

**The Blessings of Imperfection**  
**A sermon delivered at the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario**  
**Sunday, January 25, 2015**

**Reading #1: "The Carpenter & His Apprentice" a Taoist story**

A carpenter and his apprentice, were walking together through a large forest. And when they came across a tall, huge, gnarled, old, beautiful oak tree, the carpenter asked his apprentice: "Do you know why this tree is so tall, so huge, so gnarled, so old and beautiful?"

The apprentice looked at his master and said: "No, master. why?"

"Well," the carpenter said, "because it is imperfect, and so it is useless. If this tree had been useful - if it had been perfect - it would have been cut long ago and made into tables and chairs; but because it is imperfect, because it is useless, it could grow so tall and so beautiful that you can sit in its shade and relax."

**Reading #2: "The Real Marvel of DNA" from *The Medusa & the Snail* by Lewis Thomas**

We have evolved scientists. and so we know a lot about DNA; but if our kind of mind had been confronted with the problem of designing a similar replicating molecule. we'd never have succeeded. We would have made one fatal mistake: our molecule would have been perfect..

The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of DNA. Without this special attribute we could still be anaerobic bacteria and there would be no music.

**Sermon: "The Blessings of Imperfection: On Being Good Enough"** by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

"We are imperfect creatures, living in a beautifully imperfect world."

That's the start of an insurance ad I've seen on TV.

"We're imperfect creatures, living in a beautifully imperfect world."

The ad shows a guy feeding a parking meter while his lovely new car goes rolling down the hill. Another guy sawing down a tree limb that falls on his neighbor's car. A woman opening her car door, which is promptly ripped off by a passing car.

"We're imperfect creatures, living in a beautifully imperfect world."

*The Kingdom of Little Wounds* by Susann Cokel is a sort of extended fairy tale. Set in Denmark, in 1572, it tells the story of a king and queen and several princesses and a prince and their various endings. And there is the equivalent of the miller's daughter, the innocent who has to perform several impossible tasks before she is free.

But, mostly, it tells the real story - what happens after the "happily-ever-after" fairy tale ending - the story of the aftermath. Living in a time where folks believe in magic, and in the influence of the stars on our lives. A time of plagues, including the "French disease" - syphilis. A time of non-scientific "medical" treatments [like using mercury to treat syphilis].

When we talk about fairy tales we often talk about happy endings. Happy endings are a possibility. But the perfect ending is not a probability. The 'good enough' ending is.

And this extended fairy tale - it's 550 pages long - has some decidedly not-happy endings for a number of its characters, but also the possibility of some decidedly good enough endings for others.

While the striving for perfection - that idea of "happily-ever-after" - may be all around us, while we ourselves may strive for perfection, it's not going to happen. Author Leo Tolstoy [in his novel *Anna Karenina*] tells us: "If you look for perfection, you'll never be content."

Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen tells us:

"There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."

"Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in  
everything  
That's how the light gets in." — Leonard Cohen

In the very first story in the Hebrew Bible, the first of two creation stories, God creates an orderly world out of primordial chaos. Takes Him six days. After six days God looks around, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." And God saw that it was good. Not perfect. Good. Entirely adequate to its purpose.

In commenting on creation theologians have speculated that God did not create the world perfect, because then it would not be the world. It would be heaven.

The world is beautifully imperfect, with wonderfully imperfect conscious beings inhabiting it, so that these wonderfully imperfect women and men can engage in the process of bringing an imperfect world closer to the perfection we can imagine.

The world is good enough. And we are good enough to try to make it a better world - a safer, more stable, more flourishing world for all its creatures.

We are not asked to [be] the Light, to be perfection.

We are asked to appreciate, and to love, and to heal the world around us.

*Sung:*

*So let your little light shine, shine, shin*

*Someone down in the valley, trying to get home. [Sweet Honey in the Rock]*

Peter Fleck, in his book *The Blessings of Imperfection*, tells us that, if the world had been created perfect "there would be nothing left to be done; the human task would be fulfilled, the human role ended."

But, he tells us, "don't worry." That human role will not end. Perfection is not attainable. Our minds may be able to imagine the perfect, but perfection is not to be got.

Progress can be made toward perfection. But even progress requires error.

Consider our quote from Lewis Thomas. It is the small, infinitesimal variations, the errors, in DNA that allow for evolution.

That first anaerobe that could breathe in oxygen. That first fish with gills that allowed it to breath in both water and air. That first amphibian with the funky fins that allowed it to crawl over the land. That first ape who used a stick as a tool.

Without errors, without variations, we would not have evolved the fascinating variety of life we experience today.

Behavioral scientist Steve Maraboli tells us:

"We have all heard that no two snowflakes are alike. Each snowflake takes the perfect form for the maximum efficiency and effectiveness for its journey. And while the universal force of gravity gives [these snowflakes] a shared destination, the expansive space in the air gives each snowflake the opportunity to take its own path. [These snowflakes] are on the same journey, but each takes a different path

Along this gravity-driven journey, some snowflakes collide and damage each other, some collide and join together, some are influenced by wind... there are so many transitions and changes that take place along the journey of the snowflake. But, no matter what the transition, the snowflake always finds itself [perfectly] shaped for its journey."

