

Manure + Thorns = Roses

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

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Although he appreciated stoicism, France's greatest Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire, said, "I am rather an Epicurean. I do not think life is to be endured: I think it is to be enjoyed."¹ I agree, but I also think there is a lot we must endure in order to enjoy life.

There's a scene in the 2008 Academy Award winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, in which a child gets locked inside a public outhouse just as his favorite action star's helicopter is heard arriving overhead for a special event. The excited boy has been carrying a picture of the celebrity with him in desperate hope of getting his signature. Now, the moment is finally at hand but is also about to slip away. Everyone in town is running to catch a glimpse of Amitabh, their favorite action hero. With no one left to hear his pleas for help, the trapped boy looks into the well of human refuse beneath him, his last possible means of escape, his last hope. He pinches his nose with one hand, holds his treasured picture as high as he can with the other, and ... plunk! In he jumps.

In the next scene, the child is covered from head to toe in human feces, running toward the cheering crowd, yelling, "Amitabh! Amitabh!" Meanwhile, the police are doing their best to hold the excited mob away from the visiting superstar. But, when they realize he's covered in crap, everyone is eager to step aside for the boy, allowing him to easily make his way to Amitabh, who readily autographs the picture. No one else was able to get close enough to gain such a treasure, which the overjoyed and victorious child raises up shouting, "Yay! Amitabh signed my picture!" But had he not gone through the crap, had he not remained covered in it, he would never have achieved his goal.

This memorable scene serves as the perfect metaphor for what I believe life is and ought to be like most of the time. We are almost always dealing with some kind of crap and it is often, as with the boy in this cinematic parable, the crap other people put in our way. There are always those who don't seem satisfied unless they are interfering with the lives of others, usually by trying to force their own ideas and ways upon everyone else. They could be individual neighbors, coworkers, or family members, or entire groups, religions, and political parties. They can even be dictators like Vladimir Putin. "Hell is other people," Sartre said, and, at times, some of them can be. But much of the time the difficulties and challenges we endure, we choose to take on for ourselves, because, like the boy destined to become a *Slumdog Millionaire*, we know it will all be worth enduring if it means achieving a greater purpose, which is our source of true joy.

Exercise is a good example. We may enjoy exercising, but it is not a physically pleasant experience. "No pain, no gain," as the saying goes. One of the benefits of exercise is endurance. That's what it does, it makes us stronger so we can endure more exercise. And it is worth enduring because of the health benefits we enjoy as a result. This, to me, is the secret to enjoying life in general. But I don't mean to say we should intentionally seek to

suffer or tolerate all the injustices and evils in the world in the hope of someday reaching an imaginary Promise Land. What I mean is that the secret to enjoying life is first figuring out what is meaningful, then going for it and enduring whatever we must to get there. Then there is purpose in the many difficulties we face along the way. Without such meaning, without purpose in what we do, our difficulties just wear on us and make our lives perpetually miserable. But knowing their purpose even gives meaning to the difficulties, problems, and challenges before us. Knowing their purpose, finding meaning, is what makes life worth living.

This is so of most everything we engage in, great or small. I like to cook, for example, but it takes a lot of time to do it right. There's shopping, preparation, carefully putting the ingredients together, patience waiting and minding it while it cooks, and lots of cleanup afterward to truly complete the task. Compared to the brief amount of time it takes to eat, cooking isn't worth it. But the point of cooking, if you enjoy doing it, isn't about the time or the work involved, but the flavor of the dish and the joy of eating and sharing it with others. It can also be about eating healthy food, which can be hard to get if you don't cook it at home. If time were all that mattered, we'd just eat fast food most of the time, which, sadly, some people do.

The Broadway musical *Gypsy* includes the song, "Everything's Coming up Roses." Its last line says,

Everything's coming up roses and daffodils
Everything's coming up sunshine and Santa Claus
Everything's gonna be bright lights and lollipops
Everything's coming up roses for me and for you!

