

## The Unfairness of It All

By Michael A. Schuler

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### Gleanings From Contemporary Sources

#### From Philip Simmons\*, *Learning to Fall*

**E**pimetheus, the Greek God who is said to have fashioned the first human beings out of mud, was presented by Zeus with a beautiful bride named Pandora. In accepting her, he brings pleasure, companionship, and love into his house. He also brings a curiously heavy box with instructions never to let it be opened.

I remember being told this story as a child, and how upset I was when Pandora, giving in to curiosity and desire, opens the box, releasing evil and death into the world. It was like the Red Sox losing in the ninth inning—we can come so close!

It has taken me a long time to understand that—like the Red Sox losing—the ending is inevitable. The box had to be opened. When Epimetheus chooses Pandora he chooses the box, too, without knowing the full implications of that choice. Merely by desiring Pandora he has, in a sense, already opened the box. Pandora, like Eve, her counterpart in Hebrew scripture, brings the knowledge that good and evil are inseparable, a wisdom she bears in her woman's body, the site of a loved and familiar intimacy between pain and pleasure, blood and birth.

These stories are not about distinguishing right desires from wrong ones, or choosing between righteousness and sin. Rather, they tell us that desire itself, regardless of its object, enmeshes us in a world more complex than we first imagined, a world in which pain and pleasure enter our homes together.

Choosing the world means choosing all of it—joy and sorrow, health and illness, rapture and rue.

\*Philip Simmons was diagnosed with ALS, a fatal, wasting disease, in 1992. A professor of literature at Lake Forest College, he died in 2002.

#### From Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;  
Weep, and you weep alone.  
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,  
But has trouble enough of its own.  
Sing, and the hills will answer;  
Sight, it is lost on the air;  
The echoes bound to a joyful sound,  
But shrink from voicing care.

Rejoice, and men will seek you;  
Grieve, and they turn and go;

They want full measure of all your pleasure,  
But they do not need your woe.  
Be glad, and your friends are many;  
Be sad, and you lose them all—  
There are none to decline your nectared wine,  
But alone you must drink life's gall.

Feast, and your halls are crowded;  
Fast, and the world goes by.  
Succeed and give and it helps you to live,  
But no man can help you die.  
For there is room in the halls of pleasure  
For a large and lordly train,  
But one by one we must all file on  
Through the narrow aisles of pain.

### Reflections

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The week after Christmas has always struck me as a particularly difficult time. The gradual build-up to the holidays, the heightened expectations, growing excitement, and pent-up energies have all been released in a great burst of giving, getting, singing, and celebrating. And then, except for cashing in those gift cards and exchanging unwanted merchandise, it's over. Perhaps in times past Christmas lingered for twelve full days, but in the 21st century it's become pretty much a one-shot deal.

"In American culture," mental health professional Renee Rivera comments, "We really make a big deal over the holidays, and at times we raise our expectations to unrealistic levels. Then we get sad or depressed when we don't have this "It's a Wonderful Life" kind of Christmas."

And so we are left now to cope with the post-Christmas let-downs: dreams that were unfulfilled; regret over too much self-indulgence; credit card bills still pending; the lamenting of another year so quickly gone; the prospect of a cold and slippery winter ahead; concerns over the state of the economy and the future of our increasingly fragile democracy.

Yes ... there are still New Year's celebrations in the offing, but for many that probably feels rather anticlimactic after all the Christmas hoopla. This is a time when it may take a little more effort than usual to get back on track and renew out relationship with life.

Now, what I have just outlined may *not* be your experience of the holidays. You may be one of those

people who have figured out how to keep the whole over-hyped business in proper perspective and have avoided making too great an emotional investment in Christmas.

If so, good for you! And I would hope that at other times of year, and under comparable circumstances, you exhibit the same sort of coping skills, for they can come in very handy. Regrettably, complaints of disappointment and discontent with life in general are all too frequent. Quite often people *do* feel let down—that they aren't getting a fair shake or their rightful share. Less grateful than we should be for the benefits life bestows, we are also less than gracious when denied the rewards to which we feel entitled.

