

Be Careful what you Wish/Pray For

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

January 6, 2019

Rev. Paul Beckel

*What does it profit anyone to gain the whole world and lose their own soul?
From the Christian scriptures, Mark 8:36*

*You can't have everything.
Where would you put it?
Steven Wright*

GATHERING SONGS

Morning has Come #1000
My life Flows on in Endless Song #108

WELCOME

Be careful what you wish for — for the new year. What we wish for doesn't always happen, of course, and that can be disappointing. On the other hand, sometimes our wishes do come true...and we find ourselves, in consequence, with new responsibilities.

Worst of all, if we're not being careful about what we're wishing for, that is, if we're not paying attention, perhaps we're unaware — and unappreciative — of all that we already have.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Bread and Honey* by Frank Asch

CHILDREN'S BLESSING

OUR PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

ERACISM Alan Friedlob

MEDITATION / SILENCE (5:00)

Sitting together in silence is an opportunity to not-think, not obsess, not judge or desire. Simply to be conscious to our immediate experience. Not even to desire that this time will pass more quickly, instead to appreciate that as beloved community, here and with countless others in faith traditions around the world, we are held in love.

MESSAGE, PART 1

What *about* wishes, prayers, desires, plans, intentions, expectations, goals, and resolutions?

If I were to preach today from the christian tradition, I would quote the biblical letter of James and say: Wishing and praying is insufficient; “faith without works is dead.”

If I were to preach from the jewish tradition, I would paraphrase the biblical book of Ecclesiastes which says essentially: “What are you whining about? Relax! Enjoy what you have. This is as good as it gets.”

If I were to preach from the buddhist tradition, I would focus on the concept of desire, and note that desire leads to suffering. So wishing, hoping, praying, planning, intending, expecting ... desiring ... are not only insufficient, these can be a path to pain.

And speaking of paths, the path to hell, of course, is paved with good intentions. So wishing praying hoping intending may not only get us nowhere, they may get us somewhere we don't want to be.

If I were to preach from the taoist tradition, I would tell the story of maybe/maybe not. You may recall: A farmer finds a wild horse. Her neighbor says oh wonderful, you are so lucky. More humbly the farmer replies: who can tell? The next day, taming the wild horse, the farmer's son falls off and breaks his arm. “So unlucky,” says the neighbor. Who can tell? Replies the farmer. The next day the army marches by looking to conscript every healthy young man; the farmer's son gets a pass. Et cetera.

In the new year more states now allow recreational marijuana use. Good, I think. Seems like a no-brainer. But it's interesting to look back on the trajectory of seemingly unrelated consequences when *alcohol* was prohibited, and then un-prohibited. Religious liberals like to call attention to the many progressive reform movements that we championed in the early 20th century. Prohibition not so much. Even though that movement was pushed along as part of the fight for women's rights, including their right to hold property independent of drunken husbands, and the right to divorce those husbands, and to vote for politicians who would close saloons.

But not all supporters of prohibition realized that it would result, for better and for worse, in NASCAR (country boys outrunning government agents), and a federal income tax, a nationwide crime syndicate, and eventually, for better or for worse, to the right to privacy – that eventually was extended to abortion rights.

We should be careful what we wish for because we might get it in excess. Or get it and then find out we didn't want it. Or we might get it, *and want it*, but find that it brings new responsibilities — or unintended consequences — for ourselves, and others.

Maybe you saw this coming, but I surely didn't: that a tool for global social networking would be a threat to the integrity of the American electoral process. Social isolation, sure, that was foreseen from the beginning, and online bullying, even the demise of journalism. But democracy itself?

I'm really excited about the prospect of self-driving vehicles. Safety, convenience, energy

savings, and a more egalitarian society. Seriously, and yet I suspect that some of you are rolling your eyes at my optimism.

