

# The Fool or the Magician

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I think I learned to be a fool from my father.

I admit that didn't always appreciate this about him –Certainly NOT when I was a teenager!

But lately I've come to view the legacy of my father's follies in a whole new light.

Let me give you a classic example of my father the fool.

I grew up in Fresno, which I have heard people refer to as the "armpit of California."

It is flat and dry, unbearably hot all summer, grey and cold all winter, sometimes with tule fog so thick there can be 15-car pileups on the highway. Yet not too long I heard my father describe again to someone the moment he fell in love with Fresno.

The year was 1948. He and my mother were newlyweds, and my father had just graduated from law school in Los Angeles, where they'd met. Now the two of them wanted to find a place to put down roots and raise a family.

So one spring day my father set out. He describes driving into Fresno and being overcome with amazement at its beauty. The San Joaquin valley floor was lush and green, with a riot of wildflowers and plum trees in bloom. As he headed East into town, there in front of him on the horizon rose the Sierra Nevada Mountains, still capped with winter snow, cumulous clouds curling among the peaks. That moment my father knew that he had found what he was looking for.

When I've heard him tell that story in the past, I've been mortified. I know how most of the world views Fresno, and he sounds ridiculous -- falling in love with Fresno...

But the last time I heard him tell this tale, instead of groaning inside, I felt an unexpected surge of love and respect for him.

I wondered: is he really a fool? – a cock-eyed optimist, oblivious and naïve as he perches, like The Fool on the Tarot card, on the edge of a precipitous cliff of being ridiculous...

Or -- is he really a magician? – a masterful artist, aware and adept as he wields the creative alchemy of his imagination and his dreams to transform an ordinary place like Fresno into a cherished home, where he and my mother went on to raise 4 children and where a few years ago they celebrated their Golden Wedding anniversary, surrounded by a lifetime's-worth of friends and family.

I have always been fascinated by this fluid, flirtatious boundary between fools and sages, between "illusions" and "reality."

Then when I read an article on depression by writer Andrew Solomon, I became even more intrigued. Solomon wrote that:

*Accuracy of perception is not an evolutionary priority. Normal human thought and perception is marked not by accuracy, but by positive self-enhancing illusions about the self, the world, and the future...*

Solomon cited the work of Dr. Shelley Taylor, a psychology professor at UCLA. In her book called *Positive Illusions*, Dr. Taylor explains that *the mildly depressed appear to have a more accurate view of themselves, the world, and the future, than do other people. The mildly depressed lack the positive illusions that promote mental health and resiliency in others, that help buffer others against set-backs.*

So what are these positive illusions that promote mental health and resiliency?

You may be familiar with some. Beliefs like—

You are more capable and popular than you really are.

Or that you have more control over events and the world than you really do.

Or that the future is rosier than it really is.

Obviously there is a treacherous underbelly here.

For one thing, there is an important difference between mildly depressed people who see the world as it is, and deeply depressed people who struggle with a debilitating, sometimes life-threatening medical condition.

But also, there's a challenge in not taking positive illusions too far.

For example, how do we draw the fine line between positive illusions that promote health and resiliency--and unhealthy delusions that promote damaging denial?

How do we prevent positive illusions from turning into the kind of complacency

that lulls us into a false sense of security, that stunts the creative fire in our belly, that allows us to forget the suffering and unacceptable inequities that inspire our work for justice?

Noam Chomsky warns that some of the most insidious forces we face in modern life are those institutions that benefit by creating a sense of reality that's not really real. There's a subtext to the rampant consumerism that permeates our culture.

"If you haven't found happiness, then you just haven't been to the right store, you just haven't bought the right product..."

As Unitarian Universalists, we know we must be vigilant against these dangerous, sometimes subtle forces of persuasion.

We know we must name and resist manipulation.

We know we must challenge misinformation and demand the truth.

We must raise our dissenting voices loud and clear to articulate sober, incisive, muscular critiques of oppression, as we continue our faith's long standing tradition of leading organized, meaningful action to carry our values of worth and justice and equity and interconnection out into the world.

