

OVER THE EDGE

An Introduction to the sermon "Just Deserts or Just Desserts"

Rev. Fritz Hudson

June 18, 2017– First Unitarian Universalist Church of Rochester

Our church tries to find and follow the best way to live by studying the wise teachers from all times and all places in our world. One of those wise teachers lived long ago in India, all the way on the other side of our earth. He became known as the Buddha, which means "he who is awake." Those who follow his teachings carefully are known as Buddhists. And those who chose to live by those teachings, all day every day, are known as Buddhist monks.

Today I lead my last worship service as your "Minister for Now." In just a few weeks, you will begin worshipping with Rev. Luke, whom our church members voted to be your "Minister for A While," perhaps quite a while. Today I want to thank you for our now. You have been wise teachers for me. I hope you may have been taught something by me as well. The last thing I hope you will learn from me is captured in a story about a Buddhist monk. Here's the story.

A Buddhist monk finds himself being chased across a field by a very large, angry bear. The monk runs and runs and runs, but he can't get away. Finally, ahead of him he sees that he is about to come to the edge of a cliff. He looks all around. There's no other path away from the bear. He looks back at the bear. It's coming at the monk, teeth showing, eyes blazing, mouth roaring. The monk's only escape is to jump over the cliff. So, over the edge he goes.

And luckily, perhaps 6 feet or so below the top of the cliff, a small tree is growing from the side of the cliff face. As he falls, the monk grabs for the tree. He's just able to hang on, with his feet dangling down below into the thin air. He looks up. There he sees the bear, peering over the cliff's edge looking down at him, teeth showing, eyes blazing, mouth roaring, and now claws swiping down at the monk. But they can't quite reach the monk's hands or the branch. The monk breathes a huge sigh of relief.

Then the monk looks down. To his surprise, he sees that he's almost halfway down the side of the cliff. There's only perhaps five feet between the tips of his toes, to what's at the base of the cliff. But it's not solid ground down there. No, it's a pond. The monk thinks, I can just drop into the water now, and swim to the opposite in safety. Right?

Wrong. For just as the monk is about to let go of the branch, up out of the water comes the head of another animal, with a huge jaw wide open, teeth snapping at the monk's feet. It's a crocodile!

Wow! The monk's fingers tighten and tighten around that little tree branch. With great effort, he boosts himself up to wrap both his arms and his legs around the branch. The bear is still roaring and swiping above him. The crocodile is still splashing and snapping below him. But the monk is safe at least for now. He breathes another huge sigh of relief.

But then, amidst the roaring and the swiping and the splashing and the snapping, the monk begins to hear another sound. It's coming from even closer than the bear or the crocodile. It sounds like chewing, or really gnawing. It's coming from below where his feet are now wrapped around the little tree, back where the tree is coming out of the side of the cliff – and

the sound seems to be shaking the tree itself. Is that a beaver gnawing on the tree?

Now the monk knows he's really in trouble.

- Roaring and swiping bear above him.
- Splashing and snapping crocodile below him.
- Gnawing, snorting beaver about to cut off the monk's only refuge.

What can he do? What can he do?

The monk looks wildly around himself for anything that can help. The cliff is sheer rock and completely bare all around the tree. There's nothing else to grab on to. Except, except. Right below the tree growing out of the cliff there is a little, scrawny bush. It's much too small to hold the monk's weight. But, on the bush, the monk can see growing a bright, deep red, luscious raspberry.

And, here's what happens next. Suddenly everything about the monk's predicament leaves his mind--the roaring, swiping bear above; the splashing, snapping crocodile below; the gnawing, snorting beaver and his shaking tree--he forgets them all. All of the monk's attention is captured by that red, luscious raspberry. The monk reaches out his hand. He tenderly plucks up the tantalizing fruit. He smells it. He licks it. He passes it in through his lips ever so carefully, delicately. Then he brings his teeth together ever so slowly, and he ever so gently releases the exquisite burst of flavor into his mouth. He savors the juice and the berry's flesh as it passes all the way down his throat.

