

“It's Not About You”
by Rev. Barbara H. Gadon
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First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

Readings: “The Dream”, a Frog and Toad story by Ted Lobel
“The Woodcarver” by Chuang Tse

Sermon

There is a saying in the Hasidic tradition. It goes: Every garment we wear should have two pockets. In one pocket there should be a slip of paper that reads: *For you the universe was made.* In the other pocket, the rabbis said, there should be another slip of paper that reads: *You are dust and ashes. For you the universe was made.* In other words: you matter. You are special, as my old hero Fred Rogers would say. You count. You have gifts and needs and they are important. And, *You are dust and ashes.* In other words, you are, in most significant ways, like everybody else. You were born and you will die. No matter how well you play the piano or sing or walk on the high wire. Things that happen don't happen because you deserve them, or because you are good or bad. They just happen. It's not about you. No matter what the sexy people in the advertisements say, it's not about you.

Much of the suffering we do in our culture comes from the fact that we simply don't understand what to do with these two ideas. We are convinced that either one is true or the other, but both simply cannot be. Or, we think that there are SOME people for whom the universe was made – the special people – and some who are dust and ashes. We are convinced that it has to be about SOMEONE, and if it's not about me, it's about someone else. With all the attention we pay to celebrities, we become convinced that it has to be about someone. Somebody has to be the World's Greatest Toad. Somebody has to carve a bell stand so beautifully we don't understand how they did it. And we spend a lot of time feeling inadequate. Or we do get some measure of recognition or success, and we are terribly nervous about losing it. We are the culture of personal worry. We ask continually, “Am I good enough?” and “How am I doing?” And it's a shame, because in our worry, we miss a lot of joy.

Robert Fulghum talks about speaking to kindergartners. He likes to ask them, “How many of you are artists?” And most of the kids in the room shoot up their hands. Me! Me! I am! But when kids get older, he says, right around middle school, he will ask, “How many of you are artists?” and almost no one will raise their hands. Maybe one or two. Why is this? Well, the inner criteria has shifted. A kindergartner's criteria for being an artist is the joy she feels in making art. A 7th grader's criteria (and in this, my friends, I hate to tell you, most of us are still 7th graders), the criteria is how talented one is. “Artist” becomes a word that is only used for a select group of people. Only special people have talent, only so much to go around. The shift goes from the love of doing something to a self-scrutiny of one's gift. It's not about art anymore; it's about us.

Anne Lamott teaches creative writing, and she talks about what gets in the way of making art. There is a very special radio station that plays in our heads, she says. “If you are not careful, this a radio station will play in your head 24 hours a day, nonstop, in stereo. Out of the right speaker in your inner ear will come the endless stream of self-aggrandizement, the recitation of one's specialness, of how much more open and gifted and brilliant and knowing and misunderstood and humble one is. Out of the left speaker will be the rap songs of self-loathing, the lists of all the things one doesn't do well, of all the mistakes one has made today and over an entire lifetime, the doubt, the assertion that everything that one touches turns to garbage, that one doesn't do relationships well, that one is in every way a

fraud, incapable of selfless love, that one has no talent or insight. You might as well have heavy-metal music piped in through headphones while you're trying to get any writing done.” (*Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing and Life*, by Anne Lamott)

How could we get anything done? I am convinced that this station plays for all of us, in some fashion or another. It's called the ego, and we all have one. Or more specifically, it's what is called the neurotic ego. There is a good part of the ego, the functional ego, that helps ground us in reality – it helps us take action, show feelings, decide what to have for dinner, and get to the airport on time. The neurotic ego is like its evil twin. “It's motivated by fear, by feelings of inadequacy, by judgments and by much guilt. It tends to panic, has huge expectations, and often dramatizes feelings. It believes itself to be entitled to special treatment.” (*How to Be an Adult* by David Richo) In other words, that everything is about me.

