

The Joy Of Chaos

Sermon by Rev. Libby Smith

The fact that our lives are in constant transition and change can be a source of anxiety. It also has the potential to be a source of energy and excitement. Since change is inevitable, why not play with it, and use its energy to bring greater creativity and meaning to our lives? (USG, September 14, 2003)

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Reading: (untitled)

Now we are ready to look at something pretty special.
It is a duck riding the ocean a hundred feet beyond the surf.
No, it isn't a gull.
A gull always has a raucous touch about him.
This is some sort of duck, and he cuddles in the swells.
He isn't cold, and he is thinking things over.
There is a great heaving in the Atlantic,
And he is a part of it.
He looks a little like a mandarin,
Or the Lord Buddha meditating under the Bo tree
But he has hardly enough above the eyes to be a philosopher.
He has poise, however, which is what philosophers must have.
He can rest while the Atlantic heaves, because he rests in the Atlantic.
Probably he doesn't know how large the ocean is.
And neither do you.
But he realizes it.
And what does he do, I ask you. He sits down in it.
He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity – which it is.
That is religion, and the duck has it.
He has made himself a part of the boundless,
by easing himself into it just where it touches him.
I like the little duck.
He doesn't know much.
But he has religion.

*- Donald C. Babcock
- Published in The New Yorker Magazine, October 4, 1947*

Sermon: The Joy Of Chaos

“Wade in the water, children – God’s gonna trouble the water.” For years, I had trouble understanding that song. It always sounded very threatening to me, that God was going to trouble the water. It implied that by wading in that water you were taking a great risk, putting yourself in serious danger. And yet the song begins with an invitation: “Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children.” Something about the combination of wading, which makes the water sound shallow and safe, and being called “children,” made the whole thing seem welcoming, reassuring. And then that final line would come: “God’s gonna trouble the water.”

Having grown up in a humanist Unitarian fellowship, I missed the Biblical reference in the song – as I missed most Biblical references back then. But later I learned that the song refers back to a Scriptural story that does indeed offer reassurance and promise. The story goes that when the spirit of God comes down and “troubles” or stirs the waters of the pool of Bethesda, the people who are in that water will be healed.

What a wonderful promise. But my guess would be – although the story doesn’t spell it out – that it was pretty scary to be in that pool when the spirit of God came down. Because even if you really trusted that the forces at work were indeed the spirit of God, and that the spirit brought healing, it probably got pretty turbulent in that water for a while.

Our lives are full of turbulence, full of times when everything seems to be in flux, and our future uncertain. Often the times of greatest upset are also the times of greatest opportunity – for growth, for transformation, for healing. But the uncertainties and rapid changes that we encounter from day to day can leave us feeling tossed around by troubled waters that show no respect for our carefully made plans and expectations. It’s not always easy to stay open to the opportunities that lurk within our unpredictable existence.

When I began to think about calling a sermon “The Joy of Chaos,” a colleague asked me if I knew anything about chaos theory in physics. No, I said, I did not. So, wanting to be the well-read minister that our

congregations expect, I went out and bought James Gleick's best seller *Chaos*, supposed to be popularized treatment, accessible to the layperson in physics, and spent several days with it. And I still didn't know anything about chaos theory. Scientific theory can go right through my brain and out the other side with an ease and speed that astound me, and that I think bewilders my scientist spouse. Despite the fact that Gleick was praised by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as having a novelist's touch and a sense of the dramatic and poetic, I still didn't find the book a page turner. Although I could see how one might, if one had a scientific mind and the background to understand his thinking.

And yet even without full understanding, there were phrases here and there that leapt off the page at me with a jolt, that struck me as being as true theologically as I assume they are scientifically. Maybe, in fact, there's little difference between the two. But for example, "The first message," says Gleick, "is that there is disorder." (p.65) Yup. No argument there. And how about this: "Non-linearity" (chaotic systems are non-linear rather than linear. Don't worry if that doesn't mean much to you, just stay with me here.) "Non-linearity means that the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules." (p.24) Now that's life all over. Our lives definitely correspond to non-linear systems. We may plan and organize and predict all we want, but the very act of living our lives changes the way they work, giving rise to unpredictable changes. Our smallest action can have unimaginable effects further along.

That can be frightening. It can be paralyzing if we let it. And yet, to quote Gleick once more, "that twisted changeability makes non-linearity hard to calculate, but it also creates rich kinds of behavior that never occur in linear systems." And isn't that the truth? Most of the time, I would not trade the twisted changeability of my life for a more linear existence, not if it meant missing out on those rich kinds of behavior.

All very well and good in theory, like much science. But in the day to day practice of our lives, how do we cope with the uncertainty that such constant change brings? And how do we find the balance between allowing chaos to bring richness to our lives, while still creating enough structure to keep us grounded?

