

# **Spilling More Than Milk**

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, October 22, 2017

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**

Rochester, Minnesota

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## **READINGS**

*Because we spill not only milk* by Nancy Shaffer

*Measuring Up* by Ruth Calder Murphy

## SERMON

They had arranged it all perfectly, it seemed.

They had prepared the space, and made the calls,  
planned every detail down to the second, it seemed –  
they had back up plans –  
back up plates, and papers, and people

so it was a certainty  
a guarantee,  
etched in stone with full-proof-ness  
that this was going to be the best

*party, picnic, birthday, interview, garden,  
work site, wedding, baby shower, installation,  
the absolute best and most perfect  
[insert the name of the thing in your mind here]*

and then...*those dreaded words...*  
and then...

the table collapsed  
or *we had a falling out with the relatives*  
or it rained  
or someone fell  
or the bus was late  
or the bread was moldy  
or there was traffic, or storms,  
or *they got the wrong date...*

because we forgot to invite *them*  
or we didn't think of *this*  
we got the wrong *that*

or...or....or...

life

just

happened.

Again.

In spite of our best plans,  
our best intentions, our sincere hopes  
life still happens  
we fail and we falter and we make mistakes  
not because we're failures  
not because we deficient  
not because we didn't try  
but because of one very true and real  
gift and challenge –  
because we're human.  
In all its messiness and beauty and complexity.

*Because we spill not only milk*

writes Nancy Shaffer,

*but we spill seed on soil we thought was fertile but isn't –  
we spill whole lives, seeing later how much is gone that we hadn't intended –  
we tear friendships  
we tear mountainsides  
we forget not only why we went into the kitchen  
but also we forget entire lexicons of joy  
we weep at words once said as though they might be rearranged  
because we are imperfect and love so deeply  
and will never have enough days...*

We live in a culture that isn't too forgiving for our humanity –  
we live in a religious tradition that hasn't always been too understanding  
of our imperfections, our failures, our not living up to our best values,  
our ideal selves.

Too often, the messages we hear  
in families, at work, on TV or social media,  
in the classroom, the boardroom, the family room  
even from those we might call close friends –  
whether it is spoken plainly or coded in some type of metaphor  
or imagery that, compared to the metaphor of story or poetry,  
seems sinister and abrasive and constrictive –  
the message we hear is that we simply don't measure up.

We don't fit the mold, we don't get it right –  
as much as we're cool and composed and *got all our stuff together*  
on the outside  
the inside is like a pinball machine of messages  
bouncing between our childhood,  
and each little *ding!*  
is what we have heard, seen, understood,  
overtly or not,  
about ourselves over the years –

how to look  
what to wear  
where to shop  
that you need to be successful, you need to be smart,  
well-read and well-educated,  
extra-just and uber-conscious of the world and its injustices,  
you need to be intellectual, but down to earth,  
you need to dismiss superstition and ecstatic spirituality  
but have a strong spiritual practice and connection to the energy of the universe –  
and if you don't, if you can't keep up, you are not up to snuff.

You need to drive the right car,  
you need to eat the right foods  
and shop at the right co-op,  
you need to attend the right rallies,  
you need to dress nicely but not pretentiously

you need to be more spiritual, more ethical, more just –  
you just need to be better -

and the list goes on and on

until it is a litany of shortcomings  
a treatise of who you ought to be  
which is certainly not who you are.

When we bless and dedicate babies and children in our churches,  
we affirm their beauty  
speak to them of the importance  
of kindness and compassion and generous hearts –  
we invite them to live lives of justice and hospitality, forgiveness and love –  
learning from good teachers and role models,  
treating people as sacred, as beloved,  
honoring the beauty and sacredness of the earth  
and all cultures and people and land –  
to live in a common rhythm  
with all things  
for the flourishing of their own life  
and the flourishing of the wider world.

Not too long ago, as a colleague of mine was dedicating a child,  
about 1½ or 2 years old,  
the ceremony of dedication was a little different  
than when there is an infant in the arms of their family.

Because this child was,  
to the horror of her parents and grandparents,  
to the uneasiness of my colleague –  
the horror of every cleric trying to bless a child on a Sunday morning –  
this child  
was mobile.

Oh, it started off simple enough.  
Speaking about the importance of water that we blessed them with –  
how it connects them with the earth and land and water and stars –  
speaking about the meaning of the rose that we blessed them with –

how it reminds us of the beauty of the world,  
and the beauty of this child, and all children, and all people.

And then,  
the child began – moving.  
It started with squirming in her mother's arms  
and then she was set down  
and set free –  
this was now a liturgical field with a free-range child.

As my colleague spoke the words  
*May she remember that her life is her own  
and may you grant her every freedom  
as she discovers, for herself, her path in life –  
that she may have a strong sense of self...*

Well, she sure had a strong sense of self –

The blessed-child-to-be began walking away  
from the table holding the water and the rose –  
away from her parents and family  
away from the minister  
speaking of her life path  
but wishing she hadn't chosen to start off on it right at this moment...

And the parents, with their rose-colored embarrassment,  
smiled anxiously, feeling unable to contain her  
because, given the words being spoken, that didn't seem right...  
and the congregation,  
as they read a blessing together,  
smiled and laughed  
as the words jumped off the page,  
the child jumped out from the arms holding her  
and life broke out of its small container  
and became, in that moment  
embodied in a way  
that only the written words of the blessing itself could have anticipated,  
filled with the words of Kahlil Gibran –  
*your children are not your children –  
they are life's longing for itself.*

Our lives can't be contained,  
this child's, our own – anyone –  
by neat and clean containers  
with white tablecloth or altar cloth or white-laced dresses  
blessed by roses in the yellow light of autumn –  
because those threshold moments themselves  
remind us that being human is beautiful and messy.

