

## “That is So Random” – March 5, 2017

Preached by Ministerial Intern D. Scott Cooper at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento.

**Reflection:** by Worship Associate Marilyn Reynolds

**Second Reading:** Excerpt from “Pancakes and Process Theology” by Rev. Elizabeth Stevens

My step-son is a senior in high school and about to head to college. He and I banter back and forth and joke and question each other’s opinions and decisions. I do it to encourage him to be a good, thoughtful and intentional grown-up, and he does it to annoy me. During one conversation, he wondered out loud why anyone would go to church, what purpose does it serve, really? Since I was in seminary at the time, he may have suspected the question would annoy me.

Among other reasons I gave, I waxed poetic about how people typically, at some point in their lives, will ask what I call ‘the big questions.’ Some inquisitive types ask them all their lives, some wait until they’re retired and older and have more time to think about such things, but for some, it happens when a crisis hits, and they are forced to confront some of these very deep issues. Places like this are often where people come to ponder those big questions.

Some of the typical ‘big questions’ include, “What is the meaning of life?” “Is there a Higher Power and if so how do we experience or interact with it?” and, of course, “What happens after we die?” Having spent a summer as a hospital chaplain, I realized that some folks not only wait until they’re being wheeled into surgery to fill out a medical power of attorney, they also wait until then to take some of these ‘big questions’ seriously. And I felt better prepared to notarize a power of attorney than to satisfactorily answer the big questions – some of the smaller ones I could handle. Then I realized that maybe part of my job as a minister is to help us ask better questions, and help us work together toward answers we can live with.

I’ve also realized that many of the big questions, and even more questions spinning out from the really big questions are made all the more problematic by one thing: randomness. Let me explain what I mean.

I have here a pair of six-sided dice. I know some of you are afraid I’m going to break out into “Luck be a Lady” from Guys and Dolls, and others just suspect I miss my Slinky. Neither of those is true, I am just going to ask you a few questions. Now, don’t raise your hands, or answer out loud. Just answer in your own mind.

Can you accurately predict, in advance, what numbers I will roll on these dice? If I handed them to you, could you roll a four and a three if I asked nicely? If you thought to yourself yes, why are you here and not Vegas? We just began a pledge drive.

How about this: Do you believe that a higher power knows in advance what numbers I will roll on these dice? Can that higher power manipulate the dice to roll a certain number?

Do you believe that higher power sometimes tweaks lottery numbers so that the very deserving will win? Or influences the voting for Grammys, or the outcome of the Super bowl; God certainly gets thanked a lot at those events!

These aren't just cute questions ask on a Sunday morning. They clearly have deep implications. To what degree are events in the world random, and to what degree are they intentionally influenced by forces outside our control, and to what degree are we able to influence them?

Your answers to these can make huge differences in how you see your place in the world, your beliefs and attitude. And I believe your answers influence your sense of agency and can help determine the difference you make in the world.

It seems to me a lot of people are afraid of the possibility that some things are truly random. It feels safer to believe there is an entity in control and things are going according to a plan, even if we don't understand that plan, rather than consider things are random.

However, if that entity is in control, and does nothing to stop horrible random acts, it's easy to wonder to what degree that entity is responsible. And can lead some people to claim random and devastating acts are planned judgment and retribution. UUs have rejected some of that kind of thinking for years.

The theology of most of New England's Protestant churches in the sixteen and seventeen hundreds was Calvinism. Universalism and Unitarianism were both reactions against Calvinism. The God of the Calvinists was harsh and judgmental. And Calvinists determined that since God is all-knowing, "He" knows who is destined to be saved and go to heaven, even before they are born. Your fate was predestined: If you were slated for hell, there was nothing you could do to earn your way into heaven. You might see how this would upset people who were very concerned with being saved.

I have childhood friends who were taught a harsh and judgmental God, and who are still wrestling with that image. Over the centuries, the concept of a higher power was so successfully melded with the qualities of all-knowing, all-powerful, and never-changing, it has caused some people to assume they have to throw out a belief in God rather than consider a higher power who doesn't fit that mold. I believe in a Higher

Power, but not one that fits that mold. Let me describe my journey of trying to figure out an answer to this one big question.