I find I am best able to celebrate and take advantage of the creative force of change in my life if I create systems and structures that allow me to

keep my balance and not be overwhelmed by uncertainty. I think most of us tend to structure our lives with certain ritual behaviors that provide us with a framework. I use the example of how I write sermons, which is for me a very chaotic process. I don't know, when I dive into a subject, where it will take me. The very act of playing the game changes the rules. One unexpected thought early on can result in a very different sermon than I had planned to write. It was not unusual for me to step into the pulpit on Sunday mornings at BuxMont and say, "You know, when I started this sermon I thought I was going to talk about . . ." That's the nature of creative work. It's a wild and wonderful thing, but it can be a little intimidating to enter into that creative space and see where it takes me.

So first, I clean. I clear off the desk, straighten the bulletin board, put away stray papers. If I'm feeling particularly reluctant to start, I go further. I polish the silver box that belonged to my father, that holds my stamps and paper clips. I find a more pleasing arrangement for the family photos on my wall. I don't just clear the desk; I dust and polish it. It took years before I realized that this pattern of behavior was not just simple procrastination, although there are certainly elements of that in there too. But it's a way a creating a structured environment that is as ordered and familiar and reassuring as possible. That way, if I look up from the chaos of my writing, I can ground myself in my surroundings, get my balance before I plunge back in. The structure, because it makes me feel safer, allows me actually to be freer in my creative process.

Once I accepted the idea that creating order allowed me to use my creative chaos effectively, I began to experiment with additional ways of building structure into the process. I began outlining my sermons – something I had never been willing to do, for fear it would stifle my creative thought. Just the opposite turned out to be true. The better and more effective my internal structure, the better I was able to channel and use that creative process. If it didn't fit the outline, I could change the outline. But having the outline freed me to follow all kinds of wild and crazy thoughts, knowing I could always get back on track.

Writing, for me, is the vehicle most certain to lead to discoveries and questions that create turmoil in my life and thought. And those questions are inevitably the source of the greatest growth and opportunity. I remember writing to my mentor, Carl Scovel, with a theological question that had emerged while I was writing and that was really disturbing me. He wrote

back saying “I judge from the your own powerful conflictedness that you do not ask this question in a casual, academic way. It has some existential bite to it, although at this point perhaps not yet clear. I must add that this question sounds like one of those subtle lousy inconvenient divine intrusions which are able to make life most complicated – especially when we think we at last have set a few appropriate goals for the next year or so.”

One of those subtle, lousy inconvenient divine intrusions. Some of the most important things in our lives start out feeling that way. We can try to shut them out to make life a little more convenient, more predictable. But then we miss the excitement of discovering new depths of meaning, new levels of understanding. We need to learn to stay open to those intrusions that threaten to upset our neat and orderly lives. And it is easier by far to do that if we have created structures and developed gifts that allows us to keep our balance as we explore them.

If we are determined to avoid change at all costs, in order to limit the confusion in our lives, we often wind up with even worse confusion, of a less creative and productive kind. As an example, let me share with you a story that my husband tells, from a little island off the coast of Denmark called Fur. This is the island his family comes from. There is a little church on the island, a Danish Lutheran church, and for years – since time began, no doubt – they has been using the same, old, well-loved hymnal. And then the church published a new hymnal. Some of the older members of the church were utterly opposed to changing the hymnal. On Sunday mornings the hymns were posted in the front of the church by number, just as they are here, and announced by number. And these folks knew the old hymnal so well that they knew which hymn corresponded to which number. So the hymn would be announced, and half the congregation would sing the hymn that had that number in the new hymnal, while the other half would persist in singing the hymn that had that number in the old hymnal. Now that is chaos. But not constructive, creative chaos. It meant that no one could enjoy either hymn. We can't stop changes from happening in our lives. We need to find ways to come to terms with them and live in that uncertainty.

The little duck in this morning's reading is an example of that for me. He can rest while the Atlantic heaves because he rests in the Atlantic. The little duck is not a philosopher or an intellectual. He has never read a book on chaos theory. He doesn't need to. He is a realist. He has the wisdom to

recognize that the rolling, heaving Atlantic, turbulent and enormous, is his environment. And what does he do, I ask you? He sits down in it. He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity – which it is. That is religion, and the duck has it. He has made himself a part of the boundless by easing himself into it just where it touches him.

The duck realizes that when confronted with the vast, shifting and uncertain ocean of life, the only thing to do is to sit down in it. In that way he finds his own, intimate spot in what seems a huge and intimidating ocean. “There is a big heaving in the Atlantic, and he is a part of it.” His relationship to the turbulence of the ocean is not adversarial – he simply becomes a part of it, and it becomes an invitation to new experience.