It's a happy song, but a little too saccharin, even for my sweet tooth, because there's nothing in it about the bitter truth, that roses have to push their way into existence through the manure that enriches them, and, as beautiful as they are, arrive with lots of thorns. They are beautiful, but they are also tough, hardy plants. Roses without thorns, that don't rise up through the manure, truly are as fanciful as Santa Clause and about as worthless as lollipops. Reality must be faced and grappled with. It must be endured before it becomes meaningful and beautiful to us.

Being the minister of this church has been exceedingly meaningful and beautiful to me, but it has also been extremely challenging, and it has sometimes taken everything I have to keep going. Or maybe I have that backwards, this church has sometimes taken everything I have to keep going, which has made it exceedingly meaningful and beautiful to me. For, no matter the difficulties I've endured, it has and continues to enable me to do what is fulfilling in my life. Whenever things are tough, I just picture the image of that little boy covered in crap celebrating his extraordinary achievement, and I think that's what ministry is like, as is most everything else worthwhile in life.

But there was a time, not too long ago, as you might imagine, I was close to calling it quits. In the aftermath of my book *The Gadfly Papers*, I realized the religion I had been part of and served for most of my career no longer represents my values. As an institution, it attacked my character without reference to any facts, in a frenzied and panicked attempt to discredit and silence my voice. Even more painful were those within our own congregation who treated me with disdain and cruelty, and were willing to ruin the church itself, if doing so meant crushing me. They were people I had known and loved for years. It took a toll on me, and I wanted to leave. I contemplated an exit-strategy.

But I didn't want to leave merely because things had gotten tough. Tough only invigorates me. I wanted to leave because Unitarian Universalism no longer held meaning for me. I still had my values, but as an institution, my religion had come to represent their very opposite. Instead of the worth and dignity of every person upheld through a culture based on freedom, reason, and tolerance, the UUA leadership now dehumanizes those it disagrees with in an extremely authoritarian, dogmatic, and intolerant fashion. I am and always have been willing to go through crap so long as it leads to something meaningful, so long as going through it has purpose. But being part of a religion that has become so incredibly cruel and corrupt was no longer meaningful for me.

But there was still much else that did make bearing it meaningful. Firstly, ours is a historic 136-year-old congregation, that has proven to consistently uphold our liberal values more than most Unitarian churches have over the decades. If I left, I wondered where, in the current climate, would this congregation find another minister committed to honoring and continuing our liberal heritage and principles? If I left, I did not believe our congregation would survive, at least not as a genuinely liberal religious congregation. When I do leave, I hope I will leave this congregation better off than when I came, ready and eager for whatever comes next.

Additionally, all of this happened before and during COVID, which left our congregation with yet another major challenge to go through. I knew, at the very least, I had to remain long enough to help get us through the pandemic, no matter how depressed I sometimes felt. And, on a personal note, I also take some pride in standing up to bullies, and to remain standing at the end of the day, no matter the pummeling I might take. Surviving difficulties, including the cruelty of others, gives my life meaning. At the end of it all, I enjoy being able to say, "na na na na na na."

But what really kept me going and got me through a lot of this was knowing that so many of you wanted me to stay and that I had your support. Many said, "Please don't leave. We need you here." And when push came to shove, as the saying goes, 87 percent of this congregation voted unanimously for an entirely new board of trustees, which was also a tremendous show of support and a vote of confidence for me. That meant a great deal to

me, more than I can say, and it is our mutual admiration and love for each other that is the main reason I'm still here. Your wellbeing and the wellbeing of our congregation is what makes being here meaningful to me. It is what has enabled me to endure a lot of the crap we've gone through together.

But none of this was enough to make me want to stay in ministry for the long haul. I came to view Unitarian Universalism as a lost cause and an imminently dying religion that no longer gives my life meaning. Then, about a year ago, I decided I would make one more go of it by running for the UUA Presidency, a position that will be voted on this month. I didn't expect to win in this climate, but I thought it might be one more opportunity to raise awareness among other Unitarians about what's happening in our religion, and to finally force a dissenting voice onto the UUA's tightly controlled platforms and podiums.

