

A THOUSAND TO ONE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
June 3, 2018

Reading:

People will tell you there are many good lives
Waiting for everyone, each fine in its own way.
And maybe they're right, but in my opinion
One is miles above the others.
Otherwise it wouldn't have been so clear to me
When I found it. Otherwise those who lack it
Wouldn't be able to tell so clearly it's missing
As they go on living as best they can
Without complaining. Noble lives, and beautiful,
And happy as much as doing well can make them.
But as for the happiness that can't be earned,
The kind it makes no sense for you to look for,
That's something different.

Carl Dennis (b. 1939), "Aunt Celia, 1961" (excerpt)

Sermon:

In his landmark 1973 book titled *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which revolutionized anthropology as dramatically as Einstein's theory of relativity revolutionized physics, University of Chicago anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes: "One of the most significant facts about us may finally be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life and end up having lived only one."

We each begin with a thousand possible lives and end up with only one. This is the insight that animates Carl Dennis's poem about his aunt Cecilia, which served as our reading this morning. Dennis first presents what he takes to be the typical view of life: there are many good ways of living that await us, and each way of living is fine in its own way. Well lived, each life can be noble and beautiful, even happy. Anyone who lives such a life, Dennis suggests, has nothing to complain about.

But, Dennis goes on to say, there's another kind of life altogether, one that makes no sense even to look for. It ushers in a kind of happiness that can't be earned. This kind of happiness, he concludes, is "something different."

What does Dennis have in mind? What is this different kind of happiness?

Anytime we ponder the nature and meaning of human life, we have to begin with its most fundamental and inescapable reality. It's not that we make choices as human beings, nor that our choices eventually develop in what becomes for each of us a singular way of life. Rather, it's that we are contingent creatures: our lives need not have happened at all, and they need not continue. We depend upon the largess of the natural world for our very existence, and we depend upon the people around us for the quality of our ongoing lives. The fundamental human reality is that our lives aren't necessary.

By the time I was in my early teens, my family had moved from the Conservative Mennonite farming community where I was born in Delaware to southern Arkansas, where my father started a mission church affiliated with a county-owned nursing home in El Dorado. Young men from Mennonite settlements across the US who had been drafted into military service (Mennonites are pacifists) worked in the nursing home for several years as a form of alternate service. Over a period of time, some of the young men, as well as some Mennonite young women who had voluntarily decided to serve, ended up staying in El Dorado after their term of service had ended. As the population of Mennonites in El Dorado grew, the need for a pastor became apparent, which is why my father was asked to move with his family to El Dorado when I was nine years old.

I should probably add at this point that I was a chubby child growing up, no doubt due partly to nature and partly to nurture. The morally austere culture of my Mennonite upbringing admitted relatively few pleasures, but one happy exception was food, which our bountiful gardens and farms supplied in abundance. As a result, I wasn't the only one who was chubby.

Besides, I had developed a fondness for my maternal grandmother's homemade bread, which she made fresh every day, amply slathered with her homemade butter and homemade strawberry jam. I also inherited my father's fondness for pie, which we also enjoyed in abundance.

As I entered my teens, however, I began to lose weight, which seemed like a good thing to me and to everyone else. As my weight decreased, my energy level increased, which also seemed like a good thing. At least at the outset, adolescence appeared to be smiling upon me.

When I turned 14, I decided that I wanted to work part-time after school in the nursing home kitchen. In order to qualify, I needed a work permit, which required securing medical clearance. My mother took me to our family physician, who conducted the required tests (the main concern was a TB test) and filled out the necessary paperwork. Mission accomplished, my mother and I headed for the door.

As we reached the far end of the waiting room, the doctor reappeared in his office door and called out to me, asking me to return. "I just want to check one more thing," he said. He asked me to hold out my hands, which I did. He noticed a slight tremor. "I'd like to run one more blood test," he said, "just to be on the safe side."

Two days later, I found myself in the hospital being prepped for surgery to remove a toxic thyroid (an exceedingly rare condition in young people, especially young males), which had caused my weight loss. As it turned out, the surgeon wouldn't decide it was safe to operate for about six weeks, given the high risk of a fatal heart attack. Although everything eventually turned out all right, it's almost certain that I would have died of a heart attack if our family physician hadn't paid attention to his instinct that something wasn't quite right.