The neurotic ego is the advertiser's best friend. “Buy that \$300 blouse – you deserve it.” There is a clothing line called “Always for Me”, and popular magazines with names like “Self” and “You.” (I always thought the latter of these would more accurately be called “Me”.) Their ads and stories kind of blur together in a love song courting the neurotic ego. We tend not to mind this aspect of the neurotic ego because there's some attractive merchandise involved. Not just material things, but praise and attention. We GET stuff, in other words, and it feels good. And yet, it only lasts a little while. It doesn't feed us for very long, and we need more. More stuff that doesn't satisfy us.

The less appealing part of the ego is the part that tells us that things don't just happen, they happen to me. This part of us tells us that the annoying things people do us are done on purpose, are done TO us. Why do things always happen to ME, it asks. Its advice to us is to take everything personally. I always thought I could write a book called *The Art of Taking Everything Personally* - subtitled, *It's Me, Isn't It?* For the neurotic ego, the answer to that question is always yes. People become villains in the little drama that we star in. And worse, we ourselves become villains. Mistakes and potential mistakes loom large for the neurotic ego. They become life-threatening.

I was talking to my spiritual director one time, all about the people who were making my life so very difficult. All the mistakes I'd made or was afraid I would make. She said, “You are taking this very personally.” At this point, I wished that I was paying her so I could ask for my money back. I was offended! And that's a clue that the ego is involved, by the way. When we get offended by something. But then it became liberating to be reminded that it was not about me. I could loosen my grip on situations where my fingers were aching. I could stop finding someone to blame – them or me – and just breathe. I could start to accept things as they were.

Stories like “The Woodcarver” by Chuang Tzu are helpful here. Scholars of Chinese feudal society in Chuang Tzu's era are clear about what would have happened to a woodcarver if he failed his commission. {Make a cutting motion across the throat.} If the bell stand did not please the prince, he would have been executed. And you think your job is stressful! The stakes in a lot of life situations feel this high. A mother who had just adopted a toddler from Russia told me that about 5-10 times a day she does or says something to her child and wonders if that is going to scar her for life. Certainly a surgeon has to deal with the fact that a human life is literally in his or her hands. How does a surgeon, or a mother, or a woodcarver possibly get the job done – and done exquisitely? There is a lot of *forgetting* involved in this story, Parker Palmer says. The woodcarver has to forget about making great art, forget about success, even forget about the Prince and his court. (*The Active Life* by Parker Palmer)

Anne Lamott tells her writing students to do something to get their heads quiet. And the first thing to do is notice that the radio station is on, blasting us with unhelpful information about our glories and our failures. She says a prayer that she can get out of her own way. A spiritual practice of some sort works here. This weekend, we had our spiritual practice retreat, and were given instructions on how to meditate. Jim Walsh, who will teach meditation here before worship, starting next week, was there. He coached us on how to focus on our breath. If you are convinced this type of thing is navel-gazing and one more way to be self-indulgent, Jim will knock that out of you. In a nice way. “Ever had a cashier be rude to you in the check-out line?” he asked us. “What if you could just notice this rudeness, but not get caught up in it? What if you could relax, and then realize that they are probably having a rotten day?” He goes so far as to ask them if they're okay. That certainly changes things up.

The purpose for any spiritual practice is to get out of our egos and and learn compassion. To accept the world as it is. “Notice what it's like to breathe in,” he said. Where does the breath enter your nostrils? How does it feel on the exhale? Notice the pause in between breaths”, he said. “What is that like?” We noted our thoughts and feelings and sensations, but they weren't anything that attractive or unattractive, just there. They could just go by. It was liberating. It didn't completely turn the radio station off, but it lowered the volume considerably. It felt like it might be possible to get out of one's own way.

The woodcarver at one point says that he forgets his entire body. It sounds like the opposite of most spiritual practice, which encourages one to be aware of the body, to live in it. I think what he does is to let himself merge with the world around him, and not fight so hard to maintain a separate self from it. It's like the wonder we feel when looking up at the stars, or entering a forest, or looking at the ocean. We get absorbed in the world, instead of in ourselves. The starlings have been doing it for me lately. I will be all obsessed with something or other, and suddenly, I will notice this gathering storm of movement and chatter, and my backyard will be full of this gang, these hoodlum starlings who have suddenly gathered and will just as suddenly take off. It lifts me out of myself, if only for a moment. We feel that we are a part of something larger than ourselves, and lose for a moment our need to be special, important, to have our desires met.

