

**“All the World’s a Stage”
a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
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Here’s how Sisyphus got into the rock rolling business. He was a legendary king of exceptional intelligence and shrewdness. He used these gifts in various deplorable ways, including seducing his niece, usurping his brother’s entitlement to the throne, and betraying confidences shared with him by Zeus. These and other machinations set the stage for his ultimate transgression – an attempt to defeat Thanatos, the god of death, so that he could live forever.

Angered by Sisyphus’s behavior, Zeus ordered Thanatos to put him in chains and confine him in a place of punishment called Tartarus. Sisyphus somehow flattered Thanatos into putting the chains on himself, in order to demonstrate how they worked!! Whereupon Sisyphus secured the chains and fled.

Trapped in Tartarus, Thanatos could not fulfill his role of escorting to Hades those whose time to die had come. This angered Aries, the Greek god of war. No one was dying in battle. Aries freed Thanatos and caused a kind of divine extradition of Sisyphus back to Tartarus.

After several more wild and woolly rounds of Sisyphus’s efforts to outsmart the grim reaper, the gods wrote a fitting finale for him: the endless escorting of the huge boulder for which he is popularly remembered.

Is this a tragedy? The term is so overused and misused that we have to do some work to reclaim it. The comic genius Mel Brooks has offered a definition by example: “Tragedy,” he said, “is me cutting my finger. Comedy is you falling into a open sewer and dying.” The popular usage of tragedy is really just a catch-all emotional expression for something very bad happening. The conventional literary definitions focus on a drama that ends badly for the hero – usually someone who is brought down by his own poor choices because of a character flaw. The moral of the story lies in how the disastrous outcome could have been avoided if the hero had transcended his flaw.

None of this enables us to learn what the ancient Athenians have to teach us. In his book Tragedy and Philosophy, Walter Kaufmann teaches that tragedy does not require that the story end badly for the hero. Nor does it require a tragic flaw. Nor is its purpose moral instruction. The essence of tragedy is the lifting up of great suffering in a way that enables the audience to have an experience of transcendent possibility in human life. Transcendent possibility. The more a stage play has this effect on the audience, the more tragic it is.

Suffering arises from the inherent limitations of mortal life. We have the gift of consciousness, but it is incomplete. So we can’t fully grasp our own nature or how we fit into the world. We have choices to make about how to act, and we feel responsible for making them

well; but we are hampered by our incomplete consciousness. So we're left feeling responsible without knowing enough to discharge our responsibilities fully. This makes suffering inevitable. And because of what Stephen Mitchell calls the inertia of the mind, we remain stuck in the pattern of our suffering, rolling the same rock up the same hill over and over again.

As the poet Auden once said, we would rather be ruined than changed. Like Sisyphus, we have come to love our rock. It is the devil we know. We create stories about how it really isn't so bad, or how things will change one day. These distortions provide temporary relief, but they hold the old patterns in place.

So, what is that "transcendent possibility" that Walter Kaufmann was talking about? It is that we can overcome this inertia. We can awaken to our noble capacity to do what Nietzsche called "saying yes to life even in its strangest and most painful episodes."

This understanding of tragedy enables us to see the tragic meaning in Sisyphus. The story is not really about an afterlife to which he was condemned, but rather, about the grace he refused and the distorted life he chose for himself – rolling the rock of his misguided pursuit of life without end. He missed out on the joy that comes only with an appreciation of death.

Sisyphus sorely needed the wisdom of Tecumseh, the great Shawnee chieftain who once said, "be not like those whose hearts are filled with fear of death, so when their time comes they weep and pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. Sing your death song, and die like a hero going home." Tecumseh would greet Philip Larkin's black-sailed ship of birdless silence as a "knowing participant in everything alive." (an allusion to Rilke)

I identify with Sisyphus. I have rolled the rock called too much need for success. When I have hauled it to the top of the hill, it feels good . . . for a while; but then the high of the hilltop wears off and I find myself down in the swale again, depressed and sweating and straining with my rock. I have turned away from it, and I am walking home; but at times I still feel its gravitational pull, calling me back for yet another haul up the hill.

All the gods did was give Sisyphus a world that included the choice either to play his mortal part, with all of its mortal joy and suffering, or to squander it in a foolish quest for an endless life. Think of something you love to do. Now think of doing it a million times. Sisyphus was indeed a tragic figure, fleeing suffering, screaming a terrified "NO" to life. He is a powerful counterexample, teaching us the transcendent possibility in life.