But I didn't die, which is something of a miracle. More than that, I was alive in the first place, which is even more of a miracle. The most fundamental and inescapable reality of life is that we are contingent creatures: our lives need not have happened at all, and they need not continue.

The poet Raymond Carver died of cancer eleven years after he was told he had only six months to live because of his alcoholism. Confronted by the hard truth about his alcoholism and his impending death, Carver responded by transforming his life completely, extending his time on earth remarkably. His poem titled "Gravy" was one of the last poems he wrote before he died. Carver writes:

No other word will do. For that's what it was. Gravy.
Gravy, these past ten years.
Alive, sober, working, loving and
being loved by a good woman. Eleven years
ago he was told he had six months to live
at the rate he was going. And he was going
nowhere but down. So he changed his ways
somehow. He quit drinking! And the rest?
After that it was *all* gravy, every minute
of it, up to and including when he was told about,
well, some things that were breaking down and
building up inside his head. "Don't weep for me,"
he said to his friends. "I'm a lucky man.
I've had ten years longer than I or anyone
expected. Pure gravy. And don't forget it."

When it comes to the nature and meaning human life, we begin with the inescapable reality that we are contingent creatures. None of this needed to happen, and it need not continue. As human beings, we depend upon the largess of the natural world for our very existence, and we depend upon the people around us for the quality of our ongoing lives. This realization is the source of what Carl Dennis calls "the happiness that cannot be earned."

Here's the question that remains, for me at least: what way of life is a fitting response to the realization that human beings are sons and daughters of happenstance?

What Raymond Carver calls gravy, I call gratitude — an acknowledgment of what I have been given, as well as what I owe back in return. By gravy, I don't take Carver to be talking only about the good stuff on top of all the other stuff (a southern friend from my youth used to speak of "the icing on the gravy"). Rather, as Carver says, it's all gravy — all of it. Or as I prefer to say, it's all gratitude — all of it. The good stuff, the bad stuff, the easy stuff, the hard stuff: all gratitude. It's the gift of life that I've been given — the one life in a thousand that's fully mine.

Robert A. Emmons is a professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis and author of a book titled *Gratitude Works! A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity*. In his book, he draws an important distinction between feeling grateful and being grateful. He says, "We don't have much control over our emotions. We cannot easily will ourselves to feel grateful, to feel less depressed, or to feel happy." He goes on to say that our feelings follow from the way we look at the world — from the distance between our thoughts about the way things are and our thoughts about the way things should be. "But being grateful is a choice," he says, "a prevailing attitude that endures and is relatively immune to the gains and losses that flow in and out of our lives."

The key to the happiness that endures is an attitude toward life that is relatively immune to its gains and losses. It's a happiness that cannot be earned, but it also cannot be taken away. It's the recognition that it's all gravy — all of it. In spiritual terms, at least for me, it's all gratitude — all of it.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning contemporary American poet Lisel Mueller begins her poem titled "Alive Together" with the following lines:

Speaking of marvels, I am alive
together with you, when I might have been
alive with anyone under the sun,
when I might have been Abelard's woman
or the whore of a Renaissance pope
or a peasant wife with not enough food
and not enough love, with my children
dead of the plague...

Mueller goes on to describe a number of other options for how her life could have turned out — not a thousand options, but more than a few — and then she concludes the poem with these lines:

This poem is endless, the odds against us are endless,
our chances of being alive together
statistically nonexistent;
still we have made it, alive in a time

when rationalists in square hats
and hatless Jehovah's Witnesses
agree it is almost over,
alive with our lively children
who -- but for endless ifs --
might have missed out on being alive
together with marvels and follies
and longings and lies and wishes
and error and humor and mercy
and journeys and voices and faces
and colors and summers and mornings
and knowledge and tears and chance.

Today is our thousand-to-one chance to discover the kind of happiness that can't
be earned. It's all gratitude — all of it.