

## **The Spirituality of Luck**

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, Florida  
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Two weeks from today in our Sunday service, we will solemnly mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of perhaps the most infamous day in American history – 9/11, 2001, the September day vicious terrorists hijacked four domestic commercial airplanes, and succeeded in flying two of them into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and another into the Pentagon in Washington, DC, causing massive destruction and killing over 3,000 innocent citizens. I was in our nation's capital that day, and will talk more about what I personally experienced Sunday after next. Suffice it to say for now, that September 11, 2001, was a sad and surreal day in Washington.

The congregation I served in nearby Bethesda was profoundly affected by the events of that day and beyond. One of our members lost her ex-husband (and his wife and two children) on the plane that was crashed into the Pentagon, and many people in the congregation had some sort of direct, personal connection to individuals who died both in DC and in New York.

And something else that was truly noteworthy about that tragic day was the fact that no less than two members of the congregation – Jeff and Myles, both business guys who travel frequently by airplane – had incredible, unlikely, improbable, last-minute good luck which kept them off the plane that was flown into the Pentagon. Let me just tell you Jeff's curious story.

On that fateful day, Jeff (who was the congregation's Finance Chair and a stalwart member of the choir) flew out of Dulles Airport on a 7 AM flight bound on a business trip for Los Angeles. The night before, Jeff came within a heartbeat of changing his ticket to the 8:30 L.A. flight, American Flight 77, which would have been considerably more convenient for him, but, perhaps mostly out of laziness, decided at the very last minute simply to not bother with the change, and just go with the earlier 7 AM flight. That decision, which felt utterly inconsequential to him at the time, kept Jeff from a fiery death. Luck is so curious and mercurial. Jeff told me a few days later how very close to death he felt he came; and said this stroke of improbable good luck on 9/11 was life-changing for him. With a quivering voice and tears in his eyes he told me that, after this amazing piece of good luck, he would never, ever take his life and at his loved ones for granted again.

Jeff also reported that one of his seatmates on the 7 AM flight was equally, if even more dramatically, lucky. Because he was flying on government business, the day before 9/11 he had begged and cajoled the federal travel agent to make his reservation for the doomed flight, using every trick of persuasion he could think of. The stubborn, unhelpful, and dismissive bureaucrat refused, citing what seemed to the man ridiculous and petty, cost-saving rules. In the end, the man flew on Jeff's flight, not the doomed one, and I am sure that now in hindsight he regards that petty bureaucrat not as the irritant he had been, but rather as an unlikely angel and savior. Sometimes luck comes to us in the most unexpected guises, doesn't it?

Later that week, *The Washington Post* told a third story about someone else's good luck in not being on that same plane. It seems there was a Virginia flight attendant (and mother of two) who was not scheduled to fly on the doomed flight until Wednesday, but wanted very much to move her trip up to Tuesday. She asked her two friends who were to service flight #77 on 9/11 if either of them would please consider swapping schedules with her – something they frequently did. They both blithely refused, much to her consternation at the time. Now that mother is alive to raise her two children, and her two colleagues are gone from the face of the earth. Luck is often a sword with a terrible double edge, isn't it?

It fascinated me that in the days following that terrible Tuesday, the nation's newspapers and television were filled with stories about luck, both good and bad, that were told both about survivors who had just dodged the bullet and about those who had died, some by just being on the wrong side of the razor's edge. There was the ambitious, young Arab-American bond trader who worked in the World Trade Center who, when the first plane struck his tower, was not at his desk on the third floor, where all his colleagues managed to escape, but was on the one-hundredth-and-first floor, from which no one escaped, interviewing for a better job to get him ahead in life.

There were stories of other World Trade Center workers who ran unexpectedly late to work that that morning, for all kinds of little, silly, irritating reasons – a whiny child not ready for school, a dentist appointment that took longer than expected, a traffic jam caused by a stupid accident, a cinnamon bun that irresistibly beckoned from the bakery shop window – little and silly and irritating last-minute reasons that saved their lives. The media reported so many of these 9/11 "good luck" stories, because, I think, we human beings are fascinated and intrigued by these stories, aren't we? We are fascinated by how capricious and random good and bad luck can be...which is, at least in part, why I decided to preach on this topic this morning. The bottom line is: Luck is no inconsequential thing in our lives!

