

Unitarian Society of Hartford
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Small Wonders: Unexpected Moments That Change Our Life

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Reading - The reading today is from Margaret Wheatley's book "Leadership and the New Science." Margaret Wheatley writes about the universe around us from the perspective of Complex Adoptive Systems (CAS) theory. I have always thought about life – esp. human life – as the ultimate example of a Complex Adoptive System. She writes:

One day when a child, I stood beneath a swing frame that towered above me. Another child, older than me, told me of the time a girl had swung and swung until, finally, she looped over the top. I listened in silent awe. She had done what we only dreamed about, swung so uncontrollably high that finally not even gravity could hold her.

...No longer, in this relational universe, can we study anything as separate from ourselves. Our acts of observation are part of the process that brings forth the manifestation of what we are observing...Particles remain as fuzzy bundles until they are observed. Only then do they become a thing.

...John Archibald Wheeler, a noted physicist, states that the ultimate constituent of all there is in the universe is the `ethereal act of observer-participancy.` The universe, he says, is a particular universe. ..We do not, as some have suggested, create reality but we are essential to its coming forth. We evoke a potential that is already present.

..."For years I had struggled conceptually with a question I thought important: In organizations, which is the more important influence on behavior – the system or the individual? The quantum world answered that question for me with an authoritative, `It depends.` What is critical is the relationship created between the person and the setting. The relationship will always be different, will always evoke different potentialities. It all depends on the players and the moment."

Small Wonders: Unexpected Moments That Change Our Life

Good morning fellow Unitarians - and a special good morning to any first time visitors today. Obviously I am not BJ Jamestone, our minister, but come back some time when she is in the pulpit. It will be well worth your time.

Speaking of BJ, she paid me a visit recently when I was recovering from my prostate cancer surgery and asked me, "So, when you found out you had cancer, is that one of the moments you will talk about?" I told her, "No. I want to talk today about completely unexpected moments that sneak up on us, but leave us changed forever." And one more caveat. Such moments can obviously have both a positive or negative impact on us. Take, for example, the eight or 10 year old who is sexually molested by his or her favorite relative whom they trusted implicitly. To be sure, such a moment usually has a powerful, often life-long and negative impact on that young

individual. I could (and often have) talked about the impact of such experiences. But that would be a psychotherapy talk. No, today, this Sunday morning, in this Sanctuary and at the start of Christmas season, I want to talk about moments to celebrate, positive moments of change.

Here is the plan for this sermon. I will talk about three such illustrative moments from three different periods in my life – and in the process hopefully get you to think about similar such moments in your life. I will then conclude with what makes these moments so unique and so special.

The setting is the summer of 1946 in post WW II Germany. I am 5 ½ years old. My mother, whose only child I was at that point, said to me, “Alfred, I want you to sit down and listen to me carefully about something very important. You see this bundle of reeds in my hands that I use on you when you behave really badly? I am now breaking them into small pieces and will never use them on you ever again!

I can still feel that momentary rush of triumph and freedom – but it was momentary indeed because she wasn’t done yet and continued, “Instead of the reeds, next time you misbehave, I will sit down with you, and we will talk about **what** you did, **why** you did it, and **what** you need to change in your behavior.

She kept her promise – and we had many talks about the **what’s and why’s** and her expectations of change from me. I can recall vividly thinking so often at those talks, “Mom, just bring the reeds back!” She, of course, was teaching me one the rich lessons in life - a wisdom that goes all the way back to Socrates about “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Years later, when I decided to become a psychiatrist/psychotherapist after my internal medicine training, she asked me once, “So tell me, Al, is a psychiatrist a real doctor?” With a smile on my face I answered, “Yes, Mom, it is a real doctor – and not only that, it’s all your fault I ended up that way.” She knew, of course, what I meant.

It is now summer of 1955. My Mom remarried when I was eight – nine years old. They had three more children and we had all moved to the US in 1953. My stepfather was manager of a dairy farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. A well-to-do gentleman farmer owned the farm by the name of Philip Naumburg. A couple times a year Mr. Naumburg enjoyed being a farmhand for a day on his farm. He and I had just finished unloading a truckload of hay bales in the barn when he turned to me and said, “Good job, Al. I enjoy working with you (as I did with him). You are a good worker, and your parents tell me you are also a good student. So tell me what do you want to be someday?” I remember feeling both embarrassed and dumb-founded. I had never been asked such a question before and mumbled something about wanting to go to college. He continued, “Of course you want to go to college – I mean about the rest of your life. Watching you, I think you would make a great doctor or lawyer. Let me know when you decide and I’ll have you talk to one of my friends.”

