

Free Will and Destiny: A Liberal Religious Perspective
a sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner
at the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING from *My Grandfather's Blessings* by Rachel Naomi Remen

When I first met Jeanne, her psychology practice was barely above water. She shared offices with a group of physicians, and, desperate to be accepted and work under what she perceived as the umbrella of their credibility, she took whatever crumbs fell from their professional table. Hers was the smallest office in the complex and hers the only name not listed on the office door. It was obvious from the first how dedicated and gifted a therapist she was, and this compromising attitude troubled me. But Jeanne felt validated by the association and certain that she needed referrals from these physicians in order to have patients. She would stay there almost two more years.

Jeanne was a shy person, a little apologetic and sometimes hesitant in finding the right words. She was also just the slightest bit clumsy. All this made her very endearing. You felt somehow at home with her and safe. Her patients adored her.

One day at lunch, she told me that she was moving from her present office. Pleased, I asked her why she had decided to leave. "They do not have wheelchair access," she said. I looked at her in surprise. She looked away. "Rachel," she said, "I have not told you everything about myself. Years ago when I was young, I had a very serious stroke. I was not expected to recover." I was astonished. "I had no idea," I said. She nodded, "I know," she replied. "Nobody does."

I had noticed her occasional troubles with words and her awkwardness. But even with my training, I had not guessed. Jeanne was a miracle. I could barely imagine the focus and determination she had drawn upon all these years, that she drew upon still, to live her life every day. "But why have you kept this a secret, Jeanne," I asked, astounded.

Almost in tears, she said that for years she had felt damaged and ashamed. "I wanted to put it behind me," she said. "I thought if I could be seen as normal I would be more than I was." And so she had guarded her secret closely. Neither her colleagues nor her patients knew. She had felt certain that others would not refer to her or want to come to her for care if they knew. She was no longer sure this was true.

"And what do you plan to do now?" I asked her. She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. "I think I will just be myself," she told me. "I will see people like myself. People who are not like others. People who have had strokes and other brain injuries. People who can never be normal again. I think I can help them be whole."

Over the past five years, Jeanne has become widely known for her work. She has been honored by several community groups and interviewed in the newspapers. She speaks often and consults for business and hospitals. The many people she has helped refer others to her. For the first time, her practice is full. Her own name is on her door. All that she needed in order to serve was the courage of her vulnerability. (p. 150-1)

SERMON

In the mid part of February, I had the pleasure of watching both a good deal of the Winter Olympics as well as the Westminster Kennel Club dog show. Let's start with the latter. I have always been fascinated by dog shows, by the huge variety of breeds, and by the special skills the different breeds have—one breed with extraordinary swimming skills, another with the ability to herd animals many times their size, a third with instincts to stand perfectly still and point out hunting prey. Over the generations, these dogs have been selected and bred for these special skills and those of us who have or have had a purebred dog know that the basic skills and instincts are there even before we have done any training whatsoever.

The first time my golden retriever, Dixon, caught sight of a duck, I wasn't sure I would be able to stop him from going after it. And, as much as he loves being in the water, he won't go in until I've thrown something in for him to bring back to me. I never did anything to train him to do any of these things. He just knew.

Now, Olympic athletes are different, of course. Human beings are not bred for particular skills or characteristics (Yet. Which is a whole different sermon.). Even so, watching some of the elite athletes compete makes it clear that some people are born with skills and abilities that others are not. That some people are born with certain physical and psychological traits that lead them in certain directions. And not only that, for a portion of them, the drive and interest seems almost innate as well.

My favorite story about this involves Elvis Stoyko, a Canadian Olympic ice skater from a few years ago. As the story goes, he was three years old when he first saw a figure skater on television. He took one look at the skater and said, "I can do that." His parents brought him to the ice rink and it turned out he could.

Unlike Elvis Stoyko, I could never have been a competitive figure skater. I do not have the physical ability or coordination, the physique, or the mental discipline, and there is nothing I can do to change any of that. Luckily, I never really wanted to be a figure skater. But if I had, I would have been out of luck. It is simply untrue that we can be whatever we want, whatever our parents tell us when we are young.

I have always hoped that the extraordinary drive and passion that we hear about in many of the Olympians never comes without the skills to make it real. But this year we learned about the American man whose goal in life it was to be an Olympic athlete, and who for the fourth time in a row put everything he had—physically, mentally, emotionally, and financially—into training for the luge and who for the fourth time in a row didn't quite make it. Such a story makes it clear that the drive is not always matched by enough talent to make the dream come true. And this year's performance by Bode Miller also makes it clear that talent is not always matched by drive.

