

Why are you here? I'm not looking for an answer like, "because my partner wanted to come today" or "my child has Coming of Age this morning." I'm talking metaphysically. Why are you here? Why am I here? Why are we here?

Philosophers and theologians have been debating this question since the beginning of time...and if philosophers and theologians are debating something since the beginning of time, it's a pretty good sign that we have no idea what the heck is going on.

Why are we here? Is there a God? Are we alone? Architect, inventor, futurist and Unitarian Buckminster Fuller said, "Sometimes I think we're alone. Sometimes I think we're not. In either case, the thought is staggering (Buckminster Fuller, *The Sun*, December 2011, p 48)."

Why am I here? Well, I don't think that I'll ever be satisfied with an answer to this question. And so, as a result, I don't feel comfortable making any specific conclusions regarding its implications. Therefore, I must walk the path of faith. I could choose that this path of faith be infused with existential dread. I could say that there is no significant reason why I'm here; that there's no purpose. I could say that I am merely an evolutionary, biological accident and nothing more. Or I could choose that this path of faith be infused with existential optimism, and that maybe, perhaps, I'm nothing short of an evolutionary, biological miracle. In a sermon last winter I quoted author Barbara Ehrenreich who said, "you can think of life as an interruption of an eternity of personal nonexistence, and seize it as a brief opportunity to observe and interact with the living, ever-surprising world around us (Barbara Ehrenreich, "Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, *NY Times*, 08/18/18)."

And along the same lines, rather than choose a path of faith infused with the idea that life is meaningless, I could choose a path that says that I was put here for a reason... and maybe it's my job to discover that.

“Always remember that you are unique...just like everybody else (Unknown).” Yes, that’s a cute little quote...and a bit snarky. But after thinking about it for a while, and asking myself, “WWMRD?” (What would Mr. Rogers Do?), I agree wholeheartedly with it. Yes! I am unique, and you are unique, just like everybody else. We know that’s what Mr. Rogers would say. You can probably see the television screen now. It’s a close up of him and his sweater. He’s looking directly into the camera so it feels like he’s talking to you and you alone:

You are my friend you are special
You are my friend you are special to me
There’s only one in this wonderful world (*you*)
You are special

Yes, that is the path of faith that I will choose to walk. The path where I am miraculous...and you are miraculous. The path where you and I have the potential to be ordinary heroes.

Last week I told the story of the Tower of Babel, where the god figure is one that often conspires against us. And after considering the events in the Book of Job, where God brings suffering upon a good man, one could conclude that we are merely poker chips feeding an insecure god’s gambling addiction.

Might there be a more positive, healthy orientation? Might there be an orientation where we are, like Anansi’s children in this morning’s story, put here for a reason? In today’s story, Anansi’s children’s names clearly defined their purpose: See Trouble, Road Builder, River Drinker, Fish Squeezer, Stick Thrower, Cushion.

Now, when I talk about god here, I’m not talking about one’s belief in God. I’m talking about one’s conceptualization, one’s idea of what God could possibly be, whether you believe or not. But rather than have an idea of a Tower of Babel god that frustrates us, conspires against us; might there be different idea of god available to us – a helper god or gods out there somewhere, a god who works for us, nudging us forward, urging us to be in the right place at the right time, whispering in our ear, saying things like, “Turn your head and look, the love of your life is right over there” – a helping god that turns our heads or causes us to unexpectedly raise our hands and say “Yes.”

In the movie “Yes Man,” the introverted principal character, played by Jim Carrey, down in the dumps after recent divorce, makes a covenant with a self-help guru to say yes to everything. He is bound by his covenant with the self-help guru to put himself out there, be vulnerable, be uncomfortable. And although this leads to an hour and a half of some predictable Jim Carrey humor full of over-the-top physical comedy and sight gags, the main character has, in the end, a new lease on life.

Maybe the gods are waiting for us to first do our part; show some initiative, take that first step. Jim Carrey's character isn't entitled to this new lease on life until he steps forward, until he raises his hand and says yes, until he commits. Mountaineer and writer W. H. Murray speaks of this in his book *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*. He writes

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative [or creation] there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would otherwise never have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of incidents and meetings and material assistance which no man would have believed would have come his way (W. H. Murray, *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*).

Many practitioners of earth-centered, pagan traditions, removing god and gods and the supernatural from the above scenarios might label the raising of one's hand, one's commitment in this fashion, as magic. The late Margot Adler, NPR reporter, and self-proclaimed pagan witch writes

Most people define [magic] as superstition or belief in the supernatural. In contrast, most magicians, Witches and other magical practitioners do not believe that magic has anything to do with the supernatural... Magic [could be described as] simply the art of getting results. Magic is a convenient word for a whole collection of techniques, all of which involve the mind... We might conceive of these techniques as including the mobilization of confidence, will, and emotion brought about by the recognition of necessity; [We] use...these imaginative faculties, particularly the ability to visualize, in order to begin to understand how other beings function in nature so we can use this knowledge to achieve necessary ends. (Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p7)

What might prevent us from such mobilization? What might prevent us from raising our hand and committing? Feelings of unworthiness? Fear? Fear of the unknown? Fear of being vulnerable? Fear of what we might bring wouldn't be considered good enough? Maybe it's easier to simply drown in your existential dread or sorrow?

Duke Ellington committed. He "merely took the energy it took to pout and wrote some blues (Duke Ellington)."

Dancer and choreographer Agnes de Mille, unsure of her worthiness and whether her work was good enough, relates a conversation that she had with the modern dance pioneer Martha Graham. She said

The greatest thing [Martha Graham] ever said to me was in 1943 after the opening of *Oklahoma!*, when I suddenly had unexpected, flamboyant success for a work I thought was only fairly good, after years of neglect for work I thought was fine. I was bewildered and worried that my entire scale of values was untrustworthy. I talked to Martha. I remember the conversation well. It was in a Schrafft's restaurant over a soda. I confessed that I had a burning desire to be excellent, but no faith that I could be. Martha said to me, very quietly: "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open ... No artist is pleased. [There is] no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others. (Agnes de Mille via Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way*, p75).

"There is only one of you in all time [and your] expression is unique.... And if you block it, it will never exist...and it will be lost. [And] the world will [never] have it... Keep the channel open (Martha Graham)."

The world needs you. The world needs your unique expression...and it's not for you to decide how good or bad it is or how it is received...but keep the channel open.

In our reading this morning, a high school musician almost has feelings of dread as his orchestra engages in creative exchange amongst the haunted, hot, windless, stifling atmosphere of Auschwitz. Why are we here? What good could possibly come of this?

...the wind picked up, and the trees that surrounded us started to rustle vigorously... Thousands of branches, hands in their own right, were clapping for us... So many trees shaking altogether. It was as if the souls of those still residing at Auschwitz were all around us, somehow trying to reach us and tell us they had heard... We played our music to, essentially, no one, no thing – or so we thought. The void had returned what we had sent with just as much emotion. We communicated with a living universe. Reality is not the isolated plateau of life I once thought it was. I, if only for a moment, caught a glimpse of a greater, lush landscape, continuous and unbroken (Benjamin Gold, Teen Concert at Auschwitz, Parabola, Summer 2014, p80.)

The World Needs You
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I believe the world needs you, the universe needs you...your vitality and life force...more than you could ever possibly know... and there's only one in this wonderful world (you)... So, on behalf of the souls still residing at Auschwitz, and throughout the universe... keep the channel open. "The universe will reward you for taking risks on its behalf (Shakti Gawain)."