I don’t remember what I said, but what I do remember in that very instance is the sense of my self-esteem, my sense of believing in myself, went suddenly from ground level to the top floor of the court house, the tallest building in my hometown, Doylestown, all because someone with whom I had a positive father-like relationship, believed in me and took the time to mentor me at an unexpected moment. A good 40 plus years later I tracked down Mr. Naumburg’s address in Santa Fe where he had gone to build a concrete business empire and I wrote him a thank you letter and let him know what happened to me and how important a role he had played in my becoming a doctor. He wrote me back and told me how much he appreciated hearing from me

but then added, “I am delighted to know about my role in your life Al, but in all honesty, I don’t remember that talk”.

How telling about these moments of wonder. They happen quietly, and powerfully to the person being affected by them. The other person is important – he or she, after all, as Wheatley observes, helps put the swing in motion – but it is you and I who experience it as that gravity defying moment of profound internal change.

The final such moment took place right here in this Sanctuary in the early – mid 1980’s. We had back then the “January series,” four Sundays of lay-led services with a related theme for all four Sundays. I was in charge of this particular Sunday. Our guest speaker was an African-American Unitarian minister who would speak on the notion of freedom from the black cultural perspective. I had picked out a wonderful reading from the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott that would go with this topic. Right before the service, Nat Lauriant, our minister and ever the micromanager, said to me, “Al, I am cutting out the reading today. The service is too long.” I felt devastated and angry but swallowed all that and went on with the rest of the service.

My parents were visiting us that weekend and came to the service. Over lunch at one of our favorite Glastonbury restaurants my stepfather then turned to me and in a kind, gentle voice said, “Al, you seem upset. Is anything wrong?” At which point I unloaded about my anger at Nat, about how unappreciated I felt by him that morning and how Nat had great difficulty understanding the effects of his often abrupt, thoughtless actions. My stepfather nodded approvingly and said, “I think I understand now, but you know what, Al, sometimes in life you just have to learn to forgive and move on.”

I felt nonplussed and was speechless because I suddenly realized – whether my stepfather realized it or not – that for me he wasn’t talking about Nat Lauriat and me, but about me and him. In all those years together, we had had a very rocky ‘father-son’ relationship. He was an emotionally young 28 year old man when he came into my life and I was an idealistic 8 - 9 year old who had all kinds of unrealistic expectations about what would happen in this relationship. And when that didn’t happen, I swallowed my disappointment, hurt and my anger and moved on - but also had never given him another chance. But I heard him clearly that Sunday at lunch. He was as clear as he could ever be to apologize for the hurt of the past. But it was also a challenge from him to me to try to heal this relationship and try to start by forgiving him. Truly to forgive – what a difficult notion and what an important one, and one that was put front and center in my life by someone I least expected to ever be able to do that to me. I worked at it in a new way, as did he. It was too late for a father-son relationship but we became good friends and I became a more forgiving person. I kissed my stepfather only once in our life together – the last time I would see him just before he died from cancer. I kissed him on the forehead when I said goodbye to him and meant every bit of it.

Hopefully, by now I got some of you to recall similar moments in your life. What can we say about these small wonders – I dare say miraculous moments in our life? Most of all, they all happen unexpectedly. All of them start out gently like the waves floating in smoothly and rhythmically unto the beach – but then all of a sudden, out of seemingly nowhere, comes the tsunami and after the 20 seconds or so of being and feeling overwhelmed, we are changed forever - from inside out – yes, inside out.

What makes that possible? Wheatley provides an important clue. Recall her comment, “What is critical in the relationship created between the person and the setting... is the interaction of the

players.” And what exactly happens is both understandable on one level and, quite frankly, a bit mysterious on other levels. Clearly, you and I, at such moments, are allowing the other person to have an impact on us. This effect is probably quite unconscious but it sets in motion the swing that very soon “defies the effects of gravity” – or, if you wish – the ordinary. As I think about these moments, the connective link becomes my wish or need to be understood in some new way by myself. But all of that is at first quite unconscious. And what makes that possible is both the timing and the direction of the “push” or insight – generated so unknowingly by the other person.

But then I am lost; my rationalizing does not fully explain the transformational power of these moments. It is a power almost like no other I know. It took me a long time but I am finally old enough to admit that a good part of these powerful, celebratory moments in our life also have a spiritual component. And how well do we know the limits of reason to deal with that aspect!

Being Unitarians, we undoubtedly have many different explanations for these celebratory, powerfully transformational moments. For me, I am comfortable simply ascribing a good part of these moments to that Unitarian God-force within me helping me to adapt more creatively to the complexity of what you and I agree is for each and every one of us our own unique individual adaptation to life within ourselves, but shaped also by life around us.

However **you** want to explain these moments to yourself, I hope you can free yourself up every now and then, swing on that swing set and let yourself defy gravity!

Peace and joy to you all!