

Surprise¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading: You, Darkness Rainer Maria Rilke²
You, darkness, of whom I am born--
I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illumines
and excludes all the rest.

But the darkness embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people and nations—just as they are.

It lets me imagine
a great presence stirring beside me.

I believe in the night.

Sermon

I remember waking up early on Christmas Day, in a fervor of anticipation to see what Santa may have brought us. Some years my siblings and I would wake at 4 or 5 a.m., but our parents made a rule—we were allowed to get up only if it was after 7 a.m. If it was after 7 a.m., we could wake up our parents, and then my dad would go downstairs, and turn on some Christmas music and the lights of the tree. Then we could climb down the stairs to behold the pile of presents under the tree.

We were so excited to see what surprises might lurk under the red and green and silver and gold wrapping paper. In our family, we extended the pleasure of opening gifts by opening them one at a time, so we could watch our siblings' delight as well as our own. Being the oldest of several children made for a thrilling holiday morning.

When we are young, surprises are a delight. Maybe for you, it was a Hanukkah gift or a birthday surprise. Maybe it was a new puppy brought into your family, or a card from a grandparent in the mail with a dollar inside.

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² From *Rilke's Book of Hours*, trans. Joanna Macy & Anita Barrows (Riverhead Books, 1997)

However, as we get older, we learn that surprises are not always delightful. Some surprises can bring deep pain or sorrow into our lives. A sudden illness or accident, the death of a loved one, a financial setback, a betrayal by a partner—these losses are all the more devastating when they take us by surprise. Our hearts freeze, we feel a sense of profound shock, our balance is upended, and it can take a long time to heal.

No wonder then that as we grow older, we have a more uneasy relationship to the idea of surprise. No wonder that we grow to prefer predictability to surprise. As I was preparing for today's topic, I found myself noticing my own aversion to surprise, and wondering what wisdom others might have about the topic.

I discovered a book called *Surprise*, with the subtitle, "Embrace the Unpredictable and Engineer the Unexpected."³ Authors Tania Luna and LeeAnn Renninger describe themselves as Surprisologists. One of them is a research scientist, and the other has a business creating surprise adventures for people. They start the book with a little quiz—think about what your answers might be: "Do you prefer when: A) Things go according to plan? or B) When the unexpected happens?"

I don't need to think long to say that I prefer when things go according to plan. Just this week I got very cranky when Margy and I experienced a variety of unwelcome surprises in some work in our new house. As many of you know, we are in the process of moving to a new home in Portland as part of our desire for more ecological living. We haven't moved yet, but we have some carpenters doing work in the house, and we've also been arranging for new insulation and the installation of Air Source Heat Pumps.

Friday, when Margy and I went over to the house, we saw that the floors being restored in some expanded doorways were really horrible to look at. There were cuts in the wood in visible locations, and cracks between the segments. There was a big gap where a piece of cut tile should have been replaced. Definitely not according to the plan. I called the lead carpenter, and he assured us he will make it right—this was work done by a less experienced member of his crew. In the meantime, to add to the disruption of our plans for the day, we spent several hours waiting for a technician who was supposed to come at 10:30 a.m. to clean the furnace.

But here it is. The unexpected happens. Whether big or small, it would be a rare week if everything went according to plan. According to the research of Luna and Renninger, most of us would prefer control and predictability. But they also discovered that our most happy moments and our best memories are those that contain an element of the unexpected.

³ Tania Luna & Leeann Renninger, *Surprise: Embrace the Unpredictable and Engineer the Unexpected*, (Perigee Books, 2015)

So, they ask, how can we bring back into our lives that element of delightful surprise, if we may have lost it? And how can we build up our resilience so that we can more easily embrace the unpredictable aspects of life?

In many ways, our world is becoming more and more unpredictable. The rate of change has increased exponentially. Just one example--eleven years ago, Facebook did not exist, but now, almost 75 percent of people who use the internet, use Facebook. And just twenty years ago, less than 1 percent of the world population used the internet. Now it is 40 percent.

Change has become a constant in our society. Luna and Renninger discovered that we need to have a balance between familiarity and surprise. If things get too familiar, we feel bored. But if there is too much surprise, we feel anxious. With all of the unpredictability in our world, no wonder that we feel anxious and wish for things to go according to plan. So, paradoxically, one of the first steps to becoming more open to surprise in our lives is to create more stability for ourselves, to expand our sense of grounding—this grounding is an important part of what builds resilience.

The authors offer some suggestions to create a sense of stability. One of the most important is social support. In their research, they looked at events that happened in Chicago during the heat wave of 1995. The temperature reached 125 degrees. More than seven hundred people died over the course of five days. Not surprisingly, the hardest hit areas were poor neighborhoods—except for one.

The Auburn Gresham neighborhood had fewer deaths than all the other neighborhoods—even fewer than affluent areas. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg tried to figure out why. The key difference was the closeness and stability of the neighborhood. During the heat wave, people checked up on each other, shared information and resources, and they spent time in air-conditioned buildings together instead of isolated and alone.⁴

What the authors learned is that having stable and supportive people in our lives can help us to weather the unexpected problems that come our way. It is not about having any kind of people in our lives—if the other people around us are also anxious, or using destructive behaviors, their influence can multiply our own anxieties or destructive behavior. If we want to build resilience we need stable people in our lives.

