Waiting for the Ice Cream Truck

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David Beeves is the man who had all the luck. In Arthur Miller's debut play of the same name, first staged in 1944, Beeves acts out an ironic reversal of Job's mythic misfortune in Hebrew Scripture. Plagued by the contrast between his own success and the failure of those around him, he tries to make sense of his good fortune.

Over time, this cosmic injustice breeds in David a fearful irony and he becomes so convinced that something terrible will befall his newborn child, that he cannot bring himself to embrace his charmed son. He becomes reckless in order to tempt Fate, even over-investing in the capricious mink farming business. "Why, why always me?" he wonders.

Job is the faithful servant for whom luck vanishes one ancient Biblical day, along with his fortune, his family, and very nearly, his faith. After God enters into a contest with Satan to determine Job's piety, the humble Israelite confronts his absurd misfortune by initially *blessing* God. Yet, this serene accepting man is not the same person we meet later in the book.

His so-called comforters have offered him a smattering of half-baked explanations and none of them even come close to soothing his wretchedness. The cosmos has become a dark, tangled place, absent of meaning and purpose, and Job wishes for the very life of the cosmos itself to end. "Why me, Lord," he pleads. "Why me?"

Those of us gathered here today reside somewhere East of Eden and South of Heaven (and hopefully, North of Hell). We live and breathe in those charged places on the great prairie, smack between King of Hill and King of the Ash heap, where we, too ask "Why me?" and where "the misery and grandeur of human beings confront each other."

I'd call that place *the human condition* and say that part of the project of living there (deliberately and with grace) is considering what meaning can be extracted from events that seem meaningless, random, unfair and undeserved.

On this March morning, just past the fabled Ides of March, the randomness enigma coupled with the very real global coronavirus threat, begs the question of whether traditional religious concepts can ever really jibe with a Universe that is at least partially random.

How can we be saved in a random Universe? And if salvation doesn't interest you, then what about hope? Or faith? What's the point of these virtues in a partially random world, where we're each likely to tumble at some point in our human lives, from summits of success or health, onto ash heaps of despair or illness?

Our starting point in assessing the blend of randomness and providence in the Universe makes all the difference. In Job's Jewish context, God is a puppeteer who, at his discretion (or whim) makes bad and good things happen, keeps us out of harm's way, and decides whether to clean up the messes he creates. In other paradigms, God is cast as an enabler who curates Nature for our betterment or pleasure.

Likewise, in a Christian paradigm, assigning Jesus the role of our pre-ordained collective redeemer puts too much of the onus on *him,* not us, to practice confession and forgiveness, to be accountable for our own "sins" and out choices, to save the world, to suffer some of life's inevitable crucifixions, and to invite the healing release of resurrection or renewal.

To be sure, I'm looking out with compassion on a congregation that's had more than its share of Good Fridays – prolonged unemployment, unexpected and uncertain medical diagnoses, failed relationships, troubled children, and the loss of beloved family members and friends. Under each of these circumstances, I wonder if it's helpful or comforting to cling to or revert to a construct that asks us to submit to the will or whim of a personal God?

If you are a humanist or an agnostic, an atheist, or a fellow Unitarian Universalist, I think you can guess my opinion on the matter. I fret that these conventional concepts of God as a fixer lead us into an even thornier thicket of contradiction and defeat.

For some, the sense of being let down by God shatters their faith entirely in a Universe they had believed was divinely organized and maintained. Like Job, the modern-day theist, currently sheltering at home, has plenty of time to wonder: "If God is good and all powerful, and if I've been faithful, why is this tragedy befalling me? And, if God isn't all powerful and cannot stop this tragedy, why is He worth worshipping?" This can result in a profound crisis of faith.

Or, like David Beeves, one may ask (although this scenario is mighty rare): "Why is good fortune always smiling on *me*? If God is fair and just, where is my share of the sorrow?"

One summer, many years ago, I was full of existential angst and convoluted musings regarding the breakup of my long marriage. Lots of "whys" and "what ifs" floated in the humid ether. I suppose more than anything, I wanted some sign that I would recover and feel joyful again.

One August afternoon, as I strode down the hill to the beach at White Pond, the local Concord, MA watering hole with my children, I noticed a white board propped up against a tree emblazoned with the following message: "Lifeguard on duty doesn't know when the ice cream truck is coming."

I had to laugh. And, how I *needed* to laugh. Sure, we all assumed the Good Humor guy would show up at 3:30 p.m. as usual, but not even the lifeguard knew that for certain and he didn't want to be pestered. Of course, I read my typical theological bent into the message; how could I resist?

