

Rev. Ron Phares
San Miguel
The God of Imperfection
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I've been reading some really amazing books recently. One is a history of Islam called *Destiny Disrupted*. Another is a book on addiction and recovery by the comedian cum mystic Russell Brand. One is a book about Islamic geometric design, which tries to describe how Islamic artists and mystics indicate The Manifold Unity of god by a repeating and evolving pattern meant to convey, by geometric suggestion, eternity. So there's a tattoo coming out of that one. And then I'm reading Michael Pollan's *How To Change Your Mind* about applied psychedelics.

In that one, he describes an epiphany he had whilst on a psychedelic journey. I'm not going to tell you what the epiphany was. To say so out of context would do disservice to you and the author. But even as he wrote about it, it occurred to him how trite the epiphany sounded on paper. This revelation of his appeared to him as entirely novel and astounding but read rather more like a greeting card platitude.

But then Pollan observed something redemptive. He suggests that platitudes are perhaps nothing other than great truths drained of emotion. "God is love," without the overwhelming awe of either the ground of freaking being... or love.

Platitudes are nothing other than great truths drained of emotion. I tell you that because, well, we Unitarian Universalists are historically famous - coming as we do from puritan root - famous for our ability to *drain* emotion from truth.

And what I am about to say... the theme of today's reflection... IS a great truth. And I wouldn't want you to think I was serving you a plate of platitudes. We shall endeavor then to re-invest emotion - or at least wonder - into truth so as to make difference.

And here's the truth. This is it. This is what I want you to hear. This is your take home...

But I don't want you to put it in a carry out container that you can microwave when ready or in neat little frame that you can hang on your kitchen wall.

I want you to pretend that you have been on an extended sojourn outside of your typical self-conception. I want you to pretend that roughly two and a half hours ago you gobbled down

some particular kind of fungi and have spent the interim peeling away the accumulated layers of illusion you've come to call your life. I want you to hear this platitude in that imagined state.

Now, two and half imagined hours into an open hearted expulsion of ego while embracing of the timelessness of being, you are pulsing with the rhythm of the universe and hearing the rush of god whooshing through your body as you turn your eyes onto the world and with great waves of relief and release, though you've thought it before, see as if for the the first time and in golden skybourne letters dripping with honey and sunlight: Nobody's perfect.

With great waves of relief and release...

Nobody.... is remotely perfect. Not you. Not the one you see next to you. Not your god or your rejection of god.

We are - all of us - defective. Flawed. Inherently. Originally. Even little babies. And we do great injury to ourselves and each other when we assume otherwise. The expectation of perfection in one another or in one's self is so patently unreasonable that no one would confess to employing it. And yet, before you swear that you would never hold anyone to the standard of perfection, remember one thing: I am a minister and I've seen you people work!

The standard of perfection is particularly pernicious in this faith tradition that seeks to save lives by assuring everyone that within them is an worth and dignity that is inherent. Our first principle is that every person has inherent worth and dignity. And I believe this is true. And this does save lives, for those who need to hear that... everyday.

And yet all too often we do not extend the grace of imperfection when that would be life saving, or even peace-keeping. I suppose there are a few reasons why we fail to do so.

The first is likely a misplaced attempt at self protection. Now. I am not talking about extending grace in instances where one is in danger of violence. I am talking about those times when we or those we interact with are reactive or make the kind of mistakes for which amends can be made by apology and the resolve to do better. And yet even imperfections on that order tend to start a cycle of reactivity. There's probably some evolutionary reason for this, where individual survival depends of group cohesion.

And if mere, survival is your game, then perhaps reactivity will serve. But then, can a group survive without empathy? Without compassion? And what is the extension of grace for the imperfection of others if not the exercise compassion and empathy. And it has the added benefit

of modeling behavior you might like to receive when the bar set for your expectations proves too high.

Additionally, we are the unfortunate inheritors of that puritan strain of perfectionism that mistook the search for god with the appearance thereof, who sought a selfless spirituality but all too often delivered vanity in the guise of mortification and a mere mimicry of selflessness. It is from them that we received the subliminal expectation of perfection.

And then too, there is a tension that is conjured when we seek to save lives by asserting that everyone is born with dignity and worth. I have seen the dismay that arises when people act in difficult or harmful ways. We are often surprised by this. *But... how could they? They were born with inherent worth and dignity?*

Our first principle is a balm to suffering. But it also aids and abets our expectation of perfection. And in that expectation is not only a wall against the offender, but a prison for the offended. When we expect perfection, however subliminally, we create disconnection out of an unachievable premise.

