

## LIVING ON THE EDGE

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For responsive reading, see the end.

### PRELUDE

It can take a long time to create a sermon, but only twenty minutes to give it. Then that sermon is gone, not to be repeated. But there are exceptions. Before David Bryce started his sabbatical, he, Katharine Canfield, and I revised and preached again the sermon *Being Born and Letting Go*. The present sermon was given three years ago. I told Ariane Frank that I could do better with *Living on the Edge*, and she kindly allowed it.

### READING

*Your parents had to couple at precisely the right moment for the one possible sperm to fertilize the one possible egg that would result in your conception. . . . Going back ten generations, this miracle must repeat itself one thousand times . . . From the turn of the twelfth century until today, we each have, mathematically speaking, approximately two and a half million direct ancestors. . . .*

*And that's only the egg and sperm part of the miracle. Remember, each of those ancestors had to live to puberty. For those whose bloodline twines through Europe – and there were like tragedies around the globe – not one of your millions of direct forbears died as a child during the great plague, for instance, which mowed down half of Europe with its mighty scythe.*

---Forrest Church

### SERMON

I have terrible news: The Sun just blew up. [Look out the window.] We cannot know it yet, because the resulting deadly flash of light and gamma rays will take eight minutes to reach us. Eight minutes. [Set timer for eight minutes and turn it AWAY from the audience.] This means that before I am done speaking this morning all human life on Earth will be wiped out.

I appreciate your willingness to spend your last few minutes of life considering with me the incredible odds against you personally being here at all, then understand why your future does not yet exist.

Of course I start with my own past.

My mother's mother was born in 1865, at the end of the Civil War in what was still called Bleeding Kansas. When she was a young woman, my grandmother had a terrible pain in her abdomen. Back then no one knew about the appendix, at least not in Bleeding Kansas, but sooner or later my grandmother got well. A few years later she had another abdominal pain. By then they knew about appendicitis and opened her up. Her appendix was gone. During her earlier pain, my grandmother's appendix had burst, which at that time was almost always fatal.

She survived; as a result I am here talking to you today.

Before my father was born, two earlier boys were born to his parents. Each of these boys died within a year because he could not obtain, or keep down, enough milk. My father was headed for the same fate when the doctor brought to his parents a can of Carnation Condensed Milk, then new on the market, and said, "Why don't you try this?" [Show Carnation Condensed Milk can.] My father survived to have me.

As a result I am here talking to you today.

I am slightly embarrassed to admit that John Howland, who arrived on the *Mayflower*, is an ancestor of mine. Half way across the Atlantic, John Howland fell overboard. He could not swim, and was saved by grabbing the topsail halyard, a rope that happened to be dragging in the water. Not only did he survive, but John and Elizabeth Howland had ten children and a staggering eighty-eight grandchildren. No wonder so many New England white folks are descended from John Howland!

Because of that topsail halyard rope dragging in the water, I am here talking to you today.

Of course there is nothing unique about the perilous improbability of my life. Yours is equally improbable. Go back only one generation. When your parents went about the business of conceiving you, how many genetically different people could have been born? A consultant tells me that this number is more than a trillion times a trillion times a trillion -- multiplied by itself 34 times. Each variation would have produced a different you. Go back ten generations and the number of different individuals that could replace you sitting here today multiplies exponentially. Worse: If any single one of your two thousand ancestors in ten generations had moved -- or failed to move, or died as a child -- one of the couples in your recent ancestry would not have met and you would not be who you are. Welcome!

Valentin Frank has revealed a family secret: His parents Ariane and Stefan Frank knew each other as children. How often does that happen? It was not true for any of my wives; I met each of my (two!) future wives completely by chance. I love my children -- and

Carla's child -- but their genetic makeup is just as random as that of every person who sits here today.

What do we learn from all this? That each of us is absolutely and unique; nobody who has ever lived or who ever will live is exactly like you. Your very existence at this instant balances on the razor's edge of impossibility.

The uniqueness of every individual reminds me of the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism: the worth and dignity of every person. To me this First Principle parallels the scientific facts of our improbable existence on the edge of the past.

So our first key idea is that the past has created each of us unique.

So much for the past. What about the future? I hope to convince you of a second key idea, namely that your future is completely and totally unpredictable. I dramatize this by saying that your personal future does not yet exist.

When I said, "The Sun just blew up!" I expected Jack Dennis or his MIT student Ken Bernstein to shout, "How do you know?" Both special and general relativity tell us that no message can travel faster than the speed of light. It takes eight minutes for light to travel to us from the Sun. Therefore we will not know for eight minutes whether my shout is correct.

Suppose I am correct, and in (now) two minutes we will all die in a world-wide blaze of destruction. Does science have anything to say about this? Sure! It says, "Wait and see." The whole purpose of science is to predict measurement and observation and to compare the prediction to what happens.

[Look out the window.] So far, so good.

