

What Do You Expect?

A Sermon Delivered on January 5, 2020
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“My heart is a window, my heart is a slide.
My heart can be closed or opened up wide...
My heart is a shadow, a light, and a guide.
Closed or open... I get to decide.”*

-- Corinna Luyken

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Meditation: by Vanessa Southern, a piece entitled: 'Even This Is Enough.'

[There is]
So much undone.
So much to do.
So much to heal
in us and the world.
So much to acquire:
a meal
a healthy body...
a [friend]...
a job...
proof we have and are enough
just around the corner of now.

And up against it the reality of all that falls short and the limits of today.
We honor the limits:
If your body won't do what it used to, for right now let it be enough.
If your mind won't stop racing or can't think of the word, let it be enough.
If you are here utterly alone and in despair, be all that here with us.
If today you cannot sing because your throat hurts or you don't have the heart for music,
be silent... [it's ok]

The world won't stop spinning on her axis if you don't rise to all occasions today.
Love won't cease to flow in your direction,
your heart won't stop beating,
all hope won't be lost.

You are part of the plan for this world's salvation,
of that [...] have no doubt.
The world needs its oceans of people striving to be good
to carry us to the shores of hope and wash fear from the beach heads,
and cleanse all wounds so they can heal.
But oceans are big and I am sure there are parts that don't feel up to the task of the whole
some days.

Rest, if you must, then, like the swimmer lying on her back who floats,
or the hawk carried on cushions of air...

Perhaps then you will feel in your bones,
in your weary heart,
the aching, healing sense that
this is enough—
even this.

That we are enough.
You are enough.
Enough.

First Reading: by the Oklahoma poet and preacher's daughter Kaylin Haught, a poem entitled "God Says Yes To Me"

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes

Second Reading: by the former bookseller and jazz pianist, and also Buddhist teacher, Gary Thorp, from his book *Sweeping Changes: Discovering the Joy of Zen in Everyday Tasks*, from a chapter entitled "Tinkering with Perfection" (p. 125)

It is said that a wooden Buddha cannot pass through fire, and a clay Buddha cannot pass through water. What this means, of course, is that we all have our limits and weaknesses. ... There's no point in our striving to become something or someone else. When we recognize and accept who we are, we no longer feel the need to change.

Most of us try to live exemplary lives; we really do try to do our best. But there's no need for us to try to do *better* than our very best. Consider the simple act of washing a coffee cup, for example. When you wash the coffee cup, you do not need to do a perfect job. You do not need to try to make the cup perfect or worry about whether you yourself are perfect. You don't measure the temperature of the water or agonize over the pH balance of the soap. You just wash the cup. If you handle the cup with care, there will be nothing separating you from the cup. There will be no daydreams or distractions, no recriminations, no ideas of self and other, no barriers between you and what you're doing. There will just be washing the cup, and your entire life will be in it.

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Did you know that this past week, Tuesday evening at midnight to be more specific, marked the end of the best year ever?

Or at least that is the provocative point Nicholas Kristof made in his New York Times column last week. “In the long arc of human history, 2019 has been the best year ever,” he writes. Since modern humans emerged 200,000 years ago, 2019 was the year in which children were least likely to die, adults were least likely to be illiterate, and people were least likely to suffer excruciating diseases.

Historically, almost half of all humans died in childhood. Today child mortality is down to 4 percent. Just fifty years ago, half the world’s population was illiterate and living in extreme poverty – that’s living on less than \$2 a day. Today it is less than ten percent.

Every day for the past decade newspapers could have carried the headline “Another 170,000 Moved Out of Extreme Poverty Yesterday.” Every single day 325,000 people got their first access to electricity. Every day, more than 200,000 got piped water for the first time. And diseases like polio, leprosy, and even AIDS are in steep decline.

Now, Kristof wasn’t saying everything in the world is sunshine and roses. Climate change continues to be a huge threat to the planet. Economic inequality, racism, sexism, and countless injustices demand our attention. Millions of families are struggling and need help.

But he is concerned that often times we focus too much on everything that is wrong in the world and our lives, and not enough on what is right. A deep pessimism about the state of the world can end up paralyzing us, rather than empowering us. Excessive gloom and doom can leave us feeling not just hopeless but also helpless. And that would be a tragedy.

* * *

So, when you look to the future, when you look to 2020, what do you see? What do you expect? Are you hopeful or fearful? These are important questions, because our expectations will shape our perceptions, and our perceptions will shape our actions.

This is not a new insight Kristof has come up with. But rather a new angle on an ancient religious idea. A like the way it’s conveyed in the Hindu tradition. Maybe you’ve heard the story:

Once upon a time there was a man who wandered the world seeking his deepest desire. He traveled from one city to another, looking for perfect fulfillment and happiness, but in all his wanderings never found it. Finally one day, tired from his

search, he sat down underneath a great banyan tree at the foot of a mountain. What he did not know is that this was The Great Wish Fulfilling Tree. Whatever one wishes for when seated underneath it immediately becomes true.

As the man rested in his weariness he thought to himself, “What a beautiful spot this is. I wish I had a home here,” and instantly before his eyes a lovely home appeared. Surprised and delighted he thought further, “Ah, if only I had a partner to be here with me, then my happiness would be complete,” and in a moment a beautiful partner appeared calling him “husband” and beckoning to him. “Well, first, I am hungry,” he thought. “I wish there was food to eat.” Immediately a banquet table appeared covered with every wonderful kind of food and drink, main courses, pastries, sweets of every variety...

