

**Everything Happens for a Reason**  
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This Sunday and next I am going to share with you some of my experiences as a hospital chaplain. As part of the training for the ministry all students are required to be a chaplain at a hospital for 10 weeks. We learn in our training about what people experience when they are in the hospital. It takes them out of their safe and comfortable environment, they're often in a time of crisis, they're in pain - even with elective surgery people feel fearful and insecure about what comes next. It's a very difficult and vulnerable time. You learn to engage with people during this time to listen, to find openings to deeper meanings for them. To offer them spiritual support.

I found that people struggling to make meaning of their situation fell into three different categories. The first category was the people that I called "struggling with the will of God." These were people who knew that their situation was God's will, they believed that there was a God that had a plan and their illness or their accident was part of God's plan. But they were struggling. Why would God want this thing to happen to me? Why would God's plan include this?

Then, there were the people that I call "will of God accepting." These people had a tremendous faith in this God of theirs, this God with a plan, and they would say, "I'm in pain, I'm afraid, but I believe that that God is all powerful and all compassionate and all knowing, I will accept and submit to his plan."

Then, there was the third group of people who struggled who didn't have an active vision of God, who didn't necessarily have a religious or spiritual context, but were struggling to make sense of it. I remember one particular individual who fell into this category. a man in his 40's who'd had an emergency surgery. I visited him a few hours after the surgery. He was in pain but was also facing some limits long-term on his abilities. He was in shock and trying to sort it all out, but the way he framed it for me was "everything happens for a reason."

I think that people that say this aren't really sure about what they mean. This is becoming a common phrase that people use when challenges or difficulties arrive, everything happens for a reason. I have given this some consideration. Perhaps "everything happens for a reason" is really the secular form of "it's the will of God." I'm not confident that they understand that the statement implies that there's some plan that they're fitting into - that the reason is part of some greater sense of the universe. Does it always imply that there's a force that causes things

to happen? Even the people that don't necessarily believe in a God use this phrase. Are they speaking to some plan for how the universe is structured?

Now we know that that idea of a plan for everything and or that everything is pre-determined is not consistent with our UU values. Our denomination grew out of the Christian tradition in order to find our own meaning, our own belief, "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." It's not consistent with our faith to say there's a God or there's a divine plan where everything pre-ordained.

Nonetheless, the phrase is worthy of our consideration. What could be some of the reasons why things happen? Maybe everything happens because you deserve it. Isn't that something that you think is inherent when people use that phrase? Do bad things happen to you because you deserve it? Is there this sense of karma where your behavior resulted in negative things happening to you? Or positive things?

When I was preparing this sermon I kept thinking about the Sound of Music. Usually when I get a stray I give it some attention because it may be related to what I am thinking about. How many of you have seen The Sound of Music? There's a moment in the Sound of Music where Maria has left the home of the captain, the children, because she's conflicted and the countess talks her into leaving. But she comes back and there's this wonderful romantic moment with her and the captain. For my youthful self when I saw that movie that was the highlight - when they realized their love for each other and they go out in the gazebo and they dance and they kiss. It's a beautiful, beautiful moment. Then, Maria sings this song, I this beautiful romantic moment. Maria sing this song and the lyrics of the song go like this: "Perhaps I had wicked childhood, perhaps I had a miserable youth, but somewhere in my wicked miserable past I must've done something good." This is what you say at this moment? Isn't she saying there that I'm a terrible person, but she deserves this because she did something good? For her everything happens for a reason, the reason is you're either or you're bad.

I think unconsciously a lot of people carry around this belief. In fact, I think in our American culture we project this belief. You can see this now in some of the debates that are going on about the haves and the have-nots - some sense that judgments we may have as a culture about people who are homeless, people who are challenged, people without health insurance. I think there's a portion of our culture that believes that these people they did something to deserve what has happened to them. Similarly, you hear people say they worked hard for what they got in this world - implying that their hard work makes them inherently good. A lot of people work hard, some people succeed and some people don't.

Some of this thinking comes from our Puritan roots, the forbearers of Unitarians. Puritans believed that some people were chosen by God to go to heaven and others were damned -

and you never knew which. This is the essence of Calvinism. For the Puritans – those who were most likely to go to heaven were considered visible saints – they had some evidence of God's favor – health, wealth, success, etc. You can see how this idea has been passed down to us in the 21st century and still present in our culture.

Again this idea of some are saved and worthy and some are damned, is inconsistent with our UU values. Both U and U believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. A direct response to the Calvinist idea.

So I've punched a few holes in the "everything happens for a reason" rationale. Of course, the flip side to "everything happens for a reason" is that there's no plan, no structure, there's nothing. Everything is random. There's no greater meaning to anything. I think if you believe that you might not be here at church. I could not my life without some sense of meaning and purpose.

As humans, we need to believe that things are not random. We like to believe that suffering has a meaning and that our challenges are not without value. Finding meaning and developing our values is the challenge of our lives as humans. Richard Niebuhr, a 20th century theologian, says that "to deny the reality of a supernatural being called God is one thing, but to live without confidence in some center of value or without loyalty to a cause is another." (REPEAT) To live with confidence about a center of value, to develop a center of value and to live with confidence in that center is called faith.

