

Imperfect Prophets

Rev. DC Fortune

UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

October 22, 2023

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Our ancestors would no doubt shake their collective heads in wonder at the world of Unitarian Universalism today.

Our ancestors, we must remember, included Arias, one of the early Christian heretics in the fourth century. Undoubtedly, he would shake his head at how we have diverged from his ancient version of Christianity.

Calvin, of course, and Martin Luther before him, would be utterly horrified by the progressive nature of our theology: that hell is not a place, that god is loving, that we understand humanity to be inherently worthy of respect and love.

Joseph Priestley would be alarmed by the number of women and people of color in our pulpits and national leadership. How could those he considered property have been elevated to such a status?

So, too, with John Murray, one of the first Universalist preachers to land on these shores some three hundred years ago.

While he understood god's love and salvation to be universal, I am sure our expansive understanding of what is the divine would curdle his brain, at least a little.

All of these brave heretics would view our current understanding of Unitarian Universalism as the work of something utterly unholy, to be sure.

That is what happens when brave people take gradual, even tiny, steps into the emerging future. Arias defied the notion of a god in multiple persons. Martin Luther challenged the authority of the church. Calvin challenged the authority of Luther's interpretation and then responded terribly when his own interpretation was challenged by emerging generations of scholars and religious thinkers.

Such is often the way of things in revolutionary movements.

Our reading today by adrienne maree brown captures some of what I am thinking about today – we are beyond the wildest imaginations of our ancestors in all ways – in ways that would have made them immeasurably proud, and in ways that would make them spin in their graves.

Progress over centuries and millennia are like that – humanity grows as our learning and knowledge expands.

Augustinian monk Gregor Mendel was the first to explore hereditary genetics and documented patterns that indicated some genes were dominant and recessive.

Around the same time, Englishman Charles Darwin was documenting how living things changed over time in adaptation to their environments.

Both men were branded as heretics, although Mendel caught less grief about it as he worked within a monastery and explained his findings as illuminating the genius of a loving creator, and not merely a trait of cosmic chaos theory.

We are beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors, and we are beyond their most terrifying nightmares.

I thought of this reading yesterday when I was in conversation with Rev. Steve Hummel of the Trinity Reformed United Church of Christ in Bloomsburg. I met Rev. Hummel at the LGBTQ Pride event in Bloomsburg, and we shared that conversation that happens when ministers meet: “so how’d you get into this ministry gig?”

As you know, I was raised in an Irish Catholic community not far from Boston. It was and to some degree remains a significant cultural structure of connections and relations and faith. I wondered aloud what my grandmother might have thought of my current life. I wonder if my politics, my gender, my sexuality, or the fact that I am a protestant minister would horrify her more. Certainly there is not much about who I am that would be familiar to Dorothy Fortune, née Hanley, first generation Irish-American and faithful parishioner of the Immaculate Conception Parish in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

It is not as though I sprung forth, straight out of childhood as the radical person that I am today, but it took a lot of little steps of bravery and vulnerability to get here.

First, I had to escape the dysfunction of my family. That took a lot of guts, and tears, and fear.

Then I had to get sober. That also took some doing.

Then I had to do some transformational spiritual work, again: not easy.

Then I had to examine my truth and weigh whether the cost was greater to risk rejection or violence when I came out or to live dishonestly in a closeted bubble of toxic safety.

As life went on, I learned more about myself and each time I was faced with the same choice: live openly and risk rejection, abuse, and sometimes even violence, or to live under the radar, closeted, pretending to be something I am not.

There are times I think I got more shocked reactions to becoming a minister than I did to coming out as transgender.

And, if I am to be honest, I have lost and gained people and support at each of these steps along the way.

There are dreams, and there are nightmares, and I think we all occupy some portion of each realm.

I chose today's time for all ages story by AA Milne because I've been thinking a lot lately about bravery and safety and service.

I love Piglet in Milne's stories. Pooh is sweet, but dim. Owl is smart, but insecure. Kanga is a very busy parent, Tigger is fun, but a bit shallow. Piglet, however, is the most complex character in the Christopher Robin adventure tales.