No one would dispute that it takes sustained strength and tremendous courage to face the overwhelming, complicated problems of this 21<sup>st</sup> century -- violence, poverty, racism, terrorism, homelessness, unemployment, environmental degradation –

**BUT FACE THEM WE MUST.**

JRR Tolkien once said: *"It's no good to leave a dragon out of your calculations if you live near him."*

Yes, we know about the dragons. We also know about the fear, confusion and despair we feel when we face them.

Poet Mary Oliver asks - "Tell me your despair, and I will tell you mine."

But today I want to ask you a different question:

Tell me your hope, and I will tell you mine. Tell me your faith, and I will tell you mine. Tell me your love and your joy, and I will tell you mine. Because we cannot keep on moving forward without these.

A few months ago at my home congregation in Oakland, the youth led a Sunday service. I listened to one of the homilies in which a fiery, articulate young woman threw down her cynicism like a challenge – "The world is such a mess, why do anything?" she asked. "Show me the inspiration to do something."

To this young woman, and to my own two teenage sons, and to all the other youth coming of age in these tumultuous times, I reply: "I know the world is frightening. It is dangerous and broken. But it is also so beautiful. Please don't give up. Just look around at this beautiful world we live in."

I want to share with you some words written by the Reverend Dr. William Schultz, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1985 to 1993, now serving as the Executive Director of Amnesty International:

*How can any of us doubt the magnificence of a world that contains luscious pears and endless seas and jazz by Duke Ellington and paintings by Georgia O'Keefe? But to savor that magnificence... we need resources to buy the pear, we need time to visit the*

*sea. As basketball player Moses Malone so aptly put it: "If you don't got the ball, you sure can't shoot it." Religion's job is both to signal the gifts and to help everyone have a part in the unwrapping.*

*The Unitarian Universalism I love seeks to save the world because it is so precious.*

No wonder author E.B. White describes a kind of paradox he encountered, arising each morning "torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world."

It is my belief that to serve the world, we MUST take time to enjoy it. We must seek out ways to open our hearts to its beauty, to be inspired by remembering how precious it is.

One of the central tasks of a religious community, one of the reasons we come together like this, is to keep the flame of hope alive in one another.

As a community, we dance together in that creative tension between the world as it is and the world as it should, and perhaps could, be.

As we dream of possibilities, with the fresh luminous vision of the fool, and as we work to make it so, with the skilled and mature creativity of the magician, we must not forget to cultivate our own happiness like a beautiful garden, tasting the sweet juice of those luscious pears, feeling the rhythm of jazz and the waves of the endless sea.

André Gide, a brilliant French writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, called embracing joy a "moral obligation."

In fact, happiness is one of the highest states a human being can achieve, included by the founders of this country in the Declaration of Independence as one of our inalienable rights. And cognitive psychologists have discovered positive illusions woven into the very fabric of happiness. Dr. Taylor describes that "a good mood, such as that produced by a lovely piece of music, a view of the mountains, or a pleasant social gathering is uplifting. The conversation of one's companions can seem more brilliant and the wine, more flavorful."

It turns out that happiness not only enriches our own lives, but it also has the potential to benefit others. Because studies have shown that a happy person is more likely to help others in need; happy people make better workers and better parents. In potentially competitive situations, happy people act cooperatively, with benevolence, seeking out ways to increase joint benefits, rather than merely acting for their own self-interest. This reminds me of John Lennon's dream – "Imagine all the people... sharing all the world."

So how does one go about being happy? How do we find joy?

Dr. Taylor points out that Rodgers and Hammerstein songs reflect some of the methods people have found to lift their spirits, such as whistling a happy tune or thinking about one's "favorite things."

Believe it or not, psychologists have used similar techniques. Dr. Taylor explains that psychologists follow the example of Peter Pan teaching the Darling children, Wendy, Michael and John, how to fly. "Think of Christmas, think of snow." Psychologists lead the participants in their study to think happy thoughts, concentrating on pleasant experiences to make them happy. Dr. Taylor writes: "Before long, people exposed to these techniques, though unable to fly, report that they feel more cheerful, even euphoric."

So does this euphoria have a place in our quest to live as committed, engaged, justice-seeking activists?

What if it's all endorphins?

You know what? Whether it's endorphins or fairy dust doesn't really matter to me. Because to me, this feels like holy work.