You cannot predict what will happen next, especially for a single person. My sister Ruth had melanoma -- skin cancer -- that retreated into her lymph system. She was waiting to see which of her internal organs the melanoma would attack first. Ruth expected to die within a year. Instead she had a heart attack in her doctor's office and went into a coma from which she never awoke.

According to Matthew Chapter 6, Jesus came to a similar conclusion: QUOTE ". . . do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? . . . So do not worry about tomorrow . . . Today's trouble is enough for today." UNQUOTE. Jesus says that your future is in the hand of God. A more secular UU member might say,

“God only knows what your future will be.” In either case your personal future is unknown.

The stoic philosopher Epictetus also had a similar idea. He said that we can reach happiness only when we let go of the things that we cannot control. Apply Epictetus’ words to your future: You can reach happiness only when you understand that your future does not yet exist, so it is ridiculous to worry about it.

Our individual futures may not yet exist, but we all “play the odds” in making plans and raising children. Statistically it’s a good idea to look both ways before you cross the street. Future economic growth is likely to be based on technological development, so if your niece enjoys science and mathematics she has a leg up in her professional life. It’s also a good idea to be known for telling the truth and for loyalty to your friends. Eat your veggies. You do not need me to extend this list.

So every person in this room lives on the edge of time, between a past that created each of us almost totally randomly as a unique individual, with a personal future that does not yet exist. Indeed, every one of us lives on *multiple* edges. Every interesting job has multiple edges -- that is to say, possibilities. Every person you meet might become your church colleague or best friend or lover or marriage partner.

How do we respond to this situation? How do we live in this fundamental human condition?

We already mentioned a first answer: Acknowledge the worth and dignity – and uniqueness – of every person. *There*, that makes this a Unitarian-Universalist sermon!

Second, insofar as possible, choose edges that are meaningful to you. If you always turn in your income tax at the last possible minute, you are living on an edge that has zero deep meaning. In contrast, creativity and discovery *always* exist on an edge -- an edge that you may choose.

Third, each of us has some elbow room to choose a direction in life, or at least a deviation from what is happening now. Deviate in a direction that you treasure and enjoy: "Do what you love, the money will follow," is a slogan that Carla and I call "A Lie to Live By." The money may NOT follow, but you should do what you love anyway. Should you take a drop in income to follow your heart? Must you suffer under a boss that exploits both you and your colleagues? Maybe, but if so what are your coping strategies, such as meditation, counseling, job search, or advice from professionals and friends? You do not need me to add to this list either.

Fourth and finally, every summer the lay-led worship services give us what I consider to be the most important answer: Live in the present. You and I together only in *this* moment. It's true that we can predict our future for the next half hour with a *measure* of confidence: some singing, some tea and coffee, some conversation. Let us enjoy it together -- now that the Sun still shines.

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[When the timer rings:] Well, guess I was wrong about the Sun blowing up.  
Lucky us!

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## REFERENCES

*Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow* by Forrest Church, Beacon Press, Boston, 2008, page 102. “**Frank Forrester Church IV** (September 23, 1948 – September 24, 2009) was a leading Unitarian Universalist minister, author, and theologian. He was Senior Minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, until late 2006 when he was appointed as Minister of Public Theology.” (Wikipedia) His father was Frank Church, US Senator from Utah 1958 to 1981.

*Mayflower* by Nathaniel Philbrick, Penguin Books, 2006, page 32.

Responsive reading, next page

## RESPONSIVE READING

### Why I'm Here

Jacqueline Berger (2010)

Because my mother was on a date  
with a man in the band, and my father,  
thinking she was alone, asked her to dance.

*And because, years earlier, my father  
dug a foxhole but his buddy  
sick with the flu, asked him for it, so he dug  
another for himself. In the night  
the first hole was shelled.*

I'm here because my mother was twenty-seven  
and in the '50s that was old to still be single.  
And because my father wouldn't work on weapons,  
though he was an atomic engineer.

*My mother, having gone to Berkeley, liked that.  
My father liked that she didn't eat like a bird  
when he took her to the best restaurant in L.A.*

The rest of the reasons are long gone.

*One decides to get dressed, go out, though she'd rather  
stay home, but no, melancholy must be battled through,  
so the skirt, the cinched belt, the shoes, and a life is changed.*

I'm here because Jews were hated  
so my grandparents left their villages,  
came to America, married one who could cook,  
one whose brother had a business,  
married longing and disappointment  
and secured in this way the future.

*It's good to treasure the gift, but good  
to see that it wasn't really meant for you.  
The feeling that it couldn't have been otherwise  
is just a feeling. My family  
around the patio table in July.*

I've taken over the barbequing  
that used to be my father's job, ask him  
how many coals, though I know how many.  
We've been gathering here for years,  
so I believe we will go on forever.

*It's right to praise the random,  
the tiny god of probability that brought us here,  
to praise not meaning, but feeling, the still-warm  
sky at dusk, the light that lingers and the night  
that when it comes is gentle.*