Here we are waiting for the ice cream truck, full of all those goodies and we so want it to come, on time and without exception. But we have to be patient, have faith, accept uncertainty, and have our money ready for the mad dash when we hear that familiar melody beckon us.

Indulge me a bit here because there's more to the metaphor. Let's say the ice cream truck shows up and it doesn't have what you want? They're out of Chocolate Éclair bars and you have to settle for a *ChocoTaco.* Can you handle that with some grace?

Or, the truck shows up with its own usual disclaimer: "Driver is not responsible for dropped ice cream." And, despite your best efforts, your Creamsicle takes a nosedive into the sand. Now what? Are you going to blame God (that great "lifeguard" in the sky)? To be clear – the coronavirus is not an ice cream truck and the resulting illness is not a Creamsicle dropped in the sand. But we are waiting, nonetheless, for what will come, when it will arrive, and how it will affect us.

Beyond a God construct, religious liberals can turn to other less conventional methods for processing suffering, loss, and misfortune. These include human cruelty (murder, corporate greed, bombing villages or the border detention centers), human error (dropping your ice cream, or on a more serious note, smoking cigarettes and dying of lung cancer), bad timing (finding oneself aboard an ill-fated jet on 9/11), acts of Nature (Hurricanes and Earthquakes) inadvertently being exposed to the coronavirus before we understood its impact, and finally, sheer randomness beyond any rhyme or reason.

This list may hit us like a cold shower when what we yearn for is a warm bath. Especially now. As rational or humanistic as we profess to be, we may want to keep God or whatever we think of us sacred or powerful or true or comforting in the equation, and that's fine. Prayer is not prohibited.

I'm enriched by what the Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says about all this. He tells the story of a pregnant woman, dying of a brain tumor, whom he meets while out shopping for bargains and who joins his synagogue with her family during her decline. He writes: "They joined, she bore a daughter, she died, I did the funeral." Talk about a tumble. Years later, Kushner recalls delighting in that daughter, now a teenager considering the Rabbinate as her vocation.

In the face of such a random and unfair tragedy, Kushner notes (sounding a bit like a transcendentalist) that the divine is everywhere and everything. He lifts up our old pal Job as an example, to whom God shows the whole awesome pageant of life and death – a part of Job's story, by the way, that we seem to overlook or just don't know about.

God shows Job this panorama - Lions tearing apart gazelles. Vultures ripping flesh. Thunderstorms, earthquakes, everything. Then he says to Job, in effect, " What do you think of that, huh? I hope you like it because I'm in that, too. Not just in feeling good. But *everything*!" (Even randomness, one can presume).

Kushner writes: “Look, I don’t think God made a tumor grow in that girl’s mother’s brain or that God has anything to do with the girl’s choice of careers or where I shop for bargain basement clothes. But I can’t get it out of my head that somehow God is mixed up in the whole horrible, holy, joyous goddamn thing.”

Naturally, as a Rabbi, Kushner is theist at heart, liberal as he may be. And this Sanctuary isn’t a Jewish temple; it’s a Unitarian Universalist congregation where, for some of us, God isn’t mixed up in the whole horrible, joyous goddamn thing at all. In fact, many of us reject this idea entirely and resonate much more strongly with science and probability theory (like the St. Petersburg Paradox and the Monty Hall Problem) than we do with A plus B theology.

Rational perspectives may not be entirely bloodless or without important religious value. As compelling as these theories are, in a random Universe they offer no more a guarantee of cheating tragedy, a virus, or failure than blind faith. I’ve recently learned that in the Monty Hall scheme (from the TV classic Let’s Make a Deal”), the cloying game show host *always* shows the contestant one of the bad doors among the three choices. I never noticed that! This way, the contestant ends up with a 50/50 chance of winning.

If life were only that predictable; if only the Universe showed us the bad doors and offered to cut a deal with us. That would improve the odds! I’m reminded of a New Yorker cartoon that shows a male contestant facing this dilemma: “In your case, Bob,” says Monty, “there’s a choice – perpetual bliss, incessant despair, or whatever’s in the box that our lovely Carol is holding.”

Given these choices, the mystery box is the one I’d pick because it’s the most like the life I’m destined to live anyway – some bliss, some despair, lots of unknowns, both gifts and zingers wrapped up in unexpected packages that arrive on my doorstep, sometimes COD. The question is (for me, for each of us): Can I accept that randomness and let go? When the world suddenly and unexpectedly tilts and breaks open like it has these past weeks, can I face this reality and not be crushed by it, run from it, or explain it away with convenient myths? Can I surrender my illusion of control?

