

**What Have We Wrought?**  
**by Scott Gerard Prinster**  
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**Opening Words from *The Book of Hours* by Rainer Maria Rilke**

I'm living just as the century ends.  
A great leaf, that God and you and I have covered with writing  
turns now, overhead, in strange hands.  
We feel the sweep of it like a wind.  
We see the brightness of a new page where everything yet can happen.  
Unmoved by us, the fates take its measure and look at one another, saying nothing.

**Intergenerational Story**

One chilly, gray day in the forest, a day very much like this one, Fox was taking a walk after lunch to see what trouble he could get into. As he was passing through a path of prairie grass, his sharp eyes spotted a tiny, tiny movement. It was a fly, but it wasn't moving like flies usually do. Curious, and because he had nothing else to do, Fox trotted closer, until he saw that the fly was trapped in a spider's web. He didn't see any spider nearby, but Fox knew that it was only a matter of time before the fly was going to be the spider's dinner.

Now, I believe I had mentioned that Fox had just eaten his lunch, so he wasn't hungry, but he thought, "well, why don't *I* eat that fly instead of leaving it for the spider?" Flies don't have much meat on them, you know, certainly not for a fox, but sometimes the first thing that came into Fox's mind wasn't a very good idea, or a very nice idea... he really wanted to eat that fly just to be mean.

All the animals in forest knew that sometimes Fox wasn't very nice, and Fly seemed to know it too, because she cried out, "Please, Mr. Fox, spare my life -- I know that it doesn't mean very much to you, but it's all that I have, you see, and I'm so very small that I wouldn't possibly make even a good snack for you!" But Fly saw Fox's mouth getting closer, and closer... and that's all. Fox held his nose very still, right next to that sticky spider web, so that Fly was able to step onto to it and pull herself free. She rested for a moment, straightening her wings, and thanked him in a very shaky voice, for it was still rather frightening to be so close to his mouth, where his enormous and sharp teeth waited. And then she flew away, never to see him again.

Well, Fox continued on his walk, feeling rather strange, for he was not used to doing nice things for others. And so he complimented himself all the way home that evening, "Good Fox! Good Fox!"

The years passed, and Fox grew older, and began to grow a little gray in his fur, as many of us do. He ran more slowly now, and it was sometimes harder to catch food, but he was as clever as he had ever been. One afternoon, he had chased a field mouse into a corner made by some huge boulders, and was just about to gobble him up, when a great shadow fell over Fox -- something *huge* must have been standing right behind him. Fox

turned around, forgetting about the mouse, and behind him was an enormous dragon. As big as a house, and as scaly as a snake, with fire coming out of his nostrils, and a smell like a forest fire -- oh, it was terrifying!

Dragon was so big that there was no around him. Fox had chased Mouse into this corner, hoping to trap her, and now here he was trapped himself! He thought fast, but no clever tricks came to mind -- I mean, unless you have a fire extinguisher, how do you fight a dragon? Well, just at that moment, a buzzing sound filled Fox's ears -- he thought maybe he was getting ready to faint from the fear, but the sound just got louder and louder. A huge black cloud was descending around him from all directions, and he could soon see that it was made of flies -- millions of flies. He had never seen so many flies! He didn't know it, but these were the great-great-great-great-great grandchildren of that little Fly he had rescued years ago. He had completely forgotten about her, but apparently she had been busy! The millions of flies swarmed around Dragon's face, blinding him, and filled his eyes and ears with buzzing and tickling. Soon Dragon was covered completely with tiny flies, and amazingly, the weight of all those flies pushed down and down and down on him, until he fell to the ground, covered in buzzing wings and tickling legs.

Well, Fox didn't waste a moment to wonder at this amazing thing, but ran around Dragon before he could get back up, and scurried off into the forest. As he disappeared into the trees, he thought he heard a million tiny voices crying out, "Thank you, Mr. Fox! Thank you, Mr. Fox!" You'd never think that something as tiny as a fly could be important, would you? But, even though the weight of a snowflake is nothing, the weight of a million accumulated snowflakes can break even the strongest tree's limb. There is power in numbers, and who knows what may happen if you do something nice for someone you don't know?