Finishing the meal the man sat back down to lean against this wonderful tree and began to reflect, “How amazing it is that everything I wish has come true. There is some mysterious force about this tree. I wonder if there is a demon who lives in it,” and sure enough no sooner than he thought this than a great demon appeared. “Oh my,” he thought, “this demon will probably eat me up,” and that is just what it did. (The End.)

* * *

We all have our limits and weaknesses. We are imperfect people, living in an imperfect world. We often imagine that if only we could overcome our limitations, if only we could transform our weaknesses into strengths, if only we could acquire great wealth or worldly success – then we would find perfect fulfillment and happiness, and satisfy our deepest desires.

And yet – as the story tells us – trying to satisfy our deepest desires can be a big mistake. Even if our wildest dreams and desires are fulfilled, our expectations may nevertheless lead us astray.

That’s why Buddhist Gary Thorp says there’s no point in striving to become something or someone else. Better to recognize and accept who we are. Then we will no longer feel the need to change. It sounds so simple. But it isn’t easy to do.

* * *

In his book *The Soul’s Religion*, the American author Thomas Moore grapples with this same issue. He talks about his experience counseling men and women, who hope to change their lives. He says,

“I am always suspicious when people tell me they want to change. I assume that someone has given them the impression that they are not all right as they are. So I often say, “You’re all right. No need for change.” But we all know we could be better in some ways, some of us more than others. My concern is that the fantasy of change can get us into trouble. Yes, we can all be better, but if we try to be better according to any idea we have or someone else has given us, we will only get

caught in a maelstrom of self-improvement. And all that chaos is full of ego. Any change that takes place from that center is bound to make us worse, not better.”

Thomas Moore is known for writing the best-selling book *Care of the Soul*, in which he shares wisdom gleaned from his years working as a Jungian psychotherapist. But before Moore studied psychology, he was a Roman Catholic monk, and lived in a religious order for 12 years.

Throughout his life, Moore struggled with his own notions of perfection, which changed considerably over the years. He says,

“I have always liked to write, but I never had any desire to be a writer. My long and strenuous education was aimed at being something else – a musician, a priest, a teacher. I never wanted to have a family and imagined perfection as living in blissful solitude. Now I am a gray-haired father of two children, and I’m painfully aware of my imperfection in that role.

I wish I could play and write music much better than I can. I would love to know many languages, but I don’t have the aptitude for them... People have many glowing fantasies about me because of the themes of my books, and I seem to disappoint them time after time, as I often disappoint myself. I have made many mistakes and done a lot of foolish things, but when I look back at the person I was, I feel affection for him and laugh at him.”

Despite his considerable gifts and great accomplishments, despite his rich and varied life journey, Moore remained profoundly aware of his own shortcomings. For many years, a voice inside his head told him he was not good enough. For Moore, that voice was rooted in his religious upbringing.

In his experience, traditional religion tends to disregard ordinary individuals and focuses instead on some perfect ideal. It expects everyone to believe and live alike. It often presents morality as negative conformity to standard values: don’t do this, don’t do that.

He writes:

“In fifty years of church-going I don’t recall ever hearing from any church pulpit about creating and discovering my own individual spirituality. I was never encouraged to follow my [own] intuitions and passions. I was never inspired to assume my own kind of responsibility in a needy world but only to adopt minimal standards. I was told to be a saint, but later in life I discovered that the real saints are people who go against the current of culture and often against church rules and expectations.

... [Our] annoying preoccupation with perfection may be a corruption of the proper spiritual calling to be a prophet. Certainly we can all stand up at times and complain about the state of things and try to inspire... improvement. This is the calling to justice, which is a profound way to fulfill your spirituality.”

* * *

We all try to live exemplary lives. We all try to do our best. But we each have our limits and weaknesses – just like the wooden Buddha who can't pass through fire, and the clay Buddha who can't pass through water.

This is the way of the world, and it's OK. We don't have to try to do better than our very best. We simply need to do our part. Like when we wash a coffee cup. We don't need to do it perfectly. We don't need to fret and worry and agonize about the perfect water temperature or the perfect balance of soap. All we need to do is pay attention to the task at hand. Fully present. Fully engaged.

If you do this, Gary Thorp writes,

“Looking around, you begin to see the “rightness” of things, the true value they offer. (Look at the world around you, look at the people around you.) Giving your attention to things costs you nothing, and you have an unlimited quantity of attention to give. . . . As you become more aware of the nuances of the things before you, you gradually come home to your own true self. You begin to . . .to accept your [unique] place among things. Compassion comes forward to meet you, without your own wild striving, meddling, or interference.”

* * *

We are imperfect people, living in an imperfect world. We each have our limits, but still, we are enough – and the world needs us, just as we are.

The world needs oceans of people like us striving to be good. The world needs us on the shores of hope, each of us doing our part to wash fear from the beach heads. Each of us doing our part to cleanse all wounds so that they can heal. We are each part of the plan for this world's salvation.

As the poet tells us: God loves us, just the way we are. Even if we are melodramatic, God says yes to us. Regardless whether we are short or tall, regardless whether we want to wear nail polish or not – God says we can do just exactly what we want to. God says: Yes Yes Yes.

In the days and weeks ahead, may we embrace our true calling to be prophets, yearning for justice.

May we find ever-new ways to stand up and complain about the state of the world, and may we do our small part to bring hope and healing, and help make things a little better.

So be it. Amen.