The medical advances and biotechnology now available and still to come are pretty hard not to think of as *good* when you or a loved one stands to benefit. There have been many social forces converging over time, however, to bring caution to this kind of advancement. What I know most directly is that I've conducted dozens of memorial services and I've learned that — I've seen this in personal paperwork going back to the 1970s — that, among us at least, extraordinary medical intervention has been unwelcome.

I'm happy to see that within the last decade this is becoming more mainstream. But biotechnology roars ahead, for better and for worse. Pharmaceuticals and side effects.

And now smart homes providing security, energy savings, and convenience. Smart speakers at our command. I hope I am not becoming a stereotypical old curmudgeon. I'm generally enamored with technology. Artificial intelligence promises to bring the end of work for all of us. Halleluia! Perhaps.

The 2018 elections bring us to a new year, with new prospects for state and federal governance. Hurray for democracy which, having flowered in the Middle East over the last decade, has resulted in political gains for despots, warlords, and terrorist organizations — and increasing legitimacy for the Iranian theocracy. (Fifteen years ago I would have said this too about the danger of American theocracy, but the authoritarian movement has, since then, largely shed the pretense of religiosity.)

==

So, what then do we do? *Not* wish, ever? Not desire? Not plan or intend or expect or hope or pray? If, somehow, some of you can manage the cessation of all desire, terrific.

A more realistic alternative is to *be careful* about what we wish for. To be wise about it. If we're reaching high — like for the super bowl — to be prepared for disappointment. Even if we can never predict all of the consequences of our efforts and achievements, we can be attentive to the amount of work required for some of our wishes to come true, and some of the responsibilities that will come with success.

I think we wish *most wisely* when we're aware of the context from which we are wishing. There are conditions in our lives and in our society that we should not condone. Conditions we should and can find the courage to change. But how often do we wish for something better because we've become oblivious-to, or unappreciative-of, what we already have?

To be careful what-we-wish-for, we've got to be fully-conscious of what we've got. A little historical perspective may help. Today over 60 percent of Americans own their own homes. It's gone up and down but has stayed largely the same over the past 50 years. But a century ago home ownership was less than 20 percent. What made this possible? Another victory for the

progressive movement then promoting the suburban housing tract as a means to bring dignity, and some tranquility, into the lives of the working class.” [Gregg Easterbrook in *The Progress Paradox*]

The Great Recession showed us that maximizing home ownership came with great risks. Related questions, clearly, are not behind us. Do we support now the pros and cons of more urban density or the pros and cons of more suburban sprawl?

==

When Thoreau wrote *Walden* in 1854 he lamented that, with the expansion of the city into the woods, deer were becoming extinct. He feared that he would never see one. Now we wish they’d stop eating our gardens.

When Richard Nixon rode his presidential yacht on the Potomac in the 1960s, the river stank so bad that he rode inside with the windows closed. The Potomac is now so clean and inviting that signs can’t keep the swimmers out. And people drown there every year. [Easterbrook]

==

The *New Yorker* once published — it was humor, I think, a page of “frequently asked questions” to which people are directed when they receive three wishes (like from a genie or a magic fish). For example, no, you can’t wish for more wishes. Yes, you could wish to have all the money in the world which, of course, would destroy the global economy. No you can’t use one wish to ensure that the other wishes bring no negative consequences. And finally, be specific: if you wish for something like “untold riches,” you might end up with nothing better than attractive grandchildren, stimulating hobbies, or a clean bill of health.

SOLO

Life's a Funny Proposition After All

Music and Lyrics by George M. Cohan, sung by Scott Heise

MESSAGE, PART 2

On the other hand, being specific can lead to oversimplification. If we could only have this one thing, everything else would fall into place.

Also, being specific, which we are advised to do when we make smart goals, may be spiritually disastrous if it creates expectations. And I’m not talking about unreasonable expectations, or unlikely expectations, but expectations at all.

