

## Chaos

Rev. Peggy Meeker, 4/8/18

**Reading:** two selections from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," April 1963:

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

"I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in [the] stride toward freedom is not the ... Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

## Chaos

Earlier this week I was worried that I was in way over my head with this sermon topic. I started to worry back when I first saw that the Drop-In Discussion for April 29<sup>th</sup> was about Chaos Theory. I'd heard of chaos theory but had no idea what it was about, and I decided I'd better find out before today. At Wikipedia, my go-to source—at least for things that aren't politically or socially controversial—I read that "Chaos theory is a branch of mathematics focusing on the behavior of dynamical systems that are highly sensitive to initial conditions. 'Chaos' [theory states] that within the apparent randomness of chaotic complex systems, there are underlying patterns, constant feedback loops, repetition, self-similarity, fractals, self-organization, and reliance on programming at the initial point known as sensitive dependence on initial conditions." I did also find this slightly more approachable definition: chaos is "when the present determines the future, but the approximate present does not approximately determine the future" [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos_theory)]. That might be what I'm talking about! Go to the Drop-In Discussion three weeks from now to learn more.

The chaos I'm talking about is the chaos that we sometimes experience in our lives, when things fall apart, when the center doesn't hold, and nothing makes sense. I knew by the time I was 14, when my older brother was killed in a car accident, that life can turn upside-down on you. Not everybody knows this, at least not in that deep inside kind of way, but it comes to most of us, sooner or later, and when it does, it calls into question all of our assumptions about how things will work out if we work hard, or are good, or have faith, or keep a low profile. We search for meaning in whatever it is that has happened to us, and we work very hard to get back to some kind of normal, a new normal, some kind of stability. We end up having to find a way to incorporate some chaos into how we look at life. And this is where I know my chaos and chaos theory are related: they both have to do with the ability—or not—to predict what's going to happen. Will I be happy in this new job? Will this relationship be fulfilling? Will I have 3 children and a nice home? Maybe. Maybe not.

I got interested in chaos because Sarah Gillespie, who was a community minister affiliated here a few years ago, shared with me a book she had read at seminary: *The Return of the Chaos Monsters—and Other Backstories of the Bible* [Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012]. The author, Gregory Mobley, is a scholar of the Hebrew scriptures, and his thesis is that the dominant story line of the Jewish Bible is that chaos is just barely subdued, and that we partner with the natural world [or he would say with God] to manage it, and that there are times when chaos gains the upper hand.

I have long been fascinated by ancient stories, and the Hebrew scriptures are some of the oldest we have, but even older is the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation myth, a version of an even older Sumerian myth. These creation stories tell of battles between the gods at the dawn of time, and of the very earliest gods being the waters from which everything came. In the Enuma Elish, we begin with Apsu, fresh water, and Tiamat, salt water. Tiamat is also portrayed as a dragon-like monster. Tiamat gives birth to eleven monsters—snakes, serpents, scorpions, and so on—to help her fight a younger generation of gods, but she and the monsters are all killed or subdued by Marduk, who then creates the earth and the heavens from Tiamat's body. He sets up the sun and the moon and the constellations and puts everything in order. He is careful to ensure that Tiamat and her waters are contained. There is a firmament above to keep the waters from flooding down, and there is the earth below to keep the waters from flooding up.

Mobley points out that “the creation of cosmic and terrestrial structures—[the world]—out of the limbs and organs of [Tiamat,] the personified primeval waters, suggests that something indeterminate, fluid, and unstable lies at the substructure of physical reality, that everything fixed might yet sway” [p. 19]. And at the same time, that very chaos that threatens everything is also the original *source* of everything. “Chaos,” says Mobley, “is the raw material of creation” [p. 19].

So it's interesting that the creation story in the Hebrew scriptures, in Genesis 1, begins with a watery abyss, or in the words of Don Marquis, in our offertory anthem, the "flat wastes of cosmic slime." And though you might not think there are dragons in the biblical account, we do get glimpses of them. In the book of Job, for example, when Job's suffering is so great that he wants to destroy all of creation, he calls out for "those skilled at awakening Leviathan" [Job 3:8]. Leviathan is a multi-headed sea serpent. We see it again in Psalm 74: "O God, who brings deliverance throughout the land; it was You ... who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters; it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan" [from v. 12-14]. Leviathan, or Livyatan, is probably related to Litan, a sea monster of Syrian folklore. The Greeks called it Hydra. We see Leviathan again in this passage from Isaiah: "On that day the Lord will punish with his hard and huge and strong sword Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea" [Isa. 27:1].