And here – right off the bat – is the first and foremost thing that occurs to me about luck: there seems to be so darned much of it in our lives! My dictionary defines luck as "a purposeless, unpredictable and uncontrollable force that shapes events favorably or unfavorably for an individual"...and then the second, similar definition ..."a chance combination of circumstances operating for or against an individual." When you think about it, our lives are filled every day with countless, unpredictable, largely random circumstances that – when they sequentially fall into place and play themselves out – strike us as either "lucky" or "unlucky." Just from that one, fateful, American Tuesday, there were hundreds of dramatic human stories about good and bad luck that made all the difference in the world. And so it is in every day of our living.

Just two quick examples if I might. An extra couple of sips of our morning coffee allows us to not be at the intersection when some distracted motorist speeds through a red light. And, similarly, registering for a college course you were really ambivalent about can lead you to meet the love of your life who happens to be sitting one row back.

I believe in luck. I believe it was a bit of senseless good luck – a whimsical decision not to bother to change a ticket, for God's sake! – that saved my friend Jeff's life. I believe there were lots of little bits of senseless bad luck that led to the deaths of many of others. But what I do not

believe in – and this is where I suspect I part spiritual company with perhaps a majority of people in this culture – what I do not believe is that any of us have a pre-determined fate or pre-ordained destiny.

Let's take that terrible Tuesday, for example. I do not believe that the complex events of 9/11, that unfolded so suddenly in horror, were in any way “pre-determined” or “foreordained” – words that my dictionary uses to define what makes for “fate” and “destiny.” I do not believe some people were somehow “marked” for death ahead of time – while others were somehow “pre-selected” to survive. And, similarly, I most certainly do not believe that our lives unfold in accordance with any sort of “wise and loving master plan” that is directed by some unseen cosmic hand or transcendent intelligence. I emphatically do not believe that what happens to us, in this often chaotic world of ours, is somehow scripted or determined ahead of time by some “higher” or “wiser” force or being. Rather I believe that countless – absolutely countless – human and natural forces, circumstances and choices, decisions and actions, behaviors and predilections, accidents and ironies come together over time in largely random and unpredictable ways – as happens to all of us in every moment, everyday – make precisely what happened, happen. I don't believe anyone's fate, like my friend Jeff's, was sealed on that terrible Tuesday until the very last second.

Take for example...the passengers on the 5<sup>th</sup> hijacked plane that crashed into the farm field in Pennsylvania. We now know that a band of brave passengers, after they figured out what the hijackers had in mind, decided to act “Let's roll!” one of them said as they stormed the cockpit...and possibly may have come very close to re-taking control of the plane from the hijackers thereby, had things gone just a bit differently, possibly saving their own lives. Who knows how close they came to succeeding...what we do know is that by attempting to re-take control of the plane from the hijackers, they in all probability saved the lives of many others by preventing the hijackers from flying that plane into another building in Washington, DC.

And so it was with countless acts and last-minute circumstances that unfolded that day. What in the end happened to countless persons was “up for grabs” until the very last moment. September 11<sup>th</sup> was an astounding and extraordinary day, filled with astounding and extraordinary bits of luck – both good and bad – that determined, when all the random circumstances played themselves out, who would survive and who would perish.

Look...I know a lot of people in our culture think differently about fate and destiny, but this is how I think the world works. Life is first and foremost a random and fluid mystery. Nothing in my direct experience with life – and Unitarian Universalists put great stock in their own direct, individual experience with this world as they struggle to discern what is real and true and right – nothing in my direct experience with life suggests to me that there is in any way some sort of pre-determined “master plan” of either personal or global events. You often hear when someone tragically dies in a plane crash...or, conversely when someone astoundingly hits the \$200 million powerball lottery, people say, “It was God's will,” or “It was destined to be,” but I for one don't believe it! I do not believe, for example, categorically do not believe! that those more than 3,000 unlucky victims of those terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> were somehow “selected,” or “doomed” to perish, that somehow “their time had unavoidably come,” and we simply have to accept this as life's ineffable but inalterable grand plan.

I refuse – absolutely refuse, by God! – to see my creation as one intentionally and inalterably structured for so much pain, so much cruelty, death and pointlessness. I similarly do not believe that all those lucky folks who at the last minute did not get on one of those planes that were crashed – or the fortunate souls who had not yet arrived at their office in the World Trade Center Towers when they was struck – were somehow “pre-ordained” or “selected” for God knows what reason to go on living! Again, I’m not ridiculing the beliefs of others, but when I hear a survivor declare, as many did, “God spared me so that I will be around to raise my children” or “I guess I did not die because God has a plan for me.” I simply cannot accept this worldview as anything other than self-centered, fanciful thinking.