He is small, and often afraid. He rarely feels like he is in control of the world in which he lives. He has a hard time keeping up with others because his legs are short and he is tiny. He gets frightened senseless by Pooh with a honey jar stuck on his head. People don't seem to expect a lot from him, and neither does he.

And yet, Piglet shines in the story in which Owl's house blew over in a storm.

To be fair, Piglet does not want to help. He prefers to not be brave at all. He would not like to be tied to a string and hoisted to the ceiling that used to be a wall so he can squeeze through the mail slot and go get help. He would prefer that help come find them.

And yet, he is the only one who can do what needs doing in this situation.

Pooh is too round and heavy to be lifted up to the letter box, and would not fit through. Owl is also too large, even though he can fly.

Only Piglet can do it.

And so he does.

He does it just a little bit for the public accolades, but mostly because he doesn't seem to have much choice. They need help, and he's the only one who can go get it.

My favorite part of the story is when Piglet gets through the letter slot and takes stock of the outside situation.

"It's all right," he called through the letter-box. "Your tree is blown right over, Owl, and there's a branch across the door, but Christopher Robin and I can move it, and we'll bring a rope for Pooh, and I'll go and tell him now, and I can climb down quite easily, I mean it's dangerous but I can do it all right, and Christopher Robin and I will be back in about half-an-hour. Good-bye, Pooh!"

And without waiting to hear Pooh's answering "Good-bye, and thank you, Piglet," he was off.

This is one of those transformative moments like we see in the final conflict in the Wizard of Oz – the scarecrow, who believes he has no brain, devises a plan. The scardy-cat lion steps up to do the brave thing that needs doing. And the tin man who lacks a heart, brings it all together with beautiful expression of love. I know I have a heart, because I can feel it breaking."

This is that moment for Piglet.

He does the thing that is both beyond his wildest imagination AND beyond his scariest nightmare, and he manages.

“I can climb down quite easily, I mean it’s dangerous, but I can do it all right, and Christopher Robin and I will be back in about half-an-hour.”

And then he runs off to do what needs doing, without needing assurance or instructions from anyone. He comes into his own in that moment, the lowly little pink piglet with the big, sensitive ears, gets brave and does what needs doing.

Being brave is not about being unafraid. Being unafraid is quite often a terrible plan. Being afraid is a natural response to a terrifying situation. Being brave is doing what is right, even when you’re afraid.

Being brave is what brings people to pride events like yesterday. Is there a risk of social backlash for attending a pride event? In some circles, there is a LOT of backlash for that kind of stance. Yet, people show up and do the right thing.

We fly our rainbow flags out front because it is the right thing to do. Are we at risk for taking the stances we do on social justice issues? Yes, we are. And yet, this is what we are called to do.

Can we keep ourselves safe? Yes. And.

In the 21st century, what passes as safety and security is different than what we have previously understood that to be.

We live in a culture that celebrates anti-intellectualism, that celebrates violence and bullying behavior. We live in a world where there are some who take pleasure in other’s misery, and who are sometimes willing to inflict that misery.

So what do we do? It is scary stuff, being a beacon for progressive values in a community that does not celebrate non-conformity.

What we do is what Piglet did – we take a deep breath, cross our fingers, and do what needs doing. We take all the precautions we can without compromising who we are, but eventually we need to be the ones who do the right thing and make a way for those who need rescuing.

Heroes are imperfect, because we are all human.

Heroic works are generally imperfect as well, because they are organized and instigated by imperfect humans.

None of us is going to get everything right all of the time. The trick is to keep trying.

Our faith calls us each day to offer prophetic witness about what the world can be – to describe a world beyond our ancestor's wildest dreams. We must remember that those dreams may be others' nightmares. And like Piglet, our job is to keep going forward, doing the things that only we can do, and being brave when we are scared.

Being scared is ok. Surpassing our ancestors' dreams can be a scary road.

Allowing our fear to paralyze us into inaction is our worst nightmare.

The world is big and scary. Together, we can be brave and make it better for those who come after us.

May our bravery and our prophetic witness be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.