In my view, *prayer* can be meaningful when it comes in the form of expressions of gratitude, awe, or introspection. Regrettably though, that word has been thoroughly corrupted. The adage: be careful what you pray for” has come into being only because “prayer” is almost universally understood to be about hoping for, asking for, wanting something. In that form, I believe, prayer is no more than wishful thinking (which shouldn’t, by the way, be called thinking at all).

Now I'm not saying that it's possible to set aside all desires. But here's something I've found useful — an example of not being too specific, also known as hedging your bets. I'm kind of missing the snow I'd be enjoying in my native Midwest about now, that is, if it were the right kind of snow, in the right amount, at the right time.

Snow meant snowball fights with my kids, and snow forts, and sledding, and cross country skiing. A moderate snowfall also meant up to an hour digging the car out of the snow, which was good exercise, and caused many heart attacks and broken hips.

So I prayed for snow this way: I parked my car outside instead of in the garage. Then if it snowed, I was happy. And if it didn't snow, I was happy. In theory. Glory and Praise to mother nature.

I'll bet there are many other applications of this principle — ways to set ourselves up with a consolation prize even if the jackpot doesn't come through.

==

Mountain hikers and back country skiers now have such great cold weather apparel and communication devices that they can go on increasingly risky adventures.

Our favorite professional athletes get banged up, sewn up, drugged up, and come right back for more.

Hydropower produces electricity without carbon emissions. And threatens salmon, and orcas.

Dikes hold back swollen rivers to prevent floods here that lead to floods there instead.

Things have gotten so much better in weather prediction that the U.S. Weather Service has been sued — successfully — for failing to forecast an ocean storm that killed some fishermen.

Things have gotten so much better in medical care that utilization has increased exponentially. So if even a tiny tiny fraction of the time something goes wrong, medical malpractice becomes an enormous issue. When doctors were less capable, litigation was rare.

Perhaps the ancient teacher had it right in the short book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Scriptures, attributed to King David: where the author *repeated five times*: Eat, drink, be merry, and enjoy the toil you are given, for our days are short and no one knows when they will end.

What does it profit anyone to gain the whole world and lose their own soul?

==

Isn't it supposed to be that we reap what you sow? That we should work hard and thus be rewarded? Not according to Ecclesiastes, the "...*the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the*

strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.”

What is grace? What is serendipity?

Can these involve getting things that we did *not* wish for — or arriving at new levels of understanding and maturity in ways that we would not wish upon anyone. In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* Rabbi Harold Kushner, who lost a son to a childhood illness, writes, "I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of [my experience], and be what I was 15 years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose."

==

What would *you* choose? What do you wish for? A new job, a new relationship, a new church? Are these wishes good or bad — who can tell?

Are you looking for a partner, or a job, that will amplify your strengths? Or complement your weaknesses? Or are you rebound wishing: looking for a partner or job, or perhaps a church, which is exactly the opposite of your current or most recent partner or job or church?

Maybe every learning experience is something like the standard “three wishes” story. The first wish turns out to be careless, or excessive; so with the second wish we attempt to reverse the effects of the first one.

Then the third wish brings us around to where we started. But it also, finally, puts us in a position of some advantage — at least in that we’ve become wiser for having had to pick up the pieces.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

Many of us contribute to organizations that we appreciate for the work they do in our community. Not just as a transactional fee-for-service thing, where we hope we’ll get what we pay for ... but as an open-handed expression of faith in the goodness of an organization’s mission, which maybe for the benefit of others.

But what are the consequences of my asking for contributions to BUF? I genuinely believe that it is part of our mission to promote generosity because generosity, in itself, is good for the soul. And I know, through direct observation, that your generosity enables us to provide comfort to the afflicted, whether they are members or not, and affliction to the comfortable, members or not.

But this also puts us in the position of wishing wanting desiring the resources to enable us to fulfill our shared mission. So, I now invite you to give wisely, *and* to give generously.

SENDING SONG *Now let us Sing*

#368