It’s not that I don’t want those survivors to feel lucky and blessed, I do and they are! and I pray they will never take their lives for granted again! But to believe that some are chosen by some eternal, all-powerful and invincible force to survive – while others cruelly perish– puts us into an impossible theological and spiritual box! For that would mean that God – or some other ruling, cosmic force – somehow “allowed” or “directed” or “caused” the deaths of all those thousands of other equally fine and loving parents and spouses who died so pointlessly in the terrorist’s flames. And that would further mean that the lives of those who were lucky enough to survive the attacks that Tuesday, like my friend Jeff, somehow possess some superior purpose from those who were unfortunate enough be in the “wrong place in the wrong time” and perish? I can’t and won’t believe that! To me, luck is a truly blind and random thing...that just unfolds for both good and ill...for all of us, and there is no logic or purpose to it...luck just is!

Again...based on my direct experience with life – watching year after year as natural and human circumstances unfold in incredibly complex, random, and – I have to say it, frequently unfair ways, for good and righteous people certainly do perish while evil-doers often prosper – I for one refuse to believe there is any sort of wise master plan and overarching cosmic purpose to the way things randomly unfold. Rather I am persuaded that in this complex, interconnected and fluid creation of ours, things just happen...good and bad things...lucky and unlucky things...life just continues to mysteriously and curiously unfold from billions upon billions of loosely interconnected realities and forces. As far as I can see, there is no overarching plan or purpose...no cosmic consistence...no wise and loving design...just life...period...all jumbled up in joy and sorrow...holiness and horror...disaster and delight. That’s the way I see this world...that’s the only way I can see this world.

Now some would say that this – what shall we say, existentialist? view of mine – that good and bad, lucky and unlucky things just happen to us randomly and without purpose most of the time – makes human life meaningless, tragic and depressing. To which I respond with a full and sincere heart: I believe spiritually that nothing could be further from the truth! It seems to me that life’s great and sustaining meanings and purposes come not from precisely how good or bad our luck is, but rather – and this is crucial – how we choose deep in our hearts and in our lives to respond to the luck or the lack of it that comes to our lives. Good luck, like that which my friend Jeff had a decade ago on September 11<sup>th</sup>, can awaken us to the full potential, possibilities and purpose of our lives.

Again...Jeff told me he was sure he would never take life or his loved ones for granted again – an empowering and transforming feeling I am sure is shared by almost everyone who had a

close brush with death on that terrible day. And Bad Luck, if it doesn't manage to kill us, can similarly strengthen, enliven, and open us to deeper and fuller living. I believe it is the nature and quality of our response to the luck which comes our way that largely determines whether it will ultimately be "bad" or "good" for us.

This truth is tied to the idea that luck is seldom as straightforward as it seems. Perhaps many of you are familiar with the old Chinese tale about the young man whose prized horse suddenly ran away. Everyone in the village said, "Oh, what terrible luck," to which his wise, old Father said, "What makes you sure this isn't a blessing?" Some months later, his horse returned, bringing a splendid and valuable stallion with it, and everyone in the village congratulated him on his good luck, but his father said, "What makes you sure this isn't a disaster?" Their household was richer by a fine horse, which the man loved to ride, but one day he fell off the fine steed and broke his hip...everyone in the village tried to console him over his bad luck, but the father said, "What makes you sure this isn't a blessing?" A few months later, invaders from a foreign land crossed into China, and all the able-bodied men were conscripted to fight, with only a handful ever returning to the village alive. Only because the son was lame from his fall did father and son survive to take care of one another. And this Taoist tale ends with this interpretation, "Truly, blessing turns to disaster, and disaster to blessing; the changes have no end, nor can the mystery be fathomed."

Significant events from my own life confirm the wisdom of this paradox. Without going into unnecessary personal detail, a good number of years ago something happened to me which I was sure was disastrously bad luck. The sad, disruptive events were certainly painful to me at the time. But in the fullness of time, as subsequent events unfolded and as I responded as best I could to my troubles, I discovered much to my spiritual and emotional delight that what I had initially perceived as terribly bad luck was in fact...in the end...the single most positive defining event of my life that led me to incredible opportunity, fulfillment, purpose and joy.

Similarly, over the years of my ministry, I have had countless human individuals report to me with full hearts that, paradoxically and unexpectedly, some serious illness, a terrible loss or other painful, random crisis in their lives which at the time they were sure was an unmitigated and unlucky disaster, in fact eventually opened them to life and love in ways they are sure they never would have otherwise experienced. Now believe me, I in no way want to be flip about how difficult it can be for a person to move on from a patch of bad luck or hard circumstance, and I certainly don't believe bad things happen to us to test or strengthen or ennoble us. I refuse to believe that bad things happen to us to somehow "make us better people." Folks who say stupid things in the face of someone else's misfortune like, "the reason your child was run over by that car was to make you a stronger person" or "the reason you lost your baby is because God is calling you to more deeply love and care for the children you already have"...people who say things like that to others suffering misfortune should have their mouths sewn shut, or at least their driver's license for the road of life revoked for a while!