### **Reading from *Small Wonder* by Barbara Kingsolver**

My husband, an ornithologist who studies bird populations, was once amazed, in a little, out-of-the-way pet shop, to see an Indian hill mynah on display in a cage. He asked if there was a captive breeding population of these birds -- a possibility that seemed unlikely. The man in the store said no, the mynah had been captured in the wild in India and brought here to be sold as a pet. My husband was shocked to hear that; these birds were already known to be declining, though this was some years before their capture and sale became strictly illegal. He asked how the pet-store owner could justify selling a bird that was in danger of being extirpated from the wild.

"We're keeping it safe," the man explained without a twinge of remorse. "Somebody will take good care of it."

"But you've taken it from the wild. It's gone from the breeding population," my husband protested.

"But it's right here, still alive," the man replied.

“Yes, but you’ve essentially killed it. Even if there were a mate for it somewhere, they probably wouldn’t reproduce, and that’d be a dead end anyway. Genetically speaking, this bird is dead.”

The pet-shop fellow looked at his bird, which must have seemed to him very much alive, and insisted, “It’s extremely dangerous for these birds in the wild. By keeping this one as a pet, we’ve saved its life.”

Both men restated their arguments a few times until it was clear they had reached an impasse. My husband left the man and the bird that day, but he has never stopped thinking about this semantic deadlock over what it means to “save the animals.” For all of us whose first biology lesson was Noah’s Ark, it is hard to unlearn the fallacy that sparing just a few of anything can provide some sort of salvation.

## Reflections

When we consider the significant moments of the past year, we gain the benefit of hindsight that works to bring all of our stories into a more coherent history. I find it an interesting experiment to reflect back upon the events of the recent past and see how they have already begun to take on a bit of distance -- being able to stand outside an event is a necessary part of gaining what I think of as an “understanding” of our past.

In addition to the other descriptions of what makes humans uniquely what we are, that is, *Homo sapiens*, the thinker, and *Homo habilis*, the tool user, anthropologist Ernest Becker has also coined *Homo poeta*, the meaning maker. If there has been a single direction to my career as a minister and scientist, it has been to understand better humanity’s persistent hunger to wring meaning out of the various events of our lives, our demand, above all, to know *why?* This interest of mine has taken on a historical bent of late, and one of the realizations I’m coming to terms with is that the exercise of our meaning-making faculties is able to happen only in reverse. That is, what I call “understanding” does not have access to events of the future, is only beginning to dawn for what is happening in the present, and only arrives in full flower as events recede into the past and are put into context with our larger story. I’m reminded a bit of the process by which I create a sermon: in the days before I am to preach, I have gathered a collection of fragments which may or may not be related to each other, and I begin to string them together like beads. Some find a place on this week’s string, others are put aside for another day, and some never end up being useful. What makes them a sermon of any value, though, is how they are strung together with their neighbors, and how the whole hopefully has greater meaning than its parts. Unlike the Roman god Janus, who had two faces, one looking forward and one looking back, we are only able to be present in this moment and look backward as we join moments together into a coherent story. This is our gift, and this is our fate.

I note two reasons why events often look different in retrospect from how we experienced them in the moments when they were unfolding. The first reason is that our experiences lose their immediacy and become a kind of mental fossil in our memories. We store our interpretations like the archiving of a particular version of a film, and rarely

outside of psychotherapy do we consciously revisit those memories with the intention of re-editing them.

The second reason that we look back on past events differently is because we now know more of what has happened since -- we know how their stories have continued. All of the possible ways an event could have progressed have collapsed into a single outcome, and now we know what happened next. Because we now see events strung together into a larger narrative, we understand them with new insight and concern. My comprehension of a concealed weapon law, for example, takes on new qualities if there has been a recent shooting in my community. Unlike Janus, who could look forward into the future, we cannot know what meanings we will be able to ascribe to events until they are part of our past.

An important consequence of this need for distance, and perhaps the central concern of this sermon, is that we also cannot know what meaning today's events -- and particularly today's *choices* -- will eventually gain as they become part of our history. When I think of the choices I've made, it's interesting to note that many seemingly innocuous steps led to surprising changes of direction for my life. Meeting a particular person who introduced me to a new interest, learning to play the violin, reading a certain book, not paying attention at a stop sign -- I could not have guessed that such simple moments would unfold into something much larger. When the first creatures gained the ability to live on land, they were merely seeking new ways to find food, escape predators, and perpetuate their species -- who could have guessed that it would all lead to iPods, fast food, terrorism and spirituality? So many ripples of consequence have brought the world from then to now, and my mind boggles as I think of all the possibilities that could have been, collapsing to bring us all to this one singular moment.