A Buddhist teacher once was teaching a group of students and held up a large piece of paper and drew a very small M-shape on it. “What is it?” he asked them. “A bird,” they said. He shook his head sternly. “Um, a bird in the sky,” they said. He looked even angrier. “No.” They took several more guesses. “It's a bird in a snowstorm...” Finally he said, “It's the *sky* with a bird *in* it.” We think of ourselves that way. We are birds, separate, isolated, forgetting that we belong. But when ego loses its grip, we don't really lose ourselves. We just know that we belong to our surroundings.

But we don't disappear. *The universe was made for us*. That is the second slip of paper the Hasidic rabbis taught to us to carry. *The universe was made for us*. It is made for us to use our gifts. We all have gifts, contrary to the way our schools sort our children into gifted and talented, and well, NOT gifted and talented. One of my favorite teachers of writing, Brenda Ueland, begins her book by saying, “Everyone is interesting, talented and has something important to say.” She is “stern in her belief in the democracy of genius. You cannot be in her presence for long still clinging to the notion that others have talent and you, poor you, don't.” (*If You Want to Write* by Brenda Ueland, introduction by Patricia Hamp)

Don't get me wrong. I don't think everyone has the same gifts, or that there is no such thing as

individual talent. It's just that some gifts are more glamorous than others, like playing the piano, singing, dancing and walking on the high wire. But other gifts are just as important, sometimes more. You may have a gift for comforting someone in grief. Or being patient in solving a problem. I've often appreciated that someone as gifted musically as our Scott spends most of his time bringing forth and showcasing the gifts of others. Maybe that's why we love him so much. Or why I do. We must somehow learn to give our gifts away, and bring out the gifts of other people.

We just have to keep remembering that whatever we can do, it IS a gift. We did not give it to ourselves. It is not there to make us look good. As Lewis Hyde would say, we labor in service of the gift. (*The Gift: the Erotic Life of Property* by Lewis Hyde) We must work hard at developing our gifts, but like the woodcarver, we have to somehow forget ourselves in using them. And to think about what we are using them in service of. Barbara Kingsolver once said that “The difference between happy people and unhappy ones is that happy people have found a use for themselves, like a good tool.” (quoted in *Writing to Change the World* by Mary Pipher)

Do you feel that way, sometimes? Like your gifts and abilities, your work and your service have really been of use? It doesn't mean that we give away everything, take no time for ourselves, don't think about what we want or need. When we go this opposite extreme, of never doing things for ourselves, and always doing what other people need – or what we think they need – we are still trapped. Why do we do that? Is it because we're trying to please everyone? Are we afraid of what people might think of us if we don't? In that case, we're still caught. It's still about us.

For you, the universe was made. For life. Earth is remarkably calibrated to support life, cosmologists say. Whatever you believe about who made the world, and why, it is still a marvel to know that the systems that make up our world are balanced to support life. A few degrees hotter or colder and it won't. A bit wetter or drier, and it won't. And yet it does. We are constantly trying to learn if other planets have this balance – mostly because we're starting to wonder if earth will remain this balanced for much longer. Yes, the universe was made for us. But we are also made to serve it.

The world's religions try to teach us that within us, resides the divine. Hindus call it Brahman, Jews call it Shekinah, Christians call it the Christ, Buddhists call it the Buddha nature. And this inner divine knows that we are made to serve something larger than ourselves. It can handle both statements – the universe was made for us, and we are dust and ashes. All spiritual practice, all spiritual teaching, is designed to get our stubborn selves to accept that both are true.

Our faith, Unitarian Universalism, teaches us about the worth and dignity of every person. We are gifted – and yet we must be so assured of our gifts, so assured of the abundance and democracy of gifts – that we care deeply that someone else's gifts matter as much as ours. Our faith, Unitarian Universalism, teaches us about the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. Only a part, but without us, the web comes apart. Between these two, the message can turn from “You are special” to “You are enough.” And you are needed. Amen.