And the monk smacks his lips together. And he smiles and he says with a great sigh, "How delicious! How delicious!"

If you will learn from me to ignore the dangers of life, however great, however inescapable, and if you will learn how to see its beauty, taste its sweetness, and revel completely in its ecstasy, now, you will have learned all I could hope to teach you.

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JUST DESERTS OR JUST DESSERTS?

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Let's begin by calling back into our minds the image of my Buddhist monk? The animals in his life can be powerful metaphors, I think. We can all identify with the monk's predicament, in some way

- pursued by a bear,
- snapped at by crocodile,
- shaken from our safe perches by a gnawing beaver,
- with no escape in sight and limited chances of survival,

In an ultimate sense, as the adage goes, "None of us is going to get out of all this alive," right? With that fixed for us now in this image, it seems to me that the monk's story raises a question of ultimate importance for us.

The question is this: In the midst life's inescapable predicament, what does it take to see the berry bushes growing beside us, and how can we truly receive and savor the gift of their grace?

A colleague of mine once preached that Unitarian Universalists ought to be the kind of people who, in a meal, can eat dessert first. We don't believe that to earn the right to eat dessert we first have to eat our peas (metaphorically speaking). If we cannot base our sense of life's meaning in expecting some reward for deferred gratification in some sweet-by-and-by, this makes sense. But it flies in the face of at least part of our faith's history.

Unitarianism grew out of protestant Christianity, in part, by rejecting Martin Luther's fundamental proclamation: "*In Solo Fide*," salvation by faith alone. Instead we put our faith in a kind of updated revised version of the Roman Catholic doctrine: salvation by works. For our faith's founding generation two centuries ago, life's fulfillment was to be earned through "self-culture" – spiritual growth. It was not to be just accepted, by God's grace.

Then starting about a century ago, the Unitarians among us got mixed up with you Universalists. Universalists proclaimed salvation for all, the deserving and the undeserving alike. So who are we now? What have we come to believe?

- * Is life's meaning to be found in its "Just deserts" in the just rewards achieved by dint of our personal efforts, or
- * Is life's meaning rather "just desserts?" Is it to be found solely in our willingness to appreciate the accidental, the unmerited "sweetnesses" of existence, for which we cannot strive but which we can only welcome when they fall into our paths?

If you've studied western religious history, you know this controversy can be traced all the way back to an argument in 4th century Christianity. The contestants then were Augustine, of North Africa, and Pelagius, of the British Isles. Pelagius saw humanity as strong enough and wise enough to take responsibility on our own for doing good. Augustine saw humanity as so weak and damaged that we could do good only by giving our will over to God.

Most of Christianity has followed Augustine. They affirm Augustine's doctrine of "original sin":

humanity's early fall from grace necessitates God's redemption for salvation. Our forebears followed Pelagius.

The debate, though, is not over. A Dominican priest of our time, Father Matthew Fox, has been permanently barred from teaching under the aegis of the Catholic Church because of his modern challenge to this doctrine of original sin. He has written,

Even if original sin is to be taken literally (which it should not), still the facts are as follows: that, if we take the universe to be about twenty billion years old, as scientists are advising us to do, then sin (of the human variety) is only about four million years old. That's about how long humans have been around. That means that creation is 19,996,000,000 years older! than sin. Fall/redemption theology has ignored the blessing that creation is because of its anthropomorphic preoccupation with sin! The result has been among other things, a loss of pleasure from spirituality, and with this loss an increase of pain, of injustice, of sado-masochism, and of distrust. Nineteen billion years before there was any sin on earth, there was blessing.

Fox's heretical work is entitled *Original Blessing*. And, you realize, Universalism, proclaiming God's limitless love, has always proclaimed this doctrine - the doctrine of original blessing.

Unitarianism, in proclaiming human power to find truth and do good, also arose assuming original blessing. I believe, though, that we have gradually lost sight of our grounding in that teaching. We're kind of like the character Shirley in a cartoon called Miss Peach.