The question I would like for us to ponder today is this: if we aren't able to *alter* life's unfairness or undo its difficulties, what options remain? How do we reconcile ourselves to life as it really *is* and *must* be, instead of ranting and railing because it doesn't reliably deliver the goods.

Now before delving any deeper into this subject I must concede that my own personal acquaintance with grave disappointment and serious life calamity is somewhat limited. I cannot remember a childhood Christmas after which I felt cheated by Santa Claus or short-changed by my parents. We didn't have the resources to support a lavish holiday celebration, but they were always quite agreeable and continue to be so.

Life, on the whole, has been good to me. I suspect that my parents—who are still alive and thriving in their mid-eighties—would say that of their three children I have been the most fortunate. I have escaped the emotional afflictions with which some of my relatives have struggled. I've been able to keep running and working out for thirty-five years without serious injury and have never had major surgery.

I've also had the privilege of living in some of America's most beautiful and stimulating communities, visiting its most notable sights, working in a demanding but deeply rewarding profession, watching our only son blossom into a talented artist and of enjoying the companionship of the same loving woman for 40 years.

When Trina's life was threatened by malignant melanoma ten years ago, she received first-class, conscientious medical care, as well as tremendous

spiritual and emotional support from members of this congregation. We have a nice home in a safe and friendly neighborhood. The book I am now trying to finish has found a good publisher, and the people who work with me here at First Unitarian Society are both competent and congenial.

Truth be told, I really have very little to complain about. Were I to speak *only* out of my own experience today, the title of these reflections would be not the "Unfairness" but rather "The Good Fortune of It All."

I really have no idea why the first 57 years of my life have turned out as well as they have, but I am profoundly grateful for what the Fates have arranged on my behalf. Even if my world turned topsy-turvy tomorrow, I think I would *still* feel that I had lived abundantly and enjoyed more than my fair share of the world's bounty.

It would probably be fruitless to try to account for one's good fortune. Clearly, I was blessed with some pretty decent genes that have allowed me to stay healthy and avoid some of nature's more nasty genetic afflictions. I'd also note that Trina and I have been pretty sensible in our decision-making over the years. We are both hard workers with a firm sense of personal responsibility. Those things help. They improve life's odds.

Nevertheless, others have made seemingly wise choices and worked well. They have minded their Ps and Qs, but still missed the boat. There's no disputing the role just plain luck plays in any person's rise or fall, and no one can truly be said to be the master of his or her destiny.

Although my own story does not feature much of what the German's call *sturm und drang* (i.e., storm and stress) my calling as a minister has brought me into contact with many, many individuals who have dealt with far more difficulties in their daily lives.

There are those who have lived for years with ALS or multiple sclerosis, those who've been paralyzed or suffered brain damage in accidents. Others I serve have lost infants or children, and there are single parents struggling to support a family and maintain a stable homelife. I talk to teachers who were denied tenure, mid-life professionals victimized by down-sizing, graduate students with debt in six figures. More than a few otherwise capable people I know deal with substance abuse, eating disorders, gambling addictions. Many parents are fretting over their willful, wayward children, and countless children feel alienated from their parents.

I wonder at times how these beleaguered souls are able to face such adversity without succumbing to bitterness or harboring resentment toward those whom fate has dealt with more gently. Quite frankly, the people I know who have been so severely tested have often amazed me with their grace, courage, and coping ability. They have given me much to ponder, and an attitude to emulate when life lets me down as, at some point, it almost certainly will.

From what I have seen and read over the years, it seems apparent that people who handle trials and tribulations well share certain traits of character and employ similar strategies. Here, then, are a few that bear mentioning.

First, is the ability to keep things in perspective—to not presume that the “good life” is all about reaching wonderland and leaving behind this world of woe. The aim is not to escape but to reconcile ourselves to the more objectionable aspects of life. Gordon Hinckley writes:

Anyone who imagines that bliss is *normal* in life is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he’s been robbed. The fact is that most putts do not drop, most beef is tough, most children grow up to be just people, most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration, and most jobs are more often dull than otherwise. Life is like an old-time rail journey—delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders, and jolts, interspersed only occasionally with beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed. The trick is to thank God for just letting you have the ride.