And even at that young age,  
we say something to acknowledge the capacity that we each have  
for harm – to self or others –  
the capacity to be selfish, neglectful, judgmental –  
because we know it is up to each of us,  
and all of us together,  
to help build and create and sustain the conditions in which  
the best parts of us – our compassion and kindness and generosity and love  
might flourish far more than our shortcomings –  
and even when we do fail or fall short or worse,  
we can find in each other forgiveness  
so that we might rise back to our best selves,  
even when we have faltered, sometimes mightily.

Too often,  
the world isn't too forgiving –  
our loved one, even ourselves,  
aren't too forgiving  
of the messiness and the imperfections  
and the challenges –  
not too forgiving of the truth of this life,  
this house of humanity that we build,  
that poet John Carpenter writes about in this way, in his poem, *Mistakes*:

*The taps drip all night  
and won't let me sleep.  
The paint is peeling; the table, the sofa  
and staircase are coming apart.  
Nothing works.  
I call the electrician, the painter;*

*the plumber shows me a deep furrow  
in the washer scratched by a tiny grain of rust.*

*The pale ash of a whole cigarette  
curls in the ashtray; cold coffee sits in the bottom of the cup.  
Everything is recorded:  
thousands of pointless gestures,  
what you tried to forget, to erase from the past –  
you cannot disguise yourself, you cannot get away.*

*You are rattled,  
tongue-tied, and feel a sense of falling.  
There is no ending,  
only incompleteness –  
the promise you can never exhaust yourself,  
the mistakes you find yourself making  
and remaking until you are at home  
with all you touch, living at last  
in the paradise of the imperfect.*

I don't know about you,  
but that seems to be where I live –  
this *paradise of the imperfect*.

Making a re-making mistakes,  
spilling the milk and seed on infertile soil  
tearing the cloth and relationships  
and trying, over and over again,  
to be my best self –  
stumbling, over and over again,  
to make things right, make things better –  
and sometimes that happens,  
and sometimes  
you have to forgive yourself  
and get up, another day, to try again.

It can be a hard place to be –  
knowing our failures and imperfections  
and hearing the narratives



in our families, in our communities and culture,  
in our traditions and heritage  
of how we don't measure up.

Ours is a church  
imperfect and striving to be what we are called to be –  
ours is a church  
that amidst the messiness of it all  
we say  
*don't measure yourself with scales and tapes –  
put them away  
your plumb lines and your calipers,  
your gauges and thermometers,  
scales and tintometers –  
you are beloved  
and broken  
and beloved still.*

*As you are.*

Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies wrote in the 1940s,

*Let me tell you why I come to church.  
I come to church—and would whether I was a preacher or not—  
because I fall below my own standards  
and need to be constantly brought back to them.*

*I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent,  
and my church—my church of the free spirit—  
brings me back to what I want to be.*

*I could easily despair; doubt and dismay could overwhelm me.  
My church renews my courage and my hope.  
It is not enough that I should think about the world*

*and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or magazine discussion.*

*I must feel again the love I owe to others.  
I must not only hear about it but feel it.  
In church, I am brought, in every way, toward my best.*

And I would add  
we do it together.

*As we sang this morning –  
if I stumble, will you help me –  
or as we will sing in a moment –  
how far and wide we stray from who we want to be –  
the letter fails, the systems fall, every symbol wanes –  
but eternal love remains.*

Sometimes, when the burden is heavy and hard to bear  
and we need to pause for a moment  
to not only remind ourselves of who we want to be  
but to find a shred, a breath of forgiveness for how we have failed -  
from ourselves, from our loved ones,  
from whatever sacred source of love that feels large enough  
strong enough, forgiving enough  
to hold you –

we need moments to be held –  
by a love larger than us all,  
and by the strong and unsteady souls right next to us.

*Is there an angel in the house?*  
Asks poet Pat Schneider...

*Is there an angel in the house?  
If there is, come to me...  
and if you aren't too tired,  
or otherwise occupied, and if it isn't too tacky a request,  
please rock me.  
I am bruised.*

*If you will hold me until morning,*

*I promise I will rise and light the fire  
and break the bread  
and put back on my shoulder my corner of the world.*

*But for now I could use the shelter of a wing.  
Excuse me,  
is there an angel in the house?*

Sure,  
you've spilled more than milk –  
you've made and remade mistakes –  
they are built into our humanity  
like a purposeful flaw in a mosque  
or a mis-stitched thread in a tapestry or quilt -  
but now is the time  
to put away the gauges and scales  
to take a breath  
under the shelter of another's wing  
so that you can rise again in the morning  
to the fire, to the bread,  
to remember again  
these words from Rebecca Edminston Lange –

*Come into this place which we make holy by our presence.  
Come in with all your vulnerabilities and strengths,  
fears and anxieties, loves and hopes.  
For here you need not hide, nor pretend,  
nor be anything other  
than who you are  
and who you are called to be –  
this place where the ordinary is sanctified,  
the human is celebrated,  
the compassionate is expected -  
Come in where you can heal and be healed  
forgive and be forgiven.*

.  
There are angels all around you –  
spilling out of every school and clinic,  
on every street in every corner –

they are right next to you, right now.

So when you falter and fail  
to be your best self,  
and you need the shelter of a wing –  
there are angels right next to you, right now -  
in fully human form - ready to hold you.