Shirley is asked by her friend, "Hey Shirley, are you still into that metaphysical stuff?" Shirley replies "No, I used to want to be one with the universe, but now we've decided to go our separate ways."

Hindus, speaking for the other major strand of human wisdom, sometimes say that there two basic religious postures. There's what they call "monkey-hold religion" and there's "cat-hold religion."

- * In monkey-hold religion, the baby clings to the mother, holding on for dear life. Monkey-hold religion maintains contact with the sources of sustenance only through its accomplished striving. The baby's salvation depends entirely on the baby.
- * In cat-hold religion, on the other hand, the mother holds the baby by the scruff of the neck, suspending it in the air. There is really very little the baby can do, even if he or she wants to, to save him or herself. The baby might as well relax and enjoy the view. You might say she or he is in the hand of Being, and survives entirely by Being's (or God's) mercy.

Monkey-hold religion is not just the inclination of Unitarianism; it is really the spirit of much of European-America. In high school history, do you remember studying Frederick Jackson Turner? He spoke of our nation as having a "Manifest Destiny" for expansion. He wrote, To those who followed Columbus and Cortez, the New World truly seemed incredible because of its natural endowment. The land often announced itself with a heavy scent miles out into the ocean. Giovanni di Verrazano in 1524 smelled the cedars of the East Coast a hundred leagues out. The men of Henry Hudson's ship *Half Moon*, were temporarily disarmed by the fragrance of the New Jersey shore, while ships running farther up the coast occasionally swam through large beds of floating flowers.

Wherever they came inland [those European discoverers] found a rich riot of color and

sound, of game and luxuriant vegetation. Had [these explorers] been other than they were, they might have written a new mythology here. [But, being as they were], they took inventory.

As the Native Americans who've survived among us are finally getting us to hear, the time has come to reverse or at least temper all our grasping for fulfillment. Being monkeys by religious nature, we most quickly grasp the practical reasons for such a change: we need to change our grasping spirit to insure our race's future survival. But there are also aesthetic reasons (I would say spiritual reasons) that necessitate this change.

In the early 20th century much of liberal Protestant Christianity, Unitarians and Universalists firmly among them, were enthralled with the Social Gospel, the promise of building the Kingdom of God here on Earth. Then came Adolph Hitler. Hitler's intransigent evil taught most other Protestants to be humble in their pretensions to foresee progress onward and upward evermore. We UUs were among the last preachers of such optimistic faith. I wonder if perhaps now we are finally ready to learn at least as much about discerning and appreciating the graces of life as we've learned about how to improve life.

Two months ago, on Earth Sunday, I recalled for us Max Coats' words of praise:

Often I have felt that I must praise my world
For what my eyes have seen these many years,
And what my heart has loved.
And often I have tried to start my lines:
"Dear Earth," I say,
And then I pause
To look once more.
Soon I am bemused
And far away in wonder.
So I never get beyond "Dear Earth."

It is not just the grace of Earth's undeserved gift that I feel we could learn more to appreciate. Sydney Harris, a syndicated newspaper columnist, once published a column entitled "There is a free lunch and we live it." He wrote:

What is civilization but the continual process of getting something for nothing?
What we have is free inheritance from the past, handed down to us by people who labored not only for their own profit but also for the accumulated capital we use so freely and casually. The wheel, the alphabet, tillage of the soil - all these are gifts we take for granted.

Each of our years here together in Rochester on the first Sunday of March, we have remembered your church's founding on March 12, 1866. Together we have raised up the gifts we've received from your now 151-year history as a congregation. From time to time, as well, we have also held up our gifts from the 400-year history of our religious movement on Earth. Now, with Harris, I would have us see that our cultural endowment is much, much more broad and deep than just our faith's history. As Harris puts it, "History (writ large) gives us almost everything for nothing."

Out of this perspective, some words from my colleague David Rankin take on their true weight. David wrote, "The self-made person is a bore and a liar. In the drama of our lives we are (all) supporting players."