I don't expect perfection, I hear you think. I just want you to behave well. But someone who behaves well all the time... who never causes dismay... is... right?

I find that when I don't expect you or anyone to approach perfection, I am a much more copacetic pastor, friend and family member. I try not to let my expectation for imperfection slip into cynicism, the angsty expectation of upset. Just a gentle holding of something both delicate and sharp in my hands, something beautiful; a relationship, an experience.

This does not mean I excuse bad behavior. But the understanding that we are, none of us, perfect, buys me seconds. And in those moments, I can be reflective rather than reactive. In those non-reactive seconds, I can be curious.

Curiosity is the great tool of equanimity. In the moments where I can remember to be curious about imperfection, I can remember not to take it personally. The imperfection confronting me is not me, though my irritation with it certainly is. And this irritation only indicates that I have my own operative imperfection, which too I will handle gently. I will be curious and non-reactive about myself.

Speaking of curiosity, I want to depart from the personal and wonder about the essential for a moment. I wonder about the origin of the imperfect. The question of human imperfection leads, eventually, to the question of imperfection in the fabric of being.

Being itself on the grandest and most essential scale, would seem to be perfect. If everything is inter-dependent, that would at least suggest an underlying, overlaying and pervasive, generative unity. A unity suggests a kind of perfection. And if, as Carl Sagan said, we are the universe becoming conscious of itself, it seems that we are the beings granted the ability to bear witness to that unity by that unity.

Setting aside the primary questions of why the underlying, pervasive, generative unity would, for lack of a better word, *want* to witness itself or even diversify in the first place or how imperfection came to be, there is a secondary question of why the underlying, pervasive, generative unity, yearning to witness itself through itself (that is, us) produces, in us, such *imperfect* translators...

If we are the universe becoming conscious of itself... then the universe is an idiot. I mean, as far as we know, we are the only forms with consciousness. And we only have five senses! Six or seven if we're being generous. Fifty or something if we're splitting hairs. But we know there are creatures on this planet (millions of them) that have different, more, or better senses.

But *we* get consciousness? We are the universe becoming aware of itself? We imperfect igits?

This is a great mystery to me. I'm mostly at a loss. But here's one idea, have you ever seen something beautiful, something deeply moving and profound and then tried to explain it and found that you do not have the words? That no matter what you say, no matter how you express it, it isn't quite right? It has nothing to do with your experience of it. It has only to do with your *reproduction of it* in a different form.

Well, we are that reproduction. We are those ill-suited words. We are the expressions of the unity and in the same way are imperfect articulations of its beauty.

How does perfection articulate imperfectly? I don't know. I haven't gotten to that part of the trip yet. Maybe it's that no one is perfect unless... God is not perfect unless... we are perfected by imperfection.

That is to say, perhaps no organism or idea is perfect unless imperfection is understood as part of the whole of its being. No organism or idea is perfect unless imperfection is understood as part of the whole of its being. The perfect includes imperfection. I don't know.

But I do know, that, oddly enough, as imperfect articulations of perfection, we are the only creatures on earth that have a mind for the perfect or an inkling of imperfection. Likewise for

their cousins good and evil. Outside the human mind - in the mind of our kindred creatures - there is certainly discomfort, pain, and even sorrow. But evil?

This makes me wonder: is evil a product of consciousness? Or, perhaps, is consciousness the first tool developed that can recognize an evil that was always there? This second question asks if evil is a given part of being itself. And if I say, as I have said of late, that consciousness is a given, an inherent part of being - as evidenced by its being - then I must say that the quality that we recognize as evil is as well. And that is startling to me.

At any rate, meditating on imperfection has carried us into a meditation on evil. But that is not because imperfection equates with evil. No. Consciousness itself is an imperfection. What I might rather say is that evil is the rampant extreme of a self-serving, self-centered consciousness, a trait whose seed is planted within each of us... which is why compassion is so crucial.

Goodness, on the other hand, is also a result of consciousness. And since consciousness itself is an imperfection of being, then, get this, goodness is an imperfection. Goodness is the act of consciousness oriented beyond itself, an orientation toward connection.

As I wrote this I was visited by a vision. In the vision I saw being itself as a cloth comprised of smaller bits of cloth. I saw that every smaller cloth, every iota of being has a tear in it. But it is by that tear that being connects up. Something like velcro.

Engaged properly - balanced by curious mercy - being connects up and holds together. Being is made creative by its flaws engaged. If being itself was perfect, it would be an undistinguished monolith and you would not be here. Perfection eliminates the need for connection. And connection feels good. Connection feels like love. God is not perfect. God is love. Let us connect through our fractures.

With great waves of relief and release...