When we have “proper perspective” we are able to see and to accept life *whole*. We find value and meaning in that which is dark and difficult as well as in that which is easy and light; in what is distressing as well as delightful. According to the noted Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron “things come together and they fall apart,

... and the healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen ... room for misery and for joy.... Getting the knack of relaxing in the midst of chaos, learning not to panic—this is the path of the spiritual warrior.

Resolving to live in the moment is a second fruitful practice. Much of our suffering and frustration stems from haunting memories of an unpleasant past and dread of the unknown future. When we create opportunities to relax into the sensations and emotions immediately before us, we gradually

become less anxious and more curious about things; less rejecting and more accepting of the world as it is. Attention to the present, Miriam Greenspan suggests,

**A**ttention to the present, Miriam Greenspan suggests, creates the proper conditions for a sort of inner alchemy that transforms grief into gratitude and fear into wise self-awareness.

In his collection of tales from wisdom teachers in the Hasidic Jewish tradition, Martin Buber shares the experience of one rabbi who had suffered his entire life from a painful ailment similar to rheumatoid arthritis. Now an old man, Rabbi Eisik was asked by his doctor how he managed to endure such constant discomfort without complaining, to which he replied:

You would understand that readily enough if you thought of the pain as scrubbing and soaking the soul in a strong solution. Since this is so, one cannot do otherwise than accept such pain with love and not grumble. After a time, one gains the strength to endure the present pain. It is always only the question of the moment, for the pain which has passed is no longer relevant, and who would be so foolish as to concern himself with future pain?

Those Hasidic rabbis were not only tuned in to the present, they often exhibited a subtle sense of humor, and that, too, can also make a profound difference. This is one of the qualities that make a spiritual leader like the Dalai Lama so winsome. He is not all pomp and circumstance like the Pope, and is quite the opposite of those scowling Middle Eastern ayatollahs.

What impressed me about His Holiness when he visited Madison and our own Meeting House several years ago was how tickled he was by his own imperfection and by the vagaries of human behavior. I suspect that a lively sense of humor has helped keep the Dalai Lama upbeat even as the thousand-year-old culture he represents has come under siege and may not survive. Humor, then, is a third resource at our disposal.

But when queried about the future of Tibetan culture, the Dalai Lama becomes serious and philosophic. Like Judaism, he says, Tibetan Buddhism

may have to become a religion in prolonged exile. He understands, then, that some very painful and difficult conditions cannot be fixed; they just have to be accepted. Thus a fourth strategy for coping with one's afflictions, according to Philip Simmons, is to learn to look at life as "a mystery rather than a problem."

This isn't easy for Westerners because, Simmons writes, we are all raised with an Aristotelian mindset. We observe, we analyze, we diagnose, and we try to make things right. "We've gotten so good at this method that we apply it to everything," he says.

A great many of life's problems *are* amenable to solution, but when we run into one that is not, a little more Lao Tse and a little less Aristotle would be in order. Taoist wisdom teachings tell us that there are times when we simply have to "let go and enter the flow," to stop fighting the irresistible current and let it carry us through wild, unexplored territory to unforeseen destinations.

Fifth and finally, there is the matter of self-expression—finding proper outlets to share our

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experience and express our sentiments. This is particularly important when life begins to feel overly oppressive. If we get "stuck" in that negative space, our stress increases and we are more likely to become seriously depressed or physically ill. Now, by "expression" I don't mean kvetching and complaining to anyone patient enough to hear us out. But whether it takes the form of prayer, journaling, art work, or even lighting a candle during joys and sorrows, we need to realize how expression contributes to healing.

I offer the foregoing not as an expert in such matters, but merely as a thoughtful observer. Philip Simmons, who spent his last decade dealing with ALS, is the real expert and with his words I will close:

The imperfect is our paradise.... May we attend with mindfulness, generosity, and compassion to all that is broken in our lives. May we live fully in each flawed and too human moment, and thereby gain the victory.