In striving to move their audiences to the "yes" of Nietzsche rather than the "no" of Sisyphus," the ancient tragedians drew inspiration from two deities. One is Apollo, who represents structure, order, image, and illumination. The other is Dionysus, who represents chaos, primordial unity, wild abandon, and darkness.

Apollo is associated with familiar images -- the sun overhead; the mundane images of people, places, and things; and the orderly structures of institutions. Dionysus, in contrast, comes as epiphany, shrouded in mystery. He is also known as Bacchus, the god of wine and revels. The revels are about liberating people from their ordinary selves – just as theater can; and

Dionysus is also the patron Greek god of theater. The festivals held in honor of Dionysus were an important time for performing plays.

Greek tragedies called upon a quality of wild music and dancing captured by what the Spanish poet Lorca called “deep song”: “a stammer, a wavering emission of the voice, a marvelous undulation [of the cheeks] that smashes the resonant cells of our tempered scale, eludes the cold rigid staves of modern music and makes the tightly closed flowers of the semi-tones blossom into a thousand petals.” Music and movement of this quality evoke strong feelings of primordial unity among an audience, particularly the kind of throng that filled the twelve thousand seat amphitheater in Athens. This is divine inspiration from Dionysus.

These plays also called upon symbols and images that dramatize and universalize human suffering. In Greek, the characters of the tragic plays are called “brotoi,” or “the dying ones,” poetically emphasizing mortality itself as the most basic suffering. The artistic images of such characters and of the events with which they struggle are divine inspiration from Apollo.

The role of the Dionysian side is to give the audience a glimpse of the eternal. The role of the Apollonian side is to translate the eternal into images meaningful to mortals. The challenge facing the playwright is to integrate these divine forces on stage.

Imagining himself there in the amphitheater when one of the actors cries out in agony, Walter Kaufmann said, “It is not as if I were secure and comfortable and looked down on her misery; it would come closer to the fact if we said that when my suffering had become unbearable, she suddenly lent it her voice.” When the audience experiences an actor as speaking their lines, as singing their song, something extraordinary is happening.

The artistry of the Greek tragedies taps into a mix of powerful emotions. The first is an outpouring of compassion for the universal suffering of all of humanity. The resulting sense of connectedness is intense, a feeling of personal boundaries – indeed, individuality itself -- dissolving into primordial unity. The Greeks called this ecstasy. Popularly we use “ecstatic” as if it were simply the superlative of “happy,” but the real meaning is closer to a sense of standing outside yourself – exchanging, briefly, the perspective of separateness for that of unity. This brings a joyful awareness of collective belonging; but it also brings a terrifying awareness of the flimsy or even illusory quality of the images out of which human life is constructed – including human self-image. The Athenian playwrights were masterful in evoking these two awarenesses in a delicate artistic balance, moving their audiences toward a “yes to life” experience – suffering and all.

Today, literary tragedy is a mere shadow of its Athenian ancestors. The rise of institutional Christianity – not the religion of Jesus but the corruptions of it promoted by traditional churches – is an important reason why. As the great literary critic I. A. Richards observed, “the least touch of any theology which has a compensating heaven to offer the tragic hero” is fatal to tragedy.

To the same effect are Marxism and Capitalism, which offer materialistic equivalents of the Christian promises. Both envision a heaven on earth -- in the case of Marxism, a proletarian one, and in the case of capitalism, a consumerist one.

Science and psychology offer other materialistic panaceas. Science aims to deal with the suffering we feel about mortality by postponing death indefinitely – realizing the misguided wish of Sisyphus to keep Thanatos locked up in chains. Psychology will medicate into oblivion any suffering resulting from our incomplete human consciousness. . . .”

None of these systems of thought offers any prospect of moving humanity toward that “yes” to life. Each has offered some version of a story that distorts reality for the sake of palliating or denying suffering. People who buy these stories are seduced away from saying yes to life. Those who don’t buy them and have nothing else to turn to fall into a mood of resignation from which yes cannot be spoken.