But that said, I hope your experience with life confirms what I am affirming this morning when I say that – paradoxically – great blessing, opportunity, and satisfaction can and often does arise from unpleasant and unlucky circumstance...and vice-versa.

Luck, then, is surely not usually some simple and straightforward thing that always has the power to shape and define our lives at their deepest levels. Yes, luck often shapes our outward circumstances and immediate responses, and yes it can bring great and painful and powerful challenges that linger. But towering above the truth of luck's power to shape things is the fact – the holy fact – that in the face of luck, we human beings are supple and resilient and adaptable creatures, supple and resilient and adaptable creatures who are free and capable of determining, deep within our lives, and over the long term, what random events shall mean and how we shall move with and through and past them. I believe that it is the essential attitude of heart we bring to that which befalls us – good or bad – which in the end will have the power to determine whether or not the event will ultimately be a blessing or a curse.

As Chuck Swindol puts it in one of his books: The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude to me is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes...The remarkable thing is that we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. And then he concludes: I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react to it...and so it is with you...we are in charge of our attitudes.

Now I suppose this idea about the importance of having a positive attitude in the face of bad or difficult luck can be taken too far. I want to tell you a strangely humorous story my colleague Edward Frost of Atlanta swears is true. It seems that on one of his trips to England, Edward bumped into an unfortunate gentleman who had an unbelievably unlucky tale to tell about a series of seemingly random events that had recently befallen him. First, the factory where he worked burned to the ground, throwing him out of his job. Then his wife contracted a very rare and aggressive cancer and soon died. Next, his only son fell off his roof and broke his back, rendering him unable to provide for his young family. Next the man's beloved dog was killed by a speeding car, and then the man himself fell ill with a rare and degenerative illness. In sympathy, Edward said, "My dear man, what a terrible turn of unfortunate events, how do you ever bear all that bad luck?" To which the Englishman responded – in a strong British accent and with a stiff upper lip – "Oh, it's not so bad actually, I'm riding the crest of the trough."

We laugh, but we all intuitively understand the spiritual wisdom of this "riding the crest of the trough" approach, don't we? When bad luck comes, especially when – as it sometimes seems to in life – it comes in difficult and disorientating bunches, rather than simply bemoan and be immobilized by the difficulties that have befallen us, we simply have to go on, bringing whatever positive attitude and remaining resources we have to life as it now presents itself. Following bad luck, only by fully mobilizing whatever positive resources we still have at our disposal can we begin to spiritually engineer our lives back to a useful and meaningful place.

And then there is the vexing question about whether there are such things as "lucky" and "unlucky" persons. In the dramatic case of those unfortunate souls who had the incredible bad luck to cross paths with those deadly terrorists on September 11<sup>th</sup>, the answer is obvious, they were – at the very last moment when their fates were determined – truly unlucky souls, and now

they have no more life to worry about or negotiate. But for the rest of us, this question about whether we are lucky or unlucky is a lot more subtle, open and unfinished.

I had an elderly parishioner, in the last church I served back in Washington, who had over his lifetime at least his share of “hard knocks” and difficult circumstances. But when he died, this sweet man’s daughters repeatedly reported – as we planned his memorial service – that their father’s all-time favorite saying, which he regularly gave glad voice to even as he faced real challenges in his life, was “I’m a lucky guy.” For days following his memorial service, I just couldn’t get that optimistic one-liner out of my head. “I’m a lucky guy.” “I’m a lucky guy.” The only thing that separated this guy from the rest of us in terms of his luck is that he was simply more spiritually resilient, and existentially grateful for the blessings he did have. Through life’s thick and thin, through good luck and bad, this guy chose to view himself as a “lucky kind of guy.” Perhaps it was that choice of heart alone which made him truly lucky?

In a similar vein, someone recently said to me, “Scott, people make their own luck.” While I’m not sure that’s entirely true – for, as I have said, I believe a whole lot of stuff just randomly happens to us, including both really good and really bad stuff – I do believe that if we view ourselves as basically lucky – which is to say have an attitude of not feeling sorry for ourselves, our lives will be buoyed by that optimism.