In the Bible's book of Joshua, God reminds,
I have given you a land for which you did not labor, and cities which you did not build,
and yet you dwell in them. And all the yards and vineyards which you did not plant
and yet you eat of them.

This tradition makes very clear what our response should be to this reality: We should praise
and thank the omnipotent personal God who claims to have given all this to us. I wonder
now, can this really be our response?

For a long time, I bridled at any suggestion that the proper response to the wondrous grace
was some kind of "Thanks." I just didn't feel the presence of any proper recipient for my
gratitude. I looked, I still look, upon the givenness of life as at least partly accident, and I felt
no capacity to communicate with the forces that preceded the human contributors to its
existence.

There is a Unitarian heritage of making such a thankful response. Almost a century ago, the
poet e.e. cummings, son of a Unitarian minister, spoke for a central strand of our community
in these words:

*I thank God for this most amazing
day, for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for
everything
which is natural which is infinite
which is yes.*

But, I couldn't speak in that voice, myself, for a long time. But then I heard that same
message, articulated only slightly differently, by another poet, Anne Sexton.

She wrote:

*There is joy
in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook
each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle
that heats my coffee
each morning,
in the spoon and the chair
that cry "hello there Anne"
each morning,
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
each morning.*

*All this is God,
right here in my pea-green house
each morning and I mean
though often forget,
to give thanks,
to faint down by the kitchen table*

*in a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.*

*So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God,
 this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken.*

*The joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
dies young.*

The joy that isn't shared dies young. Somehow that thought pierced my recalcitrance. It struck me, it still strikes me, as profoundly true. It moves me to shout my thanks out loud, regardless of who might be there to hear it. I don't want my joy to die for lack of expression. Whether or not you can join me in that shout, I would invite you to join me it at least two other responses. One is the acknowledgement, however reluctant, that we are not, in fact, entirely the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls. A poet wrote, "Would that were brave enough simply to point:"

I would like to be that brave now. I would like simply to point our attention, for a moment, in silent appreciation of the undeserved gifts with which our moment now is endowed.

- * First to the natural gifts – as the Zen poet writes: "Sitting quietly, doing nothing spring comes, and the grass grows by itself."
- * Next to the gifts of civilization - Sidney Harris's free lunch.
- * Next to the gifts of those who have touched us personally: teachers, friends, family.
- * Last to the gift of this house and its people.

The other response to the gracious gifts of our lives, I ask, from us all, is this:

- * To deepen and renew our commitment to perpetuating this legacy, to re-shaping and re-furbishing these gifts, in so far as we are able, so that they may be given to those who come after us.
- * They begin in our now, as our children, right here at our center.
- * These gifts are moving all around us, learning their place in the larger world of many species.
- * Let us make sure that our children know, and are bequeathed, all the richness with which we ourselves have been blessed.

Is the meaning of life to be found in Just Deserts or Just in Desserts? You know perhaps, the essayist E.B. White's dilemma: "I awake each morning seized by the desire at one and the same time to savor the world and at the same time to save it. It makes it difficult to plan the day."

I still know what White is talking about. But now I will confess that for me the dilemma is not quite so piercing. I too feel strongly drawn to both savor the world and to save it.

But I now know which must come first. The piece played for our offertory "Putting on the (F)ritz"? That was suggested to them by our Music Director in Lincoln, Nebraska. When I

retired from that church after 16 years of service, she wrote a parody on "Putting on the Ritz" which she entitled. "Putting Up with Fritz." The lyrics exposed (almost) all of my annoying tendencies, many of which were direct expressions of "monkey-hold religion," of striving for salvation by garnering Just Deserts.

I've learned a bit since then. And YOU, you have been my "dessert", the double S variety. You have helped me confirm my growing conviction that one cannot know what is worth saving in this world if one has not savored its gifts in their fullest richness first. Savor first, then save. And then as we save our world, let us remember always the words of Richard Gilbert: that even "Given our best endeavor, the final result is not with us."

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