I was just out of college, and my younger brother passed away just shy of his eighteenth birthday. He had been suffering from an inoperable brain tumor for several years, and it slowly took away various physical abilities before taking his life. My mom had taken care of him for those years, and the night he died, at the hospital, was the first time I remember seeing my dad cry in public, if at all. Death wasn't a frequent visitor in my family, both sets of my grandparents would live more than a decade longer than my brother, and my parents are both still alive.

I grew up Methodist, and was active in church all my life, and because of that, or in spite of that, after my brother's death I came to believe that there is inexplicable randomness in the world. Buckets full. Things I can't explain and will probably never understand. Despicable people whose lives seem golden. Truly good people who can never catch a break. Extremely good-hearted teen-agers getting brain-tumors and dying. For me at least, I don't see faith as naiveté, I see it as a humbleness that I won't ever know or understand it all.

In one of my essays for acceptance to Seminary, I was asked which deep question I might most wrestle with. It wasn't the Gay vs. God thing, we've come to an understanding, it was this "Why do bad things happen to good people" question. I later learned people have been asking about that for centuries, it even has a fancy name, theodicy. Stacks and stacks of thick books have been written about Theodicy. I know, because all of them were assigned for me to read during seminary. In the same semester.

Theodicy involves, among other questions, people asking, if there is a Higher Power who is all-powerful, how can dreadful things be allowed to happen? Or, if there is a Spirit of love who is all-loving, why all this horrible suffering?

Even though chaplains are asked these questions a lot, and I've wondered about the answers a lot, I don't believe there is a definitive answer. I learned in the hospital that people who are suffering can smell a platitude or shallow answer a mile away.

Because there isn't an answer that works for some people, they conclude there mustn't be a God, at least not an all-powerful or all-loving one. I can relate to that conclusion. I don't believe in a Higher Power that is all-powerful or never-changing. Let me explain.

People far smarter than I have written about Process Theology. Rev. Lucy read part of Elizabeth Stevens description earlier. I can't describe this adequately right now, not only because of time constraints, but because I don't totally understand it all. But the concepts as I understand them resonate with me.

I like the idea that there is a Spirit of Life that is not all-knowing and doesn't know how it's all going to turn out. God hopes and lures and loves, and is in the thick of it, just like the rest of us. It's a relationship, and we have the ability to choose. "God pulls on the heartstrings, and activates deeper, life-giving and love-filled longings,"<sup>1</sup> Rev. Stevens wrote.

Our seventh UU Principle states our "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." We are all a part of the web, in relationship.

Because the world is set up for choice, sometimes random things happen, and God hopes and lures and loves, but doesn't step in to make the random good happen and doesn't step in to make the random awful not happen. In response, we choose what to do, in relationship with all others in our life, and God hopes and lures and loves. Then, once we've seen the results of those decisions, we again choose what to do, in relationship with all others in our life, and God hopes and lures and loves. And if what happens is wonderful, the Spirit of Life is there to rejoice with us, and if what happens is awful, the Spirit of Love is there to comfort us and walk beside us.

So, that is where I'm at with figuring out the answer to one of the big questions that is too difficult for me to figure out.

For the question "What's the meaning of life," I've told my stepson the answer is to have compassion and to help one another. He looked skeptical. He said the answer was 42.

For what happens after we die, I have decided the best answer, at least for me, is to not worry about it. To worry about it distracts us from helping one another, which as I said, is the meaning of life.

I hope you're able to take time to think about these big questions, especially before a crisis hits. And I imagine your answers will be different than mine, because we're different people with different experiences. We're here to help each other ask better questions and look for better answers.

However, I hope your answers will include something about love, and relationships, and helping and supporting one another. If one of us discovered life had rolled the dice, and that person was waiting for the results in a hospital waiting room, or at the police station, or at your kitchen table, would you be there to support them? If I handed you the dice, I know you couldn't roll a seven just because I asked you, but most of you could take the dice from my hand, and set them on the table with a three on top of one and a four on top of the other. Some things in this world are random, but we can do what we are able to do for one another while we're here.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/pancakes-and-process-theology/>