So the waters and the dragon are chaos, which can be contained, but can also get loose again. Monsters, then, are about something very real. I finally understand the appeal of horror stories: they're about meeting the monster and coming back alive. They reassure us that there is life after the monster; that we can leave home in the morning, and no matter what happens, make it back home that night. If we have to go and slay a dragon, we'll find what we need and become a hero in the process. Of course, not everybody survives in horror stories, but *someone* is alive to tell the tale. Not all is lost, not all is random, not all is meaningless.

Gregory Mobley goes on to say that the whole Jewish Bible, or Tanakh, is made up of stories about managing chaos. The creation story in Genesis is that God has subdued chaos, but just barely. The next part is the Torah—Exodus, Leviticus, and so on—an instruction manual about how humans should act so as to help keep chaos at bay. The whole section known as the Prophets gives examples of this moral cause and effect, with the prophets prodding people to right action and right relationship. The Psalms show that God needs to be prodded too, to remain merciful and steadfast, and to keep chaos at bay. I have often wondered at the many psalms that seem to be reminding God to do good, as if God would forget, but Mobley says that there is chaos not only in creation but within God as well, a "turbulence and ambivalence within the divine nature" [p. 15]. Then there's the Wisdom literature, which tells of a cosmic design for all of creation and includes the statement that Leviathan has a part in the plan. And finally, there's the apocalyptic literature—writings about the end times—which portrays all of history as a battle between order and chaos.

What to make of this as Unitarian Universalists? It sounds true to life: that chaos is always there, just out of sight, just beneath the surface, waiting to erupt; that we can partner with each other and with the world to manage chaos; and that chaos is even somehow integral to the very

nature of ultimate reality, to the interdependent web! To totally eliminate chaos would eliminate change. Chaos is part of life. Chaos generates life.

Living with chaos, to me, means living with the knowledge that nothing is permanent, as Buddhism teaches us. Everything is fluid. I go back to a quote I used here last fall, from Chögyam Trungpa: “The bad news is that you’re falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, *there’s no ground.*” Living with chaos takes living in the here and now, not living for tomorrow or next week. It means living in the calm center you can find within, in the midst of everything. In a way, it’s a little ironic that I’m talking about uncertainty and unpredictability just as we’ve learned about the candidate our Ministerial Search Committee has chosen to become our next called and settled minister. It doesn’t seem like I should be up here saying “Well, you never know.” Certainly there’s much we can count on, and we live accordingly, and we—and I!—look forward with great anticipation to the beginning of a new ministry here. *And*, we know that everything is fluid. It’s not that we don’t or shouldn’t make plans, but that we ought not cling to the plan when the unexpected happens. We live in the moment, this moment.

There’s another important way to live with the fact of chaos, though, and that’s Mobley’s idea of right action. What we do and don’t do matters. Mobley speaks of aiding and abetting life, choosing life, and supporting shalom, or harmony. I tend to think of right—or wrong—relationship with each other, and right or wrong relationship with my deepest self, and right or wrong relationship with the Earth and the web of all existence. In Children’s Worship this month, the focus is on our 6<sup>th</sup> Principle: the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; or in the children’s version, “Build a fair and peaceful world.” And this week, I couldn’t help but connect all this with Martin Luther King, Jr. Many of us are familiar with this famous quote of his, adapted from Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” As Unitarian Universalists we hope that that is true, that there is something in the universe that moves toward justice. But we also know that ours are the hands, the feet, ours the hearts and the minds that do the work of justice. Leonard Pitts, columnist at the Miami Herald, wrote a few days ago, “Fifty years after King was killed, police still get away with murder. People working full-time jobs still can’t feed themselves. We still take ‘necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes.’ Our children are still ground up by unnecessary war. African Americans are still last hired, first fired, still disproportionately poor, sick, undereducated and killed. ~~Also, Jeff Sessions is attorney general, and Donald Trump, president~~” [<http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/leonard-pitts-jr/article207867844.html>]. There is so much to be done.

As Unitarian Universalists we revere the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. In his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” that I quoted earlier, King also wrote “In a

real sense all life is inter-related. All ~~men~~ are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be ...”

We are all part of that network, and chaos is part of it too, part of what makes it run and part of what makes things hard. In a way, it’s good to know that—it’s not just me, it’s not just you. But often we struggle. We live with the fact of chaos—with life—by dwelling in the moment, staying in inter-relationship, and acting for justice, for life. May it be so, and Amen.