There is no doubt that those who make it to the top level of athletic achievement, and likely the top level of achievement in any field, work extremely hard and make choices that help get them there. At the same time, there also seems little doubt that there were things beyond their control—be it talent, innate intelligence, imagination, or opportunity—that also played a large role in their success, and that made the difference between these people and the many, many people who didn't quite make it that far.

We all like to think we are our own people. That we make the choices that determine the direction of our lives. That if we simply work hard enough or make the right decisions, we can get wherever we want. That our free will is the most powerful element of our lives.

The reality may be somewhat different.

I do believe in free will, in the power of human beings to make real choices. I do not believe that our lives are predetermined, that we are acting in a play whose outcome is already known. At the same time, I believe our ability to act with full free will, to make choices that truly belong to us alone, is much more limited than we think.

Often when we talk about the question of free will, it is set up in opposition to God's will. Through the ages, the religious question has primarily been focused on whether human beings can act differently than God intends, and whether God knows ahead of time all that will happen, thereby, in some fundamental sense, negating human free will. Another way to understand this challenge to free will is fate—the idea that things are meant to be, and will turn out a particular way no matter what we do. In either case, there is this sense of some force, some plan beyond human control and understanding which directs us, leads us. In essence keeping us from having genuine free will.

Now I, and most Unitarian Universalists, do not believe in a force that directs our lives, that controls our actions, that has a particular outcome in mind and the power to lead us there. A belief in human agency and free will is a central element of our religious heritage, particularly on the Unitarian side. Early Unitarians, in opposition to the Christian orthodoxy of the time, insisted that our choices mattered, and that it was by our choices that we would be judged. That we could live a good life or not; that God was not in control of what we did.

(The Universalist side of the story is a bit more complicated. After all, as is brought up in many a Unitarian Universalist theology class, if the Universalist doctrine that everyone is going to heaven no matter how they live is taken seriously, one could argue that it does away with free will. Such a truth would mean that, even if someone wanted something else, even if someone wanted to choose eternal damnation and did everything they could to bring it about, they could not get there, taking away their ultimate free will.)

But that controversy aside, our faith tradition is built upon the bedrock idea that we are in control of our lives. That it is our actions, our choices that matter, that make us who we are. That we have the power to live good lives, lives of meaning and hope. That we can make the world a better place, in ways both small and large. There is a lot of responsibility that comes along with all this, but there is also a lot of power, a lot of control, and infinite possibilities.

My belief, and more importantly, my experience is that human free will is partial at best. This seems clear not only in the lives of those who become Olympic athletes and those who just miss, but for every single one of us.

When I think of who I am, I think of all that I have chosen—the work I do, the place I live, the family I am creating, the ways I spend my time. But it takes less than a minute of reflection for me to see all the ways in which these choices were only partially mine.

I grew up the child of two writers. Is it any surprise that I, too, am a writer? Did I inherit it through genetics? Through environment? Both? There is probably no way to know, but it seems clear that I do what I do at least in part because my parents do what they do.

I am a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman. None of these things are things that I chose or things that I have control over. And yet, the impact they have on how I live, the choices I make, the choices I have been *able* to make is enormous. If I had been born poor, would college have been such an easy and obvious choice? If I had been born gay, I could not have gotten married as I just did.

So much of my personality seems a mystery, even to me. Why am I perfectly comfortable speaking in public but scared at the top of a long, steep escalator? Why do I like ice cream all the time, cottage cheese never, and scrambled eggs only some of the time? How is it that I love the natural world, but hate the bugs?

Frankly, if my free will were limitless, I would make some changes. I wouldn't worry so much. I would be more patient with both myself and others. I would be able to sing like Aretha Franklin. Where all these pieces of who I am come from—how much is genetic, how much environmental, and how much just the luck of the draw—I have no idea. All I know is that much of it is beyond my ability to control.

Though we think of ourselves and others as individuals, as our own people, the truth is much more complex, and much more mysterious. We are an incredible combination of our genetics and biology, our upbringing and environment, our experiences at every point in time, and the opportunities that come to us or don't through no action of our own. We kid ourselves if we think that any of us have unfettered free will and unlimited choices.

We are just beginning to learn about all the different ways in which our genes, our chemistry, and our biology influence who we are and how we act. At the extremes we find people struggling with severe mental illness, who have little or no control over how they feel and how they act or people with such physical disabilities that their world of choices is tragically small. But these are only the extremes. All of us are influenced by our physiology and chemistry. We are more or less vulnerable to heart disease, to alcoholism, to chronic anxiety. We learn visually, or aurally, or kinesthetically and however we try to stretch our abilities, we will always find it easier to learn one way more than the others. We are born with much of who we will be already in place.