I’m convinced that the little duck is a bufflehead duck – one of those wonderful, fat little sea ducks that show up in New England waters in the fall and stay until spring. You have to admire anything so hardy that it comes south to winter in New England! I used to love to watch the buffleheads the year I lived up on Cape Ann. Listen to this description of them, from *Birds of Massachusetts*:

After a winter storm, the handsome, hardy vivacious little bufflehead may be seen at its best. The sea still rages, and the white topped surges pound and roar upon the seaward ledges, tossing the spouting, snow-white spray high in the sunlit air . . . close in shore, in the very boiling of the surf, groups of little buffleheads ride easily, swimming and diving as unconcernedly as on some calm, untroubled pool. Now and then the surf seems to break directly over a bird; but at the instant when the towering crest seems to fall on its uplifted head, the head is no longer there. The little duck has dived either to the bottom for food, or to reappear as before riding easily on the farther slope of the wave. The buffleheads play in the white-topped surf. They are perfectly at home and not the least inconvenienced by the foaming surge.

That sounds like our little duck to me. He’s not stuck against his will, stranded in that heaving Atlantic. He’s in his element. He enjoys it there, plays in it, and keeps his equilibrium by knowing how to ride the waves. He doesn’t want to avoid the turbulence. In fact, if you see a sea duck on the beach, there’s probably something wrong with him.

When I discovered the duck poem I felt transformed by its example. I was just graduating from divinity school, my life felt very chaotic, and I felt he was a special gift come to inform and inspire me. I became a duck fanatic. I read the poem aloud to anyone who would listen. Finally a friend suggested that I get a tangible duck – a small statue, an icon, if you will, to remind me of the poem (and perhaps in the hopes that I would stop talking about it.) I did, and in fact I have kept images of ducks around me ever since.

And then, not long after I got my first duck, I visited a woman in the hospital who had been very dear to me, a member of the church where I did my internship, and then a member of my ordination committee. She was recently diagnosed with cancer, and very ill. It was a hard visit, and then I had to go on to a church function where I knew everyone would be asking me about her, and I would have to “be the minister” and help them deal with the bad news. I needed to work through my own grief first, and so I asked at the front desk of the hospital if there was a chaplain on duty.

Up until then I had not had positive experiences with hospital chaplains. But the Rev. Guy Steele arrived, sat down with me in the lobby, and when I began to cry, he whisked me up to his office, procuring a cup of coffee along the way. He asked all the right questions to help me sort out my feelings, and he reflected with me as a colleague about the issues of ministry that we both faced in such a situation. Knowing my theology, and how much it differed from his own, he still took me seriously as a colleague in ministry and as a spiritual seeker. He was able to honor the turbulence I was feeling as difficult and painful, but a vital part of living and loving and ministering.

And then I looked across his office and there on the wall was a poster. It was a poster of a duck. Not like my duck. This was a funny cartoon duck, bright yellow with a long neck, lounging on a deck chair with a can of beer in its hand. In the wall behind it, encircling its head, were three bullet holes. The caption read, “Sitting Duck.” I expressed my curiosity – and my fondness for ducks – and Guy explained what he saw in the poster, which he called an icon, just as I called my little duck an icon. The duck, he said, is any one of us, you, or me. The bullet holes are birth, life and death. We’re right in the middle of the, and there’s nothing we can do about it, so we might as well relax and enjoy it. But also, as we go through this life of ours, we’ve got to be willing to stick our necks out.

Amen, I say. We are in the midst of this turbulent life, and we've got to live it, sit down in it, ride the waves and live in our element. I used to think of the duck in my poem as a passive creature, one who simply endured everything that came at him. But more and more I've combined him with Guy Steele's duck, who is sticking his neck out. Because when I think about my little duck in the poem, when I think about the buffleheads who play and dive in the wild surf, they are not allowing themselves to be buffeted and beaten by those waves. They are riding the waves using their knowledge of the ocean and its movements. They are honing their skills, and enjoying the practice.

Our lives will always be filled with change. The natural world reminds us of that, as summer turns to fall. Whether we look at our own personal lives, our families, or the institutions we belong to, we are faced with the certainty that they will change. We can resist and deny that reality, but that won't stop the change, it will only lead to the kind of chaotic turbulence that happened to the hymn singing out on Fur.

Or we can look for more harmonious ways to respond. We can choose to channel the creative energy of our lives in ways that let us use it well. We can order our lives – whether we think of the way we structure our personal lives, or whether we speak of creating institutional structures that allow us to manage change and transition in orderly and effective ways.

Because even the chaos theorists acknowledge a certain amount of order. Douglas Hofstadter says “It turns out that an eerie type of chaos can lurk just behind a façade of order – and yet, deep inside the chaos lurks an even eerier type of order.” If we accept and embrace the uncertain and unpredictable elements of our lives as positive, creative times, we can use our life skill to create structures that allow us to channel that creative energy more effectively, so that we are empowered and excited by it, rather than paralyzed. I hope those of you who find that idea interesting on an institutional level will join us this weekend for our workshop, and I invite all of us to think about the ways that it relates to our own individual lives.