In our human lives we're making meaning every day. We're bombarded with images, sounds, thoughts, feelings, other people, activities. Our brain and our body must sort through all these things and somehow organize them and make meaning for us. As we go through our lives we create our reality by how we make meaning from what happens to us, what we see and experience. As we grow and we mature, this meaning becomes deeper and broader and can include more, more experiences, more people, more things outside of ourselves. It's like weaving a fabric of our experiences. This is the faith development of our lives.

Everything happens for a reason. I think the meaning of that phrase, the deeper meaning is that we work to make sense of what happens and find the meaning. Everything happens and then we try to capture it, find how the challenge fits in our life. When our lives don't unfold as we expect we have to reorient ourselves, we have to rethink, we have to recreate the fabric of our faith.

I remember when I was younger I had these grand plans for how my life was going to unfold. I was going to accomplish this by this time and this by this time. Of course, as life does, those things often didn't unfold, and so the dominoes didn't fall. With each roadblock I was in a position of reformulating who I was, how I interacted with the world, how I related to my future

and to other people. That's the work of faith development as a young person. It gets easier, thank God, as we get older, because our ability to encompass more, our ability to process things evolves, matures. But in our 20's or times of deep struggle in order to move forward we have to recreate our understanding of the world.

As parents, we like to think that our kids are going to have smooth sailing with their lives. We don't want them to face a lot of difficulties, but we know that the difficulties are what form you. Making meaning out of our challenges is what makes a stronger person who's able to take in a broader sense of the world. I think that that's what people mean when they say everything happens for a reason. They're striving to integrate their experience into their own faith. This reordering process, the reanalyzing, the reconstructing, is faith development. It's a dialog between our self and the world.

Now my friend, my everything-happens-for-a-reason friend in the hospital, I saw him a few days later. He was up and about. He was using a walker. His face was brighter. He seemed more energized. He had assimilated his experience. He saw it as opening for future possibilities. He was able to see how his life was going to take a different path and make some sense of how he was going to go forward. He was finding some clarity in what happened, some meaning, and some significance, and an opening to how he was going to move on with his life. Finding that opening, that moment of new and deeper awareness is **grace**. The opening, the spark of the divine, the lure to seeing that your life can be more than what you thought before – that's grace.

Now I want to go back to the Sound of Music. We're winding the movie backwards from the gazebo. We're going to when Maria first has her troubles and she's all confused, she runs back to the abbey. She goes in to see the Mother Superior. The Mother Superior stand sat the window and she sings, "Climb every mountain." Does everybody remember that scene? Then, Mother Superior says something to her, something that I think we hear quite a bit. When Maria feels like her life is at an end and she doesn't know what to do Rev Mother says, "When God closes the door He opens a window." How many of you have heard that phrase? It's a lovely idea. I relate strongly to this concept.

But our UU theology doesn't include a God that has everything planned out, it doesn't include a divine plan that would say that a window should be open. Who opens the window? I do believe that windows get opened. We're not alone in this life that we're creating. We are co-creators. We are making this life in concert with all other beings, with all other energies. Sometimes you open the window for others and sometimes others open that window for you. We are co-creators in this interdependent web of all existence.

Everything does happen for a reason. We're all in this co-creating the our interdependent web together. The world acts upon you and you react to it. You act upon the world and the world reacts to you.

The web that we live in, this interconnected web, is very complex with many forces interacting, some within our control and most outside of it. Often things you do have very positive and direct outcomes. And sometimes things you do result in the negative outcomes. My friend in the hospital knew this. Deep in his heart he knew that the choices that he had made, the way he had treated his body had resulted in his illness. However this is not true with earthquakes, tornadoes, accidents, illnesses. Sometimes forces come together in damaging and difficult ways that don't make sense. But as humans we make what sense we can.

In the Phillipines the hurricane wiped out everything in that whole area. You don't try to make sense of that. Of course a meteorologist could explain what happened "The earth and the winds and the forces of weather caused this tornado to happen," But that not the reason or meaning that people need in order to process their experience. What you hear people do say when they've lost everything, they say things like, "I realized what is important, I realized what's meaningful to me. I realized what my life is about." That's making meaning out of what has happened.

Humans are driven to make meaning in some of the most difficult and dire circumstances. In Man's Search For Meaning, Victor Frankl talks about those people suffering from the atrocities of the Nazis, how they try to find meaning, to make sense of what is happening or to live in a way that make sense in their situation. This is what we do as humans.

Life's challenges create opportunities for us to learn and grow – and with each opportunity for meaning making we become more spiritually mature and have a better sense of our role and our responsibilities – who we are and how we are in the world. The fabric of our faith becomes denser and wider. We are open to the presence of grace.

Everything happens for a reason – I agree. We are the reason. We make the reason and we make sense of the reason. All of us. Within the intertwined web of our lives- intertwined with other beings, with natural forces of the earth and indeed with the universe – we are co-creating this world that we know, co creating our lives. Developing and living our faith. Where we each close doors and open windows for each other, leading to richer lives and deeper meaning for us all. May it be so.