Two editors of the works of Nietzsche observe that “Great tragedy can be a central part of a culture only if the members of that culture are psychically vital and robust enough to tolerate engagement with the truth that tragedy transmits.” The Athenians had that psychic vitality. The greatness of Athens was its recognition that art and literature are not merely interesting diversions, but rather, the root and nerve of the whole cultural and social proceeding. Living in a fundamentally scientific and moralistic culture, we are very far from that greatness today.

In Athenian terms, Apollo has driven Dionysus from the theater.

So when the saints of Marxism, Capitalism, Science, Psychology and traditional Christianity go marching in, leave me out of that number. I hope to be listed instead among the heretics who see such saints as instruments of suffering, not transcendence; among those who are committed to engendering that fundamentally spiritual “yes” to life wherever we can.

It is hard to think of a better encapsulation of what religion is about than to say that it aims to move us toward saying yes to the largest possible life, including suffering. What the Athenians called ecstasy is what we describe as making a profound connection with spiritual energies that come to us from outside time and space. The divine sources of inspiration that the Athenians called Dionysus and Apollo are what we describe as the holy and as the sacred work of expressing the holy in time and space. The balancing and integration of these two aspects of divinity are what we are talking about when we speak of wholeness and reunion – of being a part of, instead of apart from, all with which we belong. Too much Apollo and we cannot step outside of ourselves and transcend suffering. Too much Dionysus and the wildness overwhelms us.

This danger of too much wildness is exactly what Annie Dillard had in mind when she wrote, “The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, making up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. . . . We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.” Such is the power of Dionysian transcendence, of touching the holy. But Annie Dillard is an idealist. Sadly, in far too many churches today, no one is in any danger at all.

Those who learn to transcend suffering cannot be controlled through fear and threats. The ghosts of tragic religious figures down through history have taught us this by their visitations in our own religious services: Frances David, the 16th century founder of our religion; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran minister who dared to challenge the Nazis; Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Catholic priest who took up the cause of landless peasants in Central America, oppressed by rightwing military regimes; and of course, Jesus of Nazareth. All of them were martyred because they wouldn't turn away from suffering and wouldn't let the world turn away either.

The tragic sensibility is evident in many religions – captured concisely, for example, in the Buddhist koan about a man who is chased by a tiger toward a cliff and forced over the edge, where he hangs by a flimsy branch. Caught between the tiger snarling at him from above and the ground far below, he feels the branch beginning to give way under his weight. Spotting a wild strawberry growing out of the side of the cliff, he picks it and eats it. The tragic truth is that we are all chased by tigers, and there is no escape. But there is transcendence, the possibility of receiving life's tragic quality and allowing it to open us to the deepest possible joy. The closer the tiger of mortality and suffering, the sweeter the fruit of our brief time here.

To focus on tragedy may seem pessimistic, but actually it's the opposite. Literary tragedy is grounded in a passionate belief in the noble human capacity to gain a transcendent perspective on human life. Now, maybe some of you are wondering whether I think there is a recruiting office for tragic experiences somewhere, toward which we all should dash so we can enlist. We certainly don't need to go looking for suffering, but we do need to choose not to turn away from it. And that means being willing to take risks – like caring deeply about other people and then allowing in the pain and grief when suffering befalls them. This is not easy. We need to be with each other in this learning.

Athens was a religious culture that had genuine salvation to offer, grounded in a profound understanding of suffering. The Athenian tragedian Aeschylus said, “he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart; and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of god.” Awful, meaning full of awe.

The Athenian theology of art, suffering, and the union of the mundane and the holy was celebrated in literature, community rituals, the educational system, and all other aspects of public life. Its amphitheater was a holy place. That Athens is gone forever. It would be pointless to try to get it back. Instead, we need to create for ourselves a culture that integrates reason and poetry, that awakens our noble nature as part animal and part deity.

Culture is an accretion of individual experiences, strivings, and expressions. By bringing her noble nature into the world, each of us participates in the creation of a noble culture. This is the invitation the poet Rainer Maria Rilke was offering when he wrote this in his Book of Hours:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

All the world really is a stage, and we are both actors and audience, living out our drama under the gaze of eternity. Let go of the rock. Let yourself be transported by the drama to a place outside yourselves both disturbing and wonderful. Pick the wild strawberry and taste the sweetness. Laugh at the tiger and lament the bough breaking. And when the time comes, go out singing your own deep song. You have no greater gift to give.