One of our culture's most familiar chronicles of unintended consequences is a story of humanity's beginnings, that of Adam and Eve. Most of us are familiar enough with the story to know that the two of them are exiled from Eden for the sin of disobedience, but what follows is often forgotten: all of their descendants -- that is, all of humanity -- are punished as well, with the pain of childbirth and the toil of working the ground for our food. When theologians interpret this story, one of the conclusions we come to is that this is also a coming-of-age story for humanity: no longer living as infants in a world where everything is taken care of for us, we are thrust into the harsh reality of responsibility... all for eating the beautiful fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

This raises an important point, then, about unintended consequences: since we can't foresee where today's choices will lead us, what should we base our decisions on? Not seeing the future, how else can we choose by what makes the most sense in the moment? When we recognize how surprising and far-reaching the consequences of present events can be, it would be easy to be overwhelmed into paralysis at what the future might bring. Do I choose this path, or this one? But what if...? But what if...?

Another passage from Barbara Kingsolver's book of essays raises this very concern with an issue of global import, the growth of terrorism:

This new enemy is not a person or a place, it isn't a country; it is a pure and fearsome ire as widespread as some raw element like fire. I can't sensibly declare war on fire, or reasonably pretend that it lives in a secret hideout like some comic-book villain, irrationally waiting while my superhero drags it out to the thrill of my applause. ... We who live in this moment are not its cause -- instead, a thousand historic hungers blended to create it -- but we are its chosen target: We threaten this hatred, and it grows. We smash the human vessels that contain it, and it doubles in volume like a magical liquid poison and pours itself into many more waiting vessels. ... This terror now requires of us something that most of us haven't considered: how to defuse a lethal enemy through some tactic more effective than simply going at it with the biggest stick at hand.

The image that comes to my mind as I read these words is that of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, which many of us know primarily from Walt Disney's animated film *Fantasia*. Having magically animated a broom to do his chores for him, the Apprentice soon finds himself in over his head in unintended consequences. Fortunately, the Sorcerer returns in the end to rescue his assistant from the chaos he has created. I wonder, though, who will rescue us from the consequences of our ham-handed role in the response to terrorism?

There was a time a few centuries ago when the Western world would have been largely in agreement that we could rely upon God to steer us through difficult choices and rescue us from disastrous consequences. God, we believed, knew the whole span of time like Janus, from beginning to end, and therefore, guided history with a particular outcome in mind. Whether or not we understood or appreciated it, whatever happened was with a greater purpose behind it, and that was a source of comfort in a time of trial.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, scientific insights seemed to eliminate the need for theological explanations, leading us to the modern worldview so familiar today. We understand the universe and its events as a sensible chain of cause and effect, essentially an enormous billiards game or clockwork machinery, in which every event unfolds in perfectly predictable ways. As with all successful worldviews, however, we placed all our trust in the wisdom of Newtonian physics, and assumed that nothing more was needed for perfect understanding of the cosmos and our lives. And, with Unitarian Universalism being a religious movement exceedingly receptive to the insights of science, I believe that we too overbalanced in our confidence that we could know and control all the circumstances of our world.

One of the most interesting recent scientific developments, which speaks to this wish for knowledge and control, is the field of chaos and complexity science. We began to realize in the 1980s that, even our best efforts on the most powerful supercomputers at predicting, say, the weather, fell apart beyond a certain point. Like looking through a fog, the farther into the future we tried to see, the fuzzier the picture was; even the best mathematical models yielded moderately reliable predictions of the weather only about as far as three days forward. Just as in our everyday lives, meteorologists have realized that

even the smallest event can grow into serious unanticipated consequences, hence the maxim that the flap of a butterfly's wings can cause a hurricane on the other side of the globe. In a marvelously scary Ray Bradbury story that I re-read this week, a big-game hunter travels back in time to hunt *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, and returns to the present to find it horrifically changed, all because of a tiny butterfly he accidentally stepped on while he was in the past.