My colleague, Mark Belletini, answers this question by saying “A religious liberal surrenders to reality, not to omnipotent Fate. Our wishes about the world are not reality. Our dreams of the way the world “should be” or “ought to be” are not reality, even if they are worthy or aspirational. The questions: “How can they behave that way?” or “Why me, Lord?” are ways of avoiding Reality. They *do* believe that way. These things *do* happen to us.” [Yes, I did just lose my job, or get that diagnosis, or experience the breakup of a relationship].

Even the ever-faithful Job asks God why he has been forsaken. Who among us has not felt forsaken at some point in our lives? We ache for comfort, relief, explanations, and rescue. Luckily, few of us experience realities as terrifying as what Job faced. Even so, to insist that Reality should automatically be different than it is represents the exact opposite of what is meant by living deliberately; that is, to surrender (rather than succumb) to the

reality of what is, to deal with it and face it without excuses or denial. This is my definition of "grace."

And this type of surrender shouldn't be confused with acquiescence or powerlessness. Just the opposite. There is great power, great maturity, and great humility in it. I realize this philosophy can be hard to accept or reconcile when chaos or viruses show up instead of order; when we cannot totally control outcomes.

The Rev. Vanessa Southern admits to a sentiment we may share when she writes: "I used to think life could be counted on to be stable. It was my parent's fault. They engineered my world to send just that message. The predictability of the evening bedtime and the packed lunch – its makes the world feel safe."

"But, maybe instead of being taught to expect predictability," Southern argues, " we should have been taught to expect chaos or at least snags; we should have been told turbulence in the air is norm, not the exception. Keep your air sickness bag close, ladies and gentlemen, this ride will be shaky." Good advice, I'd say. (Oh, and wash your hands, too!)

Southern's musing reminds me of a wonderful, quirky movie that came out a decade ago called The Straight Story, in which a modern-day Ulysses makes his way across Iowa atop a lawn tractor in a quest to reconcile with his estranged and ailing brother. At one juncture, he comes upon a woman, leaning against her car crying, and her head in her hands. In the road, lay a dead deer. All around them are open fields as far as the eye can see. Our hero stops to comfort her and she explains her plight: "This is the third one I've hit this year. Where do they come from? I don't know what to do," she wails, "I have no choice, *I have to go this way*!"

In the context of this sermon, that woman has a few options – drive 40 miles out of her way to avoid another possible (perhaps inevitable) collision with a deer; stay home; or surrender to the Reality that, like us, she has to *go this way*, take her chances, make her choices, be humble and kind and to derive what meaning she can from the sublime moments of grace and the maddening encounters with randomness.

David Beeves, Miller's lucky lad, eventually has his own epiphany, too – he realizes he was lucky because he made good fortune work for him; at each lucky crossroad, he acted on his fate and directed it. He realizes that individuals must pay attention and that they must be responsible for their actions, and that they are irrevocable connected morally to one another and to the Universe. Finally, if hesitantly, he runs upstairs to embrace his child.

One can almost hear the words of another great American playwright, Thornton Wilder, who tells us: "My advice to you is not to inquire why or wither, but just to enjoy your ice cream while its on your plate." I'd argue that it's OK to "inquire why and wither" AND to "enjoy the ice cream while it's on our plates." We have choices to make, you and me. Like the inadvertent deer killer, like David Beeves, we can run and hide; we can cower or fret, or take some new route. Or, like Job, we can confront the Real.

My friends, try to remember: “Hope is better than luck.” Expect chaos, yet be brave and foolish enough to hope and faithful enough to live deliberately despite the randomness, the fear, and the tragedy. We will find our way through, together.

This is my day. This is your day. And every which way, Grace (reliable and unpredictable) will come to find us, all the same. It may arrive in odd packages and look like loss or mistakes. But, it will grow us up and let us be children.

Grace may come to us as a brilliant blue bird sky after an snowfall, a crocus opening one Spring morn, a supermarket restocked with paper towels and hand sanitizer, butterfly dust in the brim of your hat, a piece of our hearts healed, the gift of technology to Face Time with a faraway beloved, finding ourselves healthy when this virus threat has passed, a deeper connection to our higher selves through solitude, joy or pain beyond our wildest imaginings.

Grace may even come in the form of an ice cream truck that shows up on time and even has our favorite. Whether we can maintain our Good Humor if it doesn’t? Well, a truly spiritual life wouldn’t be worth much without a challenge, now would it?

Blessed be. Blessed we.

Amen.