No sooner had I let our congregation know of these plans in an internal unlisted YouTube video, than the corrupt administration at the UUA sent me a threatening and hostile letter radically misrepresenting their election rules around running as a petitioning candidate, rather than one chosen by their own Election Campaign Committee. I won't go into the complicated details now. It should suffice to point out that a 2018 UUA report on changes to the UUA Presidential Election states:

We recommend that the by-law that allows for running for President by petition be eliminated (9.6a, as it pertains to the office of President). In the absence of the will to eliminate this by-law completely, we believe that the threshold for petition candidates should be raised significantly—to at least 50 congregations, from at least two regions, and certifiable only by the action of duly-called congregational meetings.

These changes were approved in 2019. The UUA then falsely claimed petitioning is part of the campaign process and can't begin until after they've announced their candidate on November 15th, giving petitioners, who once had as much time as they wanted to gather the necessary petitions, just 2.5 months to get 50 congregations to hold special congregational meetings to approve their petitioned candidacy. That's impossible, the UUA knows it's impossible, which is precisely what their own documents prove they wanted, to effectively eliminate the petitioning process and any challenges to their Presidential appointee.

Yet, after all this, in their latest *UUWorld* propaganda rag (Spring/Summer 2023, p. 50), they have the audacity to write, "The UUA Board of trustees invited other potential candidates to consider running by petition through the process defined in the bylaws, but no one chose to do so." As a result, their anointed candidate is now, in their own words, "the sole nominee for president," just like they planned.

Prior to this vicious assault against the democratic freedoms the UUA bylaws themselves grant me, I had regained my enthusiasm, because I found new meaning in being part of the UUA, and purpose in enduring whatever I had to. But even though they illegally prevented

me from running, my hopes were not dashed. This latest injustice only emboldened my resolve, and that is when the North American Unitarian Association was born, NAUA. For I realized we need not continue our pointless efforts to reform the UUA when there are enough of us to provide the very support and kind of liberal community amongst ourselves that we need.

And it is NAUA that has put a spring back in my step because it has given my ministry and my life new purpose and meaning. I've had to go through a lot of crap getting to this point, but it has been worth it because what I'm doing now will help assure the future not only of our historic congregation, but of many others, and of liberal religion itself. And, for the first time in a more than century, we have an Association that not only wants liberal religion to survive, but to thrive, so that, through it, the whole of human civilization might begin to flourish again. If I can someday go to my grave knowing that I helped accomplish this, then I will have both endured and enjoyed life because of the purpose and meaning this endeavor gave me.

That's a little of my story of pushing through the manure, and, in case you haven't noticed, I have a lot more thorns than I used to, but I'm still blooming. And I believe this same process is at work in all our lives because, as I said at the start, that's what life is about. Whatever happens in the coming year, our church is going to go through some tough times. Some of them may fall upon us, and some we may choose to go through because doing so will be worth it to us. The same is true for us as individuals, we will go through difficulties and face challenges ahead, some due to circumstances beyond our control and some of our own design. Whatever their origin, we will choose to undertake these challenges because doing so will be what it takes to fulfill our purposes and find our meaning.

The Stoics and Epicureans were both right, life is meant to be endured and enjoyed. We endure what we must in order to enjoy what we can. Without manure, without thorns, there can be no roses. Likewise, without the challenges and difficulties we face throughout our lives in almost all we do, our lives would be meaningless, we could not fully unfold, and we would have no joy. Struggling without purpose leaves us empty, despondent, and depressed. Yet true joy without struggle is often meaningless. May the struggles we face in the months and years ahead be meaningful and bring us much satisfaction, fulfillment, and joy.

¹ Cranston, Maurice, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers: Political Theorists of the Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 56.