We cannot know where our choices, even our best-intended choices, will lead us to. One of the concerns I have had with the idea of an all-powerful God or of perfectly-comprehensive physics is that we are apparently left with no free will of our own, since the future is already perfectly mapped out for us by a divine plan or the implacable workings of science. While this question remains one of the central puzzles for philosophers and psychologists, we certainly *feel* that we have the will to make our own choices, and we must in any case struggle to make our peace with their consequences. I think about our particular history as a religious movement, and the number of surprising turns it has taken. For example, the promoters of democracy and intellectual freedom during the Enlightenment could not have known that their noble ideals would partly fuel the bloody excesses that followed during the French Revolution, so vividly portrayed in one of my favorite novels, *A Tale of Two Cities*. More recently, the religious liberals who promoted the relaxing of morality and behavior during the sexual revolution could not have foreseen how destructive that freedom could be in the congregational setting, but the result has torn apart our communities and left many in our movement betrayed and wounded by clergy misconduct. In our own congregation, those who worked hard to make First Unitarian Society a welcoming and successful place could not have guessed that it would become so popular that many of them would eventually feel pushed out of their own religious home. Even our historic building has taken on meaning and influence that we could not have predicted.

What can we do that will protect us from these unanticipated turns of fate? How can we guarantee that our choices will not spin out into surprising consequences? Of course, we can't do any such thing, and in fact the illusion that humanity *can* completely control our outcomes has been responsible for so much disappointment and grief. I recall a clever skit that the teen group from my previous congregation had presented one Sundayf, in which they acted out everyday encounters where someone's feelings ended up being hurt. One of them carried with her a large control panel made out of cardboard looking like the set of buttons on a CD or DVD player. Whenever a situation got out of hand, Jenny would yell, "Stop!" and press the STOP button, whereupon everyone would freeze. She would then press REVERSE, and the whole scene would be quickly rewound, complete with backwards movement and squeaky backwards sounds. Pressing PLAY, they would then replay the scene in a different way that enabled it to reach a happy ending. If only our lives had such buttons, or had the "Undo" function of our computers' word processing programs! The point of their skit, though, was that we *don't* have these magical functions, and therefore must bring to bear the guidance of wisdom and love to choose our actions well the first time.

If we have no way of knowing precisely where our choices will lead, and no way of undoing and replaying the past, we are left with the difficult task of choosing a different response. I have met quite a few people who are weighed down with regret over the turns their lives have taken, and despair at their inability to make reality conform to their dreams. I want to affirm that, just because we can't know for sure what the future will bring, we needn't throw up our hands in despair and helplessness. Chronic regret is one of the most pernicious thieves stealing our quality of life, and to live with a part of ourselves always in the past, unable to find peace of mind over what we've done, is one of the most miserable fates I know. Another terrible fate is to respond to our lack of control by shutting down -- going through our lives with hearts closed, or numbed by an escape into distractions, entertainment, and creature comforts. I wouldn't wish these living deaths on anyone, and in any case I don't think that these responses are our only option. I think that our teen group had it right in affirming that living boldly in the midst of unanticipated consequences finds its form in wisdom and love.

I believe that we become able to respond in *wisdom* by educating ourselves about our past and seeing the present moment as part of a larger picture. As Kingsolver's husband argued in our reading, what seems at first a compassionate response toward one isolated bird may actually be a destructive response on a larger level. Stepping outside the fishbowl of our needs in this time and this place informs us about choices that may make a positive difference in the future.

I believe that we are able to add *love* to our wisdom in the integrity of our relationship to the world, in bringing our deepest values to the choice of our next steps. Not content to leave the future to the cynics or the nihilists, we can stake our humble claim by doing what *is* in our power, with the tools of compassion, justice and hope. Love is not giving up on the world and leaving it to the forces that exploit despair and helplessness. Love is making our choices from the depths of our truest selves, letting go of the demand that the future be our possession, and being at peace with the complexity of this life.

Although the future is not ours to know, and the best intentions may sometimes lead to consequences we never wanted, it is our lot to make our best choices nonetheless. We are not robots, merely living out our programming, nor actors in someone else's play, but sculptors of a work whose shape is only partly visible to us all. I wish you all wellness and joy in the new year, and hope that you will find in the events of your life many opportunities to nurture the coming future with wisdom and with love.