At the same time, we are shaped and changed by what happens to us as we live. Perhaps most significantly by the experiences of our early years, but also by the incidents and accidents of our lives. It is impossible that any of us would develop isolated and independent of the people and events around us.

Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, said this in a recent email interview with ESPN.com columnist Bill Simmons:

My point is it's almost impossible to know where the person ends and their environment begins, and the longer someone is in a particular environment the blurrier that line gets. More specifically, you can't make definitive judgments about the personal characteristics of people who come from structured environments. What does it mean to say that a Marine is brave? It might mean that a Marine is an inherently brave person. It may also be that the culture of the Marine Corps is so powerful, and the training so intensive, and the supporting pressure of other Marines so empowering, that even a coward would behave bravely in that context.

We are shaped in ways both known and unknown by the environments of our lives, by what we have learned from life itself.

One of the things I see most in ministry is the way lives are shaped and changed by tragedy. Illness, loss, death, addiction, accidents of all sorts—if we were in control, these things would not happen, or at least they would not happen to us. These things derail the life we have planned for ourselves. They leave us with impossible choices, or few options, none of which we want. We become much more aware of the limits we face than the possibilities that remain. How much do we feel we live lives of free will when our lives are cut short by tragedy, or restricted by circumstance?

There are, of course, happy accidents as well. Meeting the person who will become our life partner. Stumbling across an unknown talent or passion. These are things we also do not control, though, since we would have chosen them if we could have, they do not threaten our belief in our own agency in our lives.

As I have gotten older, I have become more and more aware of the ways I am not in control, the choices I cannot make, the free will I do not have. Initially I found this terrifying, and in conflict with my liberal religious faith in my ability to choose to live with meaning and hope. I still struggle with my faith when I see people around me whose lives, through circumstance beyond their control, have become so limited there are few choices left to make.

And yet, the more I see and the more I learn, the more I realize that it is our very limitedness that makes our choices so very valuable.

I think of the story of Jeanne from the reading by Rachel Naomi Remen. For as long as she tried to deny her limitedness, her vulnerability, she was not living as she could be. It was only when she claimed these things as her own, when she acknowledged all the ways in which her life was not in her control, it was only then that she became fully herself.

In her book *An Unquiet Mind*, about her struggle with manic depression, Kay Redfield Jamison writes:

I long ago abandoned the notion of a life without storms, or a world without dry and killing seasons. Life is too complicated, too constantly changing, to be anything but what it is. And I am, by nature, too mercurial to be anything but deeply wary of the grave unnaturalness involved in any attempt to exert too much control over essentially uncontrollable forces. There will always be propelling, disturbing elements, and they will be there until...the watch is taken from the wrist. It is, at the end of the day, the individual moments of restlessness, of bleakness, or strong persuasions and maddened enthusiasms, that inform one's life, change the nature and direction of one's work, and give final meaning and color to one's loves and friendships. (p. 215-6)

Perhaps the most powerful choice we can make is to accept our limitedness and work within its boundaries. This doesn't mean giving up on dreams, or not pushing ourselves to be the best people we can be. But it does mean not pretending to be something we are not. It means not only refusing to deny our vulnerabilities; it means understanding that our vulnerabilities may be the most powerful thing we have.

You see, whatever choices have already been made for us, whatever elements of our personality are fixed, whatever random accidents befall us, the outcome of our life is not known. It is not decided. Our path has not been set. Though our free will is bounded, it is there, and it remains one of the most powerful gifts we have.

When we look around the world, who are the people we admire? Are they the people who have lived life seemingly easily, with all doors open to them, all possibilities theirs to have? No, most of

the time it is not. We may envy them, but rarely do we admire them. Most of the time we admire those we see whose struggles are real and visible. Those people we see who have owned their vulnerabilities and turned them into strengths.

This is a choice we have. This is where free will comes in. We may not be able to control that which we have been given—our physical and psychological being, the environment in which we have learned about life, the accidents, both good and bad, that befall us along the way—but we can choose how we will respond. How we will use all that we have been given to live well, as best we can.

For some this simply means survival. Getting up each morning and facing the world again. For others it means using a great gift, an exceptional talent, following an extraordinary dream. For most of us, it is something in the middle. Learning to appreciate our blessings and accepting our limitations. Learning to be ourselves rather than pretending we are someone else. Owning the struggles of our lives and using them to help others with the challenges of theirs. Allowing our vulnerabilities to be our greatest strengths, our deepest sources of hope and learning.

It may not be true that we can be whomever we want to be, or that we can do whatever we want to do. But it is true that whoever we are, we can be a blessing to this world, if we choose to be.

May it be so. Amen.