Let me speak just a bit more personally for a moment. I am now in my 62nd year of life, and I must tell you that, like that parishioner back in DC, I feel in the overview, when all is said and done in my life, incredibly lucky as a human being. By almost any objective standard, I’ve been one...very...lucky...puppy! First, I was born into this amazing world. Hey, think about it, there were a million reasons that didn’t have to happen for any of us!. What’s more, I was born into a happy, loving, comfortable family, in the freest and most prosperous country in the world. I have led a life of profound economic, social and educational privilege, never really materially or emotionally wanted for anything. My body – which works pretty damned well most of the time, even my rather rickety, arthritic knee – is as far as I know free of debilitating disease. I have a special guy I love and live with, wonderful friends, and the best job I can imagine working for a great bunch of wonderful people here in Vero Beach. What can I tell you! On and on my personal good luck list could go...and when I catalogue it all in my heart and mind, all this fiercely non-superstitious guy wants to do is knock on wood.

And, by the way, if there are any more of you out there who similarly feel this morning like “lucky ducks,” I remind you that you are all sitting on wood and fabric pews. So if you are feeling grateful and lucky right now, please go right ahead and take a moment to knock on some of it...it’s good and right to regularly acknowledge to yourself that you’ve got it pretty good!

I passionately believe that acknowledging to yourself all the ways in which you are a blessed and lucky person is the first step to spiritual satisfaction in living. Theologian L. P. Jacks pretty much said it all when he observed that “Religion is primarily an affair of gratitude.” If we, despite our inevitable hardships and losses, are grateful for what we have and appreciative for how life has basically treated us, that attitude will empower us for further positive and purposeful living. As one guy who feels personally very lucky, I know that my own deep and real gratitude is one of the most powerful tools I have for building a meaningful and happy future for myself.

But before I close lest I be accused of not giving bad luck its due, it must also be acknowledged – for we all know some folks like this – that there are some objectively, plain and simple on the facts of it, really unlucky people...people whose bad luck and tragic circumstances follow them like that little cloud that often hovered above cartoon icon Charlie Brown's head...bad luck which threatens to overwhelm all their joy and purpose in living. Maybe a few of you in this room this morning feel this image applies to you? I pray not, but perhaps. As I stand here with you this morning, I can call to my mind several people in my particular universe who – through no fault of their own – have had incredible runs of bad luck at one time or another – jobs and loved ones lost, diseases and disabilities discovered, negative life circumstances seemingly conspiring all at once to drag them down. No one should spiritually and emotionally underestimate how challenging bad luck can be to any of us, regardless of how lucky we have been heretofore. Luck can change in a flash, and no one should try to tell another who is struggling with tough times “just think positively,” or (like Little Orphan Annie staring disaster in the face) simply break out into a cheerful chorus of “The sun will come out tomorrow...bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow, there'll be sun!” There are tough times when all excessively cheerful blather should be banished from earth! And I say that as a routinely cheerful person!

But nonetheless, dear friends, here is the only place where my heart will allow me to leave you spiritually this morning. In the end, I believe no one controls or chooses their luck. As I have repeatedly said, luck involves uncontrollable, unpredictable, largely random circumstance that break over us for no particular reason. But that fact doesn't mean we are helpless victims of the random “good” and “bad” events that befall us. We are human beings, amazingly supple and creative creatures really, who have incredible powers to choose our attitude and to make interior adjustments that can profoundly determine what our luck, good and bad, in life ultimately means to us. I take it on faith, which is very comforting to me actually, that we are always free as we face life's ineffable mystery and astounding flow, to bring ourselves to life's mixed circumstances as best and bravely as we can, always with whatever resources remain. While we cannot control our bad luck, by our gratitude, by our courage and by our refusal to stop being human, we can shape it and evolve it, and sometimes even slowly turn it around into something darned-near-beautiful...even amidst all the inevitable thorns of living.

I believe with all my heart that we human beings are not at the mercy of luck's wildly swinging gyrations. We are not helpless pawns of some sad and capricious cosmic chess game being played by omnipotent gods in the heavens. Yes, we find ourselves mysteriously here on a randomly spinning earth that mysteriously deals out all kinds of complications, circumstance and heartbreak. But we are human beings who have been given incredible spiritual resources with which to take life's random, flowing mess and shape it into a blessed thing of meaning, of hope, of purpose and joy.

So get back out there folks...be not afraid...work with what you've got...whenever possible, refuse to feel sorry for yourselves...choose to live as best and boldly as you can. And...oh yes...I must say it...GOOD LUCK!

AMEN.