indifference towards others. Having left the body of infinite water we suddenly feel unique and separate from others. Albert Einstein considered this separateness from others as an optical delusion of consciousness. "This delusion is a kind of prison, restricting us to our

personal desires, and affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening the circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

Unitarianism doesn't really “teach” impermanence, nor does Albert Einstein or William James for that matter. It's really a concept borrowed from eastern religions. Impermanence does not hint at happy endings, or any kind of ending other than when the arc of inhaling existence comes to end, we return to the mysterious waters from which we came. What religion can emphasize...must emphasize, is the kind of life we lead while in flight. In that blessed span of time where we breathe air and feel the warmth of the sun, we forget that this ride is not going to last. We get this false sense of permanence. So is not the point of religion, then, to figure out a meaningful way for us to fly precisely because we're not going to be in flight forever.

As we observe throughout the world, people easily become self-centered, self-absorbed in this arc of fresh air for which the flying fish serves as metaphor. It's easy to forget about others whose stories in this brief interval called existence, are stories of anguish and suffering without even the opportunity to ever feel life's blessings. What are we going to do about them? They're not part of my story...or are they? Einstein thinks we're in a prison if all we care about is our own story. Our purpose is not to suck up as many riches as we can snag during this arc of existence, although it makes my story more fun if the ride is one in luxury and I am all that matters.

Unitarians offer no certitude that happy endings await us, but instead we examine that arc out of the water more carefully. How do we make that ride less about me? How do we create urgency in the mindset of those who really believe that life goes on indefinitely, and that their story of good fortune and opulence has no end? That doesn't make Unitarianism exactly popular. We just focus on that brief interlude from when we break the surface of the water until we return there again...to help us understand that the arc of existence must include compassion for others. We are given the breath of life for a purpose aside from our own personal pleasures, and we must try to pursue that purpose until the last breath is taken.

For many years I've had the privilege of spending time on the west coast sitting high on a cliff watching the waves crash against rocks or the shoreline. I love watching the life span of a wave, from its magical beginning that results from wind and currents and moon...watching this new wave gather force as it rolls towards the shore and crashes. I sometimes single out a specific wave as though it has its own identity. Sitting high, watching it all, I chuckle at the notion of singularity as it's wave upon wave upon wave that rises and rages and crashes. What delicious impermanence. It's all a part of the whole.

But if a wave had consciousness it might well think it had its own story and adventure. The wave sees neither its momentary ride nor that it is dependent on a

set of constantly changing circumstances. And the truth is that every wave is related to every other wave.

Nothing has an inherent existence of its own.

When I am at a social gathering, and word leaks out that I am a minister, I am frequently asked about my beliefs on immortality. It's a hazard of the trade. So I blither on and watch the eyes of the inquirer begin to glaze over. What I'd really want to say, they would never understand. This is what I'd like to say: (*motion an arc*)...splash.