— Steve Maraboli, *Life, the Truth, and Being Free*

We humans, we too are on similar, and different, journeys through our lives. Universal forces of nature and social/cultural forces of nurture drive us. We collide, we sometimes damage each other, sometimes collide and join each other. So many transitions and changes on our journey - to the same destination. And we are each equipped, good enough, filled with enough light and strength, for our journeys.

*Sung:*

*So let your little light shine, shine, shine*

*Someone down in the valley, trying to get home.*

The idea of perfection is not a new idea.

Artists in ancient Greece thought perfection was very special. They saw perfection as a godly quality. Humans were very special, the best thing created by their gods. But the Greek gods were perfect.

The idea of perfection is not new; neither is the recognition of imperfection, the need for imperfection.

In some Asian cultures, people believe that they should not try to make something perfect. Only God can make something that is perfect. And so rugmakers would purposely put a flaw, an imperfection, in their woven rugs.

The Navajo people of the US Southwest put imperfections in their rugs and blankets. But they do this for a different reason. They call the line of imperfection the "spirit path." They believe that when they die, their spirit can move along this line, to a place where they can continue weaving rugs and blankets.

African American slaves used to put imperfections in their quilts. They said it would "distract the devil at night." Perfect quilts were unlucky.

And even today, some quilters include imperfections in their work. The quilter may use a color that doesn't appear in the rest of the quilt, or include an imperfect square

- a piece called a "humility square" - an imperfection to acknowledge the quilter's imperfection.

From a show called *Purposely Imperfect*, aired on 16 December 2007.

<http://spotlightenglish.com/listen/purposely-imperfect>; accessed 23 January 2014.

The Japanese have a concept called *wabi-sabi*. *Wabi-sabi* acknowledges three Buddhist principles: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, nothing is perfect.

*Wabi* describes "rustic simplicity, freshness or quietness," either in a natural or a human-made object. *Wabi* is "understated elegance."

*Sabi* is the beauty or serenity that comes with age, when the life of the object and its impermanence are evidenced in its patina and wear, or in any visible repairs.

"In today's Japan, the meaning of *wabi-sabi* is often condensed to 'wisdom in natural simplicity.' In art books, it is typically defined as 'flawed beauty'." [4]

People all around the world try very hard to reach perfection. People change their face and bodies hoping to look perfect. Companies try to make perfect products. We want everything to work without any problems.

Some of us try to be perfect at work. We desire the perfect marriage, the perfect spouse, perfect children. Some of us try to be perfect hosts & hostesses. Or try to have the perfect Christmas. Or the perfect wedding. The perfect house.

Some of us try to create the perfect family. Or despair at our very un-perfect families.

*Eleanor and Park* is the story of two 16-year-olds. The book is set in 1986 Omaha, and both teens feel like outsiders - Eleanor because she's a big [bigger than her very thin mom] redhead; Park because he's a small [smaller than his big beefy American dad], dark-complected, half Korean.

Eleanor thinks Park's family is perfect: hot meals every day; both boys have their own rooms, Park's mom and dad are visibly affectionate. Park isn't so sure. He's having a hard time learning how to drive stick shift, a skill his dad insists he learn before he get his license. Dad loses patience with Park. Park is sure his dad is disappointed in him, not just for his inability to learn to drive a stick. Park takes after his mom, who is short, dark, noticeably Korean. Unlike his brother who takes after his dad, Swedish American, who is big, very tall.

Eleanor's family is less than perfect: all five kids share the same bedroom, meals are quick and scanty. Eleanor's stepfather drinks a lot, swears a lot, fires his

shotgun to scare off some noisy basketball players at the neighboring playground.

No family is perfect. Park's family is good enough; Eleanor's is not.

But Eleanor and Park, beautifully imperfect as they are, let their little lights shine when they are with each other.

*Sung:*

*Well, it could be me or it could be you,*

*Sister or a brother, too -*

*Someone down in the valley. trying to get home.*

We cannot be perfect, but we can imagine the more perfect, long for it, work towards it. Appreciate the good enough; work to change the not nearly good enough.

Some of us are perfectionists; some of us are recovering perfectionists. As artist Salvador Dali tells us: "Have no fear of perfection - you'll never reach it." Like that tall, huge, gnarled, old, beautiful oak tree, we may let our flawed beauty shine, shine, shine. Through the cracks.

"We are imperfect creatures, living in a beautifully imperfect world." Trying for perfection. Getting to 'good enough.

*Sung:*

*So let your little light shine, shine, shine*

*Someone down in the valley, trying to get home.*

*Could be me or it could be you,*

*Sister or a brother, too -*

*Someone down in the valley. trying to get home.*

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.