Some other tools for grounding include fostering traditions, habits, rituals and routines. The authors noted that some highly creative people will go so far as to standardize many aspects of their lives—even wearing the same clothing every day—to leave room for discovering surprising new ideas and experiences. So if we are feeling stressed about too much unpredictability in our lives, or if we've just experienced a not-so-nice surprise, we might also use this as a way to lower our stress. We can practice routines and rituals that stay the same each day.

⁴ *Surprise*, p. 49.

Perhaps, like me, you like to take a walk each morning, or eat breakfast at a certain time. Those kinds of habits are good for easing the stress of too much unpredictability in other areas of life.

Another way to build resilience for the unpredictable is to learn to reframe difficult experiences to find the opportunities that might exist within them. The authors write: "Reframing isn't just a superficial attempt at positive thinking... [but a way to help your brain to process events differently.]"⁵ To learn to reframe, they propose asking the following questions concerning negative events that happen in our lives:⁶

1. What are the bright side effects?
2. What have I learned?
3. What do I want?
4. What's the solution?

Even the most difficult experiences can offer something good to us. A year ago in September, I got the surprising news that my father had just had a stroke. It has been a challenging year for him and for our family. But when I went to visit my dad while he was in the rehab hospital, we had some of the closest moments of our lives as father and daughter. During this past year, I have visited my parents four times, and talked to them frequently on the phone. I have been able to hear stories of my dad's life that I hadn't learned before, and some of the religious and political tensions that had existed between us receded to the background.

There is no solution to the challenges of his aging, but I feel blessed to have the opportunity to deepen our relationship and I have cherished our time together. These have been the bright side effects of his stroke. I think he has cherished our time as well.

Another tool for building resilience is the ability to "move with change instead of moving against it."⁷ The authors write, "Surprise forces us to stop in our tracks, look within, look around, and consider new directions. The worst surprises are best at this. So often the path we are on is simply the one we ended up on. We are too busy walking to wonder if we're walking in the right direction." When something unexpected occurs, we have the chance to take stock of our lives, and sort out what we really want. They call it the ability to "Pivot: when a bad surprise taps you on the shoulder use it as an opportunity to go in a new direction."

Sarah Susanka, the architect author of *The Not So Big Life* writes about being obedient to what life brings to us—she doesn't mean we must passively accept everything that happens, but rather, "to fully engage whatever arises to the best of our ability and to process any reactions and judgments as they come up, without editing or suppressing anything."⁸ She believes that everything that happens can be "food and fertilizer for our flourishing."

⁵ *Surprise*, p. 51-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 58.

⁸ Sarah Susanka, *The Not So Big Life*, (Random House: 2007) p. 217.

She goes on to describe her discomfort with situations of confrontation, how she hesitated to share her direct feelings for fear of angering someone else. How important it was for her to begin to notice that pattern and uncover what came up in her, so she could learn to be direct—to deal with the difficult and uncomfortable as it arose. That resonated with me as I was dealing with my discomfort about the mistakes in the work at our new house.

On reflection, I was able recognize that it was hard for me to be critical of someone, that I preferred to be positive and enthusiastic. Deeper than that, I could see that I too was fearful of angering someone on whom I was depending. But I *was* feeling angry and it was entirely appropriate to express it. When I ask, "What can I learn here?" this negative surprise becomes an opportunity to learn more about myself and to grow stronger in my ability to express myself.

If we approach our lives as a spiritual journey—or if that word doesn't resonate, perhaps a journey of human development—then whatever happens becomes the material out of which to fashion our growth. I am reminded of something I learned about being a writer—for a writer, everything is "material"—everything can be used to craft the next story or poem or play. But we are all creators of our lives, and everything can be used to craft the story we make of our lives. What we make of our lives depends on our choices, and on our willingness to be open to what emerges.

What we don't know is the outcome. We live with a future that is a mystery to us. So despite our anxiety, despite our fears, we cannot make a life that goes according to plan. We can try, but it is an impossibility. If we could succeed in planning out every event of our lives, we would be bored to death. But if we let ourselves be vulnerable to life, we can experience life more fully and find deeper fulfillment and deeper relationships with those around us, all of whom are surprises waiting to be revealed.

Part of the process of opening our lives to the unpredictable is to cultivate an intention to do so. I remember the part in the Christmas story when the young Mary is visited by an angel. The angel announces that she will bear a child who will bring new life to the people. Mary first questions the angel about how this could be possible. But then, she takes on the challenge—she says, "Yes, let it be!" And her life opens into a totally new direction that she could not have anticipated. Her openness to the unpredictable helps her to give birth to the divine child.

I am reminded though of what Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Christian mystic, wrote: "What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago, and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born."

Each time a child is born, there is a surprise that emerges in our human community. Each of us living now is a new surprising being on this earth. When we are willing to say "Yes, let it be," we make room for birthing the gift we have to give to our world. We make room in our lives for a unique adventure. What a loss if we refuse to give that gift, if we refuse to accept that adventure. May we have the courage to say yes.

Reading: In words adapted from Sarah York⁹

Give us the child who lives within...

Give us a child's eyes, that we may receive the beauty and freshness of this day like a sunrise.

Give us a child's ears, that we may hear the music of mythical times.

Give us a child's faith, that we may be cured of our cynicism.

Give us the spirit of the child, who is not afraid to need, who is not afraid to love,

Who is not afraid to say yes. Amen.

⁹ From *Lifting Our Voices: Readings in the Living Tradition*, (UUA: 2015)