Some of you may have seen the movie "Hook" where Robin Williams plays a grown up Peter Pan? Peter had forgotten who he was. In a twist of irony, he had grown up to become a modern pirate, raiding companies in corporate takeovers. When the evil Captain Hook abducted Peter's two young children, the only way Peter could save them was by finding his happy thought. Finally, he found it when he remembered the moment his son Jack was born. When he remembered that moment of amazement, of first setting eyes on his beloved son, that happy thought became the wind beneath his wings, uplifting him, reminding him how to fly.

And somehow it reminds me of my father, remembering again and again his moment of amazement when he fell in love with Fresno. That's one of his "happy thoughts" that helps him face what comes in-between those moments, where we live most of our lives – facing the daily task of renewal, of getting up in the same place, doing the same things, making our lives matter. Our moments of joy can remind us of what gives our lives meaning.

There's a song Billy Joel sings that I've always loved, called "For The Longest Time." It's got a catchy beat, the lyrics describing how alive he feels as he dares to fall in love again. My favorite line from the song is this: "I have been a fool for lesser things."

Think about it.

Haven't you been a fool for lesser things than daring to love again, than daring to dream of the world as one, than daring to search for hope until you find it?

Of course we can't ignore reality. There is tremendous suffering in the world. Daily life is a struggle. Self-deception can lead to evil. Fresno is flat and hot. But though pain and sorrow are powerful teachers, so is joy. William Blake wrote the words to the hymn we just sang: "Joy and woe are woven fine."

I feel such strong magic in the positive illusions I embrace – about what I can accomplish in the world, and how special my family is, and how blessed I am to have wonderful friends and a community like this one and my home church where I can express what is in my heart.

I've also had glimpses of such profound beauty and connection that I believe in some Great Love, in some Beloved Presence that moves mysteriously within, among, and beyond us.

Whether this belief is some kind of religious faith or a positive illusion, I don't know. But it doesn't really matter. Because what I do know is that it inspires me to live a better life.

So what inspires you? Where does your joy come from? What gives you the hope to get up out of bed each morning and make another overly optimistic "to do" list? I have one final story I want to tell you. For the past 15 years, my job has been working with law students studying for the bar exam. This can be a particularly painful ordeal for students who carry emotional baggage about the exam, such as those who took it before and failed. A few years ago, I worked with a woman named Kim who had taken and failed the bar exam 5 times. The first time she took it, her husband had been killed in a car accident two weeks before the exam. Talk about emotional baggage!

But after our first weekend class, she told me that as she was driving home, she was overcome with a sense of certainty that this time she would pass. As I got to know her, I found out that one of the tools she used to stay inspired was to play a song in her head, a theme song she chose for herself, to help her keep at it, to stay pumped. When she walked into the conference center on the first day of the bar exam, she was imagining her theme song playing loud and clear in her head [ROCKY] It was the theme song from the movie Rocky. Like Rocky, Kim was a fighter. She refused to give up.

And can you guess what news she got four months later when the bar results came out? The next day, I got a call and when I picked up the phone, all I heard was: [ROCKY] Kim fought hard for her dreams, and on that day, she won.

Like Kim, we can't give up. We must continue to fight for justice, for peace, for clean air and water, for everyone to have enough to eat. There's so much to do, and we cannot give up now.

To keep on moving forward, we need to remember to stay connected with our sources of hope and inspiration.

So whether it's Rocky or Rachmaninof,

whether it's the poetry of Rumi or the Raiders,

whether it's the beauty of the French Riviera or Fresno –

go out and find your happy thought.

Seek out that juicy joy that helps you savor your one wild and precious life.

Seek out what makes your eyes shine with love, and what opens your heart, giving you a glimpse of the divine and a reason to get up in the morning.

I thank my father for showing me how to live,

And I thank poet Mary Oliver for putting it into words:

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life*

*I was a bride married to amazement.*

*I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

As the plates pass this morning, let us reflect on what brings us together here. Let our tangible contributions to this community be infused with the passion of our faith: to work for justice so that everyone can have a part in the unwrapping of the abundant gifts of this magnificent broken world we share, inside and outside these sanctuary walls.

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